

Homily 13 on Ephesians

by St. John Chrysostom

The Gentiles' way of life is vain and darkened, and they are alienated from the life of God due to ignorance and hardening of their heart, but we can be renewed in the spirit of our mind by putting on the new man.

Topics: "Righteous Living", "Spiritual Transformation"

Description

John Chrysostom emphasizes the importance of living a righteous life in contrast to the ways of the Gentiles, highlighting the consequences of ignorance and hardening of the heart that lead to immoral behaviors. He urges believers to put off the old ways of life, characterized by greed and uncleanness, and to put on the new man created in righteousness and holiness of truth, following the example of Christ. Chrysostom challenges the congregation to strive for virtue, moderation, and self-control, pointing out the transformative power of Christ's teachings in shaping individuals to live in accordance with God's will.

Transcript

Ephesians 4:17-19

This I say therefore, and testify in the Lord, that you no longer walk as the Gentiles also walk, in the vanity of their mind, being darkened in their understanding, alienated from the life of God, because of the ignorance that is in them, because of the hardening of their heart: who being past feeling, gave themselves up to lasciviousness, to work all uncleanness with greediness.

These words are not addressed to the Ephesians only, but are now addressed also to you; and that, not from me, but from Paul; or rather, neither from me nor from Paul, but from the grace of the Spirit. And we then ought so to feel, as though that grace itself were uttering them. And now hear what it says. This I say therefore, and testify in the Lord, that you no longer walk as the Gentiles also walk, in the vanity of their mind, being darkened in their understanding, alienated from the life of God because of the ignorance that is in them, because of the hardening of their heart. If then it is ignorance, if it is hardening, why blame it? if a man is ignorant, it were just, not that he should be ill-treated for it, nor be blamed, but that he should be informed of those things of which he is ignorant. But mark how at once he cuts them off from all excuse. Who being past feeling, says he, gave themselves up to lasciviousness, to work all uncleanness with greediness; but you did not so learn Christ. Here he shows us, that the cause of their hardening was their way of life, and that their life was the consequence of their own indolence and want of feeling.

Who being past feeling, says he, gave themselves up.

Whenever then ye hear, that God gave them up unto a reprobate mind Romans 1:28, remember this expression, that they gave themselves up. If then they gave themselves over, how did God give them over? And if again God gave them over, how did they give themselves over? You see the seeming contradiction. The word, gave them over, then, means this, He permitted them to be given over. Do you see, that the impure life is the ground for like doctrines also? Every one, says the Lord, that does ill hates the light, and comes not to the light. John 3:20 For how could a profligate man, one more immersed in the practice of indiscriminate lewdness than the swine that wallow in the mire, and who is a lover of money, and has not so much as any desire after temperance, enter upon a life like this? They made the thing, says he, their work. Hence their hardening Ephesians 4:19, hence the darkness of their understanding. There is such a thing as being in the dark, even while the light is shining, when the eyes are weak; and weak they become, either by the influx of ill humors, or by superabundance of rheum. And so surely is it also here; when the strong current of the affairs of this life overwhelms the perceptive power of the understanding, it is thrown into a state of darkness. And in the same way as if we were placed in the depths under water, we should be unable to see the sun through the quantity of water lying, like a sort of barrier, above us, so surely, in the eyes of the understanding also a blindness of the heart takes place, that is, an insensibility, whenever there is no fear to agitate the soul. There is no fear of God, it says, before his eyes Psalm 36:1; and again, The fool has said in his heart, There is no God. Psalm 14:1 Now blindness arises from no other cause than from want of feeling; this clogs the channel; for whenever the fluids are curdled and collected into one place, the limb becomes dead and void of feeling; and though thou burn it, or cut it, or do what you will with it, still it feels not. So is it also with those persons, when they have once given themselves over to lasciviousness: though thou apply the word to them like fire, or steel, yet nothing touches, nothing reaches them; their limb is utterly dead. And unless you can remove the insensibility, so as to touch the healthy members, everything you do is vain.

With greediness, says he.

Here he has most completely taken away their excuse; for it was in their power, if at least they chose it, not to be greedy, nor to be lascivious, nor gluttonous, and yet to enjoy their desires. It was in their power to partake in moderation of riches, and even of pleasure and of luxury; but when they indulged the thing immoderately, they destroyed all.

To work all uncleanness, says he.

You see how he strips them of all excuse by speaking of working uncleanness. They did not sin, he means, by making a false step, but they worked out these horrid deeds, and they made the thing a matter of study. All uncleanness; uncleanness is all adultery, fornication, unnatural lust, envy, every kind of profligacy and lasciviousness.

Ver. 20, 21. But ye did not so learn Christ, he continues, if so be that you heard Him, and were taught in Him even as truth is in Jesus.

The expression, If so be that you heard Him, is not that of one doubting, but of one even strongly affirming: as he also speaks elsewhere, If so be that it is a righteous thing with God to recompense affliction to them that afflict you. 2 Thessalonians 1:6 That is to say, It was not for these purposes that ye learned Christ.

Ver. 22. That ye put away as concerning your former manner of life, the old man.

This then surely is to learn Christ, to live rightly; for he that lives wickedly knows not God, neither is known of Him; for hear what he says elsewhere, They profess that they know God, but by their works they deny Him. Titus 1:16

As truth is in Jesus; that you put away as concerning your former manner of life, the old man.

That is to say, It was not on these terms that you entered into covenant. What is found among us is not vanity, but truth. As the doctrines are true, so is the life also. Sin is vanity and falsehood; but a right life is truth. For temperance is indeed truth, for it has a great end; whereas profligacy ends in nothing.

Which waxes corrupt, says he, after the lusts of deceit. As his lusts became corrupt, so himself also. How then do his lusts become corrupt? By death all things are dissolved; for hear the Prophet, how he says, In that very day his thoughts perish. Psalm 146:4 And not by death only, but by many things besides; for instance, beauty, at the advance of either disease or old age, withdraws and dies away, and suffers corruption. Bodily vigor again is destroyed by the same means; nor does luxury itself afford the same pleasure in old age, as is evident from the case of Barzillai: the history, no doubt, you know. Or again, in another sense, lust corrupts and destroys the old man; for as wool is destroyed by the very same means by which it is produced, so likewise is the old man. For love of glory destroys him, and pleasures will often destroy him, and lust will utterly deceive him. For this is not really pleasure but bitterness and deceit, all pretense and outward show. The surface, indeed, of the things is bright, but the things themselves are only full of misery and extreme wretchedness, and loathsomeness, and utter poverty. Take off the mask, and lay bare the true face, and you shall see the cheat, for cheat it is, when that which is, appears not, and that which is not, is displayed. And it is thus that impositions are effected.

The Apostle delineates for us four men. Of these I shall give an explanation. In this place he mentions two, speaking thus, Putting away the old man, be ye renewed in the spirit of your mind, and put on the new man. And in the Epistle to the Romans, two more, as where he says, But I see a different law in my members warring against the law of my mind, and bringing me into captivity under the law of sin which is in my members. Romans 7:23 And these latter bear affinity to those former two, the new man to the inner man, and the old man to the outer man. However, three of these four were subject to corruption. Or rather there are three, the new man, the old, and this, man in his substance and nature.

Ver. 23. And that you be renewed, says he, in the spirit of your mind.

In order that no one may suppose that, whereas he speaks of old and new, he is introducing a different person, observe his expression, That ye be renewed. To be renewed is, when the selfsame thing which has grown old is renewed, changed from one thing into the other. So that the subject indeed is the same, but the change is in that which is accidental. Just as the body indeed is the same, and the change in that which is accidental, so is it here. How then is the renewal to take place? In the spirit of your mind, says he. Whosoever therefore has the Spirit, will perform no old deed, for the Spirit will not endure old deeds. In the spirit, says he, of your mind, that is, in the spirit which is in your mind.

Ver. 24. And put on the new man.

Do you see that the subject is one, but the clothing is twofold, that which is put off, and that which is put on? The new man, he continues, which after God has been created in righteousness and holiness of truth. Now wherefore does he call virtue a man? And wherefore vice, a man? Because a man cannot be shown without acting; so that these things, no less than nature, show a man, whether he be good or evil. Now as

to undress one's self and to dress one's self is easy, so may we see it is with virtue and vice. The young man is strong; wherefore let us also become strong for the performance of good actions. The young man has no wrinkle, therefore neither should we have. The young man wavers not, nor is he easily taken with diseases, therefore neither should we be.

Observe here how he calls this realizing of virtue, this bringing of it into being from nothing, a creation. But what? Was not that other former creation after God? No, in no-wise, but after the devil. He is the sole creator of sin.

How is this? For man is created henceforth, not of water, nor of earth, but in righteousness and holiness of truth. What is this? He straightway created him, he means, to be a son: for this takes place from Baptism. This it is which is the reality, in righteousness and holiness of truth. There was of old a righteousness, there was likewise a holiness with the Jews. Yet was that righteousness not in truth, but in figure. For the being clean in body was a type of purity, not the truth of purity; was a type of righteousness, not the truth of righteousness. In righteousness, says he, and holiness, which are of truth.

And this expression is used with reference to falsehood; for many there are, who to them that are without, seem to be righteous, yet are false. Now by righteousness is meant universal virtue. For hearken to Christ, how He says, Unless your righteousness shall exceed the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees, you shall in nowise enter into the kingdom of heaven. Matthew 5:20 And again, he is called righteous, who has no charge against him; for so even in courts of justice we say that that man is righteous, who has been unrighteously treated, and has not done unrighteously in return. If therefore we also before the terrible Tribunal shall be able to appear righteous one towards another, we may meet with some lovingkindness. Toward God indeed it is impossible we should appear so, whatever we may have to show. For everywhere He overcomes in what is righteous, as the Prophet judgest." In the Sept. it is: κα- νικ-σ-ζ ν τ κρ-νεσθα- σε, which is followed by Paul in Romans 3:4 (except νικ-σεις, fut. ind., instead of aor. subj.). We have given here the rendering of the Rev. Ver. of Romans 3:4.--G.A.]--> also says, That You might prevail when You come into judgment. But if we violate not what is righteous towards each other, then shall we be righteous. If we shall be able to show that we have been treated unrighteously, then shall we be righteous.

How does he say to them who are already clothed, put on? He is now speaking of that clothing which is from life and good works. Before, the clothing was from Baptism, whereas now it is from the daily life and from works; no longer after the lusts of deceit, but after God. But what means the word holy? It is that which is pure, that which is due; hence also we use the word of the last duty in the case of the departed, as much as to say, I owe them nothing further, I have nothing else to answer for. Thus it is usual for us to say, I have acquitted myself of all obligations, and the like, meaning, I owe nothing more.

Moral. Our part then is, never to put off the garment of righteousness, which also the Prophet calls, the garment of salvation Isaiah 61:10, that so we may be made like God. For He indeed has put on righteousness. This garment let us put on. Now the word, put on, plainly declares nothing else, than that we should never at all put it off. For hear the Prophet, where he says, He clothed himself also with cursing as with his garment, and it came into his inward parts. Psalm 109:18 And again, Who coverest Yourself with light as with a garment. Psalm 104:2 And again, it is usual with us to speak concerning men, such an one has put on such an one. So then it is not for one day, nor for two, nor for three, but he would have us ever arrayed in virtue, and never stripped of this garment. For a man is not so disfigured when he is stripped of his clothing, as when he is stripped of his virtue. In the former case his fellow-servants behold

his nakedness, in the latter his Lord and the Angels. If ever thou happen to see any one going out naked through the public square, tell me, are you not distressed? When then you go about stripped of this garment, what shall we say? Seest not those beggars whom we are wont to call strollers, how they roam about, how we pity even them? And yet nevertheless they are without excuse. We do not excuse them when they have lost their clothes by gaming; and how then, if we lose this garment, shall God pardon us? For whenever the devil sees a man stripped of his virtue, he straightway disguises and disfigures his face, and wounds him, and drives him to great straits.

Let us strip ourselves of our riches, that we be not stripped of righteousness. The garb of wealth mars this garment. It is a robe of thorns. Thorns are of this nature; and the more closely they are wrapped around us, the more naked are we made. Lasciviousness strips us of this garment; for it is a fire, and the fire will consume this garment. Wealth is a moth; and as the moth eats through all things alike, and spares not even silken garments, so does this also. All these therefore let us put off, that we may become righteous, that we may put on the new man.

Let us keep nothing old, nothing outward, nothing that is corrupt. Virtue is not toilsome, she is not difficult to attain. Do you not see them that are in the mountains? They forsake both houses, and wives, and children, and all preëminence, and shut themselves away from the world, and clothe themselves in sackcloth, and strew ashes beneath them; they wear collars hung about their necks, and have pent themselves up in a narrow cell. Nor do they stop here, but torture themselves with fastings and continual hunger.

Did I now enjoin you to do the like, would ye not all start away? Would ye not say, it is intolerable? But no, I say not that we must needs do anything like this:-- I would fain indeed that it were so, still I lay down no law. What then? Enjoy your baths, take care of your body, and throw yourself freely into the world, and keep a household, have your servants to wait on you, and make free use of your meats and drinks! But everywhere drive out excess, for that it is which causes sin, and the same thing, whatever it be, if it becomes excessive, becomes a sin; so that excess is nothing else than sin.

For observe, when anger is excited above what is meet, then it rushes out into insult, then it commits every sort of injury; so does inordinate passion for beauty, for riches, for glory, or for anything else. And tell me not, that indeed, those of whom I spoke were strong; for many far weaker and richer, and more luxurious than you are, have taken upon them that austere and rugged life. And why speak I of men? Damsels not yet twenty years old, who have spent their whole time in inner chambers, and in a delicate and effeminate mode of life, in inner chambers full of sweet ointments and perfumes, reclining on soft couches, themselves soft in their nature, and rendered yet more tender by their over indulgence, who all the day long have had no other business than to adorn themselves, to wear jewels, and to enjoy every luxury, who never waited on themselves, but had numerous handmaids standing beside them, who wore soft raiment softer than their skin, fine linen and delicate, who reveled continually in roses and such like sweet odors -- yea, these very ones, in a moment, seized with Christ's flame, have put off all that indolence and even their very nature, have forgotten their delicateness and youth, and like so many noble wrestlers, have stripped themselves of that soft clothing, and rushed into the midst of the contest.

And perhaps I shall appear to be telling things incredible, yet nevertheless are they true. These then, these very tender damsels, as I myself have heard, have brought themselves to such a degree of severe training, that they will wrap the coarsest horsehair about their own naked bodies, and go with those tender soles unsandaled, and will lie upon a bed of leaves: nay more, that they watch the greater part of the

night, and that they take no heed of perfumes nor of any other of their old delights, but will even let their head, once so carefully dressed, go without special care, with the hair just plainly and simply bound up, so as not to fall into unseemliness.

And their only meal is in the evening, a meal not even of herbs nor of bread, but of flour and beans and pulse and olives and figs. They spin without intermission, and labor far harder than their handmaids at home. What more? They will take upon them to wait upon women who are sick, carrying their beds, and washing their feet. Nay, many of them even cook. So great is the power of the flame of Christ; so far does their zeal surpass their very nature.

However, I demand nothing like this of you, seeing you have a mind to be outstripped by women. Yet at least, if there be any tasks not too laborious, at least perform these: restrain the rude hand, and the incontinent eye. What is there, tell me, so hard, what so difficult? Do what is just and right, wrong no man, be ye poor or rich, shopkeepers or hired servants; for unrighteousness may extend even to the poor. Or see ye not how many broils these engage in, and turn all things upside down?

Marry freely, and have children. Paul also gave charge to such, to such he wrote. Is that struggle I spoke of too great, and the rock too lofty, and its top too near unto Heaven, and are you unable to attain to such an height? At least then lay hold on lesser things, and aim at those which are lower. Have you not courage to get rid of your own riches? At least then forbear to seize on the things of others, and to do them wrong. Are you unable to fast? At least then give not yourself to self-indulgence.

Are you unable to lie upon a bed of leaves? Still, prepare not for yourselves couches inlaid with silver; but use a couch and coverings formed not for display, but for refreshment; not couches of ivory. Make yourself small. Why fill your vessel with overwhelming cargoes? If you be lightly equipped, you shall have nothing to fear, no envy, no robbers, no liars in wait. For indeed you are not so rich in money as you are in cares. Thou aboundest not so much in possessions, as in anxieties and in perils, which bring in many temptations and lusts. 1 Timothy 6:9 These things they endure, who desire to gain great possessions.

I say not, minister unto the sick; yet, at least, bid your servant do it. Do you see then how that this is no toilsome task? No, for how can it be, when tender damsels surpass us by so great a distance? Let us be ashamed of ourselves, I entreat you; for in worldly matters, to be sure, we in no point yield to them, neither in wars, nor in games; but in the spiritual contest they get the advantage of us, and are the first to seize the prize, and soar higher, like so many eagles: while we, like jackdaws, are ever living in the steam and smoke; for truly is it the business of jackdaws, and of greedy dogs, to be setting one's thoughts upon caterers and cooks.

Hearken about the women of old; they were great characters, great women and admirable; such were Sarah, Rebekah, Rachel, Deborah, and Hannah; and such there were also in the days of Christ. Yet did they in no case outstrip the men, but occupied the second rank. But now it is the very contrary; women outstrip and eclipse us. How contemptible! What a shame is this! We hold the place of the head, and are surpassed by the body. We are ordained to rule over them; not merely that we may rule, but that we may rule in goodness also; for he that rules, ought especially to rule in this respect, by excelling in virtue; whereas if he is surpassed, he is no longer ruler.

Perceive ye how great is the power of Christ's coming? How He dissolved the curse? For indeed there are more virgins than before among women, there is more modesty in those virgins, and there are more widows. No woman would lightly utter so much as an unseemly word. Wherefore then, tell me, do you use

filthy speech? For tell me not that they were virgins in despondency or despair.

The sex is fond of ornament, and it has this failing. Yet even in this you husbands surpass them, who pride yourselves even upon them, as your own proper ornament; for I do not think that the wife is so ostentatious of her own jewels, as the husband is of those of his wife. He is not so proud of his own golden girdle, as he is of his wife's wearing jewels of gold. So that even of this you are the causes, who light the spark and kindle up the flame. But what is more, it is not so great a sin in a woman as in a man. You are ordained to regulate her; in every way you claim to have the preëminence. Show her then in this also, that you take no interest in this costliness of hers, by your own apparel. It is more suitable for a woman to adorn herself, than for a man. If then thou escape not the temptation, how shall she escape it? They have moreover their share of vainglory, but this is common to them with men. They are in a measure passionate, and this again is common to them with men. But as to those things wherein they excel, these are no longer common to them with men; their sanctity, I mean, their fervency, their devotion, their love towards Christ. Wherefore then, one may say, did Paul exclude them from the teacher's seat? And here again is a proof how great a distance they were from the men, and that the women of those days were great. For, tell me, while Paul was teaching, or Peter, or those saints of old, had it been right that a woman should intrude into the office? Whereas we have gone on till we have come so debased, that it is worthy of question, why women are not teachers. So truly have we come to the same weakness as they. These things I have said not from any desire to elate them, but to shame ourselves, to chastise, and to admonish us, that so we may resume the authority that belongs to us, not inasmuch as we are greater in size, but because of our foresight, our protection of them, and our virtue. For thus shall the body also be in the order which befits it, when it has the best head to rule. And God grant that all, both wives and husbands, may live according to His good pleasure, that we may all in that terrible day be counted worthy to enjoy the lovingkindness of our Master, and to attain those good things which are promised in Jesus Christ our Lord, with whom to the Father, together with the Holy Ghost, be glory, might, and honor, now and forever and ever. Amen.

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