

Homily 18 on Matthew

by St. John Chrysostom

St. John Chrysostom's Homily 18 on Matthew emphasizes the transformative power of love, self-restraint, and the call to respond to evil with goodness.

Topics: "Loving Enemies", "Christian Perfection"

Description

John Chrysostom preaches on the importance of showing love and forgiveness towards enemies, emphasizing the need to go beyond societal norms and exhibit self-restraint in the face of insults and wrongdoings. He highlights Jesus' teachings on turning the other cheek, giving generously, and praying for those who mistreat us, ultimately aiming to emulate God's boundless love and mercy. Chrysostom urges believers to rise above human tendencies and strive for perfection by loving even those who hate us, trusting in the rewards promised by God for such actions.

Transcript

Matthew 5:38-40.

You have heard that it has been said, An eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth. But I say unto you, that you resist not the evil: but whosoever shall smite you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also. And if any man will sue you at the law, and take away your coat, let him have your cloak also.

Do you see that it was not of an eye that He was speaking before, when He made the law to pluck out the offending eye, but of him who by his friendship is harming us, and casting us into the gulf of destruction? For He who in this place uses so great strength of expression, and who, not even when another is plucking out your eye, permits you to strike out his; how should He have made it a law to strike out one's own?

But if any one accuses the ancient law, because it commands such retaliation, he seems to me very unskillful in the wisdom that becomes a legislator, and ignorant of the virtue of opportunities, and the gain of condescension. For if he considered who were the hearers of these sayings, and how they were disposed, and when they received this code of laws, he will thoroughly admit the wisdom of the Lawgiver, and will see that it is one and the same, who made both those laws and these, and who wrote each of them exceeding profitably, and in its due season. Yes, for if at the beginning He had introduced these high and most weighty commandments, men would not have received either these, or the others; but now ordaining them severally in their due time, He has by the two corrected the whole world.

And besides, He commanded this, not that we might strike out one another's eyes, but that we might keep our hands to ourselves. For the threat of suffering has effectually restrained our inclination to be doing.

And thus in fact He is silently dropping seed of much self-restraint, at least in that He commands to retaliate with just the same acts. Yet surely he that began such transgression were worthy of a greater punishment, and this the abstract nature of justice demands. But forasmuch as He was minded to mingle mercy also with justice, He condemns him whose offenses were very great to a punishment less than his desert: teaching us even while we suffer to show forth great consideration.

Having therefore mentioned the ancient law, and recognized it all, He signifies again, that it is not our brother who has done these deeds, but the evil one. For this cause he has also subjoined, But I say unto you, that you resist not the evil one. He did not say, resist not your brother, but the evil one, signifying that on his motion men dare so to act; and in this way relaxing and secretly removing most of our anger against the aggressor, by transferring the blame to another.

What then? it is said, ought we not to resist the evil one? Indeed we ought, but not in this way, but as He has commanded, by giving one's self up to suffer wrongfully; for thus shall you prevail over him. For one fire is not quenched by another, but fire by water. And to show you that even under the old law he that suffered rather prevails, that he it is who wins the crown; examine just what is done, and you will see that his advantage is great. For as he that has begun with unjust acts, will have himself destroyed the eyes of both, his neighbor's and his own (wherefore also he is justly hated of all, and ten thousand accusations are aimed at him): so he that has been injured, even after his equal retaliation, will have done nothing horrible. Wherefore also he has many to sympathize with him, as being clear from that offense even after he has retaliated. And though the calamity be equal to both parties, yet the sentence passed on it is not equal, either with God, or with men. It should seem then, that neither is the calamity equal in the end.

Now whereas at the beginning He said, he that is angry with his brother without a cause, and he that calls him fool shall be in danger of hell fire, here He requires yet more entire self-restraint, commanding him that suffers ill not merely to be quiet, but even to be more exceedingly earnest in his turn, by offering the other cheek.

And this He says, not as legislating about such a blow as this only, but as teaching also what forbearance we should practise in all our other trials. For just as when He says, whoever calls his brother fool, is in danger of hell, He speaks not of this word only, but also of all reviling; even so here also He is making a law, not so much for our bearing it manfully, when smitten, as that we should be undisturbed, whatever we suffer. Because of this He both there singled out the extremest insult, and here has set down that which seems to be of all blows most opprobrious, the blow on the cheek, so full of all insolence. And He commands this as having regard both of him that strikes and of him that is stricken. Since both he that is insulted will not think that he suffers any harm, being thus framed to self-restraint (nay, he will not even have any sense of the insult, as striving rather for a prize than as receiving a blow); and he that is offering the affront will be made ashamed, and not add a second blow, though he be fiercer than any wild beast, yea, rather will condemn himself heartily for the former. For nothing so restrains the wrong doers, as when the injured bear what is done with gentleness. And it not only restrains them from rushing onward, but works upon them also to repent for what has gone before, and in wonder at such forbearance to draw back. And it makes them more our own, and causes them to be slaves, not merely friends, instead of haters and enemies; even as avenging one's self does just the contrary: for it both disgraces each of the two, and makes them worse, and their anger it heightens into a greater flame; yea, often no less than

death itself is the end of it, going on from bad to worse. Wherefore He not only forbade you to be angry when smitten, but even enjoined you to satiate the other's desire, that so neither may the former blow appear to have befallen you against your will. For thus, lost as he may be to shame, you will be able to smite him with a mortal blow, rather than if you had smitten him with your hand; or if his shamelessness be still greater, you will make him gentle in proportion.

2. And if any man will sue you at the law, and take away your coat, let him have your cloak also. Matthew 5:40

For not in the matter of blows only, but of our goods also, He would have such forbearance exhibited. Wherefore He again employs the same strong figure. That is, as in the other case He commands to overcome in suffering, so here again, by allowing ourselves to be deprived of more than the wrong doer expected. However, He did not put it so merely, but with something to enhance it: not saying, give your cloak to him that asks, but to him that would sue you at the law, that is, if he drag you into court, and give you trouble.

And just as, after He had bidden not to call another fool, nor to be angry without cause, He went on and required more, in that He commanded to offer the right cheek also; even so here, having said, Agree with your adversary, He again amplifies the precept. For now He orders us not only to give what the other would have, but even to show forth a greater liberality.

What then! one may say, am I to go about naked? We should not be naked, if we obeyed these sayings with exactness; rather more abundantly than any should we be clothed. For first, no one would attack men of this disposition; and next, if there chanced to be any one so savage and ungentle, as to proceed even so far, yet many more would be found to clothe him, who acted with such self-denial, not with garments only, but even with their own flesh, if it were possible.

Further: even though one were of necessity to go about naked on account of this sort of self-denial, neither so were it any disgrace. Since Adam too was naked Genesis 2:25 in paradise, and was not ashamed; and Isaiah was naked, and barefoot, and more glorious than all the Jews; Isaiah 20:2-3 and Joseph Genesis 39:12 also, when he stripped himself, did then more than ever shine forth. For to be thus naked is no evil, but to be so clad, as we now are, with costly garments, this is both disgraceful and ridiculous. For this cause, you see, those had praise of God, but these He blames, both by prophets and by apostles.

Let us not therefore suppose His injunctions impossible. Nay, for besides their expediency, they are very easy, if we are sober-minded; and the profit of them is so great as to be an exceeding help, not to ourselves only, but to those also who are using us despitefully. And in this chiefly stands their excellence, that while they induce us to suffer wrong, they by the same means teach them also that do the wrong to control themselves. For while he on his part thinks it a great thing to take what belongs to others, but you signify to him, that to you it is easy to give even what he does not ask: while you bring in liberality for a counterpoise to his meanness, and a wise moderation to his covetousness: consider what a lesson he will get, being taught not by sayings, but by actual deeds, to scorn vice and to seek after virtue.

For God will have us profitable not to ourselves alone, but to all our neighbors as well. Now if you give, and abstainest from suing, you have sought your own advantage only; but if you give him some other thing, you have made him too better, and so sent him away. Of this nature is salt, which is what He would have them to be; seeing it both recruits itself, and keeps all other bodies with which it may associate: of

this nature is light; for it shows objects both to a man's self and to all others. Forasmuch then as He has set you in the rank of these things, help thou likewise him who is sitting in darkness, and teach him that neither before did he take any thing by force: persuade him that he has done no despite. Yea, for thus you yourself also will be had in more respect and reverence, if you signify that you gave freely and were not robbed. Make therefore his sin, through your moderation, an instance of your own bounty.

3. And if you think this a great thing, wait, and you will see clearly, that neither yet have you attained to perfection. For not even here does He stop with you, who is laying down the laws of patient endurance, but He proceeds even further, thus saying,

If any one shall compel you to go one mile, go with him two. Matthew 5:41

Do you see the height of self-denial? In this at least, that after giving your coat, and your cloak, not even if your enemy should wish to use your naked body for hardships and labors, not even so (says He), must thou forbid him. For He would have us possess all things in common, both our bodies and our goods, as with them that are in need, so with them that insult us: for the latter comes of manliness, the former of mercifulness.

Because of this, He said, If any one shall compel you to go one mile, go with him two: again leading you higher up, and commanding you to show forth the same kind of ambition.

For if the things of which He spoke at the beginning, being far less than these, have so great blessings pronounced on them; consider what sort of portion awaits them, who duly perform these, and what they become even before their rewards, in a human and passible body winning entire freedom from passion. Since when neither insult, nor blows, nor the spoiling of their property, galls them; while they give way to no such thing, but rather add in large measure to their endurance; reflect what kind of training their soul is undergoing.

On this account then, as in regard of blows, as in regard of our goods, so in this case also, He has bidden us act. For why, says He, do I mention insult, and property? Though he should want to make use of your very own limbs for toil and weary work, and this unjustly, do thou again conquer and overpass His unjust desire.

For to compel is this, to drag unjustly and without any reason, and by way of despite. Nevertheless, for this also be thou ready in your station, so as to suffer more than the other would fain do to you.

Give to him that asks you, and from him that would borrow of you, turn not thou away. Matthew 5:42

These last are less than what went before; but marvel not, for this He is ever wont to do, mingling the small with the great. And if these be little in comparison with those, let them hearken, who take the goods of others, who distribute their own among harlots, and kindle to themselves a double fire, both by the unrighteous income, and by the pernicious outlay.

But by borrowing, here, He means not the compact with usury, but the use merely. And elsewhere He even amplifies it, saying that we should give to them, from whom we do not expect to receive.

4. You have heard that it has been said, You shall love your neighbor, and hate your enemy. But I say unto you, love your enemies, and pray for them which despitefully use you: bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you. That ye may become like your Father which is in Heaven; for He makes His

sun to rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust.

See how He has set the highest pinnacle on our good deeds. For this is why He teaches not only to endure a blow, but to offer the right cheek also; not only to add the cloak to the coat, but to travel also two miles with him who compels you to go one; in order that you might receive with all facility that which is much more than these. But what, one may say, is more than these? Not even to count as an enemy him who is doing these things: or rather even somewhat else more than this. For He said not, do not hate, but love; He said not, do not injure, but do good.

And if any one should examine accurately, he will see that even to these things somewhat is added, much greater than they are. For neither did He simply command to love, but to pray.

Do you see how many steps He has ascended, and how He has set us on the very summit of virtue? Nay, mark it, numbering from the beginning. A first step is, not to begin with injustice: a second, after he has begun, to vindicate one's self by equal retaliation; a third, not to do unto him that is vexing us the same that one has suffered, but to be quiet; a fourth, even to give one's self up to suffer wrongfully; a fifth, to give up yet more than the other, who did the wrong, wishes; a sixth, not to hate him who has done so; a seventh, even to love him; an eighth, to do him good also; a ninth, to entreat God Himself on his behalf. Do you see, what height of self-command? Wherefore glorious too, as we see, is the reward which it has. That is, because the thing enjoined was great, and needed a fervent soul, and much earnestness, He appoints for it also such a reward, as for none of the former. For He makes not mention here of earth, as with respect to the meek; nor of comfort and mercy, as with regard to the mourners and the merciful; nor of the kingdom of Heaven; but of that which was more thrilling than all; our becoming like God, in such wise as men might become so. For He says, That ye may become like your Father which is in Heaven.

And observe, I pray you, how neither in this place, nor in the preceding parts, does He call Him His own Father, but in that instance, God, and a great King, when He was discoursing about oaths, and here, their Father. And this He does, as reserving for the proper season what He had to say touching these points.

5. Then, bringing the likeness yet closer, He says,

Because He makes His sun to rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain upon just and unjust.
Matthew 5:45

For He too, so far from hating, so He speaks, even pours benefits on those that insult Him. Yet surely in no respect is the case parallel, not only because of the surpassing nature of His benefits, but also by reason of the excellence of His dignity. For thou indeed art despised by your fellow-slave, but He by His slave, who has also received ten thousand benefits from Him: and thou indeed givest words, in praying for him, but He, deeds, very great and marvellous, kindling the sun, and giving the annual showers. Nevertheless, even so I grant you to be mine equal, in such wise as it is possible for a man so to be.

Hate not then the man that does you wrong, who is procuring you such good things, and bringing you to so great honor. Curse not him that uses you despitefully; for so have you undergone the labor, but art deprived of the fruit; you will bear the loss, but lose the reward; which is of the utmost folly, having borne the more grievous, not to bear what is less than it. But how, says one, is it possible for this to take place? Having seen God become man, and descend so far, and suffer so much for your sake, do you still inquire and doubt, how it is possible to forgive your fellow-servants their injuriousness? Do you not hear Him on the cross, saying, Forgive them, for they know not what they do? Luke 23:34 Do you not hear Paul, when

he says, He who is gone up on high, and is sitting on the right hand intercedes for us? Romans 8:34 Do you see not that even after the cross, and after He had been received up, He sent the apostles unto the Jews that had slain Him, to bring them His ten thousand blessings, and this, though they were to suffer ten thousand terrors at their hands?

6. But have you been greatly wronged? Nay, what have you endured like your Lord, bound, beaten with whips, with rods, spit upon by servants, enduring death, and that death, which is of all deaths the most shameful, after ten thousand favors shown? And even if you have been greatly wronged, for this very cause most of all do thou do him good, that you may both make your own crown more glorious, and set your brother free from the worst infirmity. For so too the physicians, when they are kicked, and shamefully handled by the insane, then most of all pity them, and take measures for their perfect cure, knowing that the insult comes of the extremity of their disease. Now I bid you too have the same mind touching them that are plotting against you, and do thou so treat them that are injuring you. For it is they above all that are diseased, it is they who are undergoing all the violence. Deliver him then from this grievous contumely, and grant him to let go his anger, and set him free from that grievous demon, wrath. Yea, for if we see persons possessed by devils, we weep for them; we do not seek to be ourselves also possessed.

Now let us do this too likewise with respect to them that are angry; for in truth the enraged are like the possessed; yea rather, are more wretched than they, being mad with consciousness of it. Wherefore also their frenzy is without excuse. Trample not then on the fallen, but rather pity him. For so, should we see any one troubled with bile, blinded and giddy, and straining to cast up this evil humor, we stretch forth a hand, and continue to support him through his struggles, and though we stain our garments, we regard it not, but seek one thing only, how we may set him free from this grievous distress. This then let us do with respect to the angry also, and continue to bear them up when vomiting and struggling; nor let him go, until he put from him all the bitterness. And then shall he feel toward you the greatest thankfulness; when he is at rest, then he will know clearly from how great trouble you have released him.

But why do I speak of the thanks from him? For God will straightway crown you, and will requite you with ten thousand honors, because you have freed your brother from a grievous disease; and that brother too will honor you as a master, ever reverencing your forbearance.

Do you see not the women that are in travail, how they bite those that stand by, and they are not pained? Or rather they are pained, but bear it bravely, and sympathize with them who are in sorrow and are torn by those pangs. These do thou too emulate, and prove not softer than women. For after these women have brought forth (for these men are more feeble minded than women), then they will know you to be a man in comparison. of Heaven?

9. What then can we deserve, who are commanded to emulate God, and are perhaps in a way not so much as to equal the publicans? For if to love them that love us be the part of publicans, sinners, and heathens: when we do not even this (and we do it not, so long as we envy our brethren who are in honor), what penalty shall we not incur, commanded as we are to surpass the scribes, and taking our place below the heathens? How then shall we behold the kingdom, I pray you? How shall we set foot on that holy threshold, who are not surpassing even the publicans? For this He covertly signified, when He said, Do not even the publicans the same?

And this thing most especially we may admire in His teaching, that while in each instance He sets down with very great fullness the prizes of the conflicts; such as to see God, and to inherit the kingdom of

Heaven, and to become sons of God, and like God, and to obtain mercy, and to be comforted, and the great reward: if anywhere He must needs mention things grievous, He does this in a subdued tone. Thus in the first place, the name of hell He has set down once only in so many sentences; and in some other instances too, it is with reserve that He corrects the hearer, and as though he were managing His discourse rather in the way of shaming than threatening him; where He says, do not even the publicans the same? and, if the salt have lost its savor; and, he shall be called least in the kingdom of Heaven.

And there are places where He puts down the sin itself by way of punishment, leaving to the hearer to infer the grievousness of the punishment: as when He says, he has committed adultery with her in his heart; and, he that puts away causes her to commit adultery; and, That which is more than these is of the evil one. For to them that have understanding, instead of the mention of the punishment, the very greatness of the sin is sufficient for correction.

Wherefore also He here brings forward the heathens and the publicans, by the quality of the person putting the disciple to shame. Which Paul too did, saying, Sorrow not, even as the rest which have no hope; 1 Thessalonians 4:13 and, Even as the Gentiles which know not God. 1 Thessalonians 4:5

And to signify that He requires nothing very overpowering, but a little more than was accustomed, He says,

Do not even the Gentiles the same? Matthew 5:47 Yet nevertheless He stops not the discourse at this, but makes it end with His rewards, and those good hopes, saying,

Be therefore perfect, as your Heavenly Father.

And He intersperses everywhere abundantly the name of the heavens, by the very place thoroughly elevating their minds. For as yet, I know not how, they were somewhat weak and dull.

10. Let us then, bearing in mind all the things which have been said, show forth great love even towards our enemies; and let us cast away that ridiculous custom, to which many of the more thoughtless give way, waiting for those that meet them to address them first. Towards that which has a great blessing, they have no zeal; but what is ridiculous, that they follow after.

Wherefore now do you not address him first? Because he is waiting for this, is the reply. Nay, for this very reason most of all you should have sprung forward to him, that you might win the crown. No, says he, since this was his object. And what can be worse than this folly? That is, Because this, says he, was his object -- to become procurer of a reward for me -- I will not put my hand to what he has thus suggested. Now if he first address you, you gain nothing, even though you accost him. But if you be first to spring forward and speak to him, you have made yourself profit of his pride, and hast gathered in a manner abundant fruit from his obstinacy. What is it then but the utmost folly, when we are to reap so large fruit from bare words, to give up the gain; and condemning him, to stumble at the very same thing? For if you blame him for this, that he first waits to be addressed by another, wherefore do you emulate that same thing which you accuse. That which you said was evil, why are you to imitate the same as good? Do you see how that nothing is more senseless than a man who associates with wickedness? Wherefore, I entreat, let us flee this evil and ridiculous practice. Yea, for ten thousand friendships has this pestilence overthrown, many enmities has it wrought.

For this cause then let us anticipate them. Since we who are commanded to take blows, and be compelled to journey, and to be stripped by enemies, and to bear it; what kind of indulgence should we deserve, exhibiting so great contentiousness in a mere formal address?

11. Why, says one, we are despised and spit upon, the moment we have given him up this. And in order that man may not despise you, do you offend God? And in order that your frenzied fellow servant may not despise you, do you despise the Lord, who has bestowed on you benefits so great? Nay, if it be amiss that your equal should despise you, how much more that you should despise the God that made you?

And together with this, consider that other point also; that when he despises you, he is at that very moment employed in procuring to you a greater reward. Since for God's sake you submit to it, because you have hearkened to His laws. And this, to what kind of honor is it not equal? To how many diadems? Be it my portion both to be insulted and despised for God's sake, rather than to be honored by all kings; for nothing, nothing is equal to this glory.

This then let us pursue, in such wise as Himself commanded, and making no account of the things of men, but showing forth perfect self restraint in all things, let us so direct our own lives. For so even now, from this very time, we shall enjoy the good things of the heavens, and of the crowns that are there, walking as angels among men, going about in the earth like the angelic powers, and abiding apart from all lust, from all turmoil.

And together with all these things we shall receive also the unutterable blessings: unto which may we all attain, by the grace and love towards man of our Lord Jesus Christ, to whom be glory, and power, and worship, with the unoriginate Father, and the Holy and Good Spirit, now and always, even forever and ever. Amen.

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