

Homily 21 on Ephesians

by St. John Chrysostom

The sermon emphasizes the importance of children obeying their parents in the Lord, and parents bringing up their children in the chastening and admonition of the Lord to produce strong and resilient children.

Scripture: Proverbs 22:6, Proverbs 23:22, Ephesians 6:1, Colossians 3:20, Hebrews 12:9

Topics: "Family Values", "Parental Discipline"

Description

John Chrysostom emphasizes the importance of children obeying and honoring their parents, as it is the first commandment with a promise of well-being and long life. He highlights the gradual progression of authority from husband to wife to children, stressing the need for children to obey their parents in the Lord, following God's commandments. Chrysostom urges fathers not to provoke their children to wrath but to nurture them in the discipline and instruction of the Lord, emphasizing the significance of spiritual upbringing over worldly wealth and status.

Transcript

Ephesians 6:1-3

Children, obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right. Honor your father and mother (which is the first commandment with promise), that it may be well with you, and you may live long on the earth.

As a man in forming a body, places the head first, after that the neck, then the feet, so does the blessed Paul proceed in his discourse. He has spoken of the husband, he has spoken of the wife, who is second in authority, he now goes on by gradual advances to the third rank -- which is that of children. For the husband has authority over the wife, and the husband and the wife over the children. Now then mark what he is saying.

Children, obey your parents in the Lord; for this is the first commandment with promise.

Here he has not a word of discourse concerning Christ, not a word on high subjects, for he is as yet addressing his discourse to tender understandings. And it is for this reason, moreover, that he makes his exhortation short, inasmuch as children cannot follow up a long argument. For this reason also he does not discourse at all about a kingdom, (because it does not belong to the tender age of childhood to understand these subjects,) but what a child's soul most especially longs to hear, that he says, namely, that it shall live long. For if any one shall enquire why it is that he omitted to discourse concerning a

kingdom, but set before them the commandment laid down in the law, he does this because he speaks to them as infantile, and because he is well aware that if the husband and the wife are thus disposed according to the law which he has laid down, there will be but little trouble in securing the submission of the children. For whenever any matter has a good and sound and orderly principle and foundation, everything will thenceforward go on with method and regularity, with much facility: the more difficult thing is to settle the foundation, to lay down a firm basis. Children, says he, obey your parents in the Lord, that is, according to the Lord. This, he means to say, is what God commands you. But what then if they shall command foolish things? Generally a father, however foolish he may be himself, does not command foolish things. However, even in that case, the Apostle has guarded the matter, by saying, in the Lord; that is, wherever you will not be offending against God. So that if the father be a gentile or a heretic, we ought no longer to obey, because the command is not then, in the Lord. But how is it that he says, Which is the first commandment? For the first is, You shall not commit adultery -- You shall not kill. He does not speak of it then as first in rank, but in respect of the promise. For upon those others there is no reward annexed, as being enacted with reference to evil things, and to departure from evil things. Whereas in these others, where there is the practice of good, there is further a promise held out. And observe how admirable a foundation he has laid for the path of virtue, that is, honor and reverence towards parents. When he would lead us away from wicked practices, and is just about to enter upon virtuous ones, this is the first thing he enjoins, honor towards parents; inasmuch as they before all others are, after God, the authors of our being, so that it is reasonable they should be the first to reap the fruits of our right actions; and then all the rest of mankind. For if a man have not this honor for parents he will never be gentle toward those unconnected with him.

However, having given the necessary injunctions to children, he passes to the fathers, and says,

Ver. 4. And ye fathers, provoke not your children to wrath; but nurture them up in the chastening and admonition of the Lord.

He does not say, love them, because to this nature draws them even against their own will, and it were superfluous to lay down a law on such subjects. But what does he say? Provoke not your children to wrath, as many do by disinheriting them, and disowning them, and treating them overbearingly, not as free, but as slaves. This is why he says, Provoke not your children to wrath. Then, which is the chief thing of all, he shows how they will be led to obedience, referring the whole source of it to the head and chief authority.

And in the same way as he has shown the husband to be the cause of the wife's obedience, (which is the reason also why he addresses the greater part of his arguments to him, advising him to attach her to himself by the power of love,) so, I say, here also, he refers the efficiency to him, by saying, But bring them up in the chastening and admonition of the Lord. You see that where there are spiritual ties, the natural ties will follow. Do you wish your son to be obedient? From the very first Bring him up in the chastening and admonition of the Lord.

Never deem it an unnecessary thing that he should be a diligent hearer of the divine Scriptures. For there the first thing he hears will be this, Honor your father and your mother; so that this makes for you. Never say, this is the business of monks. Am I making a monk of him? No. There is no need he should become a monk. Why be so afraid of a thing so replete with so much advantage? Make him a Christian. For it is of all things necessary for laymen to be acquainted with the lessons derived from this source; but especially for children.

For theirs is an age full of folly; and to this folly are superadded the bad examples derived from the heathen tales, where they are made acquainted with those heroes so admired among them, slaves of their passions, and cowards with regard to death; as, for example, Achilles, when he relents, when he dies for his concubine, when another gets drunk, and many other things of the sort. He requires therefore the remedies against these things. How is it not absurd to send children out to trades, and to school, and to do all you can for these objects, and yet, not to bring them up in the chastening and admonition of the Lord?

And for this reason truly we are the first to reap the fruits, because we bring up our children to be insolent and profligate, disobedient, and mere vulgar fellows. Let us not then do this; no, let us listen to this blessed Apostle's admonition. Let us bring them up in the chastening and admonition of the Lord. Let us give them a pattern. Let us make them from the earliest age apply themselves to the reading of the Scriptures. Alas, that so constantly as I repeat this, I am looked upon as trifling!

Still, I shall not cease to do my duty. Why, tell me, do ye not imitate them of old? You women, especially, emulate those admirable women. Has a child been born to any one? Imitate Hannah's example 1 Samuel 1:24; look at what she did. She brought him up at once to the temple. Who among you would not rather that his son should become a Samuel than that he should be king of the whole world ten thousand times over? And how, you will say, is it possible he should become such a one?

Why is it not possible? It is because thou dost not choose it yourself, nor committest him to the care of those who are able to make him such a one. And who, it will be said, is such a one as this? God. Since she put him into the hands of God. For not even Eli himself was one of those in any great degree qualified to form him; (how could he be, he who was not able to form even his own children?) No, it was the faith of the mother and her earnest zeal that wrought the whole. He was her first child, and her only one, and she knew not whether she should ever have others besides.

Yet she did not say, I will wait till the child is grown up, that he may have a taste of the things of this life, I will allow him to have his pastime in them a little in his childish years. No, all these thoughts the woman repudiated, she was absorbed in one object, how from the very beginning she might dedicate the spiritual image to God. Well may we men be put to the blush at the wisdom of this woman. She offered him up to God, and there she left him. And therefore was her married state more glorious, in that she had made spiritual objects her first care, in that she dedicated the first-fruits to God.

Therefore was her womb fruitful, and she obtained other children besides. And therefore she saw him honorable even in the world. For if men when they are honored, render honor in return, will not God much more, He who does this, even without being honored? How long are we to be mere lumps of flesh? How long are we to be stooping to the earth? Let everything be secondary with us to the provident care we should take of our children, and to our bringing them up in the chastening and admonition of the Lord.

If from the very first he is taught to be a lover of true wisdom, then wealth greater than all wealth has he acquired and a more imposing name. You will effect nothing so great by teaching him an art, and giving him that outward learning by which he will gain riches, as if you teach him the art of despising riches. If you desire to make him rich, do this. For the rich man is not he who desires great riches, and is encircled with great riches; but the man who has need of nothing.

Discipline your son in this, teach him this. This is the greatest riches. Seek not how to give him reputation and high character in outward learning, but consider deeply how you shall teach him to despise the glory that belongs to this present life. By this means would he become more distinguished and more truly

glorious. This it is possible for the poor man and the rich man alike to accomplish. These are lessons which a man does not learn from a master, nor by art, but by means of the divine oracles.

Seek not how he shall enjoy a long life here, but how he shall enjoy a boundless and endless life hereafter. Give him the great things, not the little things. Hear what Paul says, Bring them up in the chastening and admonition of the Lord; study not to make him an orator, but train him up to be a philosopher. In the want of the one there will be no harm whatever; in the absence of the other, all the rhetoric in the world will be of no advantage. Tempers are wanted, not talking; character, not cleverness; deeds, not words.

These gain a man the kingdom. These confer what are benefits indeed. Whet not his tongue, but cleanse his soul. I do not say this to prevent your teaching him these things, but to prevent your attending to them exclusively. Do not imagine that the monk alone stands in need of these lessons from Scripture. Of all others, the children just about to enter into the world specially need them. For just in the same way as the man who is always at anchor in harbor, is not the man who requires his ship to be fitted out and who needs a pilot and a crew, but he who is always out at sea; so is it with the man of the world and the monk.

The one is entered as it were into a waveless harbor, and lives an untroubled life, and far removed from every storm; while the other is ever on the ocean, and lives out at sea in the very midst of the ocean, battling with billows without number.

And though he may not need it himself, still he ought to be so prepared as to stop the mouths of others. Thus the more distinguished he is in the present life, so much the more he stands in need of this education. If he passes his life in courts, there are many Heathens, and philosophers, and persons puffed up with the glory of this life. It is like a place full of dropsical people. Such in some sort is the court. All are, as it were, puffed up, and in a state of inflammation. And they who are not so are studying to become so. Now then reflect how vast a benefit it is, that your son on entering there, should enter like an excellent physician, furnished with instruments which may allay every one's peculiar inflammation, and should go up to every one, and converse with him, and restore the diseased body to health, applying the remedies derived from the Scriptures, and pouring forth discourses of the true philosophy. For with whom is the recluse to converse? With his wall and his ceiling? Yea, or again with the wilderness and the woods? Or with the birds and the trees? He therefore has not so great need of this sort of discipline. Still, however, he makes it his business to perfect this work, not so much with a view of disciplining others as himself. There is then every need of much discipline of this sort to those that are to mix in the present world, because such an one has a stronger temptation to sin than the other. And if you have a mind to understand it, he will further be a more useful person even in the world itself. For all will have a reverence for him from these words, when they see him in the fire without being burnt, and not desirous of power. But power he will then obtain, when he least desires it, and will be a still higher object of respect to the king; for it is not possible that such a character should be hid. Amongst a number of healthy persons, indeed, a healthy man will not be noticed; but when there is one healthy man among a number of sick, the report will quickly spread and reach the king's ears, and he will make him ruler over many nations. Knowing then these things, bring up your children in the chastening and admonition of the Lord.

But suppose a man is poor. Still he will be in no wise more insignificant than the man who lives in kings' courts, because he is not in kings' courts; no, he will be held in admiration, and will soon gain that authority which is yielded voluntarily, and not by any compulsion. For if a set of Greeks, men worthless as they are, and dogs, by taking up that worthless philosophy of theirs, (for such the Grecian philosophy is,) or rather

not itself but only its mere name, and wearing the threadbare cloak, and letting their hair grow, impress many; how much more will he who is a true philosopher? If a false appearance, if a mere shadow of philosophy at first sight so catches us, what if we should love the true and pure philosophy? Will not all court it, and entrust both houses, and wives, and children, with full confidence to such men? But there is not, no, there is not such a philosopher existing now. And therefore, it is not possible to find an example of the sort. Amongst recluses, indeed, there are such, but among people in the world no longer. And that among recluses there are such, it would be possible to adduce a number of instances. However, I will mention one out of many. You know, doubtless, and have heard of, and some, perhaps, have also seen, the man whom I am now about to mention. I mean, the admirable Julian. This man was a rustic, in humble life, and of humble parentage, and totally uninstructed in all outward accomplishments, but full of unadorned wisdom. When he came into the cities, (and this was but rarely,) never did such a concourse take place, not when orators, or sophists, or any one else rode in. But what am I saying? Is not his very name more glorious than that of any king's, and celebrated even to this day? And if these things were in this world, in the world in which the Lord promised us no one good thing, in which He has told us we are strangers, let us consider how great will be the blessings laid up for us in the heavens. If, where they were sojourners they enjoyed so great honor, how great glory shall they enjoy where their own city is! If, where He promised tribulation, they meet with such attentive care, then where He promises true honors, how great shall be their rest!

And now would you have me exhibit examples of secular men? At present, indeed, we have none; still there are perhaps even secular men who are excellent, though not arrived at the highest philosophy. I shall therefore quote you examples from the saints of the ancient times. How many, who had wives to keep and children to bring up, were inferior in no respect, no, in no respect to those who have been mentioned? Now, however, it is no longer so, by reason of the present distress 1 Corinthians 7:26, as this blessed Apostle says. Now then whom would you have me mention? Noah, or Abraham? The son of the one or of the other? Or again, Joseph? Or would you have me go to the Prophets? Moses I mean, or Isaiah? However, if you will, let us carry our discourse to Abraham, whom all are continually bringing forward to us above all others. Had he not a wife? Had he not children? Yes, for I too use the same language to you, as you do to me. He had a wife, but it was not because he had a wife that he was so remarkable. He had riches, but it was not because he had riches that he pleased God. He begot children, but it was not because he begot children that he was pronounced blessed. He had three hundred and eighteen servants born in his house, but it was not on this account that he was accounted wonderful. But would you know why it was? It was for his hospitality, for his contempt of riches, for his chastened conduct. For what, tell me, is the duty of a philosopher? Is it not to despise both riches and glory? Is it not to be above both envy and every other passion? Come now then, let us bring him forward and strip him, and show you what a philosopher he was. First of all, he esteemed his fatherland as nothing. God said, Get you out of your country, and from your kindred Genesis 12:1, and immediately he went forth. He was not bound to his house, (or surely he would never have gone forth,) nor to his love of familiar friends, nor to anything else whatever. But what? glory and money he despised above all others. For when he had put an end to war by turning the enemy to flight, and was requested to take the spoil, he rejected it. Genesis 14:21-23

Again, the son of this great man was revered, not because of his riches, but for his hospitality: not because of his children, but for his obedience: not because of his wife, but for the barrenness inflicted on his wife. Genesis 25:21

They looked upon the present life as nothing, they followed not after gain, they despised all things. Tell me, which sort of plants are the best? Are not those which have their strength from themselves and are injured neither by rains, nor by hailstorms, nor by gusts of wind, nor by any other vicissitude of the sort, but stand naked in defiance of them all, and needing neither wall nor fence to protect them? Such is the true philosopher, such is that wealth of which we spoke.

He has nothing, and has all things: he has all things, and has nothing. For a fence is not within, but only without; a wall is not a thing of nature, but only built round from without. And what again, I ask, what sort of body is a strong one? Is it not that which is in health, and which is overcome neither by hunger nor repletion, nor by cold, nor by heat; or is it that which in view of all these things, needs both caterers, and weavers, and hunters, and physicians, to give it health?

He is the rich man, the true philosopher, who needs none of these things. For this cause it was that this blessed Apostle said, Bring them up in the chastening and admonition of the Lord. Surround them not with outward defenses. For such is wealth, such is glory; for when these fall, and they do fall, the plant stands naked and defenseless, not only having derived no profit from them during the time past, but even injury. For those very shelters that prevented its being injured to the attacks of the winds, will now have prepared it for perishing all at once.

And so wealth is injurious rather, because it renders us undisciplined for the vicissitudes of life. Let us therefore train up our children to be such, that they shall be able to bear up against every trial, and not be surprised at what may come upon them; let us bring them up in the chastening and admonition of the Lord. And great will be the reward which will be thus laid up in store for us. For if men for making statues and painting portraits of kings enjoy so great honor, shall not we who adorn the image of the King of kings, (for man is the image of God,) receive ten thousand blessings, if we effect a true likeness?

For the likeness is in this, in the virtue of the soul, when we train our children to be good, to be meek, to be forgiving, (because all these are attributes of God,) to be beneficent, to be humane; when we train them to regard the present world as nothing. Let this then be our task, to mold and to direct both ourselves and them according to what is right. Otherwise with what sort of boldness shall we stand before the judgment-seat of Christ? If a man who has unruly children is unworthy to be a Bishop Titus 1:6, much more is he unworthy of the kingdom of Heaven.

What do you say? If we have an unruly wife, or unruly children, shall we have to render account? Yes, we shall, if we do not with exactness bring in that which is due from ourselves; for our own individual virtue is not enough in order to salvation. If the man who laid aside the one talent gained nothing, but was punished even in such a manner, it is plain that one's own individual virtue is not enough in order to salvation, but there is need of that of another also. Let us therefore entertain great solicitude for our wives, and take great care of our children, and of our servants, and of ourselves.

And in our government both of ourselves and of them, let us beseech God that He aid us in the work. If He shall see us interested in this work, and solicitous about it, He will aid us; but if He shall see us paying no regard to it, He will not give us His hand. For He does not vouchsafe us His assistance when we sleep, but when we labor also ourselves. For a helper, (as the name implies,) is not a helper of one that is inactive, but of one who works also himself. But the good God is able of Himself to bring the work to perfection, that we may be all counted worthy to attain to the blessings promised us, through the grace and compassions of His only begotten Son, with Whom together with the Holy Ghost be unto the Father, glory, might, and

honor, now and ever, and throughout all ages. Amen.

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