

Homily 2 on Second Thessalonians

by St. John Chrysostom

The sermon emphasizes the importance of finding favor with God and the role of God's grace in our lives, encouraging the Thessalonians to persevere in the face of persecution and to remember the consequences of sin.

Topics: "Divine Favor", "Faith Growth"

Description

John Chrysostom preaches to the Church of the Thessalonians about the importance of finding favor with God, emphasizing that obtaining favor with God is far greater than seeking favor with men. He reminds them of the grace of God to soften their hearts, preparing them to receive reproof and rebuke without breaking away. Chrysostom highlights the growth of faith through enduring afflictions and the abounding love among believers, encouraging them to remain united. He urges the congregation to remember the righteous judgment of God, the recompense for afflictions, and the rest promised at the revelation of the Lord Jesus from heaven.

Transcript

2 Thessalonians 1:1-2

Paul, and Silvanus, and Timothy, unto the Church of the Thessalonians in God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ: Grace to you and peace from God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

The greater part of men do and devise all things with a view to ingratiate themselves with rulers, and with those who are greater than themselves; and they account it a great thing, and think themselves happy, if they can obtain that object. But if to obtain favor with men is so great an advantage, how great must it be to find favor with God? On this account he always thus prefaces his Epistle, and invokes this upon them, knowing that if this be granted, there will be nothing afterwards grievous, but whatever troubles there may be, all will be done away. And that you may learn this, Joseph was a slave a young man, inexperienced, unformed, and suddenly the direction of a house was committed to his hands, and he had to render an account to an Egyptian master. And you know how prone to anger and unforgiving that people is, and when authority and power is added, their rage is greater, being inflamed by power. And this too is manifest from what he did afterwards. For when the mistress made accusation, he bore with it. And yet it was not the part of those who held the garment, but of him who was stripped, to have suffered violence. For he ought to have said, If he had heard that you raised your voice, as you say, he would have fled, and if he had been guilty, he would not have waited for the coming of his master. But nevertheless he took nothing of this sort into consideration, but unreasonably giving way altogether to anger, he cast him into prison. So

thoughtless a person was he. And yet even from other things he might have conjectured the good disposition and the intelligence of the man. But nevertheless, because he was very unreasonable, he never considered any such thing. He therefore who had to do with such a harsh master, and who was entrusted with the administration of his whole house, being a stranger, and solitary, and inexperienced; when God shed abundant grace upon him, passed through all, as if his temptations had not even existed, both the false accusation of his mistress, and the danger of death, and the prison, and at last came to the royal throne.

This blessed man therefore saw how great is the grace of God, and on this account he invokes it upon them. And another thing also he effects, wishing to render them well-disposed to the remaining part of the Epistle; that, though he should reprove and rebuke them, they might not break away from him. For this reason he reminds them before all things of the grace of God, mollifying their hearts, that, even if there be affliction, being reminded of the grace by which they were saved from the greater evil, they may not despair at the less, but may thence derive consolation. As also elsewhere in an Epistle he has said, For if, while we were enemies, we were reconciled to God through the death of His Son, much more, being reconciled, shall we be saved by His life. Romans 5:10

Grace to you and peace, he says, from God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

Ver. 3. We are bound to give thanks to God always for you, brethren, even as it is meet.

Again a sign of great humility. For he led them to reflect and consider, that if for our good actions others do not admire us first, but God, much more also ought we. And in other respects too he raises up their spirits, because they suffer such things as are not worthy of tears and lamentations, but of thanksgiving to God. But if Paul is thankful for the good of others, what will they suffer, who not only are not thankful, but even pine at it.

For that your faith grows exceedingly, and the love of each one of you all toward one another abounds.

And how, you say, can faith increase? That is when we suffer something dreadful for it. It is a great thing for it to be established, and not to be carried away by reasonings. But when the winds assail us, when the rains burst upon us, when a violent storm is raised on every side, and the waves succeed each other -- then that we are not shaken, is a proof of no less than this, that it grows, and grows exceedingly, and becomes loftier. For as in the case of the flood all the stony and lower parts are soon hidden, but as many things as are above, it reaches not them, so also the faith that has become lofty, is not drawn downwards. For this reason he does not say your faith grows; but grows exceedingly, and the love of each one of you all toward one another abounds. Do you see how this contributes for the ease of affliction, to be in close guard together, and to adhere to one another? From this also arose much consolation. The love and faith, therefore, that is weak, afflictions shake, but that which is strong they render stronger. For a soul that is in grief, when it is weak, can add nothing to itself; but that which is strong does it then most. And observe their love. They did not love one indeed, and not love another, but it was equal on the part of all. For this he has intimated, by saying, of each one of you all toward one another. For it was equally poised, as that of one body. Since even now we find love existing among many, but this love becoming the cause of division. For when we are knit together in parties of two or three, and the two indeed, or three or four, are closely bound to one another, but draw themselves off from the rest, because they can have recourse to these, and in all things confide in these; this is the division of love-- not love. For tell me, if the eye should bestow upon the hand the foresight which it has for the whole body, and withdrawing itself from the other

members, should attend to that alone, would it not injure the whole? Assuredly. So also if we confine to one or two the love which ought to be extended to the whole Church of God, we injure both ourselves and them, and the whole. For these things are not of love, but of division; schisms, and distracting rents. Since even if I separate and take a member from the whole man, the part separated indeed is united in itself, is continuous, all compacted together, yet even so it is a separation, since it is not united to the rest of the body.

For what advantage is it, that you love a certain person exceedingly? It is a human love. But if it is not a human love, but you love for God's sake, then love all. For so God has commanded to love even our enemies. And if He has commanded to love our enemies, how much more those who have never aggrieved us? But, do you say, I love, but not in that way. Rather, you do not love at all. For when you accuse, when you envy, when you lay snares, how do you love? But, do you say, I do none of these things. But when a man is ill spoken of, and you do not shut the mouth of the speaker, dost not disbelieve his sayings, dost not check him, of what love is this the sign? And the love, he says, of each one of you all toward one another abounds.

Ver. 4. So that we ourselves glory in you in the Churches of God.

Indeed in the first Epistle he says, that all the Churches of Macedonia and Achaia resounded, having heard of their faith. So that we need not, he says, to speak anything. For they themselves report concerning us what manner of entering in we had unto you. 1 Thessalonians 1:8 But here he says, so that we glory. What then is it that is said? There he says that they need not instruction from him, but here he has not said that we teach them, but we glory, and are proud of you. If therefore we both give thanks to God for you, and glory among men, much more ought you to do so for your own good deeds. For if your good actions are worthy of boasting from others, how are they worthy of lamentation from you? It is impossible to say. So that we ourselves, he says, glory in you in the Churches of God, for your patience and faith.

Here he shows that much time had elapsed. For patience is shown by much time, not in two or three days. And he does not merely say patience. It is the part of patience indeed properly not yet to enjoy the promised blessings. But here he speaks of a greater patience. And of what sort is that? That which is shown in persecutions. For your patience, he says, and faith in all your persecutions and in the afflictions which you endure. For they were living with enemies who were continually endeavoring on every side to injure them, and they were manifesting a patience firm and immovable. Let all those blush who for the sake of the patronage of men pass over to other doctrines. For while it was yet the beginning of the preaching, poor men who lived by their daily earnings took upon themselves enmities from rulers and the first men of the state, when there was nowhere king or governor who was a believer; and submitted to irreconcilable war, and not even so were unsettled.

Ver. 5. Which is a manifest token of the righteous judgment of God.

See how he gathers comfort for them. He had said, We give thanks to God, he had said, We glory among men: these things indeed are honorable. But that which he most seeks for, who is in suffering, is, deliverance from evils, and vengeance upon those who are evil entreating them. For when the soul is weak, it most seeks for these things, for the philosophic soul does not even seek these things. Why then does he say, a token of the righteous Judgment of God? Here he has glanced at the retribution on either side, both of those who do the ill, and of those who suffer it, as if he had said, that the justice of God may

be shown when He crowns you indeed, but punishes them. At the same time also he comforts them, showing that from their own labors and toils they are crowned, and according to the proportion of righteousness. But he puts their part first. For although a person even vehemently desires revenge, yet he first longs for reward. For this reason he says,

That you may be counted worthy of the kingdom of God, for which you also suffer.

This then does not come to pass from the circumstance that those who injure them are more powerful than they, but because it is so that they must enter into the kingdom. For through many tribulations, he says, we must enter into the kingdom of God. Acts 14:22

Ver. 6, 7. If so be that it is a righteous thing with God to recompense affliction to them that afflict you, and to you that are afflicted rest with us at the revelation of the Lord Jesus from heaven with the Angels of His power.

The phrase If so be that here is put for because, which we also use, in speaking of things that are quite evident and not to be denied; instead of saying, Because it is exceedingly righteous. If so be, he says, that it is a righteous thing with God to punish these, he will certainly punish them. As if he had said, If God cares for human affairs, If God takes thought. And he does not put it of his own opinion, but among things confessedly true; as if one said, If God hates the wicked, that he may compel them to grant that He does hate them. For such sentences are above all indisputable, inasmuch as they also themselves know that it is just. For if this is just with men, much more with God.

To recompense, he says, affliction to them that afflict you, and to you that are afflicted rest. What then? Is the retribution equal? By no means, but see by what follows how he shows that it is more severe, and the rest much greater. Behold also another consolation, in that they have their partners in the afflictions, as partners also in the retribution. He joins them in their crowns with those who had performed infinitely more and greater works. Then he adds also the period, and by the description leads their minds upward, all but opening heaven already by his word, and setting it before their eyes; and he places around Him the angelic host, both from the place and from the attendants amplifying the image, so that they may be refreshed a little. And to you that are afflicted rest with us, he says, at the revelation of the Lord Jesus from heaven with the Angels of his power.

Ver. 8. In flaming fire rendering vengeance to them that know not God, and to them that obey not the Gospel of our Lord Jesus.

If they that have not obeyed the Gospel suffer vengeance, what will not they suffer who besides their disobedience also afflict you? And see his intelligence; he says not here those who afflict you, but those who obey not. So that although not on your account, yet on His own it is necessary to punish them. This then is said in order to full assurance, that it is altogether necessary for them to be punished: but what was said before, was said that they also might be honored, because they suffer these things on your account. The one causes them to believe concerning the punishment; the other to be pleased, because for the sake of what has been done to them they suffer these things.

All this was said to them, but it applies also to us. When therefore we are in affliction, let us consider these things. Let us not rejoice at the punishment of others as being avenged, but as ourselves escaping from such punishment and vengeance. For what advantage is it to us when others are punished? Let us not, I beseech you, have such souls. Let us be invited to virtue by the prospect of the kingdom. For he indeed

who is exceedingly virtuous is induced neither by fear nor by the prospect of the kingdom, but for Christ's sake alone, as was the case with Paul. Let us, however, even thus consider the blessings of the kingdom, the miseries of hell, and thus regulate and school ourselves; let us in this way bring ourselves to the things that are to be practiced. When you see anything good and great in the present life, think of the kingdom, and you will consider it as nothing. When you see anything terrible, think of hell, and you will deride it. When you are possessed by carnal desire, think of the fire, think also of the pleasure of sin itself, that it is nothing worth, that it has not even pleasure in it. For if the fear of the laws that are enacted here has so great power as to withdraw us from wicked actions, how much more should the remembrance of things future, the vengeance that is immortal, the punishment that is everlasting? If the fear of an earthly king withdraws us from so many evils, how much more the fear of the King Eternal?

Whence then can we constantly have this fear? If we continually hearken to the Scriptures. For if the sight only of a dead body so depresses the mind, how much more must hell and the fire unquenchable, how much more the worm that never dies. If we always think of hell, we shall not soon fall into it. For this reason God has threatened punishment; if it was not attended with great advantage to think of it, God would not have threatened it. But because the remembrance of it is able to work great good, for this reason He has put into our souls the terror of it, as a wholesome medicine. Let us not then overlook the great advantage arising from it, but let us continually advert to it, at our dinners, at our suppers. For conversation about pleasant things profits the soul nothing, but renders it more languid, while that about things painful and melancholy cuts off all that is relaxed and dissolute in it, and converts it, and braces it when unnerved. He who converses of theaters and actors does not benefit the soul, but inflames it more, and renders it more careless. He who concerns himself and is busy in other men's matters, often even involves it in dangers by this curiosity. But he who converses about hell incurs no dangers, and renders it more sober.

But do you fear the offensiveness of such words? Have you then, if you are silent, extinguished hell? Or if you speak of it, have you kindled it? Whether you speak of it or not, the fire boils forth. Let it be continually spoken of, that you may never fall into it. It is not possible that a soul anxious about hell should readily sin. For hear the most excellent advice, Remember, it says, your latter end Sirach 28:6, and you will not sin forever. A soul that is fearful of giving account cannot but be slow to transgression. For fear being vigorous in the soul does not permit anything worldly to exist in it. For if discourse raised concerning hell so humbles and brings it low, does not the reflection constantly dwelling upon the soul purify it more than any fire?

Let us not remember the kingdom so much as hell. For fear has more power than the promise. And I know that many would despise ten thousand blessings, if they were rid of the punishment, inasmuch as it is even now sufficient for me to escape vengeance, and not to be punished. No one of those who have hell before their eyes will fall into hell. No one of those who despise hell will escape hell. For as among us those who fear the judgment-seats will not be apprehended by them, but those who despise them are chiefly those who fall under them, so it is also in this case. If the Ninevites had not feared destruction, they would have been overthrown, but because they feared, they were not overthrown. If in the time of Noah they had feared the deluge, they would not have been drowned. And if the Sodomites had feared they would not have been consumed by fire. It is a great evil to despise a threat. He who despises threatening will soon experience its reality in the execution of it. Nothing is so profitable as to converse concerning hell. It renders our souls purer than any silver. For hear the prophet saying, Your judgments are always before me. From Psalm 17:22, Septuagint For although it pains the hearer, it benefits him very much.

For such indeed are all things that profit. For medicines too, and food, at first annoy the sick, and then do him good. And if we cannot bear the severity of words, it is manifest that we shall not be able to bear affliction in very deed. If no one endures a discourse concerning hell, it is evident, that if persecution came on, no one would ever stand firm against fire, against sword. Let us exercise our ears not to be over soft and tender: for from this we shall come to endure even the things themselves. If we be habituated to hear of dreadful things, we shall be habituated also to endure dreadful things. But if we be so relaxed as not to endure even words, when shall we stand against things? Do you see how the blessed Paul despises all things here, and dangers one after another, as not even temptations? Wherefore? Because he had been in the practice of despising hell, for the sake of what was God's will. He thought even the experience of hell to be nothing for the sake of the love of Christ; while we do not even endure a discourse concerning it for our own advantage. Now therefore having heard a little, go your ways; but I beseech you if there is any love in you, constantly to revert to discourses concerning these things. They can do you no harm, even if they should not benefit, but assuredly they will benefit you too. For according to our discourses, the soul is qualified. For evil communications, he says, corrupt good manners. Therefore also good communications improve it; therefore also fearful discourses make it sober. For the soul is a sort of wax. For if you apply cold discourses, you harden and make it callous; but if fiery ones, you melt it; and having melted it, you form it to what you will, and engrave the royal image upon it. Let us therefore stop up our ears to discourses that are vain. It is no little evil; for from it arise all evils.

If our mind had been practiced to apply to divine discourses, it would not apply to others; and not applying to others, neither would it betake itself to evil actions. For words are the road to works. First we think, then we speak, then we act. Many men, even when before sober, have often from disgraceful words gone on to disgraceful actions. For our soul is neither good nor evil by nature, but becomes both the one and the other from choice. As therefore the sail carries the ship wherever the wind may blow, or rather as the rudder moves the ship, if the wind be favorable, so also thought will sail without danger, if good words from a favorable quarter waft it. But if the contrary, often they will even overwhelm the reason. For what winds are to ships, that discourses are to souls. Wherever you will, you may move and turn it. For this reason one exhorting says, Let your whole discourse be in the law of the Most High. Sirach 20:20 Wherefore, I exhort you, when we receive children from the nurse, let us not accustom them to old wives' stories, but let them learn from their first youth that there is a Judgment, that there is a punishment; let it be instilled in their minds. This fear being rooted in them produces great good effects. For a soul that has learned from its first youth to be subdued by this expectation, will not soon shake off this fear. But like a horse obedient to the bridle, having the thought of hell seated upon it, walking orderly, it will both speak and utter things profitable; and neither youth nor riches, nor an orphan state, nor any other thing, will be able to injure it, having its reason so firm and able to hold out against everything.

By these discourses let us regulate as well ourselves as our wives too, our servants, our children, our friends, and, if possible, our enemies. For with these discourses we are able to cut off the greater part of our sins, and it is better to dwell upon things grievous than upon things agreeable, and it is manifest from hence. For, tell me, if you should go into a house where a marriage is celebrated, for a season you are delighted at the spectacle, but afterwards having gone away, you pine with grief that you have not so much. But if you enter the house of mourners, even though they are very rich, when you go away you will be rather refreshed. For there you have not conceived envy, but comfort and consolation in your poverty. You have seen by facts, that riches are no good, poverty no evil, but they are things indifferent. So also now, if you talk about luxury, you the more vex your soul, that is not able perhaps to be luxurious. But if you are speaking against luxury, and introduce discourse concerning hell, the thing will cheer you, and

beget much pleasure. For when you consider that luxury will not be able to defend us at all against that fire, you will not seek after it; but if you reflect that it is wont to kindle it even more, you will not only not seek, but will turn from it and reject it.

Let us not avoid discourses concerning hell, that we may avoid hell. Let us not banish the remembrance of punishment, that we may escape punishment. If the rich man had reflected upon that fire, he would not have sinned; but because he never was mindful of it, therefore he fell into it. Tell me, O man, being about to stand before the Judgment-seat of Christ, do you speak of all things rather than of that? And when you have a matter before a judge, often only relating to words, neither day nor night, at no time or season do you talk of anything else, but always of that business, and when you are about to give an account of your whole life, and to submit to a trial, can you not bear even with others reminding you of that Judgment? For this reason therefore all things are ruined and undone, because when we are about to stand before a human tribunal concerning matters of this life, we move everything, we solicit all men, we are constantly anxious about it, we do everything for the sake of it: but when we are about, after no long time, to come before the Judgment-seat of Christ, we do nothing either by ourselves, or by others; we do not entreat the Judge. And yet He grants to us a long season of forbearance, and does not snatch us away in the midst of our sins, but permits us to put them off, and that Goodness and Lovingkindness leaves nothing undone of all that belongs to Himself. But all is of no avail; on this account the punishment will be the heavier. But God forbid it should be so! Wherefore, I beseech you, let us even if but now become watchful. Let us keep hell before our eyes. Let us consider that inexorable Account, that, thinking of those things, we may both avoid vice, and choose virtue, and may be able to obtain the blessings promised to those who love Him, by the grace and lovingkindness, etc.

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