

Homily 20 on Matthew

by St. John Chrysostom

St. John Chrysostom's Homily 20 on Matthew emphasizes the importance of sincerity in fasting and spiritual practices while warning against the dangers of hypocrisy and the pursuit of earthly treasures.

Scripture: Matthew 6:16-33

Topics: "Hypocrisy In Fasting", "Spiritual Wealth"

Description

John Chrysostom preaches about the dangers of hypocrisy in fasting, warning against seeking recognition from others rather than from God. He emphasizes the importance of fasting with a sincere heart and not for show, pointing out the folly of neglecting to fast while pretending to do so. Chrysostom highlights the need to guard against the love of money and the enslavement it brings, urging listeners to lay up treasures in heaven rather than on earth. He encourages a shift in focus from earthly possessions to spiritual wealth, reminding believers of the eternal rewards of storing up treasures in heaven.

Transcript

Matt. VI. 16.

And when you fast, be not as the hypocrites, of a sad countenance. For they disfigure their faces, that they may appear unto men to fast.

Here it were well to sigh aloud, and to wail bitterly: for not only do we imitate the hypocrites, but we have even surpassed them. For I know, yea I know many, not merely fasting and making a display of it, but neglecting to fast, and yet wearing the masks of them that fast, and cloaking themselves with an excuse worse than their sin.

For I do this, say they, that I may not offend the many. What do you say? There is a law of God which commands these things, and do you talk of offense? And do you think that in keeping it you are offending, in transgressing it, delivering men from offense? And what can be worse than this folly?

Will you not leave off becoming worse than the very hypocrites, and making your hypocrisy double? And when you consider the great excess of this evil, will you not be abashed at the force of the expression now before us? In that He did not say, they act a part, merely, but willing also to touch them more deeply, He says, For they disfigure their faces; that is, they corrupt, they mar them.

But if this be a disfiguring of the face, to appear pale for vainglory, what should we say concerning the women who corrupt their faces with colorings and paintings to the ruin of the unchaste sort of young men? For while those harm themselves only, these women harm both themselves and them who behold them. Wherefore we should fly both from the one pest and from the other, keeping at distance enough and to spare. For so He not only commanded to make no display, but even to seek to be concealed. Which thing He had done before likewise.

And whereas in the matter of almsgiving, He did not put it simply, but having said, Take heed not to do it before men, He added, to be seen of them; yet concerning fasting and prayer, He made no such limitation. Why could this have been? Because for almsgiving to be altogether concealed is impossible, but for prayer and fasting, it is possible.

As therefore, when He said, Let not your left hand know what your right hand does, it was not of hands that He was speaking, but of the duty of being strictly concealed from all; and as when He commanded us to enter into our closet, not there alone absolutely, nor there primarily, did He command us to pray, but He covertly intimated the same thing again; so likewise here, in commanding us to be anointed, He did not enact that we positively must anoint ourselves; for then we should all of us be found transgressors of this law; and above all, surely, they who have taken the most pains to keep it, the societies of the monks, who have taken up their dwelling on the mountains. It was not this then that He enjoined, but, forasmuch as the ancients had a custom to anoint themselves continually, when they were taking their pleasure and rejoicing (and this one may see clearly from David 2 Samuel 12:20 and from Daniel); Daniel 10:3 He said that we were to anoint ourselves, not that we should positively do this, but that by all means we might endeavor, with great strictness, to hide this our acquisition. And to convince you that so it is, He Himself, when by action exhibiting what He enjoined in words, having fasted forty days, and fasted in secret, did neither anoint nor wash Himself: nevertheless, though He did not these things, He most assuredly fulfilled the whole without vainglory. It is this then that He enjoins on us likewise, both bringing before us the hypocrites, and by a twice repeated charge dissuading the hearers.

And somewhat else He signified by this name, this of hypocrites, I mean. That is, not only by the ridiculousness of the thing, nor by its bringing an extreme penalty, but also by showing that such deceit is but for a season, does He withdraw us from that evil desire. For the actor seems glorious just so long as the audience is sitting; or rather not even then in the sight of all. For the more part of the spectators know who it is, and what part he is acting. However, when the audience is broken up, he is more clearly discovered to all. Now this, you see, the vainglorious must in all necessity undergo. For even here they are manifest to the majority, as not being that which they appear to be, but as wearing a mask only; but much more will they be detected hereafter, when all things appear naked and open.

And by another motive again He withdraws them from the hypocrites, by showing that His injunction is light. For He does not make the fast more strict, nor command us to practise more of it, but not to lose the crown thereof. So that what seems hard to bear, is common to us and to the hypocrites, for they also fast; but that which is lightest, namely, not to lose the reward after our labors, this is what I command, says He; adding nothing to our toils, but gathering our wages for us with all security, and not suffering us to go away unrewarded, as they do. Nay, they will not so much as imitate them that wrestle in the Olympic games, who although so great a multitude is sitting there, and so many princes, desire to please but one, even him who adjudges the victory among them; and this, though he be much their inferior. But you, though you have a twofold motive for displaying the victory to Him, first, that He is the person to adjudge it, and also, that He is beyond comparison superior to all that are sitting in the theatre -- you are displaying it to others,

who so far from profiting, do privily work you the greatest harm.

However, I do not forbid even this, says He. Only, if you are desirous to make a show to men, also, wait, and I will bestow on you this too in fuller abundance, and with great profit. For as it is, this quite breaks you off from the glory which is with me, even as to despise these things unites you closely; but then shall you enjoy all in entire security; having, even before that last, no little fruit to reap in this world also, namely, that you have trodden under foot all human glory, and art freed from the grievous bondage of men, and art become a true worker of virtue. Whereas now, as long at least as you are so disposed, if you should be in a desert, you will be deserted by all your virtue, having none to behold you. This is to act as one insulting virtue itself, if you are to pursue it not for its own sake, but with an eye to the ropemaker, and the brazier, and the common people of the baser sort, that the bad and they that are far removed from virtue may admire you. And you are calling the enemies of virtue to the display and the sight thereof, as if one were to choose to live continently, not for the excellency of continence, but that he might make a show before prostitutes. You also, it would seem, would not choose virtue, but for the sake of virtue's enemies; whereas you ought indeed to admire her on this very ground, that she has even her enemies to praise her -- yet to admire her (as is meet), not for others, but for her own sake. Since we too, when we are loved not for our own, but for others' sake, account the thing an insult. Just so I bid you reckon in the case of virtue as well, and neither to follow after her for the sake of others, nor for men's sake to obey God; but men for God's sake. Since if you do the contrary, though thou seem to follow virtue, you have provoked equally with him who follows her not. For just as he disobeyed by not doing, so thou by doing unlawfully.

2. Lay not up for yourselves treasures upon earth.

Thus, after He has cast out the disease of vainglory, and not before, He seasonably introduces His discourse of voluntary poverty. For nothing so trains men to be fond of riches, as the fondness for glory. This, for instance, is why men devise those herds of slaves, and that swarm of eunuchs, and their horses with trappings of gold, and their silver tables, and all the rest of it, yet more ridiculous; not to satisfy any wants, nor to enjoy any pleasure, but that they may make a show before the multitude.

Now above He had only said, that we must show mercy; but here He points out also how great mercy we must show, when He says, Lay not up treasure. For it not being possible at the beginning to introduce all at once His discourse on contempt of riches, by reason of the tyranny of the passion, He breaks it up into small portions, and having set free the hearer's mind, instills it therein, so as that it shall become acceptable. Wherefore, you see, He said first, Blessed are the merciful; and after this, Agree with your adversary; and after that again, If any one will sue you at the law and take your coat, give him your cloak also; but here, that which is much greater than all these. For there His meaning was, if you see a law-suit impending, do this; since to want and be freed from strife, is better than to possess and strive; but here, supposing neither adversary nor any one at law with you, and without all mention of any other such party, He teaches the contempt of riches itself by itself, implying that not so much for their sake who receive mercy, as for the giver's sake, He makes these laws: so that though there be no one injuring us, or dragging us into a court of justice, even so we may despise our possessions, bestowing them on those that are in need.

And neither here has He put the whole, but even in this place it is gently spoken; although He had in the wilderness shown forth to a surpassing extent His conflicts in that behalf. Matthew 4:9-10 However He does not express this, nor bring it forward; for it was not yet time to reveal it; but for a while He searches out for reasons, maintaining the place of an adviser rather than a lawgiver, in His sayings on this subject.

For after He had said, Lay not up treasures upon the earth, He added, where moth and rust does corrupt, and where thieves break through and steal.

For the present He signifies the hurtfulness of the treasure here, and the profit of what is there, both from the place, and from the things which mar it. And neither at this point does He stop, but adds also another argument.

And first, what things they most fear, from these He urges them. For of what are you afraid? says He: lest your goods should be spent, if you give alms? Nay, then give alms, and so they will not be spent; and, what is more, so far from being spent, they will actually receive a greater increase; yea, for the things in heaven are added unto them.

However, for a time He says it not, but puts it afterwards. But for the present, what had most power to persuade them, that He brings forward, namely, that the treasure would thus remain for them unspent.

And on either hand He attracts them. For He said not only, If you give alms, it is preserved: but He threatened also the opposite thing, that if you give not, it perishes.

And see His unspeakable prudence. For neither did He say, Thou dost but leave them to others; since this too is pleasant to men: He alarms them however on a new ground, by signifying that not even this do they obtain: since though men defraud not, there are those which are sure to defraud, the moth and the rust. For although this mischief seem very easy to restrain, it is nevertheless irresistible and uncontrollable, and devise what you will, you will be unable to check this harm.

What then, does moth make away with the gold? Though not moth, yet thieves do. What then, have all been despoiled? Though not all, yet the more part.

3. On this account then He adds another argument, which I have already mentioned, saying,

Where the man's treasure is, there is his heart also.

For though none of these things should come to pass, says He, you will undergo no small harm, in being nailed to the things below, and in becoming a slave instead of a freeman, and casting yourself out of the heavenly things, and having no power to think on anything that is high, but all about money, usuries and loans, and gains, and ignoble traffickings. Than this what could be more wretched? For in truth such an one will be worse off than any slave, bringing upon himself a most grievous tyranny, and giving up the chiefest thing of all, even the nobleness and the liberty of man. For how much soever any one may discourse unto you, you will not be able to hear any of those things which concern you, while your mind is nailed down to money; but bound like a dog to a tomb, by the tyranny of riches, more grievously than by any chain, barking at all that come near you, you have this one employment continually, to keep for others what you have laid up. Than this what can be more wretched?

However, forasmuch as this was too high for the mind of His hearers, and neither was the mischief within easy view of the generality, nor the gain evident, but there was need of a spirit of more self-command to perceive either of these; first, He has put it after those other topics, which are obvious, saying, Where the man's treasure is, there is his heart also; and next He makes it clear again, by withdrawing His discourse from the intellectual to the sensible, and saying,

The light of the body is the eye.

What He says is like this: Bury not gold in the earth, nor do any other such thing, for thou dost but gather it for the moth, and the rust, and the thieves. And even if you should entirely escape these evils, yet the enslaving of your heart, the nailing it to all that is below, you will not escape: For wheresoever your treasure may be, there is your heart also. As then, laying up stores in heaven, you will reap not this fruit only, the attainment of the rewards for these things, but from this world you already receive your recompence, in getting into harbor there, in setting your affections on the things that are there, and caring for what is there (for where you have laid up your treasures, it is most clear you transfer your mind also); so if you do this upon earth, you will experience the contrary.

But if the saying be obscure to you, hear what comes next in order. The light of the body is the eye; if therefore your eye be single, your whole body shall be full of light. But if your eye be evil, your whole body shall be full of darkness. But if the light that is in you be darkness, how great is the darkness!

He leads His discourse to the things which are more within the reach of our senses. I mean, forasmuch as He had spoken of the mind as enslaved and brought into captivity, and there were not many who could easily discern this, He transfers the lesson to things outward, and lying before men's eyes, that by these the others also might reach their understanding. Thus, If you know not, says He, what a thing it is to be injured in mind, learn it from the things of the body; for just what the eye is to the body, the same is the mind to the soul. As therefore you would not choose to wear gold, and to be clad in silken garments, your eyes withal being put out, but accountest their sound health more desirable than all such superfluity (for, should you lose this health or waste it, all your life besides will do you no good): for just as when the eyes are blinded, most of the energy of the other members is gone, their light being quenched; so also when the mind is depraved, your life will be filled with countless evils: -- as therefore in the body this is our aim, namely, to keep the eye sound, so also the mind in the soul. But if we mutilate this, which ought to give light to the rest, by what means are we to see clearly any more? For as he that destroys the fountain, dries up also the river, so he who has quenched the understanding has confounded all his doings in this life. Wherefore He says, If the light that is in you be darkness, how great is the darkness?

For when the pilot is drowned, and the candle is put out, and the general is taken prisoner; what sort of hope will there be, after that, for those that are under command?

Thus then, omitting now to speak of the plots to which wealth gives occasion, the strifes, the suits (these indeed He had signified above, when He said, The adversary shall deliver you to the judge, and the judge to the officer); and setting down what is more grievous than all these, as sure to occur, He so withdraws us from the wicked desire. For to inhabit the prison is not nearly so grievous, as for the mind to be enslaved by this disease; and the former is not sure to happen, but the other is connected as an immediate consequent with the desire of riches. And this is why He puts it after the first, as being a more grievous thing, and sure to happen.

For God, He says, gave us understanding, that we might chase away all ignorance, and have the right judgment of things, and that using this as a kind of weapon and light against all that is grievous or hurtful, we might remain in safety. But we betray the gift for the sake of things superfluous and useless.

For what is the use of soldiers arrayed in gold, when the general is dragged along a captive? What the profit of a ship beautifully equipped, when the pilot is sunk beneath the waves? What the advantage of a well-proportioned body, when the sight of the eyes is stricken out? As therefore, should any one cast into sickness the physician (who should be in good health, that he may end our diseases), and then bid him lie

on a silver couch, and in a chamber of gold, this will nothing avail the sick persons; even so, if you corrupt the mind (which has power to put down our passions), although thou set it by a treasure, so far from doing it any good, you have inflicted the very greatest loss, and hast harmed your whole soul.

4. Do you see how by those very things, through which most especially men everywhere affect wickedness, even by these most of all He deters them from it, and brings them back to virtue? For with what intent do you desire riches? says He; is it not that you may enjoy pleasure and luxury? Why now, this above all things you will fail to obtain thereby, it will rather be just contrary. For if, when our eyes are stricken out, we perceive not any pleasant thing, because of such our calamity; much more will this be our case in the perversion and maiming of the mind.

Again, with what intent do you bury it in the earth? That it may be kept in safety? But here too again it is the contrary, says He.

And thus, as in dealing with him that for vainglory fasts and gives alms and prays, by those very things which he most desires He had allured him not to be vainglorious:-- for with what intent, says He, do you so pray and give alms? For love of the glory that may be had from men? Then do not pray thus, says He, and so you shall obtain it in the day that is to come:-- so He has taken captive the covetous man also, by those things for which he was most earnest. Thus: what would you? says He, to have your wealth preserved, and to enjoy pleasure? Both these things I will afford you in great abundance, if you lay up your gold in that place, where I bid you.

It is true that hereafter He displayed more clearly the evil effect of this on the mind, I mean, when He made mention of the thorns; Matthew 13:22 but for the present, even here He has strikingly intimated the same, by representing him as darkened who is beside himself in this way.

And as they that are in darkness see nothing distinct, but if they look at a rope, they suppose it to be a serpent, if at mountains and ravines, they are dead with fear; so these also: what is not alarming to them that have sight, that they regard with suspicion. Thus among other things they tremble at poverty: or rather not at poverty only, but even at any trifling loss. Yea, and if they should lose some little matter, those who are in want of necessary food do not so grieve and bewail themselves as they. At least many of the rich have come even to the halter, not enduring such ill fortune: and to be insulted also, and to be despitely used, seems to them so intolerable, that even because of this again many have actually torn themselves from this present life. For to everything wealth had made them soft, except to the waiting on it. Thus, when it commands them to do service unto itself, they venture on murders, and stripes, and revilings, and all shame. A thing which comes of the utmost wretchedness; to be of all men most effeminate, where one ought to practise self-command, but where more caution was required, in these cases again to become more shameless and obstinate. Since in fact the same kind of thing befalls them, as one would have to endure who had spent all his goods on unfit objects. For such an one, when the time of necessary expenditure comes on, having nothing to supply it, suffers incurable evils, forasmuch as all that he had has been ill spent beforehand.

And as they that are on the stage, skilled in those wicked arts, do in them go through many things strange and dangerous, but in other necessary and useful things none so ridiculous as they; even so is it with these men likewise. For so such as walk upon a stretched rope, making a display of so much courage, should some great emergency demand daring or courage, they are not able, neither do they endure even to think of such a thing. Just so they likewise that are rich, daring all for money, for self-restraint's sake

endure not to submit to anything, be it small or great. And as the former practise both a hazardous and fruitless business; even so do these undergo many dangers and downfalls, but arrive at no profitable end. Yea, they undergo a twofold darkness, both having their eyes put out by the perversion of their mind, and being by the deceitfulness of their cares involved in a great mist. Wherefore neither can they easily so much as see through it. For he that is in darkness, is freed from the darkness by the mere appearance of the sun; but he that has his eyes mutilated not even when the sun shines; which is the very case of these men: not even now that the Sun of Righteousness has shone out, and is admonishing, do they hear, their wealth having closed their eyes. And so they have a twofold darkness to undergo, part from themselves, part from disregard to their teacher.

5. Let us then give heed unto Him exactly, that though late we may at length recover our sight. And how may one recover sight? If you learn how you were blinded. How then were you blinded? By your wicked desire. For the love of money, like an evil humor which has collected upon a clear eyeball, has caused the cloud to become thick.

But even this cloud may be easily scattered and broken, if we will receive the beam of the doctrine of Christ; if we will hear Him admonishing us, and saying, Lay not up for yourselves treasures upon earth.

But, says one, what avails the hearing to me, as long as I am possessed by the desire? Now in the first place, there will be power in the continual hearing to destroy even the desire. Next, if it continue to possess you, consider that this thing is not really so much as a desire. For what sort of desire is this, to be in grievous bondage, and to be subject to a tyranny, and to be bound on all sides, and to dwell in darkness, and to be full of turmoil, and to endure toils without profit, and to keep your wealth for others, and often for your very enemies? With what sort of desire do these things agree? Or rather of what flight and aversion are they not worthy? What sort of desire, to lay up treasure in the midst of thieves? Nay, if you do at all desire wealth, remove it where it may remain safe and unmolested. Since what you are now doing is the part of one desiring, not riches, surely, but bondage, and affront, and loss, and continual vexation. Yet thou, were any one among men on earth to show you a place beyond molestation, though he lead you out into the very desert, promising security in the keeping of your wealth -- you are not slow nor backward; you have confidence in him, and puttest out your goods there; but when it is God instead of men who makes you this promise, and when He sets before you not the desert, but Heaven, you accept the contrary. Yet surely, how manifold soever be their security below, you can never become free from the care of them. I mean, though thou lose them not, you will never be delivered from anxiety lest you lose. But there you will undergo none of these things: and mark, what is yet more, thou dost not only bury your gold, but plantest it. For the same is both treasure and seed; or rather it is more than either of these. For the seed remains not for ever, but this abides perpetually. Again, the treasure germinates not, but this bears you fruits which never die.

6. But if you tell me of the time, and the delay of the recompence, I too can point out and tell how much you receive back even here: and besides all this, from the very things of this life, I will try to convict you of making this excuse to no purpose. I mean, that even in the present life you provide many things which you are not yourself to enjoy; and should any one find fault, you plead your children and their children, and so thinkest you have found palliation enough for your superfluous labors. For when in extreme old age you are building splendid houses, before the completion of which (in many instances) you will have departed; when you plant trees, which will bear their fruit after many years; plantest trees in the field, the fruit of which will yield after many (μυρα) years."--R.]}-->when you are buying properties and inheritances, the ownership of which you will acquire after a long time, and art eagerly busy in many other such things, the

enjoyment whereof you will not reap; is it indeed for your own sake, or for those to come after, that you are so employed? How then is it not the utmost folly, here not at all to hesitate at the delay of time; and this though you are by this delay to lose all the reward of your labors: but there, because of such waiting to be altogether torpid; and this, although it bring you the greater gain, and although it convey not your good things on to others, but procure the gifts for yourself.

But besides this, the delay itself is not long; nay, for those things are at the doors, and we know not but that even in our own generation all things which concern us may have their accomplishment, and that fearful day may arrive, setting before us the awful and incorruptible tribunal. Yea, for the more part of the signs are fulfilled, and the gospel moreover has been preached in all parts of the world, and the predictions of wars, and of earthquakes, and of famines, have come to pass, and the interval is not great.

But is it that thou dost not see any signs? Why, this self-same thing is a very great sign. For neither did they in Noah's time see any presages of that universal destruction, but in the midst of their playing, eating, marrying, doing all things to which they were used, even so they were overtaken by that fearful judgment. And they too in Sodom in like manner, living in delight, and suspecting none of what befell them, were consumed by those lightnings, which then came down upon them.

Considering then all these things, let us betake ourselves unto the preparation for our departure hence.

For even if the common day of the consummation never overtake us, the end of each one is at the doors, whether he be old or young; and it is not possible for men after they have gone hence, either to buy oil any more, or to obtain pardon by prayers, though he that entreats be Abraham, Luke 16:24 or Noah, or Job, or Daniel. Ezekiel 14:14

While then we have opportunity, let us store up for ourselves beforehand much confidence, let us gather oil in abundance, let us remove all into Heaven, that in the fitting time, and when we most need them, we may enjoy all: by the grace and love towards man of our Lord Jesus Christ, to whom be the glory, and the might, now and always, and forever and ever. Amen.

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