

Homily 10 on Matthew

by St. John Chrysostom

John the Baptist's message of repentance and preparation for the coming of Jesus is a call to all people to turn away from sin and seek righteousness.

Scripture: Isaiah 40:3, Matthew 3:1-11, Luke 3:3, John 1:33, Acts 19:4, Romans 13:12, 1 Corinthians 6:11, Hebrews 10:37

Topics: "Repentance", "Kingdom Of Heaven"

Description

John Chrysostom preaches about the significance of repentance and the coming of the Kingdom of Heaven, as proclaimed by John the Baptist in the wilderness of Judæa. He explains the purpose of Jesus' baptism after thirty years, emphasizing the fulfillment of all righteousness through obedience to the law. John's baptism symbolizes repentance for the remission of sins, urging people to acknowledge their sins, humble themselves, and seek God's grace and forgiveness.

Transcript

Matthew 3:1-2.

In those days comes John the Baptist, preaching in the wilderness of Judæa, and saying, Repent ye: for the kingdom of Heaven is at hand.

How in those days? For not then, surely, when He was a child, and came to Nazareth, but thirty years after, John comes; as Luke also testifies. How then is it said, in those days? The Scripture is always wont to use this manner of speech, not only when it is mentioning what occurs in the time immediately after, but also of things which are to come to pass many years later. Thus also, for example, when His disciples came unto Him as He sat on the Mount of Olives, and sought to learn about His coming, and the taking of Jerusalem: Matthew 24:3 and yet ye know how great is the interval between those several periods. I mean, that having spoken of the subversion of the mother city, and completed His discourse on that subject, and being about to pass to that on the consummation, he inserted, Then shall these things also come to pass; Matthew 24:23 not bringing together the times by the word then, but indicating that time only in which these things were to happen. And this sort of thing he does now also, saying, In those days. For this is not put to signify the days that come immediately after, but those in which these things were to take place, which he was preparing to relate.

But why was it after thirty years, it may be said, that Jesus came unto His baptism? After this baptism He was thenceforth to do away with the law: wherefore even until this age, which admits of all sins, He

continues fulfilling it all; that no one might say, that because He Himself could not fulfill it, He did it away. For neither do all passions assail us at all times; but while in the first age of life there is much thoughtlessness and timidity, in that which comes after it, pleasure is more vehement, and after this again the desire of wealth. For this cause he awaits the fullness of His adult age, and throughout it all fulfills the law, and so comes to His baptism, adding it as something which follows upon the complete keeping of all the other commandments.

To prove that this was to Him the last good work of those enjoined by the law, hear His own words: For thus it becomes us to fulfill all righteousness. Matthew 3:15 Now what He says is like this: We have performed all the duties of the law, we have not transgressed so much as one commandment. Since therefore this only remains, this too must be added, and so shall we fulfill all righteousness. For He here calls by the name of righteousness the full performance of all the commandments.

2. Now that on this account Christ came to His baptism, is from this evident. But wherefore was this baptism devised for Him? For that not of himself did the son of Zacharias proceed to this, but of God who moved him -- this Luke also declares, when he says, The word of the Lord came unto him, Luke 3:2 that is, His commandment. And he himself too says, He that sent me to baptize with water, the same said to me, upon whom you shall see the Spirit descending like a dove, and remaining on Him, the same is He which baptizes with the Holy Ghost. John 1:33 Wherefore then was he sent to baptize? The Baptist again makes this also plain to us, saying, I knew Him not, but that He should be made manifest to Israel, therefore am I come baptizing with water. John 1:31

And if this was the only cause, how says Luke, that he came into the country about Jordan, preaching the baptism of repentance for the remission of sins? Luke 3:3 And yet it had not remission, but this gift pertained unto the baptism that was given afterwards; for in this we are buried with Him, and our old man was then crucified with Him, and before the cross there does not appear remission anywhere; for everywhere this is imputed to His blood. And Paul too says, But you are washed, but you are sanctified, not by the baptism of John, but in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, and by the Spirit of our God. 1 Corinthians 6:11 And elsewhere too he says, John verily preached a baptism of repentance, (he says not of remission,) that they should believe in Him that should come after him. Acts 19:4 For when the sacrifice was not yet offered, neither had the spirit yet come down, nor sin was put away, nor the enmity removed, nor the curse destroyed; how was remission to take place?

What means then, for the remission of sins?

The Jews were senseless, and had never any feeling of their own sins, but while they were justly accountable for the worst evils, they were justifying themselves in every respect; and this more than anything caused their destruction, and led them away from the faith. This, for example, Paul himself was laying to their charge, when he said, that they being ignorant of God's righteousness, and going about to establish their own, had not submitted themselves unto the righteousness of God. Romans 10:3 And again: What shall we say then? That the Gentiles, which followed not after righteousness, have attained to righteousness; but Israel, which followed after the law of righteousness, has not attained unto the law of righteousness. Wherefore? Because they sought it not by faith, but as it were by works.

Since therefore this was the cause of their evils, John comes, doing nothing else but bringing them to a sense of their own sins. This, among other things, his very garb declared, being that of repentance and confession. This was indicated also by what he preached, for nothing else did he say, but bring forth fruits

meet for repentance. Matthew 3:8 Forasmuch then as their not condemning their own sins, as Paul also has explained, made them start off from Christ, while their coming to a sense thereof would set them upon longing to seek after their Redeemer, and to desire remission; this John came to bring about, and to persuade them to repent, not in order that they might be punished, but that having become by repentance more humble, and condemning themselves, they might hasten to receive remission.

But let us see how exactly he has expressed it; how, having said, that he came preaching the baptism of repentance in the wilderness of Judæa, he adds, for remission, as though he said, For this end he exhorted them to confess and repent of their sins; not that they should be punished, but that they might more easily receive the subsequent remission. For had they not condemned themselves, they could not have sought after His grace; and not seeking, they could not have obtained remission.

Thus that baptism led the way for this; wherefore also he said, that they should believe in Him which should come after him; Acts 19:4 together with that which has been mentioned setting forth this other cause of His baptism. For neither would it have been as much for him to have gone about to their houses, and to have led Christ around, taking Him by the hand, and to have said, Believe in This Man; as for that blessed voice to be uttered, and all those other things performed in the presence and sight of all.

On account of this He comes to the baptism. Since in fact both the credit of him that was baptizing, and the purport of the thing itself, was attracting the whole city, and calling it unto Jordan; and it became a great spectacle.

Therefore he humbles them also when they have come, and persuades them to have no high fancies about themselves; showing them liable to the utmost evils, unless they would repent, and leaving their forefathers, and all vaunting in them, would receive Him that was coming.

Because in fact the things concerning Christ had been up to that time veiled, and many thought He was dead, owing to the massacre which took place at Bethlehem. For though at twelve years old He discovered Himself, yet did He also quickly veil Himself again. And for this cause there was need of that splendid exordium and of a loftier beginning. Wherefore also then for the first time he with clear voice proclaims things which the Jews had never heard, neither from prophets, nor from any besides; making mention of Heaven, and of the kingdom there, and no longer saying anything touching the earth.

But by the kingdom in this place he means His former and His last advent.

3. But what is this to the Jews? one may say, for they know not even what you say. Why, for this cause, says he, do I so speak, in order that being roused by the obscurity of my words, they may proceed to seek Him, whom I preach. In point of fact, he so excited them with good hopes when they came near, that even many publicans and soldiers inquired what they should do, and how they should direct their own life; which was a sign of being thenceforth set free from all worldly things, and of looking to other greater objects, and of foreboding things to come. Yea, for all, both the sights and the words of that time, led them unto lofty thoughts.

Conceive, for example, how great a thing it was to see a man after thirty years coming down from the wilderness, being the son of a chief priest, who had never known the common wants of men, and was on every account venerable, and had Isaiah with him. For he too was present proclaiming him, and saying, This is he who I said should come crying, and preaching throughout the whole wilderness with a clear voice. For so great was the earnestness of the prophets touching these things, that not their own Lord

only, but him also who was to minister unto Him, they proclaimed a long time beforehand, and they not only mentioned him, but the place too in which he was to abide, and the manner of the doctrine which he had to teach when he came, and the good effect that was produced by him.

See, at least, how both the prophet and the Baptist go upon the same ideas, although not upon the same words.

Thus the prophet says that he shall come saying, Prepare ye the way of the Lord, make his paths straight. Isaiah 40:3 And he himself when he had come said, Bring forth fruits meet for repentance, Matthew 3:8 which corresponds with, Prepare ye the way of the Lord. Do you see that both by the words of the prophet, and by his own preaching, this one thing is manifested alone; that he had come, making a way and preparing beforehand, not bestowing the gift, which was the remission, but ordering in good time the souls of such as should receive the God of all?

But Luke expresses somewhat further: not repeating the exordium, and so passing on, but setting down likewise all the prophecy. For every valley, says he, shall be filled; and every mountain and hill shall be brought low; and the crooked shall be made straight, and the rough ways smooth; and all flesh shall see the salvation of God. Luke 3:5-6 Do you perceive how the prophet has anticipated all by his words; the concourse of the people, the change of things for the better, the easiness of that which was preached, the first cause of all that was occurring, even if he has expressed it rather as in figure, it being in truth a prophecy which he was uttering? Thus, when he says, Every valley shall be filled, and every mountain and hill shall be brought low, and the rough ways shall be made smooth; he is signifying the exaltation of the lowly, the humiliation of the self-willed, the hardness of the law changed into easiness of faith. For it is no longer toils and labors, says he, but grace, and forgiveness of sins, affording great facility of salvation. Next he states the cause of these things, saying, All flesh shall see the salvation of God; no longer Jews and proselytes only, but also all earth and sea, and the whole race of men. Because by the crooked things he signified our whole corrupt life, publicans, harlots, robbers, magicians, as many as having been perverted before afterwards walked in the right way: much as He Himself likewise said, publicans and harlots go into the kingdom of God before you, Matthew 21:31 because they believed. And in other words also again the prophet declared the self-same thing, thus saying, Then wolves and lambs shall feed together. Isaiah 11:6 For like as here by the hills and valleys, he meant that incongruities of character are blended into one and the same evenness of self-restraint, so also there, by the characters of the brute animals indicating the different dispositions of men, he again spoke of their being linked in one and the same harmony of godliness. Here also, as before, stating the cause. That cause is, There shall be He that rises to reign over the Gentiles, in Him shall the Gentiles trust: much the same as here too he said, All flesh shall see the salvation of God, everywhere declaring that the power and knowledge of these our Gospels would be poured out to the ends of the world, converting the human race, from a brutish disposition and a fierce temper to something very gentle and mild.

4. And the same John had his raiment of camel's hair, and a leathern girdle about his loins. Matthew 3:4

Observe, how the prophets foretold some things, others they left to the evangelists. Wherefore also Matthew both sets down the prophecies, and adds his own part, not accounting even this superfluous, to speak of the dress of the righteous man.

For indeed it was a marvellous and strange thing to behold so great austerity in a human frame: which thing also particularly attracted the Jews, seeing in him the great Elijah, and guided by what they then

beheld, to the memory of that blessed man; or rather, even to a greater astonishment. For the one indeed was brought up in cities and in houses, the other dwelt entirely in the wilderness from his very swaddling clothes. For it became the forerunner of Him who was to put away all the ancient ills, the labor, for example, the curse, the sorrow, the sweat; himself also to have certain tokens of such a gift, and to come at once to be above that condemnation. Thus he neither ploughed land, nor opened furrow, he ate not his bread by the sweat of his face, but his table was hastily supplied, and his clothing more easily furnished than his table, and his lodging yet less troublesome than his clothing. For he needed neither roof, nor bed, nor table, nor any other of these things, but a kind of angel's life in this our flesh did he exhibit. For this cause his very garment was of hair, that by his dress he might instruct men to separate themselves from all things human, and to have nothing in common with the earth, but to hasten back to their earlier nobleness, wherein Adam was before he wanted garments or robe. Thus that garb bore tokens of nothing less than a kingdom, and of repentance.

And do not say to me, Whence had he a garment of hair and a girdle, dwelling as he did in the wilderness? For if you are to make a difficulty of this, you will also inquire into more things besides; how in the winters, and how in the heats of summer, he continued in the wilderness, and this with a delicate body, and at an immature age? How the nature of his infant flesh endured such great inconstancy of weather, and a diet so uncommon, and all the other hardships arising from the wilderness?

Where now are the philosophers of the Greeks, who at random and for nought emulated the shamelessness of the Cynics (for what is the profit of being shut up in a tub, and afterwards running into such wantonness)? They who encompassed themselves with rings and cups, and men servants and maid servants, and with much pomp besides, falling into either extreme. But this man was not so; but he dwelt in the wilderness as in Heaven, showing forth all strictness of self-restraint. And from thence, like some angel from Heaven, he went down unto the cities, being a champion of godliness, and a crowned victor over the world, and a philosopher of that philosophy which is worthy of the heavens. And these things were, when sin was not yet put away, when the law had not yet ceased, when death was not yet bound, when the brazen gates were not yet broken up, but while the ancient polity still was in force.

Such is the nature of a noble and thoroughly vigilant soul, for it is everywhere springing forward, and passing beyond the limits set to it; as Paul also did with respect to the new polity.

But why, it may be asked, did he use a girdle with his raiment? This was customary with them of old time, before men passed into this soft and loose kind of dress. Thus, for instance, both Peter John 21:7 appears to have been girded, and Paul; for it says, the man that owns this girdle. Acts 21:11 And Elijah 2 Kings 1:8 too was thus arrayed, and every one of the saints, because they were at work continually, laboring, and busying themselves either in journeyings, or about some other necessary matter; and not for this cause only, but also with a view of trampling under foot all ornaments, and practising all austerity. This very kind of thing accordingly Christ declares to be the greatest praise of virtue, thus saying, What went ye out for to see? A man clothed in soft raiment? Behold, they that wear soft clothing are in king's houses. Matthew 11:8

But if he, who was so pure, and more glorious than the heaven, and above all prophets, than whom none greater was born, and who had such great boldness of speech, thus exercised himself in austerity, scorning so exceedingly all dissolute delicacy, and training himself to this hard life; what excuse shall we have, who after so great a benefit, and the unnumbered burdens of our sins, do not show forth so much as the least part of his penance, but are drinking and surfeiting, and smelling of perfumes, and in no better

trim than the harlot women on the stage, and are by all means softening ourselves, and making ourselves an easy prey to the devil?

5. Then went out to him all Judea, and Jerusalem, and all the region round about Jordan, and were baptized of him, confessing their sins. Matthew 3:5-6

Do you see how great power was in the coming of the prophet? How he stirred up all the people; how he led them to a consideration of their own sins? For it was indeed worthy of wonder to behold him in human form showing forth such things and using so great freedom of speech, and rising up in condemnation of all as children, and having his great grace beaming out from his countenance. And, moreover, the appearance of a prophet after the great interval of time contributed to their amazement, because the gift had failed them, and returned to them after a long time. And the nature of his preaching too was strange and unusual. For they heard of none of those things to which they were accustomed; such as wars and battles and victories below, and famine and pestilence, and Babylonians and Persians, and the taking of the city, and the other things with which they were familiar, but of Heaven and of the kingdom there, and of the punishment in hell. And it was for this cause, let me add, that although they that committed revolt in the wilderness, those in the company of Judas, and of Theudas, Acts 5:36-37 had been all of them slain no great while before, yet they were not the more backward to go out there. For neither was it for the same objects that he summoned them, as for dominion, or revolt, or revolution; but in order to lead them by the hand to the kingdom on high. Wherefore neither did he keep them in the wilderness to take them about with him, but baptizing them, and teaching them the rules concerning self-denial, he dismissed them; by all means instructing them to scorn whatever things are on earth, and to raise themselves up to the things to come, and press on every day.

6. This man then let us also emulate, and forsaking luxury and drunkenness let us go over unto the life of restraint. For this surely is the time of confession both for the uninitiated and for the baptized; for the one, that upon their repentance they may partake of the sacred mysteries; for the others, that having washed away their stain after baptism, they may approach the table with a clean conscience. Let us then forsake this soft and effeminate way of living. For it is not, it is not possible at once both to do penance and to live in luxury. And this let John teach you by his raiment, by his food, by his abode. What then? Do you require us, you may say, to practise such self-restraint as this? I do not require it, but I advise and recommend it. But if this be not possible to you, let us at least, though in cities, show forth repentance, for the judgment is surely at our doors. But even if it were further off, we ought not even so to be emboldened, for the term of each man's life is the end of the world virtually to him that is summoned. But that it is even at the doors, hear Paul saying, The night is far spent, the day is at hand; Romans 13:12 and again, He that comes will come, and will not tarry. Hebrews 10:37

For the signs too are now complete, which announce that day. For this Gospel of the Kingdoms, says He, shall be preached in all the world for a witness unto all nations; and then shall the end come. Attend with care to what is said. He said not, when it has been believed by all men, but when it has been preached to all. For this cause he also said, for a witness to the nations, to show, that He does not wait for all men to believe, and then for Him to come. Since the phrase, for a witness, has this meaning, for accusation, for reproof, for condemnation of them that have not believed.

But we, while hearing these things and seeing them, slumber, and see dreams, sunk in a lethargy, as in some very deepest night. For the things present are nothing better than dreams, whether they be prosperous, or whether they be painful. Wherefore I entreat you now at length to be awakened, and to

look another way, unto the Sun of Righteousness. For no man while sleeping can see the sun, nor delight his eyes with the beauty of its beams; but whatever he may see, he beholds all as in a dream. For this cause we need much penance, and many tears; both as being in a state of insensibility while we err, and because our sins are great, and beyond excuse. And that I lie not, the more part of them that hear me are witnesses. Nevertheless, although they be beyond excuse, let us repent, and we shall receive crowns.

7. But by repentance I mean, not only to forsake our former evil deeds, but also to show forth good deeds greater than those. For, bring forth, says he, fruits meet for repentance. But how shall we bring them forth? If we do the opposite things: as for instance, have you seized by violence the goods of others? Henceforth give away even your own. Have you been guilty of fornication for a long time? abstain even from your wife for certain appointed days; exercise continence. Have you insulted and stricken such as were passing by? Henceforth bless them that insult you, and do good to them that smite you. For it suffices not for our health to have plucked out the dart only, but we must also apply remedies to the wound. Have you lived in self-indulgence, and been drunken in time past? Fast, and take care to drink water, in order to destroy the mischief that has so grown up within you. Have you beheld with unchaste eyes beauty that belonged to another? Henceforth do not so much as look upon a woman at all, that you may stand in more safety. For it is said, Depart from evil, and do good; and again, Make your tongue to cease from evil, and your lips that they speak no guile. But tell me the good too. Seek peace, and pursue it: I mean not peace with man only, but also peace with God. And he has well said, pursue her: for she is driven away, and cast out; she has left the earth, and is gone to sojourn in Heaven. Yet shall we be able to bring her back again, if we will put away pride and boasting, and whatsoever things stand in her way, and will follow this temperate and frugal life. For nothing is more grievous than wrath and fierce anger. This renders men both puffed up and servile, by the former making them ridiculous, by the other hateful; and bringing in opposite vices, pride and flattery, at the same time. But if we will cut off the greediness of this passion, we shall be both lowly with exactness, and exalted with safety. For in our bodies too all distempers arise from excess; and when the elements thereof leave their proper limits, and go on beyond moderation, then all these countless diseases are generated, and grievous kinds of death. Somewhat of the same kind one may see take place with respect to the soul likewise.

8. Let us therefore cut away excess, and drinking the salutary medicine of moderation, let us abide in our proper temperament, and give careful heed to our prayers. Though we receive not, let us persevere that we may receive; and if we do receive, then because we have received. For it is not at all His wish to defer giving, but by such delay He is contriving for us to persevere. With this intent He does also lengthen out what is good for us better than we do, and loves us more ardently than those who gave us birth. And let both these considerations be a charm for us to chant to ourselves in every terror that occurs, that so we may quell our despondency, and in all things glorify Him, who on our behalf does and orders all, even God.

For so we shall both easily repulse all hostile devices, and attain unto the incorruptible crowns: by the grace and love towards man of our Lord Jesus Christ, with whom be unto the Father glory, might, and honor, together with the Holy Ghost, now, and always, even for ever and ever. Amen.

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