

Homily 21 on Matthew

by St. John Chrysostom

The sermon emphasizes the impossibility of serving two masters, the consequences of serving mammon, and the call to self-denial and trust in God for our provision.

Scripture: Matthew 6:24-28, Matthew 6:31-34, Luke 16:13

Topics: "Wealth And Idolatry", "Spiritual Growth"

Description

John Chrysostom preaches about the impossibility of serving two masters, emphasizing the need to choose between serving God or wealth, as serving both is contradictory. He highlights the dangers of being enslaved by riches, which can lead one away from God's service and true devotion. Chrysostom urges the listeners to prioritize their affection towards God and perfect their charity by despising wealth. He explains that God's providence sustains us, even as we are encouraged to trust in Him for our needs without excessive worry or anxiety. The sermon concludes with a call to practice moderation, almsgiving, and honest labor, as steps towards achieving higher levels of self-denial and spiritual growth.

Transcript

Matt. VI. 24.

No man can serve two masters, for either he will hate the one and love the other, or else he will hold to one and despise the other.

Do you see how by degrees He withdraws us from the things that now are, and at greater length introduces what He has to say, touching voluntary poverty, and casts down the dominion of covetousness?

For He was not contented with His former sayings, many and great as they were, but He adds others also, more and more alarming.

For what can be more alarming than what He now says, if indeed we are for our riches to fall from the service of Christ? Or what more to be desired, if indeed, by despising wealth, we shall have our affection towards Him and our charity perfect? For what I am continually repeating, the same do I now say likewise, namely, that by both kinds He presses the hearer to obey His sayings; both by the profitable, and by the hurtful; much like an excellent physician, pointing out both the disease which is the consequence of neglect, and the good health which results from obedience.

See, for instance, what kind of gain He signifies this to be, and how He establishes the advantage of it by their deliverance from the contrary things. Thus, wealth, says He, hurts you not in this only, that it arms robbers against you, nor in that it darkens your mind in the most intense degree, but also in that it casts you out of God's service, making you captive of lifeless riches, and in both ways doing you harm, on the one hand, by causing you to be slaves of what you ought to command; on the other, by casting you out of God's service, whom, above all things, it is indispensable for you to serve. For just as in the other place, He signified the mischief to be twofold, in both laying up here, where moth corrupts, and in not laying up there, where the watch kept is impregnable; so in this place, too, He shows the loss to be twofold, in that it both draws off from God, and makes us subject to mammon.

But He sets it not down directly, rather He establishes it first upon general considerations, saying thus; No man can serve two masters: meaning here two that are enjoining opposite things; since, unless this were the case, they would not even be two. For so, the multitude of them that believed were of one heart and of one soul, Acts 4:32 and yet were they divided into many bodies; their unanimity however made the many one.

Then, as adding to the force of it, He says, so far from serving, he will even hate and abhor: For either he will hate the one, says He, and love the other, or else he will hold to the one and despise the other. And it seems indeed as if the same thing were said twice over; He did not however choose this form without purpose, but in order to show that the change for the better is easy. I mean, lest you should say, I am once for all made a slave; I am brought under the tyranny of wealth, He signifies that it is possible to transfer one's self, and that as from the first to the second, so also from the second one may pass over to the first.

2. Having thus, you see, spoken generally, that He might persuade the hearer to be an uncorrupt judge of His words, and to sentence according to the very nature of the things; when he has made sure of his assent, then, and not till then, He discovers Himself. Thus He presently adds, You cannot serve God and mammon. Let us shudder to think what we have brought Christ to say; with the name of God, to put that of gold. But if this be shocking, its taking place in our deeds, our preferring the tyranny of gold to the fear of God, is much more shocking.

What then? Was not this possible among the ancients? By no means. How then, says one, did Abraham, how did Job obtain a good report? Tell me not of them that are rich, but of them that serve riches. Since Job also was rich, but he served not mammon, but possessed it and ruled over it, and was a master, not a slave. Therefore he so possessed all those things, as if he had been the steward of another man's goods; not only not extorting from others, but even giving up his own to them that were in need. And what is more, when he had them they were no joy to him: so he also declared, saying, If I did so much as rejoice when my wealth waxed great: Job 31:25 wherefore neither did he grieve when it had gone. But they that are rich are not now such as he was, but are rather in a worse condition than any slave, paying as it were tribute to some grievous tyrant. Because their mind is as a kind of citadel occupied by the love of money, which from thence daily sends out unto them its commands full of all iniquity, and there is none to disobey. Be not therefore thus over subtle. Nay, for God has once for all declared and pronounced it a thing impossible for the one service and the other to agree. Say not thou, then, it is possible. Why, when the one master is commanding you to spoil by violence, the other to strip yourself of your possessions; the one to be chaste, the other to commit fornication; the one to be drunken and luxurious, the other to keep the belly in subjection; the one again to despise the things that are, the other to be riveted to the present; the one to admire marbles, and walls, and roofs, the other to contemn these, but to honor self-restraint: how is it possible that these should agree?

Now He calls mammon here a master, not because of its own nature, but on account of the wretchedness of them that bow themselves beneath it. So also He calls the belly a god, Philippians 3:19 not from the dignity of such a mistress, but from the wretchedness of them that are enslaved: it being a thing worse than any punishment, and enough, before the punishment, in the way of vengeance on him who is involved in it. For what condemned criminals can be so wretched, as they who having God for their Lord, do from that mild rule desert to this grievous tyranny, and this when their act brings after it so much harm even here? For indeed their loss is unspeakable by so doing: there are suits, and molestations, and strifes, and toils, and a blinding of the soul; and what is more grievous than all, one falls away from the highest blessings; for such a blessing it is to be God's servant.

3. Having now, as you see, in all ways taught the advantage of contemning riches, as well for the very preservation of the riches, as for the pleasure of the soul, and for acquiring self-command, and for the securing of godliness; He proceeds to establish the practicability of this command. For this especially pertains to the best legislation, not only to enjoin what is expedient, but also to make it possible. Therefore He also goes on to say,

Take no thought for your life, what you shall eat.

That is, lest they should say, What then? If we cast all away, how shall we be able to live? At this objection, in what follows, He makes a stand, very seasonably. For as surely as if at the beginning He had said, Take no thought, the word would have seemed burdensome; so surely, now that He has shown the mischief arising out of covetousness, His admonition coming after is made easy to receive. Wherefore neither did He now simply say, Take no thought, but He added the reason, and so enjoined this. After having said, You cannot serve God and mammon, He added, therefore I say unto you, take no thought. Therefore; for what? Because of the unspeakable loss. For the hurt you receive is not in riches only, rather the wound is in the most vital parts, and in that which is the overthrow of your salvation; casting you as it does out from God, who made you, and cares for you, and loves you.

Therefore I say unto you, take no thought. Thus, after He has shown the hurt to be unspeakable, then and not before He makes the commandment stricter; in that He not only bids us cast away what we have, but forbids to take thought even for our necessary food, saying, Take no thought for your soul, what you shall eat. Not because the soul needs food, for it is incorporeal; but He spoke according to the common custom. For though it needs not food, yet can it not endure to remain in the body, except that be fed. And in saying this, He puts it not simply so, but here also He brings up arguments, some from those things which we have already, and some from other examples.

From what we have already, thus saying:

Is not the soul more than meat, and the body more than the raiment?

He therefore that has given the greater, how shall He not give the less? He that has fashioned the flesh that is fed, how shall He not bestow the food? Wherefore neither did He simply say, Take no thought what you shall eat, or wherewithal you shall be clothed; but, for the body, and, for the soul: forasmuch as from them He was to make His demonstrations, carrying on His discourse in the way of comparison. Now the soul He has given once for all, and it abides such as it is; but the body increases every day. Therefore pointing out both these things, the immortality of the one, and the frailty of the other, He subjoins and says,

Which of you can add one cubit unto his stature? Matthew 6:27

Thus, saying no more of the soul, since it receives not increase, He discoursed of the body only; hereby making manifest this point also, that not the food increases it, but the providence of God. Which Paul showing also in other ways, said, So then, neither is he that plants any thing, neither he that waters; but God that gives the increase. 1 Corinthians 3:7

From what we have already, then, He urges us in this way: and from examples of other things, by saying, Behold the fowls of the air. Matthew 6:26 Thus, lest any should say, we do good by taking thought, He dissuades them both by that which is greater, and by that which is less; by the greater, i.e. the soul and the body; by the less, i.e. the birds. For if of the things that are very inferior He has so much regard, how shall He not give unto you? Says He. And to them on this wise, for as yet it was an ordinary multitude: but to the devil not thus; but how? Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds out of the mouth of God. Matthew 4:4 But here He makes mention of the birds, and this in a way greatly to abash them; which sort of thing is of very great value for the purpose of admonition.

4. However, some of the ungodly have come to so great a pitch of madness, as even to attack His illustration. Because, say they, it was not meet for one strengthening moral principle, to use natural advantages as incitements to that end. For to those animals, they add, this belongs by nature. What then shall we say to this? That even though it is theirs by nature, yet possibly we too may attain it by choice. For neither did He say, behold how the birds fly, which were a thing impossible to man; but that they are fed without taking thought, a kind of thing easy to be achieved by us also, if we will. And this they have proved, who have accomplished it in their actions.

Wherefore it were meet exceedingly to admire the consideration of our Lawgiver, in that, when He might bring forward His illustration from among men, and when He might have spoken of Moses and Elias and John, and others like them, who took no thought; that He might touch them more to the quick, He made mention of the irrational beings. For had He spoken of those righteous men, these would have been able to say, We are not yet become like them. But now by passing them over in silence, and bringing forward the fowls of the air, He has cut off from them every excuse, imitating in this place also the old law. Yea, for the old covenant likewise sends to the bee, and to the ant, and to the turtle, and to the swallow. Jeremiah 8:7 And neither is this a small sign of honor, when the same sort of things, which those animals possess by nature, those we are able to accomplish by an act of our choice. If then He take so great care of them which exist for our sakes, much more of us; if of the servants, much more of the master. Therefore He said, Behold the fowls, and He said not, for they do not traffic, nor make merchandise, for these were among the things that were earnestly forbidden. But what? they sow not, neither do they reap. What then? says one, must we not sow? He said not, we must not sow, but we must not take thought; neither that one ought not to work, but not to be low-minded, nor to rack one's self with cares. Since He bade us also be nourished, but not in taking thought.

Of this lesson David also lays the foundation from old time, saying enigmatically on this wise, You open Your hand, and fillest every living thing with bounty; and again, To Him that gives to the beasts their food, and to the young ravens that call upon Him.

Who then, it may be said, have not taken thought? Did you not hear how many of the righteous I adduced? Do you see not with them Jacob, departing from his father's house destitute of all things? Do you not hear him praying and saying, If the Lord give me bread to eat and raiment to put on? Genesis 28:20 which was not the part of one taking thought, but of one seeking all of God. This the apostles also attained, who cast away all, and took no thought: also, the five thousand, and the three thousand.

5. But if you can not bear, upon hearing so high words, to release yourself from these grievous bonds, consider the unprofitableness of the thing, and so put an end to your care. For

Which of you by taking thought (says He) can add one cubit unto his stature. Matthew 6:27

Do you see how by that which is evident, He has manifested that also which is obscure? Thus, As unto your body, says He, you will not by taking thought be able to add, though it be ever so little; so neither to gather food; think as you may otherwise. Hence it is clear that not our diligence, but the providence of God, even where we seem to be active, effects all. So that, were He to forsake us, no care, nor anxiety, nor toil, nor any other such thing, will ever appear to come to anything, but all will utterly pass away.

Let us not therefore suppose His injunctions are impossible: for there are many who duly perform them, even as it is. And if you know not of them, it is nothing marvellous, since Elias too supposed he was alone, but was told, I have left unto myself seven thousand men. Whence it is manifest that even now there are many who show forth the apostolic life; like as the three thousand then, and the five thousand. And if we believe not, it is not because there are none who do well, but because we are far from so doing. So that just as the drunkard would not easily believe, that there exists any man who does not taste even water (and yet this has been achieved by many solitaries in our time); nor he who connects himself with numberless women, that it is easy to live in virginity; nor he that extorts other men's goods, that one shall readily give up even his own: so neither will those, who daily melt themselves down with innumerable anxieties, easily receive this thing.

Now as to the fact, that there are many who have attained unto this, we might show it even from those, who have practised this self-denial even in our generation.

But for you, just now, it is enough to learn not to covet, and that almsgiving is a good thing; and to know that you must impart of what you have. For these things if you will duly perform, beloved, you will speedily proceed to those others also.

6. For the present therefore let us lay aside our excessive sumptuousness, and let us endure moderation, and learn to acquire by honest labor all that we are to have: since even the blessed John, when he was discoursing with those that were employed upon the tribute, and with the soldiery, enjoined them to be content with their wages. Luke 3:14 Anxious though he were to lead them on to another, and a higher self-command, yet since they were still unfit for this, he speaks of the lesser things. Because, if he had mentioned what are higher than these, they would have failed to apply themselves to them, and would have fallen from the others.

For this very reason we too are practising you in the inferior duties. Yes, because as yet, we know, the burden of voluntary poverty is too great for you, and the heaven is not more distant from the earth, than such self-denial from you. Let us then lay hold, if it be only of the lowest commandments, for even this is no small encouragement. And yet some among the heathens have achieved even this, though not in a proper spirit, and have stripped themselves of all their possessions. However, we are contented in your case, if alms are bestowed abundantly by you; for we shall soon arrive at those other duties too, if we advance in this way. But if we do not so much as this, of what favor shall we be worthy, who are bidden to surpass those under the old law, and yet show ourselves inferior to the philosophers among the heathens? What shall we say, who when we ought to be angels and sons of God, do not even quite maintain our being as men? For to spoil and to covet comes not of the gentleness of men, but of the fierceness of wild beasts; nay, worse than wild beasts are the assailers of their neighbor's goods. For to

them this comes by nature, but we who are honored with reason, and yet are falling away unto that unnatural vileness, what indulgence shall we receive?

Let us then, considering the measures of that discipline which is set before us, press on at least to the middle station, that we may both be delivered from the punishment which is to come, and proceeding regularly, may arrive at the very summit of all good things; unto which may we all attain, by the grace and love towards man of our Lord Jesus Christ, to whom be glory and dominion for ever and ever. Amen.

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