

Hebrews 5:1-14

by St. John Chrysostom

The sermon emphasizes the superiority of Christ's priesthood over the Levitical priesthood and calls the listeners to spiritual maturity and discernment.

Topics: "Christ's Priesthood", "Spiritual Maturity"

Description

John Chrysostom preaches about the superiority of the new covenant over the old, emphasizing the high priesthood of Christ and His compassionate nature towards the ignorant and those who stray. He highlights Christ's obedience and suffering, leading to His perfection and becoming the Author of eternal salvation. Chrysostom urges believers to mature in their faith, moving from spiritual infancy to discerning good and evil through the exercise of their senses with the Scriptures, warning against being easily swayed by false teachings and the importance of diligently studying God's Word for spiritual growth and protection.

Transcript

For every high priest taken from among men, is ordained for men in things pertaining to God, that he may offer both gifts and sacrifices for sins: who can have compassion on the ignorant and on them that are out of the way, for that he himself also is compassed with infirmity; and by reason hereof he ought, as for the people so also for himself to offer for sins.

1. The blessed Paul wishes to show in the next place that this covenant is far better than the old. This then he does by first laying down remote considerations. For inasmuch as there was nothing bodily or that made a show, no temple for instance, nor Holy of Holies, nor Priest with so great apparel, no legal observances, but all things higher and more perfect, and there was nothing of bodily things, but all was in things spiritual, and things spiritual did not attract the weak, as things bodily; he thoroughly sifts this whole matter.

And observe his wisdom: he makes his beginning from the priest first, and continually calls Him an High Priest, and from this first [point] shows the difference [of the two Dispensations]. On this account he first of all defines what a Priest is, and shows whether He has any things proper to a Priest, and whether there are any signs of priesthood. It was however an objection in his way that He [Christ] was not even well-born, nor was He of the sacerdotal tribe, nor a priest on earth. How then was He a Priest? Some one may say.

And just as in the Epistle to the Romans having taken up an argument of which they were not easily persuaded, that Faith effects that which the labor of the Law could not, nor the sweat of the daily life, he betook himself to the Patriarch and referred the whole [question] to that time: so now here also he opens out the other path of the Priesthood, showing its superiority from the things which happened before. And as, in [the matter of] punishment, he brings before them not Hell alone, but also what happened to their fathers, so now here also, he first establishes this position from things present. For it were right indeed that earthly things should be proved from heavenly, but when the hearers are weak, the opposite course is taken.

2. Up to a certain point he lays down first the things which are common [to Christ and their High Priests], and then shows that He is superior. For comparative excellence arises thus, when in some respects there is community, in others superiority; otherwise it is no longer comparative.

For every High Priest taken from among men, this is common to Christ; is ordained for men in things pertaining to God, and this also; that he may offer both gifts and sacrifices for the people, and this too, [yet] not entirely: what follows however is no longer so: who can have compassion on the ignorant, and on them that are out of the way, from this point forward is the superiority, inasmuch as himself also is encompassed with infirmity; and by reason hereof he ought as for the people, so also for himself, to offer for sins.

Hebrews 5:4-5

Then also [there are] other [points]: He is made [Priest] (he says) by Another and does not of Himself intrude into [the office]. This too is common Hebrews 5:4, And no man takes this honor to himself, but he that is called of God as was Aaron.

Here again he conciliates them in another point, because He was sent from God: which Christ was wont to say throughout to the Jews. He that sent Me is greater than I, and, I came not of Myself. John 12:49; 14:28; 8:42

He appears to me in these words also to hint at the priests of the Jews, as being no longer priests, [but] intruders and corrupters of the law of the priesthood; Hebrews 5:5 So Christ also glorified not Himself to be made an High Priest.

How then was He appointed (one says)? For Aaron was many times appointed as by the Rod, and when the fire came down and destroyed those who wished to intrude into the priesthood. But in this instance, on the contrary, they [the Jewish Priests] not only suffered nothing, but even are in high esteem. Whence then [His appointment]? He shows it from the prophecy. He has nothing [to allege] perceptible by sense, nothing visible. For this cause he affirms it from prophecy, from things future; But He that said to Him You are My Son, today have I begotten You. What has this to do with the Son? Yea (he says) it is a preparation for His being appointed by God.

Hebrews 5:6

As He says also in another place, You are a Priest forever after the order of Melchisedech. Unto whom now was this spoken?

Who is after the order of Melchisedech? No other [than He]. For they all were under the Law, they all kept sabbaths, they all were circumcised; one could not point out any other [than Him].

Hebrews 5:7-8

3. Who in the days of His flesh, when He had offered up prayers and supplications with strong crying and tears, to Him that was able to save Him from death, and was heard in that He feared; though He were a Son, yet learned He obedience by the things which He suffered. Do you see that he sets forth nothing else than His care and the exceeding greatness of His love? For what means the [expression] with strong crying? The Gospel nowhere says this, nor that He wept when He prayed, nor yet that He uttered a cry. Do you see that it was a condescension? For he could not [merely] say that He prayed, but also with strong crying.

Hebrews 5:9-10

And was heard, (he says), in that He feared; though He were a Son, yet learned He obedience by the things which He suffered., And being made perfect He became the Author of eternal salvation unto all them that obey Him: called of God an High Priest after the order of Melchisedech.

Be it with crying, why also strong [crying] and tears?

Having offered, (he says), and having been heard in that He feared. What do you say? Let the Heretics be ashamed. The Son of God was heard in that He feared. And what more could any man say concerning the prophets? And what sort of connection is there, in saying, He was heard in that He feared, though He were Son, yet learned He obedience by the things which He suffered? Would any man say these things concerning God? Why, who was ever so mad? And who, even if he were beside himself, would have uttered these things? Having been heard, (he says), in that He feared, He learned obedience by the things which He suffered. What obedience? He that before this had been obedient even unto death, as a Son to His Father, how did He afterwards learn? Do you see that this is spoken concerning the Incarnation?

Tell me now, did He pray the Father that He might be saved from death? And was it for this cause that He was exceeding sorrowful, and said, If it be possible, let this cup pass from Me? Matthew 26:38-39 Yet He nowhere prayed the Father concerning His resurrection, but on the contrary He openly declares, Destroy this temple and within three days I will raise it up. John 2:19 And, I have power to lay down My life, and I have power to take it again. No man takes it from Me, I lay it down of Myself. John 10:18 What then is it; why did He pray? (And again He said, Behold we go up to Jerusalem, and the Son of Man shall be betrayed unto the chief priests and scribes, and they shall condemn Him to death. And they shall deliver Him to the Gentiles, to mock, and to scourge, and to crucify Him; and the third day He shall rise again Matthew 20:18-19, and said not, My Father shall raise Me up again.) How then did He pray concerning this? But for whom did He pray? For those who believed on Him.

And what he means is this, 'He is readily listened to.' For since they had not yet the right opinion concerning Him, he said that He was heard. Just as He Himself also when consoling His disciples said, If you loved Me, you would rejoice, because I go to My Father John 14:28, and My Father is greater than I. But how did He not glorify Himself, He who made Himself of no reputation Philippians 2:7, He who gave Himself up? For, it is said, He gave Himself up for our sins. See And again, Who gave Himself a ransom for us all. 1 Timothy 2:6 What is it then? You see that it is in reference to the flesh that lowly things are spoken concerning Himself: So also here, Although He were Son, He was heard in that He feared, it is said. He wishes to show, that the success was of Himself, rather than of God's favor. So great (he says) was His reverence, that even on account thereof God had respect unto Him.

He learned, he says, to obey God. Here again he shows how great is the gain of sufferings. And having been made perfect, he says, He became the Author of salvation to them that obey Him. (Cf. supra, pp. 384, 391.) But if He, being the Son, gained obedience from His sufferings, much more shall we. Do you see how many things he discourses about obedience, that they might be persuaded to it? For it seems to me that they would not be restrained. From the things, he says, which He suffered He continually learned to obey God. And being made perfect through sufferings. This then is perfection, and by this means must we arrive at perfection. For not only was He Himself saved, but became to others also an abundant supply of salvation. For being made perfect He became the Author of salvation to them that obey Him.

Hebrews 5:11-12

4. Being called, he says, of God an High Priest after the order of Melchisedech: Hebrews 5:11 Of whom we have many things to say and hard to be uttered [or explained]. When he was about to proceed to the difference of the Priesthood, he first reproves them, pointing out both that such great condescension was milk, and that it was because they were children that he dwelt longer on the lowly subject, relating to the flesh, and speaks [about Him] as about any righteous man. And see, he neither kept silence as to the doctrine altogether, nor did he utter it; that on the one hand, he might raise their thoughts, and persuade them to be perfect, and that they might not be deprived of the great doctrines; and on the other, that he might not overwhelm their minds.

Of whom, he says, we have many things to say and hard to be explained, seeing you are dull of hearing. Because they do not hear, the doctrine is hard to be explained. For when one has to do with men who do not go along with him nor mind the things that are spoken, he cannot well explain the subject to them.

But perhaps some one of you that stand here, is puzzled, and thinks it a hard case, that owing to the Hebrews, he himself is hindered from hearing the more perfect doctrines. Nay rather, I think that perhaps here also except a few, there are many such [as they], so that this may be said concerning yourselves also: but for the sake of those few I will speak.

Did he then keep entire silence, or did he resume the subject again in what follows; and do the same as in the Epistle to the Romans? For there too, when he had first stopped the mouths of the gainsayers, and said, Nay but, O man, who are you that repliest against God? Romans 9:20, he then subjoined the solution. And for my own part I think that he was not even altogether silent, and yet did not speak it out, in order to lead the hearers to a longing [for the knowledge]. For having mentioned [the subject], and said that certain great things were stored up in the doctrine, see how he frames his reproof in combination with panegyric.

For this is ever a part of Paul's wisdom, to mix painful things with kind ones. Which he also does in the Epistle to the Galatians, saying, You did run well; who did hinder you? Galatians 5:7 And, Have ye suffered so many things in vain? If it be yet in vain Galatians 3:4, and, I have confidence in you in the Lord. Galatians 5:10 Which he says also to these [Hebrews], But we are persuaded better things of you, and things that accompany salvation. Hebrews 6:9 For these two things he effects, he does not overstrain them, nor suffer them to fall back; for if the examples of others are sufficient to arouse the hearer, and to lead him to emulation; when a man has himself for an example and is bidden to emulate himself, the possibility follows at the same time. He therefore shows this also, and does not suffer them to fall back as men utterly condemned, nor as being always evil, but [says] that they were once even good; Hebrews 5:12 for when for the time ye ought to be teachers, he says. Here he shows that they had been believers a

long while, and he shows also that they ought to instruct others.

5. At all events observe him continually travailing to introduce the discourse concerning the High Priest, and still putting it off. For hear how he began: Having a great High Priest that is passed into the heavens Hebrews 4:14; and omitting to say how He was great, he says again, For every High Priest taken from among men, is appointed for men in things pertaining to God. Hebrews 5:1 And again, So Christ also glorified not Himself to be made an High Priest. Hebrews 5:5 And again after saying, You are a Priest for ever after the order of Melchisedech Hebrews 5:6, he again puts off [the subject], saying, Who in the days of His Flesh offered prayers and supplications. Hebrews 5:7 When therefore he had been so many times repulsed, he says, as if excusing himself, The blame is with you. Alas! How great a difference! When they ought to be teaching others, they are not even simply learners, but the last of learners. Hebrews 5:12, For when for the time ye ought to be teachers, you have need again that some one teach you again which be the first principles of the oracles of God. Here he means the Human Nature [of Christ]. For as in external literature it is necessary to learn the elements first, so also here they were first taught concerning the human nature.

You see what is the cause of his uttering lowly things. So Paul did to the Athenians also, discoursing and saying, The times of this ignorance God winked at: but now commands all men everywhere to repent, because He has appointed a day in the which He will judge the world in righteousness by that Man whom He has ordained, whereof He has given assurance unto all men, in that He has raised Him from the dead. Acts 17:30-31 Therefore, if he says anything lofty, he expresses it briefly, while the lowly statements are scattered about in many parts of the Epistle. And thus too he shows the lofty; since the very lowliness [of what is said] forbids the suspicion that these things relate to the Divine Nature. So here also the safe ground was kept.

But what produces this dullness? This he pointed out especially in the Epistle to the Corinthians, saying, For whereas there is among you envy and strife and divisions, are you not carnal? 1 Corinthians 3:3 But observe, I beseech you, his great wisdom, how he always deals according to the distempers before him. For there the weakness arose more from ignorance, or rather from sin; but here not from sins only, but also from continual afflictions. Wherefore he also uses expressions calculated to show the difference, not saying, you have become carnal, but dull: in that case carnal, but in this the pain is greater. For they [the Corinthians] indeed were not able to endure [his reproof], because they were carnal: but these were able. For in saying, Seeing you have become dull of hearing Hebrews 5:11, he shows that formerly they were sound in health, and were strong, fervent in zeal, which he also afterwards testifies respecting them.

6. And have become such as have need of milk, not of strong meat. He always calls the lowly doctrine milk, both in this place and in the other. When, he says, for [i.e. because of] the time ye ought to be teachers: because of that very thing, namely the time, for which you ought especially to be strong, for this especially you have become backsliding. Now he calls it milk, on account of its being suited to the more simple. But to the more perfect it is injurious, and the dwelling on these things is hurtful. So that it is not fitting that matters of the Law should be introduced now or the comparison made from them, [such as] that He was an High Priest, and offered sacrifice, and needed crying and supplication. Wherefore see how these things are unhealthful to us; but at that time they nourished them being by no means unhealthful to them.

So then the oracles of God are true nourishment. For I will give unto them, he says, not a famine of bread, nor a thirst of water, but a famine of hearing the word of the Lord. Amos 8:11

I gave you milk to drink, and not meat 1 Corinthians 3:2; He did not say, I fed you, showing that such [nourishment] as this is not food, but that [the case is] like that of little children who cannot be fed with bread. For such have not drink given them, but their food is to them instead of drink.

Moreover he did not say, you have need, but you have become such as have need of milk and not of strong meat. That is, you willed [it]; you have reduced yourselves to this, to this need.

Hebrews 5:13

For every one that partakes of milk is unskilled in the word of righteousness: for he is a babe. What is the Word [doctrine] of righteousness? He seems to me here to hint at conduct also. That which Christ also said, Unless your righteousness shall exceed the righteousness of the Scribes and Pharisees Matthew 5:20, this he says likewise, unskilled in the word of righteousness, that is, he that is unskilled in the philosophy that is above, is unable to embrace a perfect and exact life. Or else by righteousness he here means Christ, and the high doctrine concerning Him.

That they then were become dull, he said; but from what cause, he did not add, leaving it to themselves to know it, and not wishing to make his discourse hard to bear. But in the case of the Galatians he both marveled Galatians 1:6 and stood in doubt, which tends much more to encourage, as [it is the language] of one who would never have expected that this should happen. For this is [what] the doubting [implies].

You see that there is another infancy, You see that there is another full age. Let us become of full age in this sense: It is in the power even of those who are children, and the young to come to that full age: for it is not of nature, but of virtue.

Hebrews 5:14

7. But strong meat belongs to them that are of full age [perfect], even them who by reason of use have their senses exercised to discern both good and evil. Those had not their senses exercised, nor did they know good and evil. He is not speaking now concerning life [conduct], when he says to discern good and evil, for this is possible and easy for every man to know, but concerning doctrines that are wholesome and sublime, and those that are corrupted and low. The babe knows not how to distinguish bad and good food. Oftentimes at least it even puts dirt into its mouth, and takes what is hurtful; and it does all things without judgment; but not [so] the full grown man. Such [babes] are they who lightly listen to everything, and give up their ears indiscriminately: which seems to me to blame these [Hebrews] also, as being lightly carried about, and now giving themselves to these, now to those. Which he also hinted near the end [of the Epistle], saying, Be not carried aside by various and strange doctrines. Hebrews 13:9 This is the meaning of to discern good and evil. For the mouth tastes meat, but the soul tries words. Job 34:3

8. Let us then learn this lesson. Do not, when you hear that a man is not a Heathen nor a Jew, straightway believe him to be a Christian; but examine also into all the other points; for even Manichæians, and all the heresies, have put on this mask, in order thus to deceive the more simple. But if we have the senses of the soul exercised to discern both good and evil, we are able to discern such [teachers].

But how do our senses become exercised? By continual hearing; by experience of the Scriptures. For when we set forth the error of those [Heretics], and you hear today and tomorrow; and provest that it is not right, you have learned the whole, you have known the whole: and even if you should not comprehend today, you will comprehend tomorrow.

That have, he says, their senses exercised. You see that it is needful to exercise our hearing by divine studies, so that they may not sound strangely. Exercised, says he, for discerning, that is, to be skilled.

One man says, that there is no Resurrection; and another looks for none of the things to come; another says there is a different God; another that He has His beginning from Mary. And see at once how they have all fallen away from want of moderation, some by excess, others by defect. As for instance, the first Heresy of all was that of Marcion; this introduced another different God, who has no existence. See the excess. After this that of Sabellius, saying that the Son and the Spirit and the Father are One. Next that of Marcellus and Photinus, setting forth the same things. Moreover that of Paul of Samosata, saying that He had His beginning from Mary. Afterwards that of the Manichæans; for this is the most modern of all. After these the heresy of Arius. And there are others too.

And on this account have we received the Faith, that we might not be compelled to attack innumerable heresies, and to deal with them, but whatever any man might have endeavored either to add or take away, that we might consider spurious. For as those who give the standards do not oblige [people] to busy themselves about measures innumerable, but bid them keep to what is given them; so also in the case of doctrines.

9. But no man is willing to give heed to the Scriptures. For if we did give heed, not only should we not be ourselves entangled by deceit, but we should also set others free who are deceived, and should draw them out of dangers. For the strong soldier is not only able to help himself, but also to protect his comrade, and to free him from the malice of the enemy. But as it is, some do not even know that there are any Scriptures. Yet the Holy Spirit indeed made so many wise provisions in order that they might be safely kept.

And look at it from the first, that you may learn the unspeakable love of God. He inspired the blessed Moses; He engraved the tables, He detained him on the mount forty days; and again as many [more] to give the Law. And after this He sent prophets who suffered woes innumerable. War came on; they slew them all, they cut them to pieces, the books were burned. Again, He inspired another admirable man to publish them, Ezra I mean, and caused them to be put together from the remains. And after this He arranged that they should be translated by the seventy. They did translate them. Christ came, He receives them; the Apostles disperse them among men. Christ wrought signs and wonders.

What then after so great painstaking? The Apostles also wrote, even as Paul likewise said, they were written for our admonition, upon whom the ends of the world have come. 1 Corinthians 10:11 And again Christ said, You do err not knowing the Scriptures Matthew 22:29: and again Paul said, That through patience and comfort of the Scriptures we may have hope. Romans 15:4 And again, All Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable. 2 Timothy 3:16 And let the word of Christ dwell in you richly. Colossians 3:16 And the prophet, he shall meditate in His Law day and night Psalm 1:2, and again in another place, Let all your communication be in the law of the Most High. Sirach 9:15 And again, How sweet are Your words unto my throat. (He said not to my hearing, but to my throat); more than honey and the honeycomb to my mouth. Psalm 119:103 And Moses says, You shall meditate in them continually, when you rise up, when you sit, when you lie down. Deuteronomy 6:7 Be in them 1 Timothy 4:15, says he. And innumerable things one might say concerning them. But notwithstanding, after so many things there are some who do not even know that there are Scriptures at all. For this cause, believe me, nothing sound, nothing profitable comes from us.

10. Yet, if any one wished to learn military affairs, of necessity he must learn the military laws. And if any one sought to learn navigation or carpentry or anything else, of necessity he must learn the [principles] of the art. But in this case they will not do anything of the kind, although this is a science which needs much wakeful attention. For that it too is an art which needs teaching, hear the prophet saying, Come, you children, hearken unto me, I will teach you the fear of the Lord. Psalm 34:11 It follows therefore certainly that the fear of God needs teaching. Then he says, What man is he that desires life? Psalm 34:12 He means the life yonder; and again, Keep your tongue from evil and your lips from speaking guile; de part from evil and do good, seek peace and pursue it. Psalm 34:13-14

Do you know indeed who said these things, a prophet or a historian, or an apostle, or an evangelist? For my own part I do not think you do, except a few. Yea and these themselves again, if we bring forward a testimony from some other place, will be in the same case as the rest of you. For see, I repeat the same statement expressed in other words. Wash ye, make you clean, put away your wickedness from your souls before My eyes, learn to do well, seek out judgment. Keep your tongue from evil, and do good: learn to do well. Isaiah 1:16-17 You see that virtue needs to be taught? For this one says, I will teach you the fear of the Lord, and the other, Learn to do well.

Now then do you know where these words are? For myself I do not think you do, except a few. And yet every week these things are read to you twice or even three times: and the reader when he goes up [to the desk] first says whose the book is, [the book] of such a prophet, and then says what he says, so that it shall be more intelligible to you and you may not only know the contents of the Book, but also the reason of the writings, and who spoke these things. But all in vain; all to no purpose. For your zeal is spent on things of this life, and of things spiritual no account is made. Therefore not even those matters turn out according to your wishes, but there also are many difficulties. For Christ says, Seek the Kingdom of God, and all these things shall be added unto you. Matthew 6:33 These things He said, shall also be given in the way of addition: but we have inverted the order and seek the earth and the good things which are in the earth, as if those other [heavenly] things were to be given us in addition. Therefore we have neither the one nor the other. Let us then at last wake up and become coveters of the things which shall be hereafter; for so these also will follow. For it is not possible that he who seeks the things that relate to God, should not also attain human [blessings]. It is the declaration of the Truth itself which says this. Let us not then act otherwise, but let us hold fast to the counsel of Christ, lest we fail of all. But God is able to give you compunction and to make you better, in Christ Jesus our Lord, with whom to the Father together with the Holy Ghost be glory, power, honor, now and for ever and world without end. Amen.

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