

Homily 1 on the Gospel of John (Preface)

by St. John Chrysostom

St. John Chrysostom's homily emphasizes the urgency and importance of attentively receiving divine teachings to transform one's life and elevate the soul towards heaven.

Scripture: Psalm 19:10, Isaiah 1:19, Matthew 7:6, John 15:19, Ephesians 3:10

Topics: "Spiritual Growth", "Divine Revelation"

Description

John Chrysostom emphasizes the importance of attentively listening to the divine message being delivered, comparing it to the eagerness people show towards athletes, musicians, and rhetoricians. He describes the Apostle John as a man speaking from heaven, proclaiming truths sweeter and more delightful than any music, urging the audience to cleanse their souls to fully receive the profound mysteries being shared. Chrysostom urges the listeners to approach the divine message with reverence and earnest will, likening the transformation of the soul to changing from clay to gold in an instant. He warns against indulging in worldly distractions and implores the audience to prioritize the spiritual nourishment offered by the divine message.

Transcript

1. They that are spectators of the heathen games, when they have learned that a distinguished athlete and winner of crowns has come from any quarter, run all together to view his wrestling, and all his skill and strength; and you may see the whole theater of many ten thousands, all there straining their eyes both of body and mind, that nothing of what is done may escape them. So again these same persons, if any admirable musician come among them, leave all that they had in hand, which often is necessary and pressing business, and mount the steps, and sit listening very attentively to the words and the accompaniments, and criticising the agreement of the two. This is what the many do.

Again; those who are skilled in rhetoric do just the same with respect to the sophists, for they too have their theaters, and their audience, and clappings of hands, and noise, and closest criticism of what is said.

And if in the case of rhetoricians, musicians, and athletes, people sit in the one case to look on, in the other to see at once and to listen with such earnest attention; what zeal, what earnestness ought you in reason to display, when it is no musician or debater who now comes forward to a trial of skill, but when a man is speaking from heaven, and utters a voice plainer than thunder? For he has pervaded the whole earth with the sound; and occupied and filled it, not by the loudness of the cry, but by moving his tongue with the grace of God.

And what is wonderful, this sound, great as it is, is neither a harsh nor an unpleasant one, but sweeter and more delightful than all harmony of music, and with more skill to soothe; and besides all this, most holy, and most awful, and full of mysteries so great, and bringing with it goods so great, that if men were exactly and with ready mind to receive and keep them, they could no longer be mere men nor remain upon the earth, but would take their stand above all the things of this life, and having adapted themselves to the condition of angels, would dwell on earth just as if it were heaven.

2. For the son of thunder, the beloved of Christ, the pillar of the Churches throughout the world, who holds the keys of heaven, who drank the cup of Christ, and was baptized with His baptism, who lay upon his Master's bosom with much confidence, this man comes forward to us now; not as an actor of a play, not hiding his head with a mask, (for he has another sort of words to speak,) nor mounting a platform, nor striking the stage with his foot, nor dressed out with apparel of gold, but he enters wearing a robe of inconceivable beauty. For he will appear before us having put on Christ Romans 13:14; Galatians 3:27, having his beautiful feet shod with the preparation of the Gospel of peace Ephesians 6:15; wearing a girdle not about his waist, but about his loins, not made of scarlet leather nor daubed outside with gold, but woven and composed of truth itself. Now will he appear before us, not acting a part, (for with him there is nothing counterfeit, nor fiction, nor fable,) but with unmasked head he proclaims to us the truth unmasked; not making the audience believe him other than he is by carriage, by look, by voice, needing for the delivery of his message no instruments of music, as harp, lyre, or any other the like, for he effects all with his tongue, uttering a voice which is sweeter and more profitable than that of any harper or any music. All heaven is his stage; his theater, the habitable world; his audience, all angels; and of men as many as are angels already, or desire to become so, for none but these can hear that harmony aright, and show it forth by their works; all the rest, like little children who hear, but what they hear understand not, from their anxiety about sweetmeats and childish playthings; so they too, being in mirth and luxury, and living only for wealth and power and sensuality, hear sometimes what is said, it is true, but show forth nothing great or noble in their actions through fastening themselves for good to the clay of the brickmaking. By this Apostle stand the powers from above, marveling at the beauty of his soul, and his understanding, and the bloom of that virtue by which he drew unto him Christ Himself, and obtained the grace of the Spirit. For he has made ready his soul, as some well-fashioned and jeweled lyre with strings of gold, and yielded it for the utterance of something great and sublime to the Spirit.

3. Seeing then it is no longer the fisherman the son of Zebedee, but He who knows the deep things of God 1 Corinthians 2:10, the Holy Spirit I mean, that strikes this lyre, let us hearken accordingly. For he will say nothing to us as a man, but what he says, he will say from the depths of the Spirit, from those secret things which before they came to pass the very Angels knew not; since they too have learned by the voice of John with us, and by us, the things which we know. And this has another Apostle declared, saying, To the intent that unto the principalities and powers might be known by the Church the manifold wisdom of God. Ephesians 3:10 If then principalities, and powers, and Cherubim, and Seraphim, learned these things by the Church, it is very clear that they were exceedingly earnest in listening to this teaching; and even in this we have been not a little honored, that the Angels learned things which before they knew not with us; I do not at present speak of their learning by us also. Let us then show much silence and orderly behavior; not today only, nor during the day on which we are hearers, but during all our life, since it is at all times good to hear Him. For if we long to know what is going on in the palace, what, for instance, the king has said, what he has done, what counsel he is taking concerning his subjects, though in truth these things are for the most part nothing to us; much more is it desirable to hear what God has said, especially when all concerns us. And all this will this man tell us exactly, as being a friend of the King Himself, or rather, as

having Him speaking within himself, and from Him hearing all things which He hears from the Father. I have called you friends, He says, for all things that I have heard of My Father, I have made known unto you. John 15:15

4. As then we should all run together if we saw one from above bend down on a sudden from the height of heaven, promising to describe exactly all things there, even so let us be disposed now. It is from thence that this Man speaks to us; He is not of this world, as Christ Himself declares, You are not of the world John 15:19, and He has speaking within him the Comforter, the Omnipresent, who knows the things of God as exactly as the soul of man knows what belongs to herself, the Spirit of holiness, the righteous Spirit, the guiding Spirit, which leads men by the hand to heaven, which gives them other eyes, fitting them to see things to come as though present, and giving them even in the flesh to look into things heavenly. To Him then let us yield ourselves during all our life in much tranquillity. Let none dull, none sleepy, none sordid, enter here and tarry; but let us remove ourselves to heaven, for there He speaks these things to those who are citizens there. And if we tarry on earth, we shall gain nothing great from thence. For the words of John are nothing to those who do not desire to be freed from this swinish life, just as the things of this world to him are nothing. The thunder amazes our souls, having sound without significance; but this man's voice troubles none of the faithful, yea, rather releases them from trouble and confusion; it amazes the devils only, and those who are their slaves. Therefore that we may know how it amazes them, let us preserve deep silence, both external and mental, but especially the latter; for what advantage is it that the mouth be hushed, if the soul is disturbed and full of tossing? I look for that calm which is of the mind, of the soul, since it is the hearing of the soul which I require. Let then no desire of riches trouble us, no lust of glory, no tyranny of anger, nor the crowd of other passions besides these; for it is not possible for the ear, except it be cleansed, to perceive as it ought the sublimity of the things spoken; nor rightly to understand the awful and unutterable nature of these mysteries, and all other virtue which is in these divine oracles. If a man cannot learn well a melody on pipe or harp, unless he in every way strain his attention; how shall one, who sits as a listener to sounds mystical, be able to hear with a careless soul?

5. Wherefore Christ Himself exhorted, saying, Give not that which is holy unto the dogs, neither cast your pearls before swine. Matthew 7:6 He called these words pearls, though in truth they be much more precious than they, because we have no substance more precious than that. For this reason too He is wont often to compare their sweetness to honey, not that so much only is the measure of their sweetness, but because among us there is nothing sweeter. Now, to show that they very exceedingly surpass the nature of precious stones, and the sweetness of any honey, hear the prophet speaking concerning them, and declaring this superiority; More to be desired are they, he says than gold and much precious stone; sweeter are they also than honey and the honeycomb. Psalm 19:10 But to those (only) who are in health; wherefore he has added, For your servant keeps them. And again in another place calling them sweet he has added, to my throat. For he says, How sweet are your words unto my throat. Psalm 119:103 And again he insists on the superiority, saying, Above honey and the honeycomb to my mouth. For he was in very sound health. And let not us either come near to these while we are sick, but when we have healed our soul, so receive the food that is offered us.

It is for this reason that, after so long a preface, I have not yet attempted to fathom these expressions (of St. John), in order that every one having laid aside all manner of infirmity, as though he were entering into heaven itself, so may enter here pure, and freed from wrath and carefulness and anxiety of this life, of all other passions. For it is not otherwise possible for a man to gain from hence anything great, except he have first so cleansed anew his soul. And let no one say that the time to the coming communion is short,

for it is possible, not only in five days, but in one moment, to change the whole course of life. Tell me what is worse than a robber and a murderer, is not this the extremest kind of wickedness? Yet such an one arrived straight at the summit of excellence, and passed into Paradise itself, not needing days, nor half a day, but one little moment. So that a man may change suddenly, and become gold instead of clay. For since what belongs to virtue and to vice is not by nature, the change is easy, as being independent of any necessity. If you be willing and obedient, He says, you shall eat the good of the land. Isaiah 1:19 Do you see that there needs the will only? will -- not the common wishing of the multitude -- but earnest will. For I know that all are wishing to fly up to heaven even now; but it is necessary to show forth the wish by works. The merchant too wishes to get rich; but he does not allow his wish to stop with the thought of it; no, he fits out a ship, and gets together sailors, and engages a pilot, and furnishes the vessel with all other stores, and borrows money, and crosses the sea, and goes away into a strange land, and endures many dangers, and all the rest which they know who sail the sea. So too must we show our will; for we also sail a voyage, not from land to land, but from earth to heaven. Let us then so order our reason, that it be serviceable to steer our upward course, and our sailors that they be obedient to it, and let our vessel be stout, that it be not swamped amidst the reverses and despondencies of this life, nor be lifted up by the blasts of vainglory, but be a fast and easy vessel. If so we order our ship, and so our pilot and our crew, we shall sail with a fair wind, and we shall draw down to ourselves the Son of God, the true Pilot, who will not leave our bark to be engulfed, but, though ten thousand winds may blow, will rebuke the winds and the sea, and instead of raging waves, make a great calm.

6. Having therefore ordered yourselves, so come to our next assembly, if at least it be at all an object of desire to you to hear somewhat to your advantage, and lay up what is said in your souls. But let not one of you be the wayside, none the stony ground, none the full of thorns. Matthew 13:4-7 Let us make ourselves fallow lands. For so shall we (the preachers) put in the seed with gladness, when we see the land clean, but if stony or rough, pardon us if we like not to labor in vain. For if we shall leave off sowing and begin to cut up thorns, surely to cast seed into ground unwrought were extreme folly.

It is not meet that he who has the advantage of such hearing be partaker of the table of devils. For what fellowship has righteousness with unrighteousness? 2 Corinthians 6:14 You stand listening to John, and learning the things of the Spirit by him; and do you after this depart to listen to harlots speaking vile things, and acting viler, and to effeminates cuffing one another? How will you be able to be fairly cleansed, if you wallow in such mire? Why need I reckon in detail all the indecency that is there? All there is laughter, all is shame, all disgrace, revilings and mockings, all abandonment, all destruction. See, I forewarn and charge you all. Let none of those who enjoy the blessings of this table destroy his own soul by those pernicious spectacles. All that is said and done there is a pageant of Satan. But you who have been initiated know what manner of covenants you made with us, or rather you made with Christ when He guided you into His mysteries, what you spoke to Him, what speech you had with Him concerning Satan's pageant; how with Satan and his angels you renounced this also, and promised that you would not so much as cast a glance that way. There is then no slight ground for fear, lest, by becoming careless of such promises, one should render himself unworthy of these mysteries.

7. Do you see not how in king's palaces it is not those who have offended, but those who have been honorably distinguished, that are called to share special favor, and are numbered among the king's friends. A messenger has come to us from heaven, sent by God Himself, to speak with us on certain necessary matters, and you leave hearing His will, and the message He sends to you, and sit listening to stage-players. What thunderings, what bolts from heaven, does not this conduct deserve! For as it is not

meet to partake of the table of devils, so neither is it of the listening to devils; nor to be present with filthy raiment at that glorious Table, loaded with so many good things, which God Himself has provided. Such is its power, that it can raise us at once to heaven, if only we approach it with a sober mind. For it is not possible that he who is continually under the influence of the words of God, can remain in this present low condition, but he needs must presently take wing, and fly away to the land which is above, and light on the infinite treasures of good things; which may it be that we all attain to, through the grace and lovingkindness of our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom and with whom be glory to the Father and the All-holy Spirit, now and ever, and world without end. Amen.

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