

Homily 16 on Ephesians

by St. John Chrysostom

St. John Chrysostom's homily emphasizes the necessity of actively practicing goodness and forgiveness to attain the kingdom of Heaven.

Scripture: Leviticus 24:20, Matthew 5:39, Matthew 7:2, Matthew 25:34, Ephesians 4:31

Topics: "Christian Ethics", "Forgiveness"

Description

John Chrysostom emphasizes the importance of not only abstaining from wickedness but also actively practicing goodness to attain the kingdom of Heaven. He warns against the consequences of not doing good, highlighting that even the omission of good deeds is considered unrighteousness. Chrysostom stresses the significance of forgiveness, explaining that forgiving others is a greater act than forgiving debts, as it benefits both the forgiver and the forgiven. He encourages turning the other cheek and returning good for evil, as a way to achieve a glorious victory and to disarm anger and resentment.

Transcript

Ephesians 4:31, 32

Let all bitterness, and wrath, and anger, and clamor, and railing be put away from you, with all malice. And be ye kind one to another, tender-hearted, forgiving each other, even as God also in Christ forgave you.

If we are to attain to the kingdom of Heaven, it is not enough to abandon wickedness, but there must be abundant practice of that which is good also. To be delivered indeed from hell we must abstain from wickedness; but to attain to the kingdom we must cleave fast to virtue. Do you not know that even in the tribunals of the heathen, when examination is made of men's deeds, and the whole city is assembled, this is the case? Nay, there was an ancient custom among the heathen, to crown with a golden crown, -- not the man who had done no evil to his country, for this were in itself no more than enough to save him from punishment -- but him who had displayed great public services. It was thus that a man was to be advanced to this distinction. But what I had special need to say, had, I know not how, well near escaped me. Accordingly having made some slight correction of what I have said, I retract the first portion of this division.

For as I was saying that the departure from evil is sufficient to prevent our falling into hell, while I was speaking, there stole upon me a certain awful sentence, which does not merely bring down vengeance on them that dare to commit evil, but which also punishes those who omit any opportunity of doing good.

What sentence then is this? When the day, the dreadful day, He says, was arrived, and the set time had come, the Judge, seated on the judgment seat, set the sheep on the right hand and the goats on the left; and to the sheep He said, Come, you blessed of My Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world: for I was an hungered, and you gave me meat.

Matthew 25:34 So far, well. For it was meet that for such compassion they should receive this reward. That those, however, who did not communicate of their own possessions to them that were in need, that they should be punished, not merely by the loss of blessings, but by being also sent to hell-fire, what just reason, I say, can there be in this? Most certainly this too will have a fair show of reason, no less than the other case: for we are hence instructed, that they that have done good shall enjoy those good things that are in heaven, but they, who, though they have no evil indeed to be charged with, yet have omitted to do good, will be hurried away with them that have done evil into hell-fire.

Unless one might indeed say this, that the very not doing good is a part of wickedness, inasmuch as it comes of indolence, and indolence is a part of vice, or rather, not a part, but a source and baneful root of it. For idleness is the teacher of all vice. Let us not then foolishly ask such questions as these, what place shall he occupy, who has done neither any evil nor any good? For the very not doing good, is in itself doing evil. Tell me, if you had a servant, who should neither steal, nor insult, nor contradict you, who moreover should keep from drunkenness and every other kind of vice, and yet should sit perpetually in idleness, and not doing one of those duties which a servant owes to his master, would you not chastise him, would you not put him to the rack?

Tell me. And yet forsooth he has done no evil. No, but this is in itself doing evil. But let us, if you please, apply this to other cases in life. Suppose then that of an husbandman. He does no damage to our property, he lays no plots against us, and he is not a thief, he only ties his hands behind him, and sits at home, neither sowing, nor cutting a single furrow, nor harnessing oxen to the yoke, nor looking after a vine, nor in fact discharging any one of those other labors required in husbandry.

Now, I say, should we not punish such a man? And yet he has done no wrong to any one; we have no charge to make against him. No, but by this very thing has he done wrong. He does wrong in that he does not contribute his own share to the common stock of good. And what again, tell me, if every single artisan or mechanic were only to do no harm, say to one of a different craft -- nay, were to do no harm, even to one of his own, but only were to be idle, would not our whole life at that rate be utterly at an end and perish?

Do you wish that I yet further extend the discourse with reference to the body also? Let the hand then neither strike the head, nor cut out the tongue, nor pluck out the eye, nor do any evil of this sort, but only remain idle, and not render its due service to the body at large; would it not be more fitting that it should be cut off, than that one should carry it about in idleness, and a detriment to the whole body? And what too, if the mouth, without either devouring the hand, or biting the breast, should nevertheless fail in all its proper duties; were it not far better that it should be stopped up?

If therefore both in the case of servants, and of mechanics, and of the whole body, not only the commission of evil, but also the omission of what is good, is great unrighteousness, much more will this be the case in regard to the body of Christ.

Moral. And therefore the blessed Paul also, in leading us away from sin, leads us on to virtue. For where, tell me, is the advantage of all the thorns being cut out, if the good seeds be not sown? For our labor,

remaining unfinished, will come round and end in the same mischief. And therefore Paul also, in his deep and affectionate anxiety for us, does not let his admonitions stop at eradicating and destroying evil tempers, but urges us at once to evidence the implanting of good ones.

For having said, Let all bitterness, and wrath, and clamor, and railing be put away from you, with all malice, he adds, And be ye kind one to another, tender-hearted, forgiving each other. For all these are habits and dispositions. And our abandonment of the one thing is not sufficient to settle us in the habitual practice of the other, but there is need again of some fresh impulse, and of an effort not less than that made in our avoidance of evil dispositions, in order to our acquiring good ones.

For so in the case of the body, the black man, if he gets rid of this complexion, does not straightway become white. Or rather let us not conduct our discourse with an argument from physical subjects, but draw our example from those which concern moral choice. He who is not our enemy, is not necessarily our friend; but there is an intermediate state, neither of enmity nor of friendship, which is perhaps that in which the greater part of mankind stand toward us. He that is not crying is not therefore necessarily also laughing, but there is a state between the two.

And so, I say, is the case here. He that is not bitter is not necessarily kind, neither is he that is not wrathful necessarily tender-hearted; but there is need of a distinct effort, in order to acquire this excellence. And now look how the blessed Paul, according to the rules of the best husbandry, thoroughly cleans and works the land entrusted to him by the Husbandman. He has taken away the bad seeds; he now exhorts us to retain the good plants. Be kind, says he, for if, when the thorns are plucked up, the field remains idle, it will again bear unprofitable weeds.

And therefore there is need to preoccupy its unoccupied and fallow state by the setting of good seeds and plants. He takes away anger, he puts in kindness; he takes away bitterness, he puts in tender-heartedness; he extirpates malice and railing, he plants forgiveness in their stead. For the expression, forgiving one another, is this; be disposed, he means, to forgive one another. And this forgiveness is greater than that which is shown in money-matters. For he indeed who forgives a debt of money to him that has borrowed of him, does, it is true, a noble and admirable deed, but then the kindness is confined to the body, though to himself indeed he repays a full recompense by that benefit which is spiritual and concerns the soul; whereas he who forgives trespasses will be benefiting alike his own soul, and the soul of him who receives the forgiveness.

For by this way of acting, he not only renders himself, but the other also, more charitable. Because we do not so deeply touch the souls of those who have wronged us by revenging ourselves, as by pardoning them, and thus shaming them and putting them out of countenance. For by the other course we shall be doing no good, either to ourselves or to them, but shall be doing harm to both by seeking ourselves for retaliation, like the rulers of the Jews, and by kindling up the wrath that is in them; but if we return injustice with gentleness, we shall disarm all his anger, and shall be setting up in his breast a tribunal which will give a verdict in our favor, and will condemn him more severely than we ourselves could.

For he will convict and will pass sentence upon himself, and will look for every pretext for repaying the share of long-suffering granted him with fuller measure, knowing that, if he repay it in equal measure, he is thus at a disadvantage, in not having himself made the beginning, but received the example from us. He will strive accordingly to exceed in measure, in order to eclipse, by the excess of his recompense, the disadvantage he himself sustains in having been second in making advances towards requital; and the

disadvantage again which accrues to the other from the time, if he was the first sufferer, this he will make up by excess of kindness.

For men, if they are right-minded, are not so affected by evil as by the good treatment they may receive at the hands of those whom they have injured. For it is a base sin, and it is matter of reproach and scorn for a man who is well-treated not to return it; while for a man who is ill-treated, not to go about to resent it, this has the praise and applause, and the good word of all. And therefore they are more deeply touched by this conduct than any.

So that if you have a wish to revenge yourself, revenge yourself in this manner. Return good for evil, that you may render him even your debtor, and achieve a glorious victory. Have you suffered evil? Do good; thus avenge you of your enemy. For if you shall go about to resent it, all will blame both you and him alike. Whereas if you shall endure it, it will be otherwise. You they will applaud and admire; but him they will reproach. And what greater punishment can there be to an enemy, than to behold his enemy admired and applauded by all men? What more bitter to an enemy, than to behold himself reproached by all before his enemy's face? If you shall avenge you on him, you will both be condemned perhaps yourself, and will be the sole avenger; whereas, if you shall forgive him, all will be avengers in your stead. And this will be far more severe than any evil he can suffer, that his enemy should have so many to avenge him. If you open your mouth, they will be silent; but if you are silent, not with one tongue only, but with ten thousand tongues of others, you smite him, and art the more avenged. And on you indeed, if you shall reproach him, many again will cast imputations (for they will say that your words are those of passion); but when others who have suffered no wrong from him thus overwhelm him with reproaches, then is the revenge especially clear of all suspicion. For when they who have suffered no mischief, in consequence of your excessive forbearance feel and sympathize with you, as though they had been wronged themselves, this is a vengeance clear of all suspicion. But what then, you will say, if no man should take vengeance? It cannot be that men will be such stones, as to behold such wisdom and not admire it. And though they wreak not their vengeance on him at the time; still, afterwards, when they are in the mood, they will do so, and they will continue to scoff at him and abuse him. And if no one else admire you, the man himself will most surely admire you, though he may not own it. For our judgment of what is right, even though we be come to the very depth of wickedness, remains impartial and unbiased. Why, suppose ye, did our Lord Christ say, Whosoever smites you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also? Matthew 5:39 Is it not because the more long-suffering a man is, the more signal the benefit he confers both on himself and on the other? For this cause He charges us to turn the other also, to satisfy the desire of the enraged. For who is such a monster as not to be at once put to shame? The very dogs are said to feel it; for if they bark and attack a man, and he throws himself on his back and does nothing, he puts a stop to all their wrath. If they then reverence the man who is ready to suffer evil from them, much more will the race of man do so, inasmuch as they are more rational.

However, it is right not to overlook what a little before came into my recollection, and was brought forward for a testimony. And what then was this? We were speaking of the Jews, and of the chief rulers among them, how that they were blamed, as seeking retaliation. And yet this the law permitted them; eye for eye, and tooth for tooth. Leviticus 24:20 True, but not to the intent that men should pluck out each other's eyes, but that they should check boldness in aggression, by fear of suffering in return, and thus should neither do any evil to others, nor suffer any evil from others themselves. Therefore it was said, eye for eye, to bind the hands of the aggressor, not to let yours loose against him; not to ward off the hurt from your eyes only, but also to preserve his eyes safe and sound.

But, as to what I was enquiring about -- why, if retaliation was allowed, were they arraigned who practiced it? Whatever can this mean? He here speaks of vindictiveness; for on the spur of the moment he allows the sufferer to act, as I was saying, in order to check the aggressor; but to bear a grudge he permits no longer; because the act then is no longer one of passion, nor of boiling rage, but of malice premeditated. Now God forgives those who may be carried away, perhaps upon a sense of outrage, and rush out to resent it. Hence He says, eye for eye; and yet again, the ways of the revengeful lead to death. Now, if, where it was permitted to put out eye for eye, so great a punishment is reserved for the revengeful, how much more for those who are bidden even to expose themselves to ill-treatment. Let us not then be revengeful, but let us quench our anger, that we may be counted worthy of the lovingkindness, which comes from God (for with what measure, says Christ, ye mete, it shall be measured unto you, and with what judgment ye judge, you shall be judged) Matthew 7:2, and that we may both escape the snares of this present life, and in the day that is at hand, may obtain pardon at His hands, through the grace and loving-kindness of our Lord Jesus Christ, with whom, to the Father, together with the Holy Ghost, be glory, power, honor, both now and forever and ever. Amen.

Source: <https://sermonindex.net/speakers/st-john-chrysostom/homily-16-on-ephesians/>

Grow in Your Walk with Christ

Listen and read messages that will stir your heart for Christ and point you to deeper repentance and devotion.

- 50,000+ Sermons from speakers past and present
- 3,900+ Classic Christian Books freely readable online
- 1,200+ Bible Translations and Commentaries
- Over 450k forum posts — Join our vibrant online Christian forum

www.sermonindex.net