

# Homily 22 on Romans

by St. John Chrysostom

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*St. John Chrysostom's Homily 22 on Romans emphasizes the importance of responding to persecution and adversity with kindness, love, and humility, and living in harmony with others as a key aspect of Christian living.*

**Scripture:** Romans 12:14-20

**Topics:** "Christian Love", "Overcoming Persecution"

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## Description

John Chrysostom preaches on the importance of responding to persecution with blessings and not curses, emphasizing the angelic nature of blessing those who persecute us. He encourages believers to rejoice with those who rejoice and weep with those who weep, promoting empathy and unity among believers. Chrysostom highlights the significance of humility, urging believers to be of the same mind towards one another, to avoid pride, and to condescend to those of low estate. He stresses the Christian virtue of not seeking revenge but leaving it to God, who will repay. The sermon concludes with a call to overcome evil with good, showing kindness even to enemies, as a powerful demonstration of Christian love and victory over darkness.

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## Transcript

Rom. XII. 14

Bless them which persecute you; bless, and curse not.

After teaching them how they ought to be minded towards one another, and after joining the members closely into one, he next proceeds to lead them forth to the battle without, which he makes easier as from this point. For as he who has not managed things well with those of his own side, will find more difficulty in arranging affairs with strangers, so he, that has practised himself duly among these, will with the more ease have the advantage of those without also. Hence then Paul also as he goes on in his journey, after the one places the other, and says, Bless them that persecute you.

He did not say, be not spiteful or revengeful, but required something far better. For that a man that was wise might do, but this is quite an angel's part. And after saying bless, he proceeds, and curse not, lest we should do both the one and the other, and not the former only. For they that persecute us are purveyors of a reward to us. But if you are sober-minded, there will be another reward after that one, which you will gain yourself. For he will yield you that for persecution, but you will yield yourself the one from the blessing of another, in that you bring forth a very great sign of love to Christ.

For as he that curses his persecutor, shows that he is not much pleased at suffering this for Christ, thus he that blesses shows the greatness of his love. Do not then abuse him, that you yourself may gain the greater reward, and may teach him that the thing is matter of inclination, not of necessity, of holiday and feast, not of calamity or dejection. For this cause Christ Himself said, Rejoice when men speak all manner of evil against you falsely. Matthew 5:11 Hence too it was that the Apostles returned with joy not from having been evil spoken of only, but also at having been scourged.

Acts 5:40-41 For besides what I have mentioned, there will be another gain, and that no small one, that you will make, both the abashing of your adversaries hereby, and instructing of them by your actions that you are travelling to another life; for if he see you joyous, and elevated, (ἐὐφροσύνην καὶ ἠνθροπύην) from suffering ill, he will see clearly from the actions that you have other hopes greater than those of this life. So that if you dost not so, but weepst and lamentest, how is he to be able to learn from that that you are tarrying for any other life?

And besides this, you will compass yet another thing. For provided he see you not vexed at the affronts done you, but even blessing him, he will leave harassing you. See then how much that is good comes from this, both a greater reward for yourself and a less temptation, and he will forbear persecuting you, and God too will be glorified: and to him that is in error your endurance will be instruction in godliness. For this reason it was not those that insult us only, but even those that persecute us and deal despitefully with us, that he bade us requite with the contrary. And now he orders them to bless, but as he goes on, he exhorts them to do them good in deeds also.

Ver. 15. Rejoice with them that do rejoice, and weep with them that weep.

Since it is possible to bless and not to curse, and yet not to do this out of love, he wishes us to be penetrated with the warmth of friendship throughout. And this is why he goes on in these words, that we are not only to bless, but even feel compassion for their pains and sufferings, whenever we happen to see them fallen into trouble. Yes, it will be said, but to join in the sorrows of mourners one can see why he ordered them, but why ever did he command them the other thing, when it is no such great matter? Aye, but that requires more of a high Christian temper, to rejoice with them that do rejoice, than to weep with them that weep. For this nature itself fulfils perfectly: and there is none so hard-hearted as not to weep over him that is in calamity: but the other requires a very noble soul, so as not only to keep from envying, but even to feel pleasure with the person who is in esteem. And this is why he placed it first. For there is nothing that ties love so firmly as sharing both joy and pain one with another. Do not then, because you are far from difficulties yourself, remain aloof from sympathizing too. For when your neighbor is ill-treated, you ought to make the calamity your own. Take share then in his tears, that you may lighten his low spirits. Take share in his joy, that you may make the joy strike deep root, and fix the love firmly, and be of service to yourself rather than to him in so doing, by your weeping rendering yourself merciful, and by your feeling his pleasure, purging yourself of envy and grudging. And let me draw your attention to Paul's considerateness. For he does not say, Put an end to the calamity, lest you should say in many cases (or perchance ἐπιβουλεύσει) that it is impossible: but he has enjoined the easier task, and that which you have in your power. For even if you are not able to remove the evil, yet contribute tears, and you will take the worst half away. And if you be not able to increase a man's prosperity, contribute joy, and you will have made a great addition to it. Therefore it is not abstaining from envy only, but what is a much greater thing that he exhorts us to, namely, joining in the pleasure. For this is a much greater thing than not envying.

Ver. 16. Be of the same mind one towards another. Mind not high things, but condescend to men of low estate.

Here again he insists much upon lowliness of mind, the subject he had started this exhortation with. For there was a probability of their being full of high-mindedness, both on account of their city (see p. 343), and from sundry other causes; he therefore keeps drawing off (ἀ½' ἰεῖζ ἰφῆλῆμι, 2 manuscripts ἀ½' ἰεῖζ ἰφῆλῆμι) the morbid matter, and lowers the inflammation. For there is nothing that makes such schisms in the Churches as vanity does. And what does he mean by, Be of the same mind one towards another? Has a poor man come into your house? Be like him in your bearing, do not put on any unusual pompous air on account of your riches. There is no rich and poor in Christ. Be not then ashamed of him because of his external dress, but receive him because of his inward faith. And if you see him in sorrow, do not disdain to comfort him, nor if you see him in prosperity, feel abashed at sharing his pleasure, and being gladdened with him, but be of the same mind in his case, that you would be of in your own. For it says, Be of the same mind one towards another. For instance, if you think yourself a great man, therefore think him so likewise. Do you suspect that he is mean and little? Well then, pass this same sentence upon yourself, and cast aside all unevenness. And how is this to be? By your casting aside that reckless temper. Wherefore he proceeds: Mind not high things, but condescend to men of low estate. That is, bring yourself down to their humble condition, associate with them, walk with them, do not be humbled in mind only, but help them also, and reach forth your hand to them, not by means of others, but in your own person, as a father taking care of a child, as the head taking care of the body. As he says in another place, being bound with them that are in bonds. Hebrews 13:3 But here he means by those of low estate not merely the lowly-minded, but those of a low rank, and which one is apt to think scorn of.

Be not wise in your own conceits. This is, do not think that you can do for yourselves. Because the Scripture says in another place besides, Woe to them that are wise in their own eyes, and prudent in their own sight. Isaiah 5:22 And by this again, he secretly draws off recklessness, and reduces conceit and turgidity. For there is nothing that so elates men and makes them feel different from other people, as the notion that they can do by themselves. Whence also God has placed us in need one of another, and though thou be wise you will be in need of another: but if you think that you are not in need of him, you will be the most foolish and feeble of men. For a man of this sort bares himself of all succor, and in whatever error he may run into, will not have the advantage either of correction or of pardon, and will provoke God by his recklessness, and will run into many errors. For it is the case, aye, and often too, that a wise man does not perceive what is needful, and a man of less shrewdness hits upon somewhat that is applicable. And this happened with Moses and his father-in-law, and with Saul and his servant, and with Isaac and Rebecca. Do not then suppose that you are lowered by needing another man. For this exalts you the more, this makes you the stronger, and the brighter too, and the more secure.

Ver. 17. Recompense to no man evil for evil.

For if you find fault with another who plots against you, why do you make yourself liable to this accusation? If he did amiss how do you come not to shun imitating him? And observe how he puts no difference here but lays down one law for all. For he does not say, recompense not evil to the believer, but to no man, be he heathen, be he contaminated, or what not. Provide things honest in the sight of all men.

Ver. 18. If it be possible, as much as lies in you, live peaceably with all men.

This is that: let your light shine before men Matthew 5:16, not that we are to live for vanity, but that we are not to give those who have a mind for it a handle against us. Whence he says also in another place, Give none offense, neither to the Jews, nor to the Gentiles, nor to the Church of God. 1 Corinthians 10:32 And in what follows he limits his meaning well, by saying, If it be possible. For there are cases in which it is not possible, as, for instance, when we have to argue about religion, or to contend for those who are wronged. And why be surprised if this be not universally possible in the case of other persons, when even in the case of man and wife he broke through the rule? But if the unbelieving depart, let him depart. 1 Corinthians 7:15 And his meaning is nearly as follows: Do your own part, and to none give occasion of war or fighting, neither to Jew nor Gentile. But if you see the cause of religion suffering anywhere, do not prize concord above truth, but make a noble stand even to death. And even then be not at war in soul, be not averse in temper, but fight with the things only. For this is the import of as much as in you lies, be at peace with all men. But if the other will not be at peace, do not thou fill your soul with tempest, but in mind be friendly (ἰτῆρῆ»ἰζῆ,, several manuscripts ἰτῆρῆ»ἰϰεῖτῆρῆἰζῆ,) as I said before, without giving up the truth on any occasion.

Ver. 19. Dearly beloved, avenge not yourselves, but rather give place unto wrath. For it is written, Vengeance is mine; I will repay, says the Lord.

Unto what wrath? To the wrath of God. Now since what the injured man desires most to see is, himself having the pleasure of revenge, this very thing he gives him in full measure, that if you dost not avenge yourself, he means, God will be your avenger. Leave it then to Him to follow up your wrongs. For this is the force of give place unto wrath. Then to give further comfort, he brings the quotation forward also, and after winning him more throughly to himself in this way, he demands more Christian heroism (ἰτῆρῆ»ἰζῆἰϰεῖτῆρῆἰζῆ½) of him, and says:

Ver. 20, 21. If your enemy hunger, feed him; if he thirst, give him to drink; for in so doing you shall heap coals of fire upon his head. Be not overcome of evil, but overcome evil with good.

Why, he means, am I telling you that you must keep peace? For I even insist upon your doing kindness. For he says, give him to eat, and give him to drink. Then as the command he gave was a very difficult and a great one, he proceeds: for in so doing you shall heap coals of fire upon his head. And this he said both to humble the one by fear, and to make the other more ready-minded through hope of a recompense. For he that is wronged, when he is feeble, is not so much taken with any goods of his own as with the vengeance upon the person who has pained him.

For there nothing so sweet as to see an enemy chastised. What he is longing for, then, that he gives him first, and when he has let the venom go, then he again gives advice of a higher tone, saying, Be not overcome of evil. For he knew that if the enemy were a very brute, he would not continue an enemy when he had been fed. And if the man injured be of ever so little a soul, still when feeding him and giving him to drink, he will not himself even have any farther craving for his punishment.

Hence, out of confidence in the result of the action, he does not simply threaten, but even dwells largely upon the vengeance. For he did not say, you shall take vengeance but, you shall heap coals of fire upon his head. Then he further declares him victor, by saying, be not overcome of evil, but overcome evil with good. And he gives a kind of gentle hint, that one is not to do it with that intention, since cherishing a grudge still would be being overcome of evil. But he did not say it at once, as he did not find it advisable yet.

But when he had disburdened the man of his anger, then he proceeded to say, overcome evil with good. Since this would be a victory. For the combatant is rather than the conqueror, not when he brings himself under to take the blows, but when he withdraws himself, and makes his antagonist waste his strength upon the air. And in this way he will not be struck himself, and will also exhaust the whole of the other's strength. And this takes place in regard to affronts also. For when you do affronts in return, you have the worse, not as overcome (so 1 manuscript ἡμιμαχίῃ, Sav. ἡμιμαχίῃ,) by a man, but what is far more disgraceful, by the slavish passion of anger.

But if you are silent, then you will conquer, and erect a trophy without a fight, and will have thousands to crown you, and to condemn the slander of falsehood. For he that replies, seems to be speaking in return as if stung. And he that is stung, gives reason to suspect that he is conscious of being guilty of what is said of him. But if you laugh at it, by your laughing you do away with the sentence against you. And if you would have a clear proof of what has been said, ask the enemy himself, when he is most vexed?

When you are heated, and insult him in return? Or when you laugh at him as he insults you? And you will be told the last rather. For he too is not so much pleased with not being insulted in return, as he is vexed because his abuse was not able to gain any hold upon you. Did you never see men in a passion, how they make no great account of their own wounds, but rush on with much violence, and are worse than very wild boars for seeking the hurt of their neighbor, and look to this alone, and are more given to this than to being on their guard against getting harmed?

When therefore you deprive him of that he desires most, you bereave him of everything, by holding him thus cheap, and showing him to be easy to be despised, and a child rather than a man; and you indeed have gained the reputation of a wise man, and him you invest with the character of a noisome beast. This too let us do when we are struck, and when we wish to strike, let us abstain from striking again. But, would you give a mortal blow? Turn to him the other cheek also Matthew 5:39, and you will smite him with countless wounds.

For they that applaud, and wonder at you, are more annoying to him than men to stone him would be; and before them, his conscience will condemn him, and will exact the greatest punishment of him, and so he will go off with a confused look as if he had been treated with the utmost rigor. And if it is the estimation of the multitude that you look for, this too you will have in larger share. And in a general way we have a kind of sympathy with those who are the sufferers; but when we also see that they do not strike (several manuscripts resist, ἀντιμαχίῃ, ἡμιμαχίῃ,) in return, but even give themselves up to it, we not only pity them, but even feel admiration for them.

Here then I find reason to lament, that we who might have things present, if we listened to Christ's Law as we should, and also attain to things to come, are cast out of both by not paying attention to what has been told us, but giving ourselves to unwarranted philosophising about them. For He has given us laws upon all these points for our good, and has shown us what makes us have a good name, what brings us to disgrace. And if it was likely to have proved His disciples ridiculous, He would not have enjoined this.

But since this makes them the most notable of men namely, the not speaking ill, when we have ill spoken of us; the not doing ill when we have ill done us; this was His reason for enjoining it. But if this be so, much more the speaking of good when we have ill spoken of us, and the praising of those that insult us, and the doing good to those that plot against us, will make us so. This then was why He gave these laws. For He is careful for His own disciples, and knowing well what it is that makes little or great.



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