

Homily 14 on Ephesians

by St. John Chrysostom

St. John Chrysostom emphasizes the importance of putting away falsehood, being angry and sinning not, and not giving place to the devil in order to live a life that honors God.

Scripture: Ephesians 4:25-27, Ephesians 4:29-30

Topics: "Christian Unity", "Holy Spirit"

Description

John Chrysostom emphasizes the importance of truthfulness and unity among believers, urging them to put away falsehood and speak truth to one another, as they are members of the same body. He warns against harboring anger and advises not to let unresolved conflicts linger, as it can give the devil a foothold. Chrysostom highlights the significance of not grieving the Holy Spirit through unwholesome speech and actions, encouraging believers to edify one another with their words and conduct, reflecting the grace they have received from God.

Transcript

Ephesians 4:25-27

Wherefore, putting away falsehood, speak ye truth each one with his neighbor; for we are members one of another. Be angry, and sin not; let not the sun go down upon your wrath: neither give place to the devil.

Having spoken of the old man generally, he next draws him also in detail; for this kind of teaching is more easily learned when we learn by particulars. And what says he? Wherefore, putting away falsehood. What sort of falsehood? Idols does he mean? Surely not; not indeed but that they are falsehood also. However, he is not now speaking of them, because these persons had nothing to do with them; but he is speaking of that which passes between one man and another, meaning that which is deceitful and false. Speak ye truth, each one, says he, with his neighbor; then what is more touching to the conscience still, because we are members one of another. Let no man deceive his neighbor. As the Psalmist says here and there; With flattering lip and with a double heart do they speak. Psalm 12:2 For there is nothing, no, nothing so productive of enmity as deceit and guile.

Observe how everywhere he shames them by this similitude of the body. Let not the eye, says he, lie to the foot, nor the foot to the eye. For example, if there shall be a deep pit, and then by having reeds laid across upon the mouth of it upon the earth, and yet concealed under earth, it shall by its appearance furnish to the eye an expectation of solid ground, will not the eye use the foot, and discover whether it

yields and is hollow underneath, or whether it is firm and resists? Will the foot tell a lie, and not report the truth as it is? And what again? If the eye were to spy a serpent or a wild beast, will it lie to the foot? Will it not at once inform it, and the foot thus informed by it refrain from going on? And what again, when neither the foot nor the eye shall know how to distinguish, but all shall depend upon the smelling, as, for example, whether a drug be deadly or not; will the smelling lie to the mouth? And why not? Because it will be destroying itself also. But it tells the truth as it appears to itself. And what again? Will the tongue lie to the stomach? Does it not, when a thing is bitter, reject it, and, if it is sweet, pass it on? Observe ministration, and interchange of service; observe a provident care arising from truth, and, as one might say, spontaneously from the heart. So surely should it be with us also; let us not lie, since we are members one of another. This is a sure token of friendship; whereas the contrary is of enmity. What then, you will ask, if a man shall use treachery against you? Hearken to the truth. If he use treachery, he is not a member; whereas he says, lie not towards the members.

Be angry, and sin not.

Observe his wisdom. He both speaks to prevent our sinning, and, if we do not listen, still does not forsake us; for his fatherly compassion does not desert him. For just as the physician prescribes to the sick what he must do, and if he does not submit to it, still does not treat him with contempt, but proceeding to add what advice he can by persuasion, again goes on with the cure; so also does Paul. For he indeed who does otherwise, aims only at reputation, and is annoyed at being disregarded; whereas he who on all occasions aims at the recovery of the patient, has this single object in view, how he may restore the patient, and raise him up again. This then is what Paul is doing. He has said, Lie not. Yet if ever lying should produce anger, he goes on again to cure this also. For what says he? Be angry, and sin not. It were good indeed never to be angry. Yet if ever any one should fall into passion, still let him not fall into so great a degree. For let not the sun, says he, go down upon your wrath. Would you have your fill of anger? One hour, or two, or three, is enough for you; let not the sun depart, and leave you both at enmity. It was of God's goodness that he rose: let him not depart, having shone on unworthy men. For if the Lord of His great goodness sent him, and has Himself forgiven you your sins, and yet you forgive not your neighbor, look, how great an evil is this! And there is yet another besides this. The blessed Paul dreads the night, lest overtaking in solitude him that was wronged, still burning with anger, it should again kindle up the fire. For as long as there are many things in the daytime to banish it, you are free to indulge it; but as soon as ever the evening comes on, be reconciled, extinguish the evil while it is yet fresh; for should night overtake it, the morrow will not avail to extinguish the further evil which will have been collected in the night. Nay, even though you should cut off the greater portion, and yet not be able to cut off the whole, it will again supply from what is left for the following night, to make the blaze more violent. And just as, should the sun be unable by the heat of the day to soften and disperse that part of the air which has been during the night condensed into cloud, it affords material for a tempest, night overtaking the remainder, and feeding it again with fresh vapors: so also is it in the case of anger.

Neither give place to the devil.

So then to be at war with one another, is to give place to the devil; for, whereas we had need to be all in close array, and to make our stand against him, we have relaxed our enmity against him, and are giving the signal for turning against each other; for never has the devil such place as in our enmities. Numberless are the evils thence produced. And as stones in a building, so long as they are closely fitted together and leave no interstice, will stand firm, while if there is but a single needle's passage through, or a crevice no broader than a hair, this destroys and ruins all; so is it with the devil.

So long indeed as we are closely set and compacted together, he cannot introduce one of his wiles; but when he causes us to relax a little, he rushes in like a torrent. In every case he needs only a beginning, and this is the thing which it is difficult to accomplish; but this done, he makes room on all sides for himself. For henceforth he opens the ear to slanders, and they who speak lies are the more trusted: they have enmity which plays the advocate, not truth which judges justly.

And as, where friendship is, even those evils which are true appear false, so where there is enmity, even the false appear true. There is a different mind, a different tribunal, which does not hear fairly, but with great bias and partiality. As, in a balance, if lead is cast into the scale, it will drag down the whole; so is it also here, only that the weight of enmity is far heavier than any lead. Wherefore, let us, I beseech you, do all we can to extinguish our enmities before the going down of the sun.

For if you fail to master it on the very first day, both on the following, and oftentimes even for a year, you will be protracting it, and the enmity will thenceforward augment itself, and require nothing to aid it. For by causing us to suspect that words spoken in one sense were meant in another, and gestures also, and everything, it infuriates and exasperates us, and makes us more distempered than madmen, not enduring either to utter a name, or to hear it, but saying everything in invective and abuse.

How then are we to allay this passion? How shall we extinguish the flame? By reflecting on our own sins, and how much we have to answer for to God; by reflecting that we are wreaking vengeance, not on an enemy, but on ourselves; by reflecting that we are delighting the devil, that we are strengthening our enemy, our real enemy, and that for him we are doing wrong to our own members. Would you be revengeful and be at enmity? Be at enmity, but be so with the devil, and not with a member of your own.

For this purpose it is that God has armed us with anger, not that we should thrust the sword against our own bodies, but that we should baptize the whole blade in the devil's breast. There bury the sword up to the hilt; yea, if you will, hilt and all, and never draw it out again, but add yet another and another. And this actually comes to pass when we are merciful to those of our own spiritual family and peaceably disposed one towards another. Perish money, perish glory and reputation; my own member is dearer to me than they all. Thus let us say to ourselves; let us not do violence to our own nature to gain wealth, to obtain glory.

Ver. 28. Let him that stole, says he, steal no more.

Do you see what are the members of the old man? Falsehood, revenge, theft. Why said he not, Let him that stole be punished, be tortured, be racked; but, let him steal no more? But rather let him labor, working with his hands the thing that is good, that he may have whereof to give to him that has need.

Where are they which are called pure; they that are full of all defilement, and yet dare to give themselves a name like this? For it is possible, very possible, to put off the reproach, not only by ceasing from the sin, but by working some good thing also. Perceive ye how we ought to get quit of the sin? They stole. This is the sin. They steal no more. This is not to do away the sin. But how shall they? If they labor, and charitably communicate to others, thus will they do away the sin. He does not simply desire that we should work, but so work as to labor, so as that we may communicate to others. For the thief indeed works, but it is that which is evil.

Ver. 29. Let no corrupt speech proceed out of your mouth.

What is corrupt speech? That which is said elsewhere to be also idle, backbiting, filthy communication, jesting, foolish talking. See ye how he is cutting up the very roots of anger? Lying, theft, unseasonable conversation. The words, however, Let him steal no more, he does not say so much excusing them, as to pacify the injured parties, and to recommend them to be content, if they never suffer the like again. And well too does he give advice concerning conversation; inasmuch as we shall pay the penalty, not for our deeds only, but also for our words.

But such as is good, he proceeds, for edifying, as the need may be, that it may give grace to them that hear.

That is to say, What edifies your neighbor, that only speak, not a word more. For to this end God gave you a mouth and a tongue, that you might give thanks to Him, that you might build up your neighbor. So that if you destroy that building, better were it to be silent, and never to speak at all. For indeed the hands of the workmen, if instead of raising the walls, they should learn to pull them down, would justly deserve to be cut off. For so also says the Psalmist; The Lord shall cut off all flattering lips. Psalm 12:3 The mouth -- this is the cause of all evil; or rather not the mouth, but they that make an evil use of it. From thence proceed insults, revilings, blasphemies, incentives to lusts, murders, adulteries, thefts, all have their origin from this. And how, you will say, do murders? Because from insult you will go on to anger, from anger to blows, from blows to murder. And how, again, adultery? Such a woman, one will say, loves you, she said something nice about you. This at once unstrings your firmness, and thus are your passions kindled within you.

Therefore Paul said, such as is good. Since then there is so vast a flow of words, he with good reason speaks indefinitely, charging us to use expressions of that kind, and giving us a pattern of communication. What then is this? By saying, for edifying, either he means this, that he who hears you may be grateful to you: as, for instance, a brother has committed fornication; do not make a display of the offense, nor revel in it; you will be doing no good to him that hears you; rather, it is likely, you will hurt him, by giving him a stimulus. Whereas, advise him what to do, and you are conferring on him a great obligation. Discipline him how to keep silence, teach him to revile no man, and you have taught him his best lesson, you will have conferred upon him the highest obligation. Discourse with him on contrition, on piety, on almsgiving; all these things will soften his soul, for all these things he will own his obligation. Whereas by exciting his laughter, or by filthy communication, you will rather be inflaming him. Applaud the wickedness, and you will overturn and ruin him.

Or else he means thus, that it may make them, the hearers, full of grace. For as sweet ointment gives grace to them that partake of it, so also does good speech. Hence it was moreover that one said, Your name is as ointment poured forth. Canticles 1:3 It caused them to exhale that sweet perfume. You see that what he continually recommends, he is saying now also, charging every one according to his several ability to edify his neighbors. Thou then that givest such advice to others, how much more to yourself!

Ver. 30. And grieve not, he adds, the Holy Spirit of God.

A matter this more terrible and startling, as he also says in the Epistle to the Thessalonians; for there too he uses an expression of this sort. He that rejects, rejects not man, but God. 1 Thessalonians 4:8 So also here. If you utter a reproachful word, if you strike your brother, you are not striking him, you are grieving the Holy Spirit. And then is added further the benefit bestowed, in order to heighten the rebuke.

And grieve not the Holy Spirit, says He, in whom you were sealed unto the day of redemption.

He it is who marks us as a royal flock; He, who separates us from all former things; He, who suffers us not to lie among them that are exposed to the wrath of God -- and do you grieve Him? Look how startling are his words there; For he that rejects, says he, rejects not man, but God: and how cutting they are here, Grieve not the Holy Spirit, says he, in whom you were sealed.

Moral. Let this seal then abide upon your mouth, and never destroy the impression. A spiritual mouth never utters a thing of the kind. Say not, It is nothing, if I do utter an unseemly word, if I do insult such an one. For this very reason is it a great evil, because it seems to be nothing. For things which seem to be nothing are thus easily thought lightly of; and those which are thought lightly of go on increasing; and those which go on increasing become incurable.

You have a spiritual mouth. Think what words you uttered immediately upon being born, -- what words are worthy of your mouth. You call God, Father, and do you straightway revile your brother? Think, whence is it you call God, Father? Is it from nature? No, you could never say so. Is it from your goodness? No, nor is it thus. But whence then is it? It is from pure lovingkindness, from tenderness, from His great mercy. Whenever then you call God, Father, consider not only this, that by reviling you are committing things unworthy of that, your high birth, but also that it is of lovingkindness that you have that high birth. Disgrace it not then, after receiving it from pure lovingkindness, by showing cruelty towards your brethren. Do you call God Father, and yet revile? No, these are not the works of the Son of God. These are very far from Him. The work of the Son of God was to forgive His enemies, to pray for them that crucified Him, to shed His blood for them that hated Him. These are works worthy of the Son of God, to make His enemies -- the ungrateful, the dishonest, the reckless, the treacherous -- to make these brethren and heirs: not to treat them that have become brethren with ignominy like slaves.

Think what words your mouth uttered -- of what table these words are worthy. Think what your mouth touches, what it tastes, of what manner of food it partakes! Do you deem yourself to be doing nothing grievous in railing at your brother? How then do you call him brother? And yet if he be not a brother, how do you say, Our Father? For the word Our is indicative of many persons. Think with whom you stand at the time of the mysteries! With the Cherubim, with the Seraphim! The Seraphim revile not: no, their mouth fulfills this one only duty, to sing the Hymn of praise, to glorify God.

And how then shall you be able to say with them, Holy, Holy, Holy, if you use your mouth for reviling? Tell me, I pray. Suppose there were a royal vessel, and that always full of royal dainties, and set apart for that purpose, and then that any one of the servants were to take and use it for holding dung. Would he ever venture again, after it had been filled with dung, to store it away with those other vessels, set apart for those other uses? Surely not. Now railing is like this, reviling is like this.

Our Father! But what? Is this all? Hear also the words, which follow, which art in Heaven. The moment you say, Our Father, which art in Heaven, the word raises you up, it gives wings to your mind, it points out to you that you have a Father in Heaven. Do then nothing, speak nothing of things upon earth. He has set you among that host above, He has numbered you with that heavenly choir. Why do you drag yourself down? You are standing beside the royal throne, and you revile. Are you not afraid lest the king should deem it an outrage?

Why, if a servant, even with us, beats his fellow-servant or assaults him, even though he do it justly, yet we at once rebuke him, and deem the act an outrage; and yet do you, who art standing with the Cherubim beside the king's throne, revile your brother? Do you see not these holy vessels? Are they not used

continually for only one purpose? Does any one ever venture to use them for any other? Yet are you holier than these vessels, yea, far holier. Why then defile, why contaminate yourself?

Standest thou in Heaven, and do you revile? Have you your citizenship with Angels, and do you revile? Are you counted worthy the Lord's kiss, and do you revile? Hath God graced your mouth with so many and great things, with hymns angelic, with food, not angelic, no, but more than angelic, with His own kiss, with His own embrace, and do you revile? Oh, no, I implore you. Vast are the evils of which this is the source; far be it from a Christian soul. Do I not convince you as I am speaking, do I not shame you?

Then does it now become my duty to alarm you. For hear what Christ says: Whosoever shall say to his brother, You fool, shall be in danger of the hell of fire. Matthew 5:22 Now if that which is lightest of all leads to hell, of what shall not he be worthy, who utters presumptuous words? Let us discipline our mouth to silence. Great is the advantage from this, great the mischief from ill language. We must not spend our riches here. Let us put door and bolt upon them. Let us devour ourselves alive if ever a vexatious word slip out of our mouth.

Let us entreat God, let us entreat him whom we have reviled. Let us not think it beneath us to do so. It is ourselves we have wounded, not him. Let us apply the remedy, prayer, and reconciliation with him whom we have reviled. If in our words we are to take such forethought, much more let us impose laws upon ourselves in our deeds. Yea, and if we have friends, whoever they may be, and they should speak evil to any man or revile him, demand of them and exact satisfaction. Let us by all means learn that such conduct is even sin; for if we learn this, we shall soon depart from it.

Now the God of peace keep both your mind and your tongue, and fence you with a sure fence, even His fear, through Jesus Christ our Lord, with whom to the Father, together with the Holy Spirit, be glory forever. Amen.

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