

Homily 14 on Matthew

by St. John Chrysostom

Jesus' sermon emphasizes the importance of repentance, faith, and following Him, and warns of the consequences of sin.

Topics: "Repentance", "Discipleship"

Description

John Chrysostom preaches on Jesus departing to Galilee after hearing about John's imprisonment, teaching us to avoid seeking out temptations and to stand firm when faced with challenges. He highlights how Jesus' departure to Capernaum fulfilled prophecy and how His preaching to the Gentiles was prompted by the actions of the Jews. Chrysostom emphasizes the importance of repentance as Jesus begins His ministry, calling on us to leave behind our sinful ways and follow Him wholeheartedly. He reflects on the disciples' immediate obedience to Jesus' call, showcasing their faith and willingness to abandon everything for the sake of following Christ.

Transcript

Matt. IV. 12.

Now when Jesus had heard that John was delivered up, He departed into Galilee.

1. Wherefore does He depart? Again instructing us not to go to meet temptations, but to give place and withdraw ourselves. For it is no reproach, the not casting one's self into danger, but the failing to stand manfully when fallen into it. To teach us this accordingly, and to soothe the envy of the Jews, He retires to Capernaum; at once fulfilling the prophecy, and making haste to catch the teachers of the world: for they, as you know, were abiding there, following their craft.

But mark, I pray you, how in every case when He is about to depart unto the Gentiles, He has the occasion given Him by Jews. For so in this instance, by plotting against His forerunner, and casting him into prison, they thrust out Christ into the Galilee of the Gentiles. For to show that He neither speaks of the Jewish nation by a part of it, nor signifies obscurely all the tribes; mark how the Prophet distinguishes that place, saying The land of Nephthalim, by the way of the sea, beyond Jordan, Galilee of the Gentiles, the people which sat in darkness, saw great light: by darkness here not meaning that which is sensible, but men's errors and ungodliness. Wherefore he also added, They which sat in the region and shadow of death, to them light is sprung up. For that you might learn that neither the light nor the darkness which he speaks of are sensible, in discoursing of the light, he called it not merely light, but a great light which

elsewhere he expresses by the word, True: John 1:9 and in describing the darkness, he termed it, a shadow of death.

Then implying that they did not of themselves seek and find, but that God showed Himself to them from above, he says to them, Light is sprung up; that is, the light of itself sprang up and shone forth: it was not that they first ran to the light. For in truth the condition of men was at the worst before Christ's coming. Since they more than walked in darkness; they sat in darkness; a kind of sign that they did not even hope to be delivered. For as persons not even knowing where to put a step forward, so they sat, overtaken by the darkness, not being able so much as to stand any more.

2. From that time Jesus began to preach and to say, Repent; for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.

From that time: what time? After John was cast into prison. And wherefore did He not preach to them from the beginning? Indeed what occasion for John at all, when the witness of His works was proclaiming Him?

That hence also you might learn His dignity; namely, that as the Fathers, so He too has prophets; to which purpose Zacharias also spoke; And you, child, shall be called a prophet of the Highest. Luke 1:76 And that he might leave no occasion to the shameless Jews; which motive He himself alleged, saying, John came neither eating nor drinking, and they say, he has a devil. The Son of Man came eating and drinking, and they say, Behold a man gluttonous and a winebibber, a friend of publicans and sinners. But wisdom is justified of her children.

And moreover it was necessary that what concerned Him should be spoken by another first and not by Himself. For if even after both testimonies and demonstrations so many and so great, they said, You bear record of Yourself, Your record is not true: John 8:13 had He, without John's saying anything, come into the midst, and first borne record Himself; what would they not have said? For this cause, neither did He preach before John, nor did He work miracles, until John was cast into prison; lest in this way the multitude should be divided. Therefore also John did no miracle at all; that by this means also might give over the multitude to Jesus, His miracles drawing them unto Him.

Again, if even after so many divine precautions, John's disciples, both before and after his imprisonment, were jealously disposed towards Him, and the people too suspected not Him but John to be the Christ; what would not the result have been, had none of these things taken place? For this cause both Matthew distinctly notes, that from that time He began to preach; and when He began His preaching, He Himself also taught this same doctrine, which the other used to preach; and no word as yet concerning Himself does the doctrine which he preached say. Because it was for the time a great thing even for this to be received, forasmuch as they had not as yet the proper opinion about Him. Therefore also at the beginning He puts nothing severe or grievous, as the other did, mentioning an axe, and a tree cut down; a fan, and a threshing-floor, and unquenchable fire; but His preludes are gracious: the Heavens and the kingdom there are the good tidings which he declares to His hearers.

3. And walking by the sea of Galilee, He saw two brethren, Simon that was surnamed Peter, and Andrew his brother, casting a net into the sea; for they were fishers. And He says unto them, Come ye after me, and I will make you fishers of men. And they left their nets, and followed Him. Matthew 4:18-19

And yet John says that they were called in another manner. Whence it is evident that this was a second call; and from many things one may perceive this. For there it is said, that they came to Him when John was not yet cast into prison; but here, after he was in confinement. And there Andrew calls Peter, but here

Jesus calls both. And John says, Jesus seeing Simon coming, says, You are Simon, the Son of Jona, you shall be called Cephas, which is by interpretation, a stone. John 1:42 But Matthew says that he was already called by that name; for his words are, Seeing Simon that was called Peter. And from the place whence they were called, and from many other things, one may perceive this; and from their ready obedience, and abandonment of all. For now they were well instructed beforehand. Thus, in the other case, Andrew is seen coming into His house, and hearing many things; but here, having heard one bare word, they followed immediately. Since neither was it unnatural for them to follow Him at the beginning, and then leave Him again and return anew to their own craft, when they saw both John thrown into prison, and Himself departing. Accordingly you see that He finds them actually fishing. But He neither forbade them at the first when minded to withdraw, nor having withdrawn themselves, did He let them go altogether; but He gave way when they started aside from Him, and comes again to win them back; which kind of thing is the great point in fishing.

But mark both their faith, and their obedience. For though they were in the midst of their work (and you know how greedy a thing fishing is), when they heard His command, they delayed not, they procrastinated not, they said not, let us return home, and converse with our kinsfolk, but they forsook all and followed, even as Elisha did to Elijah. 1 Kings 19:20-21 Because such is the obedience which Christ seeks of us, as that we delay not even a moment of time, though something absolutely most needful should vehemently press on us. Wherefore also when some other had come unto Him, and was asking leave to bury his own father, Matthew 8:21-22 not even this did He permit him to do; to signify that before all we ought to esteem the following of Himself.

But if you should say, the promise is very great; even for this do I most admire them, for that when they had not as yet seen any sign, they believed in so great a reach of promise, and accounted all but second to that attendance. And this, because they believed that by what words they were caught, by the same they would be able to catch others also.

To these, then, such was His promise: but to James and John He says no such thing. For the obedience of those that had gone before had by this time paved the way for these. And besides they had also heard many things before concerning Him.

And see how he does with exact care intimate unto us their poverty also: in that He found them sewing up their nets. So exceeding great was their poverty, that they were mending what was worn out, not being able to buy others. And this too was for the time no small proof of virtue, their beating poverty with ease, their supporting themselves by honest labor, their being bound one to another by the power of love, their having their father with them, and attending upon them.

4. When therefore He had caught them, then He begins in their presence to work miracles, by His deeds confirming the words of John concerning Him. And He was continually frequenting their synagogues, even by this instructing them that He was not a sort of adversary of God and deceiver, but that He had come in accordance with the Father.

And while frequenting them, He did not preach only, but also showed forth miracles. And this, because on every occasion, whenever anything is done strange and surprising, and any polity is introduced, God is wont to work miracles as pledges of his power, which He affords to them that are to receive His laws. Thus, for instance, when He was about to make man, He created a whole world, and then gave him that law which he had in Paradise. And when He was to give laws to Noah, He showed forth anew great

miracles, in that He reduced again the whole creation to its elements, and made that fearful sea to prevail for a full year; and in that, amid so great a tempest, He preserved that righteous man. And in the time of Abraham too He vouchsafed many signs; as his victory in the war, the plague upon Pharaoh, his deliverance from dangers. And when about to legislate for the Jews, He showed forth those marvellous and great prodigies, and then gave the law. Just so in this case also, being to introduce a certain high polity, and to tell them what they had never heard, by the display of the miracles He confirms what He says.

Thus because the kingdom He was preaching appeared not, by the things that appear, He makes it, though invisible, manifest.

And mark the evangelist's care to avoid superfluity of words; how he tells us not of every one of them that are healed, but in a few words speeds over showers of miracles.

For they brought unto Him, says he, all that were sick with various diseases, and torments, and those which were possessed with devils, and those which were lunatic, and those that had the palsy, and He healed them.

But our inquiry is this; why it can have been that He demanded faith of none of them? For He said not, what we find Him saying after this, Believe ye that I am able to do this? Matthew 9:28 because He had not as yet given proof of His power. And besides, the very act of approaching Him, and of bringing others to Him, exhibited no common faith. For they brought them even from far; whereas they would never have brought them, unless they had persuaded themselves of great things concerning Him.

Now then, let us too follow Him; for we also have many diseases of our soul, and these especially He would fain heal. Since with this intent He corrects that other sort, that He may banish these out of our soul.

5. Let us therefore come unto Him, and let us ask nothing pertaining to this life, but rather remission of sins. For indeed He gives it even now, if we be in earnest. Since as then His fame went out into Syria, so now into the whole world. And they indeed ran together on hearing that He healed persons possessed: and you, after having much more and greater experience of His power, do you not rouse yourself and run?

But whereas they left both country, and friends, and kinsfolk; do you not endure so much as to leave your house for the sake of drawing near, and obtaining far greater things? Or rather we do not require of you so much as this, but leave your evil habits only, and you can easily be made whole, remaining at home with your friends.

But as it is, if we have any bodily ailment, we do and contrive everything to be rid of what pains us; but when our soul is indisposed, we delay, and draw back. For which cause neither from the other sort are we delivered: since the things that are indispensable are becoming to us secondary, and the secondary indispensable; and letting alone the fountain of our ills, we would fain cleanse out the streams.

For that our bodily ills are caused by the wickedness of the soul, is shown both by him that had the palsy thirty and eight years, and by him that was let down through the roof, and by Cain also before these; and from many other things likewise one may perceive this. Let us do away then with the well-spring of our evils, and all the channels of our diseases will be stayed. For the disease is not palsy only, but also our sin; and this more than that, by how much a soul is better than a body.

Let us therefore now also draw near unto Him; let us entreat Him that He would brace our paralyzed soul, and leaving all things that pertain to this life, let us take account of the things spiritual only. Or if you cleave unto these also, yet think of them after the other.

Neither must you think lightly of it, because you have no pain in sinning; rather on this very account most of all do thou lament, that you feel not the anguish of your offenses. For not because sin bites not, does this come to pass, but because the offending soul is insensible. Regard with this view them that have a feeling of their own sins, how they wail more bitterly than such as are being cut, or burned; how many things they do, how many suffer, how greatly they mourn and lament, in order to be delivered from their evil conscience. They would not do any such thing, unless they were exceedingly pained in soul.

The best thing then is, to avoid sin in the first instance: the next to it, is to feel that we sin, and thoroughly amend ourselves. But if we have not this, how shall we pray to God, and ask forgiveness of our sins, we who take no account of these matters? For when you yourself who hast offended art unwilling to know so much as this very fact, that you have sinned; for what manner of offenses will you entreat God for pardon? For what you know not? And how will you know the greatness of the benefit? Tell therefore your offenses in particular, that you may learn for what you receive forgiveness, that so you may become grateful towards your Benefactor.

But you, when it is a man whom you have provoked, entreat friends, neighbors, and door-keepers, and spendest money, and consumest many days in visiting and petitioning, and though he that is provoked utterly reject you once, twice, ten thousand times over, you despond not, but becoming more earnest you make the more entreaty; but when the God of all is provoked, we gape, and throw ourselves back, and live in luxury and in drunkenness, and do all things as usual. And when shall we be able to propitiate Him? And how shall we by this very thing fail to provoke Him so much the more? For not so much sinning, as signing without even pain, causes in Him indignation and wrath. Wherefore it were meet after all this to sink into the very earth, and not so much as to behold this sun, nor to breathe at all, for that having so placable a Master, we provoke Him first, and then have no remorse for provoking Him. And yet He assuredly, even when He is angry, does not so as hating and turning away from us, but in order that in this way at least He may win us over to Himself. For if He continued after insult befriending you, you would the more despise Him. Therefore in order that this may not be, He turns away for a little while, to have you ever with Himself.

6. Let us now, I pray you, take courage at His love to man, and let us show forth an anxious repentance, before the day come on, which permits us not to profit thereby. For as yet all depends on us, but then He that judges has alone control over the sentence. Let us therefore come before His face with confession; let us bewail, let us mourn. For if we should be able to prevail upon the Judge before the appointed day to forgive us our sins, then we need not so much as enter into the court; as on the other hand, if this be not done, He will hear us publicly in the presence of the world, and we shall no longer have any hope of pardon. For no one of those who have not done away with their sins here, when he has departed there shall be able to escape his account for them; but as they who are taken out of these earthly prisons are brought in their chains to the place of judgment, even so all souls, when they have gone away hence bound with the manifold chains of their sins, are led to the awful judgment-seat. For in truth our present life is nothing better than a prison. But as when we have entered into that apartment, we see all bound with chains; so now if we withdraw ourselves from outward show, and enter into each man's life, into each man's soul, we shall see it bound with chains more grievous than iron: and this most especially if you enter into the souls of them that are rich. For the more men have about them, so much the more are they bound.

As therefore with regard to the prisoner, when you see him with irons on his back, on his hands, and often on his feet too, you therefore most of all account him miserable; so also as to the rich man, when you see him encompassed with innumerable affairs, let him not be therefore rich, but rather for these very things wretched, in your account. For together with these bonds, he has a cruel jailor too, the wicked love of riches; which suffers him not to pass out of this prison, but provides for him thousands of fetters, and guards, and doors, and bolts; and when he has cast him into the inner prison, persuades him even to feel pleasure in these bonds; that he may not find so much as any hope of deliverance from the evils which press on him.

And if in thought you were to lay open that man's soul, you would see it not bound only, but squalid, and filthy, and teeming with vermin. For no better than vermin are the pleasures of luxury, but even more abominable, and destroy the body more, together with the soul also; and upon the one and upon the other they bring ten thousand scourges of sickness.

On account then of all these things let us entreat the Redeemer of our souls, that He would both burst asunder our bands, and remove this our cruel jailor, and having set us free from the burden of those iron chains, He would make our spirits lighter than any wing. And as we entreat Him, so let us contribute our own part, earnestness, and consideration, and an excellent zeal. For thus we shall be able both in a short time to be freed from the evils which now oppress us, and to learn in what condition we were before, and to lay hold on the liberty which belongs to us; unto which God grant we may all attain, by the grace and love towards man of our Lord Jesus Christ, to whom be glory and power forever and ever. Amen.

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