

Homily 17 on the Acts of the Apostles

by St. John Chrysostom

St. John Chrysostom's homily emphasizes the parallels between Moses and Christ, the consequences of Israel's disobedience, and the importance of bold yet gentle speech in faith.

Scripture: Exodus 2:22, Numbers 12:3, 1 Kings 19:10, Matthew 5:22, Acts 7:35-51

Topics: "Moses And Leadership", "Holy Spirit"

Description

John Chrysostom preaches about the life of Moses, highlighting how God raised him up as a ruler and deliverer despite the rejection and disobedience of the Israelites. He emphasizes Moses' role in leading the people out of Egypt, performing wonders and signs, and receiving the law from God. Chrysostom draws parallels between the Israelites' disobedience in the wilderness and the rejection of Christ by his hearers, pointing out the consequences of resisting the Holy Spirit and betraying the Just One. He encourages his audience to imitate Moses' boldness and gentleness, showing how anger, when used appropriately, can be a tool for defending others and correcting wrongs.

Transcript

Acts VII. 35

This Moses whom they refused, saying, Who made you a ruler and a judge over us? The same did God send to be a ruler and a deliverer by the hand of the Angel which appeared to him in the bush.

This is very suitable to the matter in hand. This Moses, he says. This, the man who had been in danger of losing his life; the man who had been set at naught by them; this the man whom they had declined: this same, God having raised up, sent unto them. Whom they refused, saying, Who made you a ruler? just as they themselves (the hearers) said, We have no king, but Cæsar. John 19:15 He here shows also, that what was then done, was done by Christ. The same did God send by the hand of the Angel, who said to him, I am the God of Abraham.

This same Moses, he says -- and observe how he points to his renown -- this same Moses, he says, brought them out, after that he had showed wonders and signs in the land of Egypt, and in the Red sea, and in the wilderness forty years. This is that Moses, which said to the children of Israel, A prophet shall the Lord your God raise up unto you of your brethren, like me (v. 36, 37): set at naught like me. Him, likewise, Herod wished to kill, and in Egypt He found preservation just as it was with the former, even when He was a babe, He was aimed at for destruction.

This is he, that was in the Church in the wilderness with the Angel which spoke to him in the mount Sina, and with our fathers: who received the lively oracles to give unto us. Acts 7:38 Again no mention of temple, none of sacrifice. With the Angel, it says, he received the lively oracles to give unto the fathers. It shows, that he not only wrought miracles, but also gave a law, as Christ did. Just as Christ first works miracles, and then legislates: so did Moses. But they did not hear him, keeping their disobedience, even after the miracles: To whom, he says, our fathers would not obey: Acts 7:39 after the wonders done in those forty years.

And not only so, but just the contrary: but thrust him from them, and in their hearts turned back again into Egypt. Saying unto Aaron, Make us gods to go before us; for as for this Moses, which brought us out of the land of Egypt, we know not what has become of him. And they made a calf in those days, and offered sacrifice unto the idol, and rejoiced in the works of their own hands. Then God turned, and gave them up to worship the host of heaven; as it is written in the book of the Prophets, O you house of Israel, have ye offered to me slain beasts and sacrifices by the space of forty years in the wilderness?

Yea, you took up the tabernacle of Moloch, and the star of your god Remphan, figures which you made to worship them: and I will carry you away beyond Babylon. (v. 40, 43.) The expression, gave them up, means, He suffered. Our fathers had the tabernacle of witness in the wilderness, as he had appointed, speaking unto Moses, that he should make it according to the fashion he had seen. Acts 7:44 Even when there was a Tabernacle, yet there were no sacrifices. Did ye offer unto Me slain beasts and sacrifices?

Amos 5:25 There was the tabernacle of witness, and yet it profited them nothing, but they were consumed. But neither before, nor afterwards, did the miracles profit them anything. Which also, our fathers that came after brought in. Do you see, how the holy place is there wherever God may be? For to this end also he says, in the wilderness, to compare place with place. Then the benefit (conferred upon them): And our fathers that came after brought it in with Jesus into the possession of the Gentiles, whom God drove out before the face of our fathers, unto the days of David; who found favor before God, and desired to find a tabernacle for the God of Jacob. (v. 45, 46.)

David desired to find favor: and he built not, he, the wonderful, the great; but the castaway, Solomon. But Solomon, it says, built Him a house. Howbeit the Most High dwells not in (places) made with hands. Acts 7:47-50 This was shown indeed already by what had been before said: but it is shown also by the voice of a prophet; What house will you build for Me? Says the Lord God. As says the prophet, Heaven is my throne, and earth is my footstool: what house will you build for me? Says the Lord: or what is the place of my rest? Hath not my hand made all these things? Isaiah 66:1-2

Marvel not, he says, if they on whom Christ confers His benefits refuse His kingdom, seeing in the case of Moses it was just the same. (Recapitulation). He brought them out; and rescued them not in a general way, but also while they were in the wilderness. Wonders and signs, etc. Acts 7:35-50 Do you mark that they themselves (Stephen's hearers) are concerned in those old miracles also? This is that Moses: Acts 7:37 he, that conversed with God; he, that had been saved out of situations so strange and wonderful; he, that wrought so great works, and had so great power. [Which said to the children of Israel, A prophet, etc.]

He shows, that the prophecy must by all means be fulfilled, and that Moses is not opposed to Him. This is he that was in the Church in the wilderness, and, that said to the children of Israel. Acts 7:38 Do you mark that thence comes the root, and that salvation is from the Jews? John 4:22 With the Angel, it says, which spoke unto him. Romans 11:16 Lo, again he affirms that it was He (Christ) that gave the Law, seeing

Moses was with Him in the Church in the wilderness. And here he puts them in mind of a great marvel, of the things done in the Mount: Who received living oracles to give unto us.

On all occasions Moses is wonderful, and (so) when need was to legislate. What means the expression, Living oracles (λαλῶντες)? Those, whereof the end was shown by words (δι' ἰσχυρῶν): in other words, he means the prophecies. Then follows the charge, in the first instance, against the patriarchs [after], the signs and wonders, after the receiving of the lively oracles: To whom, he says, our fathers would not obey. Acts 7:39 But concerning those, Ezekiel says that they are not living; as when he says, And I gave you statutes that are not good.

Ezekiel 20:25 It is with reference to those that he says, Living. But thrust him from them, and in their hearts turned back to Egypt-- the place where they groaned, where they cried, whence they called upon God. And said to Aaron, Make us gods which shall go before us. Acts 7:40 O the folly! Make, say they; that they may go before us. Whither? Into Egypt. See how hard they were to tear away from the customs of Egypt! What do you say? What, not wait for him that brought you out, but flee the benefit, and deny the Benefactor?

And mark how insulting they are: For as for this Moses, they say:-- which brought us out of the land of Egypt nowhere the name of God: instead of that, they ascribed all to Moses. Where they ought to give thanks (to God), they bring Moses forward: where it was, to do as the Law bade them, they no longer make account of Moses. We know not what has become of him. And yet he told them that he was going up to receive the Law: and they had not patience to wait forty days. Make us gods -- they did not say, a God. -- And yet one may well wonder at this, that they do not even know.-- And they made a calf in those days, and offered sacrifices unto the idol, and rejoiced in the works of their own hands Acts 7:41: for which they ought to have hid their faces.

What wonder that you know not Christ, seeing ye knew not Moses, and God Who was manifested by such wonders? But they not only knew Him not: they also insulted in another way, by their idol making. Then God turned, and gave them up to worship the host of heaven Acts 7:42 Hence these same customs date their origin, hence the sacrifices: they were themselves the first that made sacrifices to their idols! For that is why it is marked, They made a calf in Horeb, and offered sacrifices to the idol: seeing that, before this the name of sacrifice is nowhere mentioned, but only lively ordinances, and lively oracles.

And rejoiced -- that is the reason for the feasts. Exodus 32:5-6 As it is written in the Book of the Prophets -- and observe, he does not cite the text without a purpose, but shows by it that there is no need of sacrifices; saying: Did ye offer slain beasts and sacrifice to Me?-- He lays an emphasis on this word (to Me?). You cannot say that it was from sacrificing to Me, that you proceeded to sacrifice to them:-- by the space of forty years: and this too, in the wilderness, where He had most signally shown Himself their Protector.

Yea, you took up the tabernacle of Moloch, and the star of your god Remphan: images which you made to worship them. The cause of sacrifices! And I will carry you away beyond Babylon. Acts 7:43 Even the captivity, an impeachment of their wickedness! But a Tabernacle, say you, there was (the Tabernacle) 'of Witness.' Acts 7:44 (Yes,) this is why it was: that they should have God for Witness: this was all. According to the fashion, it says, that was shown you on the mount: so that on the mount was the Original.

And this Tabernacle, moreover, in the wilderness, was carried about, and not locally fixed. And he calls it, Tabernacle of witness: i.e. (for witness) of the miracles, of the statutes. This is the reason why both it and

those (the fathers) had no Temple. As He had appointed, that spoke unto Moses, that he should make it according to the fashion that he had seen. Again, it was none other than He (Christ) that gave the fashion itself. Until the days of David Acts 7:45: and there was no temple!

And yet the Gentiles also had been driven out: for that is why he mentions this: Whom God drove out, he says, before the face of our fathers. Whom He drove out, he says: and even then, no Temple! And so many wonders, and no mention of a Temple! So that, although first there is a Tabernacle, yet nowhere a Temple. Until the days of David, he says: even David, and no Temple! And he sought to find favor before God Acts 7:46: and built not:-- so far was the Temple from being a great matter!

But Solomon built Him a house. Acts 7:47 They thought Solomon was great: but that he was not better than his father, nay not even equal to him, is manifest. Howbeit the Most High dwells not in temples made with hands; as says the prophet, Heaven is My throne, and earth is My footstool. (v. 48, 49.) Nay, not even these are worthy of God, forasmuch as they are made, seeing they are creatures, the works of His hand. See how he leads them on little by little (showing) that not even these are to be mentioned. And again the prophecy says openly, What house will you build Me? etc. Acts 7:50

What is the reason that at this point he speaks in the tone of invective (καταφορικῶς)? Great was his boldness of speech, when at the point to die: for in fact I think he knew that this was the case. You stiffnecked, he says, and uncircumcised in heart and ears. This also is from the prophets: nothing is of himself. You do always resist the Holy Ghost: as your fathers did, so do ye. Acts 7:51 When it was not His will that sacrifices should be, you sacrifice: when it is His will, then again ye do not sacrifice: when He would not give you commandments, you drew them to you: when you got them, you neglected them. Again, when the Temple stood, you worshipped idols: when it is His will to be worshipped without a Temple, you do the opposite. Observe, he says not, You resist God, but, the Spirit: so far was he from knowing any difference between Them. And, what is greater: As your fathers did, he says, so do ye. Thus also did Christ (reproach them), forasmuch as they were always boasting much of their fathers. Which of the prophets have not your fathers persecuted? And they have slain them which showed before of the coming of the Just One: he still says, the Just One, wishing to check them: of Whom you have been now the betrayers and murderers -- two charges he lays against them -- who have received the Law by the disposition of Angels, and have not kept it. Acts 7:52 How, By the disposition of Angels? Some say (The Law), disposed by Angels; or, put into his hand by the Angel Who appeared to him in the bush; for was He man? No wonder that He who wrought those works, should also have wrought these. You slew them who preached of Him, much more Himself. He shows them disobedient both to God, and to Angels, and the Prophets, and the Spirit, and to all: as also Scripture says elsewhere: Lord, they have slain Your Prophets, and thrown down Your altars. 1 Kings 19:10 They, then, stand up for the Law, and say, He blasphemes against Moses: he shows, therefore, that it is they who blaspheme, and that (their blasphemy is not only against Moses, but) against God; shows that they from the very beginning have been doing this: that they have themselves destroyed their customs, that there is no need of these: that while accusing him, and saying that he opposed Moses, they themselves were opposing the Spirit: and not merely opposing, but with murder added to it: and that they had their enmity all along from the very beginning. Do you see, that he shows them to be acting in opposition both to Moses and to all others, and not keeping the Law? And yet Moses had said, A Prophet shall the Lord raise up unto you: and the rest also told of this (Christ) that He would come: and the prophet again said, What house will you build Me? and again, Did ye offer to Me slain beasts and sacrifices those forty years? Deuteronomy 18:18

Such is the boldness of speech of a man bearing the Cross. Let us then also imitate this: though it be not a time of war, yet it is always the time for boldness of speech. For, I spoke, says one, in Your testimonies before kings, and was not ashamed. Psalm 119:46 If we chance to be among heathens, let us thus stop their mouths. without wrath, without harshness. (Comp. Hom. in 1 Cor. iv. §6; xxxiii. §4, 5; Col. xi. §2.) For if we do it with wrath, it no longer seems to be the boldness (of one who is confident of his cause,) but passion: but if with gentleness, this is boldness indeed.

For in one and the same thing success and failure cannot possibly go together. The boldness is a success: the anger is a failure. Therefore, if we are to have boldness, we must be clean from wrath that none may impute our words to that. No matter how just your words may be, when you speak with anger, you ruin all: no matter how boldly you speak, how fairly reprove, or what not. See this man, how free from passion as he discourses to them! For he did not abuse them: he did but remind them of the words of the Prophets.

For, to show you that it was not anger, at the very moment he was suffering evil at their hands, he prayed, saying, Lay not to their charge this sin. So far was he from speaking these words in anger; no, he spoke in grief and sorrow for their sakes. As indeed this is why it speaks of his appearance, that they saw his face as it had been the face of an angel, on purpose that they might believe. Let us then be clean from wrath. The Holy Spirit dwells not where wrath is: cursed is the wrathful.

It cannot be that anything wholesome should approach, where wrath goes forth. For as in a storm at sea, great is the tumult, loud the clamor, and then would be no time for lessons of wisdom (φιλοσοφία): so neither in wrath. If the soul is to be in a condition either to say, or to be disciplined to, anything of philosophy, it must first be in the haven. Do you see not how, when we wish to converse on matters of serious import, we look out for places free from noise, where all is stillness, all calm, that we may not be put out and discomposed?

But if noise from without discomposes, much more disturbance from within. Whether one pray, to no purpose does he pray with wrath and disputings: 1 Timothy 2:8 whether he speak, he will only make himself ridiculous: whether he hold his peace, so again it will be even then: whether he eat, he is hurt even then: whether he drink, or whether he drink not; whether he sit, or stand, or walk; whether he sleep: for even in their dreams such fancies haunt them. For what is there in such men that is not disagreeable?

Eyes unsightly, mouth distorted, limbs agitated and swollen, tongue foul and sparing no man, mind distraught, gestures uncomely: much to disgust. Mark the eyes of demoniacs, and those of drunkards and madmen; in what do they differ from each other? Is not the whole madness? For what though it be but for the moment? The madman too is possessed for the moment: but what is worse than this? And they are not ashamed at that excuse; I knew not (says one) what I said. And how came it that thou did not know this, thou the rational man, you that hast the gift of reason, on purpose that you may not act the part of the creatures without reason, just like a wild horse, hurried away by rage and passion?

In truth, the very excuse is criminal. For you ought to have known what you said. It was the passion, say you, that spoke the words, not I. How should it be that? For passion has no power, except it get it from you. You might as well say, It was my hand that inflicted the wounds, not I. What occasion, think you, most needs wrath? Would you not say, war and battle? But even then, if anything is done with wrath, the whole is spoiled and undone. For of all men, those who fight had best not be enraged: of all men, those had best not be enraged, who want to hurt (το βροντας).

And how is it possible to fight then? You will ask. With reason, with self-command (■ πεικε■& 139-): since fighting is, to stand in opposition. Do you see not that even these (common) wars are regulated by definite law, and order, and times? For wrath is nothing but an irrational impulse: and an irrational creature cannot possibly perform anything rational. For instance, the man here spoke such words, and did it without passion. And Elias said, How long will you halt on both your knees? 1 Kings 18:21 and spoke it not in passion.

And Phinees slew, and did it without passion. For passion suffers not a man to see, but, just as in a night-battle, it leads him, with eyes blindfolded and ears stopped up, where it will. Then let us rid ourselves of this demon, at its first beginning let us quell it, let us put the sign of the Cross on our breast, as it were a curb. Wrath is a shameless dog: but let it learn to hear the law. If there be in a sheep-fold a dog so savage as not to obey the command of the shepherd, nor to know his voice, all is lost and ruined.

He is kept along with the sheep: but if he makes a meal on the sheep, he is useless, and is put to death. If he has learned to obey you, feed your dog: he is useful when it is against the wolves, against robbers, and against the captain of the robbers that he barks, not against the sheep, not against friends. If he does not obey he ruins all: if he learns not to mind you, he destroys all. The mildness in you let not wrath consume, but let it guard it, and feed it up. And it will guard it, that it may feed in much security, if it destroy wicked and evil thoughts, if it chase away the devil from every side.

So is gentleness preserved, when evil works are nowhere admitted: so we become worthy of respect, when we learn not to be shameless. For nothing renders a man so shameless, as an evil conscience. Why are harlots without shame? Why are virgins shamefaced? Is it not from their sin that the former, from their chastity that the latter, are such? For nothing makes a person so shameless, as sin. And yet on the contrary, say you, it puts to shame. Yes; him who condemns himself: but him that is past blushing, it renders even more reckless: for desperation makes daring. For the wicked, says the Scripture, when he has come into the depths of evils, despises. Proverbs 18:3 But he that is shameless, will also be reckless, and he that is reckless, will be daring.

See in what way gentleness is destroyed, when evil thoughts gnaw at it. This is why there is such a dog, barking mightily: we have also sling and stone (ye know what I mean): we have also spear and enclosure and cattle-fold: let us guard our thoughts unhurt. If the dog be gentle (σα■v■) with the sheep, but savage against those without, and keep vigilant watch, this is the excellence of a dog: and, be he ever so famished, not to devour the sheep; be he ever so full, not to spare the wolves.

Such too is anger meant to be: however provoked, not to forsake gentleness; however at quiet, to be on the alert against evil thoughts: to acknowledge the friend, and not for any beating forsake him, and for all his caressing, to fly at the intruder. The devil uses caressing full oft: let the dog know at sight that he is an intruder. So also let us caress (σα■νωμεν) Virtue, though she put us to pain, and show our aversion to Vice, though she give us pleasure. Let us not be worse than the dogs, which, even when whipped and throttled, do not desert their master: but if the stranger also feed them, even so they do hurt.

There are times when anger is useful; but this is when it barks against strangers. What means it, Whosoever is angry with his brother without a cause? Matthew 5:22 It means, Stand not up in your own quarrel, neither avenge yourself: if you see another suffering deadly wrong, stretch out your hand to help him. This is no longer passion, when you are clear of all feeling for yourself alone. David had gotten Saul into his power, and was not moved by passion, did not thrust the spear into him, the enemy he had in his

power; but took his revenge upon the Devil. 1 Samuel 26:7 Moses, when he saw a stranger doing an injury, even slew him Exodus 2:22: but when one of his own people, he did not so: them that were brethren he would have reconciled; the others not so.

That most meek Numbers 12:3 Moses, as Scripture witnesses of him, see how he was roused! But not so, we: on the contrary, where we ought to show meekness, no wild beast so fierce as we: but where we ought to be roused, none so dull and sluggish. (Hom. vi. de laud. Pauli, ad fin.) On no occasion do we use our faculties to the purpose they were meant for: and therefore it is that our life is spent to no purpose. For even in the case of implements; if one use them, one instead of other, all is spoilt: if one take his sword, and then, where he should use it and cut with it, uses only his hand, he does no good: again, where he should use his hand, by taking the sword in hand he spoils all.

In like manner also the physician, if where he ought to cut, he cuts not, and where he ought not, he does cut, mars all. Wherefore, I beseech you, let us use the thing (τὸ πρῶγματι) at its proper time. The proper time for anger is never, where we move in our own quarrel: but if it is our duty to correct others, then is the time to use it, that we may by force deliver others. (Hom. in Matt. xvi. §7.) So shall we both be like God, always keeping a spirit free from wrath, and shall attain unto the good things that are to come, through the grace and loving-kindness of our Lord Jesus Christ, with whom, to the Father and the Holy Ghost together, be glory, dominion, and honor, now and evermore, world without end. Amen.

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