

Homily 1 on Matthew

by St. John Chrysostom

The sermon emphasizes the importance of the written word and the harmony of the Gospels, and highlights the power of the Spirit in guiding us to understand and believe the truth.

Scripture: Matthew 1:1-5, John 14:26, Acts 8:28, 2 Corinthians 3:3, Hebrews 8:10

Topics: "Scripture Study", "Holy Spirit"

Description

John Chrysostom preaches about the importance of embracing the written Word as a second best course after failing to exhibit a life pure enough to rely solely on the grace of the Spirit. He highlights the superiority of the grace of the Spirit over written words, as seen in the lives of saints in the Old and New Testaments. Chrysostom emphasizes the significance of heeding the written Word, comparing the giving of the Old Law at Mount Sinai with the New Covenant given by Christ. He urges the listeners to diligently study the Scriptures, especially the Gospel of Matthew, to understand the mysteries of the heavenly city and the blessings promised by God.

Transcript

It were indeed meet for us not at all to require the aid of the written Word, but to exhibit a life so pure, that the grace of the Spirit should be instead of books to our souls, and that as these are inscribed with ink, even so should our hearts be with the Spirit. But, since we have utterly put away from us this grace, come, let us at any rate embrace the second best course.

For that the former was better, God has made manifest, both by His words, and by His doings. Since unto Noah, and unto Abraham, and unto his offspring, and unto Job, and unto Moses too, He discoursed not by writings, but Himself by Himself, finding their mind pure. But after the whole people of the Hebrews had fallen into the very pit of wickedness, then and thereafter was a written word, and tables, and the admonition which is given by these.

And this one may perceive was the case, not of the saints in the Old Testament only, but also of those in the New. For neither to the apostles did God give anything in writing, but instead of written words He promised that He would give them the grace of the Spirit: for He, says our Lord, shall bring all things to your remembrance. John 14:26 And that you may learn that this was far better, hear what He says by the Prophet: I will make a new covenant with you, putting my laws into their mind, and in their heart I will write them, and, they shall be all taught of God. And Paul too, pointing out the same superiority, said, that they had received a law not in tables of stone, but in fleshy tables of the heart.

But since in process of time they made shipwreck, some with regard to doctrines, others as to life and manners, there was again need that they should be put in remembrance by the written word.

2. Reflect then how great an evil it is for us, who ought to live so purely as not even to need written words, but to yield up our hearts, as books, to the Spirit; now that we have lost that honor, and have come to have need of these, to fail again in duly employing even this second remedy. For if it be a blame to stand in need of written words, and not to have brought down on ourselves the grace of the Spirit; consider how heavy the charge of not choosing to profit even after this assistance, but rather treating what is written with neglect, as if it were cast forth without purpose, and at random, and so bringing down upon ourselves our punishment with increase.

But that no such effect may ensue, let us give strict heed unto the things that are written; and let us learn how the Old Law was given on the one hand, how on the other the New Covenant.

3. How then was that law given in time past, and when, and where? After the destruction of the Egyptians, in the wilderness, on Mount Sinai, when smoke and fire were rising up out of the mountain, a trumpet sounding, thunders and lightnings, and Moses entering into the very depth of the cloud. But in the new covenant not so -- neither in a wilderness, nor in a mountain, nor with smoke and darkness and cloud and tempest; but at the beginning of the day, in a house, while all were sitting together, with great quietness, all took place. For to those, being more unreasonable, and hard to guide, there was need of outward pomp, as of a wilderness, a mountain, a smoke, a sound of trumpet, and the other like things: but they who were of a higher character, and submissive, and who had risen above mere corporeal imaginations, Yea, for it was removal of punishment, and remission of sins, and righteousness, and sanctification, and redemption, and adoption, and an inheritance of Heaven, and a relationship unto the Son of God, which he came declaring unto all; to enemies, to the perverse, to them that were sitting in darkness. What then could ever be equal to these good tidings? God on earth, man in Heaven; and all became mingled together, angels joined the choirs of men, men had fellowship with the angels, and with the other powers above: and one might see the long war brought to an end, and reconciliation made between God and our nature, the devil brought to shame, demons in flight, death destroyed, Paradise opened, the curse blotted out, sin put out of the way, error driven off, truth returning, the word of godliness everywhere sown, and flourishing in its growth, the polity of those above planted on the earth, those powers in secure intercourse with us, and on earth angels continually haunting, and hope abundant touching things to come.

Therefore he has called the history good tidings, forasmuch as all other things surely are words only without substance; as, for instance, plenty of wealth, greatness of power, kingdoms, and glories, and honors, and whatever other things among men are accounted to be good: but those which are published by the fishermen would be legitimately and properly called good tidings: not only as being sure and immoveable blessings, and beyond our deserts, but also as being given to us with all facility.

For not by laboring and sweating, not by fatigue and suffering, but merely as being beloved of God, we received what we have received.

5. And why can it have been, that when there were so many disciples, two write only from among the apostles, and two from among their followers? (For one that was a disciple of Paul, and another of Peter, together with Matthew and John, wrote the Gospels.) It was because they did nothing for vainglory, but all things for use.

What then? Was not one evangelist sufficient to tell all? One indeed was sufficient; but if there be four that write, not at the same times, nor in the same places, neither after having met together, and conversed one with another, and then they speak all things as it were out of one mouth, this becomes a very great demonstration of the truth.

6. But the contrary, it may be said, has come to pass, for in many places they are convicted of discordance. Nay, this very thing is a very great evidence of their truth. For if they had agreed in all things exactly even to time, and place, and to the very words, none of our enemies would have believed but that they had met together, and had written what they wrote by some human compact; because such entire agreement as this comes not of simplicity. But now even that discordance which seems to exist in little matters delivers them from all suspicion, and speaks clearly in behalf of the character of the writers.

But if there be anything touching times or places, which they have related differently, this nothing injures the truth of what they have said. And these things too, so far as God shall enable us, we will endeavor, as we proceed, to point out; requiring you, together with what we have mentioned, to observe, that in the chief heads, those which constitute our life and furnish out our doctrine, nowhere is any of them found to have disagreed, no not ever so little.

But what are these points? Such as follow: That God became man, that He wrought miracles, that He was crucified, that He was buried, that He rose again, that He ascended, that He will judge, that He has given commandments tending to salvation, that He has brought in a law not contrary to the Old Testament, that He is a Son, that He is only-begotten, that He is a true Son, that He is of the same substance with the Father, and as many things as are like these; for touching these we shall find that there is in them a full agreement.

And if among the miracles they have not all of them mentioned all, but one these, the other those, let not this trouble you. For if on the one hand one had spoken of all, the number of the rest would have been superfluous; and if again all had written fresh things, and different one from another, the proof of their agreement would not have been manifest. For this cause they have both treated of many in common, and each of them has also received and declared something of his own; that, on the one hand, he might not seem superfluous, and cast on the heap to no purpose; on the other, he might make our test of the truth of their affirmations perfect.

7. Now Luke tells us also the cause wherefore he proceeds to write: that you may hold, says he, the certainty of the words wherein you have been instructed; Luke 1:4 that is, that being continually reminded you may hold to the certainty, and abide in certainty.

But as to John, he has himself kept silence touching the cause; yet, (as a tradition says, which has come down to us from the first, even from the Fathers,) neither did he come to write without purpose; but forasmuch as it had been the care of the three to dwell upon the account of the dispensation, and the doctrines of the Godhead were near being left in silence, he, moved by Christ, then and not till then set himself to compose his Gospel. And this is manifest both from the history itself, and from the opening of his Gospel. For he does not begin like the rest from beneath, but from above, from the same point, at which he was aiming, and it was with a view to this that he composed the whole book. And not in the beginning only, but throughout all the Gospel, he is more lofty than the rest.

Of Matthew again it is said, that when those who from among the Jews had believed came to him, and besought him to leave to them in writing those same things, which he had spoken to them by word, he also

composed his Gospel in the language of the Hebrews. And Mark too, in Egypt, is said to have done this self-same thing at the entreaty of the disciples.

For this cause then Matthew, as writing to Hebrews, sought to show nothing more, than that He was from Abraham, and David; but Luke, as discoursing to all in general, traces up the account higher, going on even to Adam. And the one begins with His generation, because nothing was so soothing to the Jew as to be told that Christ was the offspring of Abraham and David: the other does not so, but mentions many other things, and then proceeds to the genealogy.

8. But the harmony between them we will establish, both by the whole world, which has received their statements, and by the very enemies of the truth. For many sects have had birth, since their time, holding opinions opposed to their words; whereof some have received all that they have said, while some have cut off from the rest certain portions of their statements, and so retain them for themselves. But if there were any hostility in their statements, neither would the sects, who maintain the contrary part, have received all, but only so much as seemed to harmonize with themselves; nor would those, which have parted off a portion, be utterly refuted by that portion; so that the very fragments cannot be hid, but declare aloud their connection with the whole body. And like as if you should take any part from the side of an animal, even in that part you would find all the things out of which the whole is composed -- nerves and veins, bones, arteries, and blood, and a sample, as one might say, of the whole lump -- so likewise with regard to the Scriptures; in each portion of what is there stated, one may see the connection with the whole clearly appearing. Whereas, if they were in discord, neither could this have been pointed out, and the doctrine itself had long since been brought to nought: for every kingdom, says He, divided against itself shall not stand. But now even in this shines forth the might of the Spirit, namely, in that it prevailed on these men, engaged as they were in those things which are more necessary and very urgent, to take no hurt at all from these little matters.

Now, where each one was abiding, when he wrote, it is not right for us to affirm very positively.

But that they are not opposed to each other, this we will endeavor to prove, throughout the whole work. And thou, in accusing them of disagreement, art doing just the same as if you were to insist upon their using the same words and forms of speech.

9. And I do not yet say, that those likewise who glory greatly in rhetoric and philosophy, having many of them written many books touching the same matters, have not merely expressed themselves differently, but have even spoken in opposition to one another (for it is one thing to speak differently and another to speak at variance); none of these things do I say. Far be it from me to frame our defense from the frenzy of those men, neither am I willing out of falsehood to make recommendations for the truth.

But this I would be glad to inquire: how were the differing accounts believed? How did they prevail? How was it that, while saying opposite things, they were admired, were believed, were celebrated everywhere in the world?

And yet the witnesses of what they said were many, and many too were the adversaries and enemies thereof. For they did not write these things in one corner and bury them, but everywhere, by sea and by land, they unfolded them in the ears of all, and these things were read in the presence of enemies, even as they are now, and none of the things which they said offended any one. And very naturally, for it was a divine power that pervaded all, and made it to prosper with all men.

10. For if it had not been so, how could the publican, and the fisherman, and the unlearned, have attained to such philosophy? For things, which they that are without have never been able to imagine, no not in a dream, are by these men with great certainty both published and made convincing, and not in their lives only, but even after death: neither to two men, nor twenty men, nor an hundred, nor a thousand, nor ten thousand, but to cities, nations, and people, both to land and sea, in the land both of Greeks and barbarians, both inhabited and desert; and all concerning things far beyond our nature. For leaving the earth, all their discourse is concerning the things in heaven, while they bring in unto us another principle of life, another manner of living: both wealth and poverty, freedom and slavery, life and death, our world and our polity, all changed.

Not like Plato, who composed that ridiculous Republic, or Zeno, or if there be any one else that has written a polity, or has framed laws. For indeed, touching all these, it has been made manifest by themselves, that an evil spirit, and some cruel demon at war with our race, a foe to modesty, and an enemy to good order, oversetting all things, has made his voice be heard in their soul. When, for example, they make their women common to all, and stripping virgins naked in the Palæstra, bring them into the gaze of men; and when they establish secret marriages, mingling all things together and confounding them, and overturning the limits of nature, what else is there to say? For that these their sayings are all inventions of devils, and contrary to nature, even nature herself would testify, not tolerating what we have mentioned; and this, though they write not amidst persecutions, nor dangers, nor fightings, but in all security and freedom, and deck it out with many ornaments from many sources. But these doctrines of the fishermen, chased as they were, scourged and in jeopardy, both learned and unlearned, both bond and free, both kings and private soldiers, both barbarians and Greeks, have received with all good will.

11. And you can not say, that it was because these things were trifling and low, that they were easily to be received by all men: nay, for these doctrines are far higher than those. For as to virginity, they never imagined even the name thereof so much as in a dream, nor yet of voluntary poverty, nor of fasting, nor of any other of those things that are high.

But they that are of our part not only exterminate lust, they chastise not only the act, but even an unchaste look, and insulting language, and disorderly laughter, and dress, and gait, and clamor, and they carry on their exactness even to the smallest things, and have filled the whole earth with the plant of virginity. And touching God too, and the things in heaven, they persuade men to be wise with such knowledge as no one of those has at any time been able so much as to conceive in his mind. For how could they, who made for gods images of beasts, and of monsters that crawl on the earth, and of other things still more vile?

Yet these high doctrines were both accepted and believed, and they flourish every day and increase; but the others have passed away, and perished, having disappeared more easily than spiders' webs.

And very naturally, for they were demons that published these things; wherefore besides their uncleanness, their obscurity is great, and the labor they require greater. For what could be more ridiculous than that republic, in which, besides what I have mentioned, the philosopher, when he has spent lines without number, that he may be able to show what justice is, has over and above this prolixity filled his discourse with much indistinctness? This, even if it did contain anything profitable, must needs be very useless for the life of man. For if the husbandman and the smith, the builder and the pilot, and every one who subsists by the labor of his hands, is to leave his trade, and his honest toils, and is to spend such and such a number of years in order to learn what justice is; before he has learned he will often times be

absolutely destroyed by hunger, and perish because of this justice, not having learned anything else useful to be known, and having ended his life by a cruel death.

12. But our lessons are not such; rather Christ has taught us what is just, and what is seemly, and what is expedient, and all virtue in general, comprising it in few and plain words: at one time saying that, on two commandments hang the Law and the Prophets; Matthew 22:40 that is to say, on the love of God and on the love of our neighbor: at another time, Whatsoever ye would that men should do to you, do ye also to them; for this is the Law and the Prophets. Matthew 7:12

And these things even to a laborer, and to a servant, and to a widow woman, and to a very child, and to him that appears to be exceedingly slow of understanding, are all plain to comprehend and easy to learn. For the lessons of the truth are like this; and the actual result bears witness thereto. All at least have learned what things they are to do, and not learned only, but been emulous also of them; and not in the cities alone nor in the midst of the market places, but also in the summits of the mountains.

Yea, for there will you see true wisdom abounding, and choirs of angels shining forth in a human body, and the commonwealth of Heaven manifested here on earth. For a commonwealth did these fishermen too write for us, not with commands that it should be embraced from childhood, like those others, nor making it a law that the virtuous man must be so many years old, but addressing their discourse generally to every age. For those lessons are children's toys, but these are the truth of things.

And as a place for this their commonwealth they have assigned Heaven, and God they have brought in as the framer thereof, and as lawgiver of the statutes there set; as indeed was their duty. And the rewards in their commonwealth are not leaves of bay nor olive, nor an allowance of meat in the public hall, nor statues of brass, these cold and ordinary things, but a life which has no end, and to become children of God, to join the angels' choir, and to stand by the royal throne, and to be always with Christ. And the popular guides of this commonwealth are publicans, and fishermen, and tent-makers, not such as have lived for a short time, but such as are now living forever. Therefore even after their death they may possibly do the greatest good to the governed.

This republic is at war not with men, but with devils, and those incorporeal powers. Wherefore also their captain is no one of men, nor of angels, but God Himself. And the armor too of these warriors suits the nature of the warfare, for it is not formed of hides and steel, but of truth and of righteousness, and faith, and all true love of wisdom.

13. Since then the aforesaid republic is both the subject on which this book was written, and it is now proposed for us to speak thereof, let us give careful heed to Matthew, discoursing plainly concerning this: for what he says is not his own, but all Christ's, who has made the laws of this city. Let us give heed, I say, that we may be capable of enrolment therein, and of shining forth among those that have already become citizens thereof, and are awaiting those incorruptible crowns. To many, however, this discourse seems to be easy, while the prophetic writings are difficult. But this again is the view of men who know not the depth of the thoughts laid up therein. Wherefore I entreat you to follow us with much diligence, so as to enter into the very ocean of the things written, with Christ for our guide at this our entering in.

But in order that the word may be the more easy to learn, we pray and entreat you, as we have done also with respect to the other Scriptures, to take up beforehand that portion of the Scripture which we may be going to explain, that your reading may prepare the way for your understanding (as also was the case with the eunuch Acts 8:28), and so may greatly facilitate our task.

14. And this because the questions are many and frequent. See, for instance, at once in the beginning of his Gospel, how many difficulties might be raised one after the other. As first, wherefore the genealogy of Joseph is traced, who was not father of Christ. Secondly, whence may it be made manifest that He derives His origin from David, while the forefathers of Mary, who bare Him, are not known, for the Virgin's genealogy is not traced? Thirdly, on what account Joseph's genealogy is traced, when he had nothing to do with the birth; while with regard to the Virgin, who was the very mother, it is not shown of what fathers, or grandfathers, or ancestors, she is sprung.

And along with these things, this is also worth inquiry, wherefore it can be, that, when tracing the genealogy through the men, he has mentioned women also; and why since he determined upon doing this, he yet did not mention them all, but passing over the more eminent, such as Sarah, Rebecca, and as many as are like them, he has brought forward only them that are famed for some bad thing; as, for instance, if any was a harlot, or an adulteress, or a mother by an unlawful marriage, if any was a stranger or barbarian. For he has made mention of the wife of Uriah, and of Tamar, and of Rahab, and of Ruth, of whom one was of a strange race, another an harlot, another was defiled by her near kinsman, and with him not in the form of marriage, but by a stolen intercourse, when she had put on herself the mask of an harlot; and touching the wife of Uriah no one is ignorant, by reason of the notoriety of the crime. And yet the evangelist has passed by all the rest, and inserted in the genealogy these alone. Whereas, if women were to be mentioned, all ought to be so; if not all but some, then those famed in the way of virtue, not for evil deeds.

See you how much care is required of us straightway in the first beginning? And yet the beginning seems to be plainer than the rest; to many perhaps even superfluous, as being a mere numbering of names.

After this, another point again is worth inquiry; wherefore he has omitted three kings. For if, because they were exceeding ungodly, he therefore passed by their names in silence, neither should he have mentioned the others, that were like them.

And this again is another question; why, after having spoken of fourteen generations, he has not in the third division maintained the number.

And wherefore Luke has made mention of other names, and not only not all of them the same, but also many more of them, while Matthew has both fewer and different, though he too has ended with Joseph, with whom Luke likewise concluded.

You see how much wakeful attention is needed on our part, not only for explanation, but even that we may learn what things we have to explain. For neither is this a little matter, to be able to find out the difficulties; there being also this other hard point, how Elizabeth, who was of the Levitical tribe, was kinswoman to Mary.

15. But that we may not overload your memory, by stringing many things together, here let us stay our discourse for a time. For it is enough for you in order that you be thoroughly roused, that you learn the questions only. But if you long for their solution also, this again depends on yourselves, before we speak. For if I see you thoroughly awakened, and longing to learn, I will endeavor to add the solution also; but if gaping and not attending, I will conceal both the difficulties, and their solution, in obedience to a divine law. For, says He, Give not the holy things to the dogs, neither cast ye your pearls before swine, lest they trample them under their feet.

But who is he that tramples them under foot? He that does not account these things precious, and venerable. And who, it may be asked, is so wretched as not to esteem these things venerable, and more precious than all? He who does not bestow on them so much leisure as on the harlot women in the theatres of Satan. For there the multitude pass the whole day, and give up not a few of their domestic concerns for the sake of this unseasonable employment, and they retain with exactness whatever they have heard, and this though it be to the injury of their souls, that they keep it. But here, where God is speaking, they will not bear to tarry even a little time.

Therefore, let me warn you, we have nothing in common with Heaven, but our citizenship goes no further than words. And yet because of this, God has threatened even hell, not in order to cast us therein, but that He might persuade us to flee this grievous tyranny. But we do the opposite, and run each day the way that leads there, and while God is commanding us not only to hear, but also to do what He says, we do not submit so much as to hearken.

When then, I pray you, are we to do what is commanded, and to put our hand to the works, if we do not endure so much as to hear the words that relate to them, but are impatient and restless about the time we stay here, although it be exceedingly short?

16. And besides, when we are talking of indifferent matters, if we see those that are in company do not attend, we call what they do an insult; but do we consider that we are provoking God, if, while He is discoursing of such things as these, we despise what is said, and look another way?

Why, he that is grown old, and has travelled over much country, reports to us with all exactness the number of stadia, and the situations of cities, their plans, and their harbors and markets; but we ourselves know not even how far we are from the city that is in Heaven. For surely we should have endeavored to shorten the space, had we known the distance. That city being not only as far from us as Heaven is from the earth, but even much farther, if we be negligent; like as, on the other hand, if we do our best, even in one instant we shall come to the gates thereof. For not by local space, but by moral disposition, are these distances defined.

But you know exactly the affairs of the world, as well new as old, and such too as are quite ancient; you can number the princes under whom you have served in time past, and the ruler of the games, and them that gained the prize, and the leaders of armies, matters that are of no concern to you; but who has become ruler in this city, the first or the second or the third, and for how long, each of them; and what each has accomplished, and brought to pass, you have not imagined even as in a dream. And the laws that are set in this city you will not endure to hear, nor attend to them, even when others tell you of them. How then, I pray you, do you expect to obtain the blessings that are promised, when thou dost not even attend to what is said?

17. But though never before, now, at any rate, let us do this. Yea, for we are on the point of entering into a city (if God permit) of gold, and more precious than any gold.

Let us then mark her foundations, her gates consisting of sapphires and pearls; for indeed we have in Matthew an excellent guide. For through his gate we shall now enter in, and much diligence is required on our part. For should He see any one not attentive, He casts him out of the city.

Yes, for the city is most kingly and glorious; not as the cities with us, divided into a market-place, and the royal courts; for there all is the court of the King. Let us open therefore the gates of our mind, let us open

our ears, and with great trembling, when on the point of setting foot on the threshold, let us worship the King that is therein. For indeed the first approach has power straightway to confound the beholder.

For the present we find the gates closed; but when we see them thrown open (for this is the solution of the difficulties), then we shall perceive the greatness of the splendor within. For there also, leading you with the eyes of the Spirit, is one who offers to show you all, even this Publican; where the King sits, and who of His host stand by Him; where are the angels, where the archangels; and what place is set apart for the new citizens in this city, and what kind of way it is that leads there, and what manner of portion they have received, who first were citizens therein, and those next after them, and such as followed these. And how many are the orders of these tribes, how many those of the senate, how many the distinctions of dignity.

Let us not therefore with noise or tumult enter in, but with a mystical silence.

For if in a theatre, when a great silence has been made, then the letters of the king are read, much more in this city must all be composed, and stand with soul and ear erect. For it is not the letters of any earthly master, but of the Lord of angels, which are on the point of being read.

If we would order ourselves on this wise, the grace itself of the Spirit will lead us in great perfection, and we shall arrive at the very royal throne, and attain to all the good things, by the grace and love towards man of our Lord Jesus Christ, to whom be glory and might, together with the Father and the Holy Ghost, now and always, even for ever and ever. Amen.

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