

Homily 13 on the Acts of the Apostles

by St. John Chrysostom

The Apostles' boldness and obedience to God led to their escape from prison and their continued preaching of the Gospel, despite the opposition of the High Priest and the Sadducees.

Scripture: Acts 5:19-37

Topics: "Obedience To God", "Persecution And Faith"

Description

John Chrysostom preaches on Acts 5:17-18, highlighting the indignation of the high-priest and the Sadducees towards the Apostles, who were put in prison but miraculously freed by an Angel of the Lord. Despite opposition, the Apostles boldly continue to teach in the temple, leading to confusion and disbelief among the rulers. Chrysostom emphasizes the importance of obedience to God rather than men, showcasing the Apostles' unwavering faith and courage in the face of persecution and threats of death.

Transcript

Acts 5:17-18

Then having risen up, the high-priest and they that were with him (which is the sect of the Sadducees) were filled with indignation, and laid their hands on the Apostles, and put them in the common prison.

Having risen up, that is, being roused, being excited at the things taking place, the high-priest and they which were with him (which is the sect of the Sadducees) were filled with indignation, and laid their hands on the Apostles: they now assault them more vigorously: and put them in the common prison; but did not immediately bring them to trial, because they expected them again to be softened down. But the Angel of the Lord opened the prison doors, and brought them forth, and said, Go, stand and speak in the temple to the people all the words of this life.

And when they heard that, they entered into the temple early in the morning, and taught. Acts 5:19-21 This was done both for the encouragement of the disciples, and for the benefit and instruction of the others. And observe how the proceeding in the present instance is just the same as in what Christ Himself did. Namely, in His miracles though He does not let men see them in the act of being wrought, He furnishes the means whereby they may be apprised of the things wrought: thus, in His Resurrection, He did not let them see how He rose: in the water made wine, the guests do not see it done, for they have been drinking much, and the discernment He leaves to others.

Just so in the present case, they do not see them in the act of being brought forth, but the proofs from which they might gather what had been done, they do see. And it was by night that the Angel put them forth. Why was this? Because in this way they were more believed than they would have been in the other: so, people would not even have had occasion to put the question: they would not in some other way have believed. So it was in the old times, in the case of Nebuchadnezzar: he saw them praising God in the furnace, and then indeed he was put in amazement.

Daniel 3:24 Whereas then these priests ought as their first question to have asked, How did you come out? Instead of this, as if nothing had happened, they ask, Did we not strictly charge you not to speak? Acts 5:28 And observe, by report of others they are apprised of all the circumstances: they see the prison remaining closed with safety, and the guards standing before the doors. A twofold security this; as was the case at the sepulchre, where was both the seal, and the men to watch.

See how they fought against God! Say, was this of man's doing, that happened to them? Who led them forth, when the doors were shut? How came they out, with the keepers standing before the door? Verily they must be mad or drunken to talk so. Here are men, whom neither prison, nor bonds, nor closed doors, had been able to keep in; and yet they expect to overpower them: such is their childish folly! Their officers come and confess what has taken place, as if on purpose to debar them from all show of reason.

Do you mark how there is miracle upon miracle, differing in kind, some wrought by them, others on them, and these more illustrious than the others? And when they heard that, they entered into the temple early in the morning, and taught. But the high-priest came, and they that were with him, and called the council together, and all the senate of the children of Israel, and sent to the prison to have them brought. But when the officers came, and found them not in the prison, they returned, and told, saying, The prison truly found we shut with all safety, and the keepers standing without before the doors: but when we had opened, we found no man within.

Now when the high-priest and the captain of the temple and the chief priests heard these things, they doubted of them whereunto this would grow. Acts 5:21-25 It is well ordered that the information was not brought to them at once, but they are first utterly at a loss what to think, that when they have considered it well and seen that there is a Divine Power in the case, then they may learn the whole state of the case. Then came one, and told them, saying, Behold, the men whom you put in prison are standing in the temple, and teaching the people.

Then went the captain with the other officers, and brought them without violence: for they feared the multitude, lest they should have been stoned. (v. 25, 26.) O the folly of the men! They feared, says he, the multitude. Why, how had the multitude helped the Apostles? When they ought to have feared that God Who was continually delivering them like winged creatures out of their power, instead of that, they feared the multitude! And the high-priest, shameless, reckless, senseless, asked them, saying, Did not we strictly command you that you should not teach in this name?

And, behold you have filled Jerusalem with your doctrine and intend to bring this man's blood upon us. (v. 27, 28.) What then (say the Apostles)? Again with mildness they address them; and yet they might have said, Who are you, that you countermand God? But what do they say? Again in the way of exhortation and advice, and with much mildness, they make answer. Then Peter and the other Apostles answered and said, We ought to obey God rather than men. Acts 5:29 High magnanimity!

He shows them too that they are fighting against God. For, he says, Whom you killed, Him has God raised up. The God of our fathers raised up Jesus, Whom you slew and hanged on a tree. Him has God exalted with His right hand to be a Prince and a Saviour, for to give repentance to Israel, and forgiveness of sins. (v. 30, 31.) And again they refer the whole to the Father, that He should not seem to be alien to the Father. And has exalted, says He, with his right hand. He affirms not merely the Resurrection, but the Exaltation also.

For to give repentance to Israel. Observe here as before the gain (to them): observe the perfection of doctrine conveyed in the form of apology. And we are witnesses of these things. Acts 5:32 Great boldness of speech! And the ground of their credibility: And so is also the Holy Ghost, Whom God has given to them that obey Him. Do you observe that they allege not only the Spirit's testimony? And they said not, Whom He has given to us, but, to them that obey Him: therein alike showing their own unassuming temper, and intimating the greatness of the gift, and showing the hearers that it was possible for them also to receive the Spirit.

See, how these people were instructed both by deeds and by words, and yet they paid no heed, that their condemnation might be just. For to this end did God suffer the Apostles to be brought to trial, that both their adversaries might be instructed, and all might learn, and that the Apostles might be invigorated to boldness of speech. And they hearing that, were cut to the heart. Acts 5:33 The others (on a former occasion) when they heard these things were pricked; here they were cut (as with a saw) (διεπροντο) and desired to slay them. Acts 2:37

But it is necessary now to look over again what we have read. But the angel of the Lord by night opened the prison doors, and brought them forth, and said, Go, stand and speak in the temple to the people all the words of this life. Brought them forth. (Recapitulation, v. 19, 20.) He did not bring them away to benefit themselves thereby, but, Stand, he says, and speak in the temple to the people. But if the guards had put them out, as those thought, they would have fled, that is, supposing they had been induced to come out: and if those had put them forth, they would not have stood in the temple, but would have absconded.

No one is so void of sense, as not at once to see this. Did we not strictly charge you? Acts 5:28 Well, if they undertook to obey you, you do well to call them to account: but if even at the very time they told you they would not obey, what account have you to call them to, what defense is there for them to make? And behold you have filled Jerusalem with your doctrine, and intend to bring this man's blood upon us. Mark the inconsistency of the accusations and the exceeding folly.

They want to make it appear now, that the dispositions of the Jews are sanguinary, as if they were doing these things not for the truth's sake, but in the wish to be revenged. And for this reason too the Apostles do not answer them with defiance (θρασως): for they were teachers. And yet where is the man, who, with a whole city to back him, and endowed with so great grace, would not have spoken and uttered something big? But not so did these: for they were not angered; no, they pitied these men, and wept over them, and marked in what way they might free them from their error and wrath.

And they no longer say to them, Judge ye: Acts 4:19 but they simply affirm, saying, Whom God raised up, Him do we preach: it is by the will of God that these things are done. They said not, Did not we tell you even then, that we cannot but speak the things which we have seen and heard? Acts 4:20 for they are not contentious for glory; but they repeat again the same story -- the Cross, the Resurrection. And they tell not, wherefore He was crucified -- that it was for our sakes: but they hint at this indeed, but not openly as

yet, wishing to terrify them awhile.

And yet what sort of rhetoric is here? None at all, but everywhere it is still the Passion, and the Resurrection and the Ascension, and the end wherefore: The God of our fathers raised up Jesus, etc. (v. 30, 31.) And yet what improbable assertions are these! Very improbable, no doubt; but for all that, not rulers, not people, had a word to say against them: but those had their mouths stopped, and these received the teaching. And we, says he, are witnesses of these things. Acts 5:32 Of what things?

Of His having promised forgiveness and repentance: for the Resurrection indeed was acknowledged, now. But that He gives forgiveness, both we are witnesses, and so is the Holy Ghost, Who would not have come down, unless sins had been first remitted: so that this is an indisputable proof. When they heard that, they were cut (to the heart), and took counsel to slay them. Acts 5:33 Do you hear of the forgiveness of sins, O wretched man, and that God does not demand punishment, and do you wish to slay them?

What wickedness was this! And yet, either they ought to have convicted them of lying, or if they could not do that, to have believed: but if they did not choose to believe, yet they ought not to slay them. For what was there deserving of death? Such was their intoxication, they did not even see what had taken place. Observe, how everywhere the Apostles, when they have made mention of the crime, add the mention of forgiveness; showing, that while what had been done was worthy of death, that which was given was proffered to them as to benefactors! In what other way could any one have persuaded them?

Then stood up the high-priest, etc. As men in high repute, these (the Apostles) were about to take their place near to the Prophets. The Sadducees were they that were most sore on the subject of the Resurrection. But perchance some one will say: Why, what man, endowed with such gifts as the Apostles were, would not have been great? But consider, I pray you, how, before that they were endowed with the grace, they were continuing steadfastly with one accord in prayer Acts 1:14, and depending on the aid from above.

And do you, my beloved, hope for the kingdom of heaven, yet endurest naught? And have you received the Spirit, yet sufferest not such things, nor encounterest perils? But they, before they had breathing-time from their former dangers, were again led into others. And even this too, that there is no arrogance, no conceit, how great a good it is! To converse with mildness, what a gain it is! For not all that they did was the immediate work of grace, but there are many marks of their own zeal as well.

That the gifts of grace shine forth in them, this was from their own diligence. See, for instance, from the very beginning, how careful Peter is; how sober and vigilant: how they that believed cast away their riches, had no private property, continued in prayer, showed that they were of one mind, passed their time in fastings. What grace, I ask (alone), did all this? Therefore it is that He brings the evidence home to them through their own officers. Just as in the case of Christ, it was their officers who said, Never man spoke as this Man speaks.

John 7:46 These (proofs) are more apt to be believed than the Resurrection. -- Observe also the moderation shown by (the rulers) themselves, and how they give way. The high-priest asked them, saying, etc. Acts 5:27: here he reasons with them, forsooth, in a moderate tone; for he was frightened: indeed to hinder was what he desired rather than to kill, since that he cannot do: and with the view to rouse them all, and show them the extreme danger they are in, And intend, says he (to the Apostles), to bring this man's blood upon us.

Do you still take Him to be but man? He wants to make it appear that the injunction was necessary for their own safety. But mark what (Peter) says: Him has God exalted with His right hand to be a Prince and a Saviour, for to give repentance to Israel, and forgiveness of sins. Acts 5:31 Here he forbears to mention the Gentiles, not to give them a handle against him. And they desired, it says, to slay them. Acts 5:33 See again these in perplexity, these in pain: but those in quiet and cheerfulness and delight.

It is not merely, They were grieved, but They were cut (to the heart). Truly this makes good that proverb, Evil do, evil fare: as we may see in this case. Here were these men in bonds, set at the bar of judgment, and the men that sit in judgment upon them were in distress and helpless perplexity. For as he who strikes a blow upon the adamant, gets the shock of the blow himself, so it was with these men. But they saw that not only was their boldness of speech not stopped, but rather their preaching increased the more, and that they discoursed without a thought of fear, and afforded them no handles against them.

Let us imitate these, my beloved: let us be undaunted in all our dangers. There is nothing dreadful to him that fears God; but all that is dreadful is for others. For when a man is delivered from his passions, and regards all present things as a shadow, say, from whom shall he suffer anything dreadful? Whom shall he have to fear? Whom shall he need plead to? Let us flee to this Rock which cannot be shaken. If any one were to build for us a city, and throw up a wall around it, and remove us to a land uninhabited, where there were none to disturb us, and there supply us with abundance of everything, and not suffer us to have anything to trouble us with anybody, he would not set us in such perfect safety, as Christ has done now.

Be it a city made of brass, if you will, surrounded on all sides with a wall, lofty and impregnable, let there be no enemy near it; let it have land plentiful and rich, let there be added abundance of other things, let the citizens too be mild and gentle, and no evil-doer there, neither robber, nor thief, no informer, no court of justice, but merely agreements (συναλλ■λματα); and let us dwell in this city: not even thus would it be possible to live in security. Wherefore? Because there could not but be differences with servants, with wives, with children, to be a groundwork of much discomfort.

But here was nothing of the kind; for here was nothing at all to pain them or cause any discomfort. Nay, what is more wonderful to say, the very things which are thought to cause discomfort, became matter of all joy and gladness. For tell me, what was there for them to be annoyed at? What to take amiss? Shall we cite a particular case for comparison with them? Well, let there be one of consular dignity, let him be possessed of much wealth, let him dwell in the imperial city, let him have no troublesome business with anybody, but only live in delight, and have nothing else but this to do, seated at the very summit of wealth and honor and power: and let us set against him a Peter, in bonds if you will, in evils without number: and we shall find that he is the man that lives the most delightfully.

For when there is such excess of joy, as to be delighted when in bonds, think what must be the greatness of that joy! For like as those who are high in office, whatsoever evils may happen, are not sensible of them, but continue in enjoyment: so did these the more rejoice on account of these very evils. For it is impossible, impossible in words to express how great pleasure falls to their lot, who suffer for Christ's sake: for they rejoice in their sufferings, rather than in their good things.

Whoever loves Christ, knows what I say.-- But what as regards safety? And who, I ask, if he were ever so rich, could have escaped so many perils, going about among so many different nations, for the sole purpose of bringing about a reformation in their manner of life? For it was just as if by royal mandate that they carried all before them, nay, far more easily, for never mandate could have been so effectual, as their

words were. For the royal edict compels by necessity, but these drew men willingly and spontaneously, yea, and with hearts above measure thankful.

What royal edict, I ask, would ever have persuaded men to part with all their property and their lives; to despise home, country, kindred, yea, even self-preservation? Yet the voices of fishermen and tent-makers availed for this. So that they were both happy, and more powerful and strong than all others. Yes, say you, those of course were, for they wrought miracles. (supra, p. 83, note 4.) But I ask what miracles did those who believed work, the three thousand, and the five thousand; and yet these, we read, passed their time in gladness?

And well they might: for that which is the groundwork of all discomforts, the possession of riches, was done away with. For that, that, I say, was ever the cause both of wars and fighting, and grief, and discomfort, and all evils: the thing which makes life full of labor and troubles, it is that. And indeed it would be found that many more rich than poor have reason to be sad. If any think this is not true, their notion is derived not from the nature of the things, but from their own fancy.

And if the rich do enjoy some sort of pleasure, this is not to be wondered at: for even those who are covered all over with the itch, have a good deal of pleasure. For that the rich are for all the world like these, and their mind affected in the same sort, is plain from this circumstance. Their cares annoy them, and they choose to be engrossed with them for the sake of the momentary pleasure: while those who are free from these affections, are in health and without discomfort.

Whether is more pleasant, I ask, whether of the two more safe? To have to take thought only for a single loaf of bread and suit of clothes, or for an immense family, both slaves and freemen, not having care about himself (only)? For as this man has his fears for himself, so have you for those who depend on your own person. Why, I pray you, does poverty seem a thing to be shunned? Just in the same way as other good things are, in the judgment of many, things to be deprecated.

Yes, say you, but it is not that those good things are subjects for deprecation, but that they are hard of attainment. Well, so is poverty, not a thing to be deprecated, but hard of attainment: so that if one could bear it, there would be no reason to deprecate it. For how is it that the Apostles did not deprecate it? How is it that many even choose it, and so far from deprecating, even run to it? For that which is really a thing to be deprecated, cannot be an object of choice save to madmen.

But if it be the men of philosophic and elevated minds that betake themselves to this, as to a safe and salubrious retreat, no wonder if to the rest it wears a different appearance. For, in truth, the rich man seems to me to be just like a city, unwall'd, situated in a plain, inviting assailants from all sides: but poverty, a secure fortress, strong as brass can make it, and the way up to it difficult. And yet, say you, the fact is just the reverse: for these are they, who are often dragged into courts of law, these are they who are overborne and ill-treated.

No: not the poor, as poor, but those who being poor want to be rich. But I am not speaking of them, but of such as make it their study to live in poverty. For say, how comes it that nobody ever drags the brethren of the hills into courts of law? And yet if to be poor is to be a mark for oppression, those ought most of all to be dragged there, since they are poorer than all others. How comes it that nobody drags the common mendicants into the law-courts? Because they have come to the extreme of poverty.

How is it that none does violence to them, none lays vexatious informations against them? Because they abide in a stronghold too safe for that. How many think it a condition hard to struggle against, poverty, I mean, and begging! What then, I ask, is it a good thing to beg? It is good, if there be comfort, say you; if there be one to give: it is a life so free from trouble and reverses, as every one knows. But I do not mean to commend this; God forbid! What I advise is the not aiming at riches.

For say, whom would you rather call blessed? Those who find themselves at home with virtue, (■ πτηδε■ους πρ■ς ■ρετ■ν) or those who stand aloof? Of course, those who are near. Say then, which of the two is the man to learn anything that is profitable, and to shine in the true wisdom? The former, or the latter? The first, all must see. If you doubt it, satisfy yourself in this way. Fetch hither from the market-place any of the poor wretches there; let him be a cripple, lame, maimed: and then produce some other person, comely of aspect, strong in body, full of life and vigor in every part, overflowing with riches: let him be of illustrious birth, and possessed of great power.

Then let us bring both these into the school of philosophy: which of them, I ask, is more likely to receive the things taught? The first precept, at the outset, Be lowly and moderate (for this is Christ's command): which will be most able to fulfil it, this one or the other? Blessed are they that mourn Matthew 5:4: which will most receive this saying? Blessed are the lowly: which will most listen to this? Blessed are the pure in heart. Blessed are they which do hunger and thirst after righteousness.

Blessed are they which are persecuted for righteousness' sake (ib. 8, 6, 10). Which will with ease receive these sayings? And, if you will, let us apply to all of them these rules, and see how they will fit. Is not the one inflamed and swollen all over, while the other is ever lowly minded and subdued in his whole bearing? It is quite plain. Yes, and there is a saying to that effect among those that are without: (I was) a slave, Epictetus by name, a cripple in body, for poverty a very Iruus, and a friend of the Immortals.

For how, I would ask, can it be otherwise, but that the soul of the rich must teem with evils; folly, vainglory, numberless lusts, anger and passion, covetousness, iniquity, and what not? So that even for philosophy, the former is more congenially (■ πτηδε■α) disposed than the latter. By all means seek to ascertain which is the more pleasant: for this I see is the point everywhere discussed, whether such an one has the more enjoyable way of life. And yet even as regards this, we need not be in doubt; for to be near to health, is also to have much enjoyment.

But whether of the two, I would ask, is best disposed (■ πτη■δειος) to the matter now in hand, that which we will needs carry into accomplishment -- our law, I mean -- the poor man or the rich? Whether of them will be apt to swear? The man who has children to be provoked with, the man who has his covenants with innumerable parties, or the man who is concerned to apply for just a loaf of bread or a garment? This man has not even need of oaths, should he wish, but always lives free from cares of business; nay, more, it is often seen that he who is disciplined to swear not at all, will also despise riches; and one shall see in his whole behavior his ways all branching off from this one good habit, and leading to meekness, to contempt of riches, to piety, to subduedness of soul, to compunction of heart.

Then let us not be indolent, my beloved, but let us again show great earnestness: they who have succeeded, that they may keep the success achieved, that they be not easily caught by the receding wave, nor the refluent tide carry them back again [they too who are yet behindhand, that they may be raised up again, and strive to make up that which is wanting. And meanwhile let those who have succeeded, help those who have not been able to do the same]: and by reaching out their hands, as they

would to men struggling in the deep water, receive them into the haven of no-swearing (■ νόμοσ■αζ).

For it is indeed a haven of safety, to swear not at all: whatever storms burst upon us, to be in no danger of sinking there: be it anger, be it insult, be it passion, be it what it may, the soul is stayed securely; yea, though one have vented some chance word or other that ought not, and had been better not, to be spoken, yet he has laid himself under no necessity, no law. (Supra, Hom. ix. §5. ad. Pop. Ant. viii. §3.) See what Herod did for his oath's sake: he cut off the head of the Fore-runner.

But because of his oaths, it says, and because of them which sat at meat with him Mark 6:26, he cut off the head of the Prophet. Think what the tribes had to suffer for their oath in the matter of the tribe of Benjamin Judges 21:5-10: what Saul had to suffer for his oath 1 Samuel 14:24, etc.. For Saul indeed perjured himself, but Herod did what was even worse than perjury, he committed murder. Joshua again -- you know how it fared with him, for his oath in the matter of the Gibeonites.

Joshua 9 For it is indeed a snare of Satan, this swearing. Let us burst the cords; let us bring ourselves into a condition in which it will be easy (not to swear); let us break loose from every entanglement, and from this snare of Satan. Let us fear the command of the Lord: let us settle ourselves in the best of habits: that, making progress, and having achieved this and the rest of the commandments, we may obtain those good things which are promised to them that love Him, through the grace and loving-kindness of our Lord Jesus Christ, with Whom to the Father and the Holy Ghost together be glory, power, and honor, now and ever, and world without end. Amen.

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