

Homily 23 on Romans

by St. John Chrysostom

The sermon emphasizes the importance of submission to authority, highlighting the role of rulers as ministers of God and the benefits of obedience.

Scripture: Genesis 2:24, Psalm 34:8, Psalm 37:4, Proverbs 19:14, Romans 13:1, Colossians 3:3, 1 Timothy 2:1

Topics: "Civil Authority", "Christian Love"

Description

John Chrysostom preaches on the importance of being subject to higher powers, emphasizing that God has ordained rulers for the better ordering of society and to prevent unnecessary conflicts. He highlights that all power is of God, and resisting authorities is akin to resisting God's ordinance. Chrysostom encourages believers to pay tribute, honor, and love one another, as love fulfills the Law and works no ill towards neighbors. He stresses that love is the foundation of virtue and the key to experiencing God's Kingdom and eternal joy.

Transcript

Rom. XIII. 1

Let every soul be subject unto the higher powers.

Of this subject he makes much account in other epistles also, setting subjects under their rulers as household servants are under their masters. And this he does to show that it was not for the subversion of the commonwealth that Christ introduced His laws, but for the better ordering of it, and to teach men not to be taking up unnecessary and unprofitable wars. For the plots that are formed against us for the truth's sake are sufficient and we have no need to be adding temptations superfluous and unprofitable. And observe too how well-timed his entering upon this subject is. For when he had demanded that great spirit of heroism, and made men fit to deal either with friends or foes, and rendered them serviceable alike to the prosperous and those in adversity and need, and in fact to all, and had planted a conversation worthy of angels, and had discharged anger, and taken down recklessness, and had in every way made their mind even, he then introduces his exhortation upon these matters also. For if it be right to requite those that injure us with the opposite, much more is it our duty to obey those that are benefactors to us. But this he states toward the end of his exhortation, and hitherto does not enter on these reasonings which I mention, but those only that enjoin one to do this as a matter of debt. And to show that these regulations are for all, even for priests, and monks, and not for men of secular occupations only, he has made this plan at the outset, by saying as follows: let every soul be subject unto the higher powers, if you be an

Apostle even, or an Evangelist, or a Prophet, or anything whatsoever, inasmuch as this subjection is not subversive of religion. And he does not say merely obey, but be subject. And the first claim such an enactment has upon us, and the reasoning that suits the faithful, is, that all this is of God's appointment.

For there is no power, he says, but of God. What say you? It may be said; is every ruler then elected by God? This I do not say, he answers. Nor am I now speaking about individual rulers, but about the thing in itself. For that there should be rulers, and some rule and others be ruled, and that all things should not just be carried on in one confusion, the people swaying like waves in this direction and that; this, I say, is the work of God's wisdom. Hence he does not say, for there is no ruler but of God; but it is the thing he speaks of, and says, there is no power but of God.

And the powers that be, are ordained of God. Thus when a certain wise man says, It is by the Lord that a man is matched with a woman Proverbs 19:14, Septuagint, he means this, God made marriage, and not that it is He that joins together every man that comes to be with a woman. For we see many that come to be with one another for evil, even by the law of marriage, and this we should not ascribe to God. But as He said Himself, He which made them at the beginning, made them male and female, and said, For this cause shall a man leave father and mother, and shall cleave to his wife, and they two shall be one flesh.

Matthew 19:4-5; Genesis 2:24 And this is what that wise man meant to explain. For since equality of honor does many times lead to fightings, He has made many governments and forms of subjection; as that, for instance, of man and wife, that of son and father, that of old men and young, that of bond and free, that of ruler and ruled, that of master and disciple. And why are you surprised in the case of mankind, when even in the body He has done the same thing? For even here He has not made all parts of equal honor, but He has made one less and another greater, and some of the limbs has He made to rule and some to be ruled.

And among the unreasoning creatures one may notice this same principle, as among bees, among cranes, among herds of wild cattle. And even the sea itself is not without this goodly subordination; for there too many of the clans are ranged under one among the fishes, and are led thus as an army, and make long expeditions from home. For anarchy, be where it may, is an evil, and a cause of confusion. After having said then whence governments come, he proceeds, Whosoever therefore resists the power, resists the ordinance of God.

See what he has led the subject on to, and how fearful he makes it, and how he shows this to be a matter of debt. For lest the believers should say, You are making us very cheap and despicable, when you put us, who are to enjoy the Kingdom of Heaven, under subjection to rulers, he shows that it is not to rulers, but to God again that he makes them subject in doing this. For it is to Him, that he who subjects himself to authorities is obedient. Yet he does not say this -- for instance that it is God to Whom a man who listens to authorities is obedient-- but he uses the opposite case to awe them, and gives it a more precise form by saying, that he who listens not thereto is fighting with God, Who framed these laws.

And this he is in all cases at pains to show, that it is not by way of favor that we obey them, but by way of debt. For in this way he was more likely to draw the governors who were unbelievers to religion, and the believers to obedience. For there was quite a common report in those days (Tert. Ap. 1, 31, 32), which maligned the Apostles, as guilty of a sedition and revolutionary scheme, and as aiming in all they did and said at the subversion of the received institutions. When then you show our common Master giving this in charge to all His, you will at once stop the mouths of those that malign us as revolutionists, and with great boldness will speak for the doctrines of truth.

Be not then ashamed, he says, at such subjection. For God has laid down this law, and is a strong Avenger of them if they be despised. For it is no common punishment that He will exact of you, if you disobey, but the very greatest; and nothing will exempt you, that you can say to the contrary, but both of men you shall undergo the most severe vengeance, and there shall be no one to defend you, and you will also provoke God the more. And all this he intimates when he says,

And they that resist shall receive to themselves damnation. Then to show the gain of the thing after the fear, he uses reasons too to persuade them as follows:

Ver. 3. For rulers are not a terror to good works, but to the evil.

For when he has given a deep wound, and stricken them down, he again uses gentler treatment, like a wise physician, who applies soothing medicines, and he comforts them, and says, why be afraid? Why shudder? For does he punish a person that is doing well? Or is he terrible to a person who lives in the practice of virtue? Wherefore also he proceeds, Will you then not be afraid of the power? Do that which is good, and you shall have praise of the same. You see how he has made him friends (κεῖνος) with the ruler, by showing that he even praises him from his throne. You see how he has made wrath unmeaning.

Ver. 4. For he is the minister of God to you for good.

So far is he from terrifying you, he says, that he even praises you: so far from being a hindrance to you, that he even works with you. When then you have his praise and his succor, how is it that you are not in subjection to him? For he makes virtue easier for you in other ways also, by chastising the wicked, by benefiting and honoring the good, and by working together with the will of God. Whence too he has even given him the name of Minister. And consider: I give you counsel to be sober-minded, and he, by the laws, speaks the same language. I exhort you not to be rapacious and grasping. And he sits in judgment in such cases, and so is a worker together with us, and an assistant to us, and has been commissioned by God for this end. Hence there are both reasons for reverencing him, both because he was commissioned by God, and because it was for such an object. But if you do that which is evil, be afraid. It is not then the ruler that makes the fear, but our own wickedness.

For he bears not the sword in vain. You see how he has furnished him with arms, and set him on guard like a soldier, for a terror to those that commit sin. For he is the minister of God to execute wrath, a revenger upon him that does evil. Now lest you should start off at hearing again of punishment, and vengeance, and a sword, he says again that it is God's law he is carrying out. For what if he does not know it himself? Yet it is God that has so shaped things (οὕτως τεπρωσεν). If then, whether in punishing, or in honoring, he be a Minister, in avenging virtue's cause, in driving vice away, as God wills, why be captious against him, when he is the cause of so many good doings, and paves the way for yours too? Since there are many who first practised virtue through the fear of God. For there are a duller sort, whom things to come have not such a hold upon as things present. He then who by fear and rewards gives the soul of the majority a preparatory turn towards its becoming more suited for the word of doctrine, is with good reason called the Minister of God.

Ver. 5. Wherefore ye must needs be subject, not only for wrath but also for conscience sake.

What is the meaning of, not only for wrath? It means not only because thou dost resist God by not being subject, nor only because you are procuring great evils for yourself, both from God and the rulers, but also because he is a benefactor to you in things of the greatest importance, as he procures peace to you, and

the blessings of civil institutions. For there are countless blessings to states through these authorities; and if you were to remove them, all things would go to ruin, and neither city nor country, nor private nor public buildings, nor anything else would stand, but all the world will be turned upside down, while the more powerful devour the weaker. And so even if some wrath were not to follow man's disobedience, even on this ground you ought to be subject, that you may not seem devoid of conscience and feeling towards the benefactor.

Ver. 6. For, for this cause pay ye tribute also; for they are God's ministers, attending continually on this very thing.

Without going one by one into the benefits done to states by the rulers, as that of good order and peace, the other services, as regarding the soldiery, and those over the public business, he shows the whole of this by a single case. For that you are benefited by him, he means, you bear witness yourself, by paying him a salary. Observe the wisdom and judgment of the blessed Paul. For that which seemed to be burdensome and annoying -- the system of imposts -- this he turns into a proof of their care for men. What is the reason, he means, that we pay tribute to a king? It is not as providing for us? And yet we should not have paid it unless we had known in the first instance that we were gainers from this superintendence. Yet it was for this that from of old all men came to an agreement that governors should be maintained by us, because to the neglect of their own affairs, they take charge of the public, and on this they spend their whole leisure, whereby our goods also are kept safe. After saying then what the external goods are, he again averts to the former line of argument (for in this way he was more likely to attract the believer to him), and he shows again that this is God's decree, and on it he makes his advice rest finally, in these words, they are God's ministers. Then to show the pains they take, and their hard life, he proceeds,

Waiting continually upon this very thing.

For this is their life, this their business, that you may enjoy peace. Wherefore in another Epistle, he bids them not only be subject, but also pray in their behalf. And as showing there too that the advantage was common to all, he adds, that we may lead a quiet and peaceable life in all things. 1 Timothy 2:1-2 For it is in no small degree that they contribute to the settled state of the present life, by keeping guard, beating off enemies, hindering those who are for sedition in the cities, putting an end to differences among any. For do not tell me of some one who makes an ill use of the thing, but look to the good order that is in the institution itself, and you will see the great wisdom of Him who enacted this law from the first.

Ver. 7, 8. Render therefore to all their dues; tribute to whom tribute, custom to whom custom, fear to whom fear, honor to whom honor. Owe (or ye owe) no man anything, but to love one another.

He still keeps upon the same line, bidding them pay them not money only, but honor and fear. And how is it when he said above, Will you not be afraid of the power? Do that which is good; that he here says render fear? He does it meaning exceeding honor, and not the fear which comes from a bad conscience, which he alluded to before. And it is not give, that he says, but render (or give back, **■ π■δοτε**), and then adds to it, the dues. For it is not a favor that you confer by so doing, since the thing is matter of due. And if you do it not, you will be punished as obstinate. Do not suppose that you are lowering yourself, and detracting from the dignity of your own philosophy, if you rise up at the presence of a ruler, or if you uncover your head. For if he laid these laws down at that time, when the rulers were Gentiles, much more ought this to be done with them now they are believers. But if you mean to say, that you are entrusted with greater privileges, be informed that this is not your time. For you are a stranger and a sojourner. A time will be

when you shall appear brighter than all. Now your life is hid with Christ in God. When Christ shall appear, then shall you also appear with Him in glory Colossians 3:3-4 Seek not then in this life of accidents your change, but even if you have to be with fear in a ruler's presence, do not think that this is unworthy your noble birth. For so God wills, that the ruler who has his place marked by Him, should have his own power. And when he who is conscious of no evil in himself, stands with fear in the judge's presence, much more will he who does evil things be affrighted, and thou in this way will be the more respected. For it is not from honoring that the lowering of self comes but from dishonoring him. And the ruler will treat you with greater respect, and he will glorify your Master owing to this, even if he be an unbeliever. Owe owest, but he would have it look the other way.}--> no man anything, but to love one another. Again he has recourse to the mother of good deeds, and the instructress of the things spoken of, who is also productive of every virtue, and says that this is a debt also, not however such as the tribute or the custom, but a continuous one. For he does not wish it ever to be paid off, or rather he would have it always rendered, yet never fully so, but to be always owing. For this is the character of the debt, that one keeps giving and owing always. Having said then how he ought to love, he also shows the gain of it, saying,

For he that loves another has fulfilled the Law.

And do not, pray, consider even this a favor; for this too is a debt. For you owe love to your brother, through your spiritual relationship. And not for this only, but also because we are members one of another. And if love leave us, the whole body is rent in pieces. Love therefore your brother. For if from his friendship you gain so much as to fulfil the whole Law, you owe him love as being benefited by him.

Ver. 9. For this, You shall not commit adultery, You shall not kill, You shall not steal, You shall not bear false witness, and any other commandment, is briefly comprehended in this saying, You shall love your neighbor as yourself.

He does not say merely it is fulfilled, but it is briefly comprehended, that is, the whole work of the commandments is concisely and in a few words completed. For the beginning and the end of virtue is love. This it has for its root, this for its groundwork, this for its summit. If then it be both beginning and fulfilment, what is there equal to it? But he does not seek love merely, but intense love. For he does not say merely love your neighbor, but, as yourself. Hence also Christ said that the Law and the Prophets hang upon it. And in making two kinds of love, see how He has raised this! For after saying that the first commandment is, You shall love the Lord your God, He added a second; and He did not stay, but added, like it; You shall love your neighbor as yourself. What can be equal to this love to man, or this gentleness? That when we were at infinite distance from Him, He brings the love to us into comparison with that toward Himself, and says that is like this. Hence then, to put the measures of either as nearly the same, of the one He says, with all your heart, and with all your soul, but of this towards one's neighbor, He says, as yourself. But Paul said, that when this did not exist even the other was of no great profit to us. As then we, when we are fond of any one, say, if you love him, then you love me; so He also to show this says, is like it; and to Peter, If you love Me, feed My sheep. John 21:16

Ver. 10. Love works no ill to his neighbor, therefore love is the fulfilling of the Law.

Observe how it has both virtues, abstinence from evils (for it works no ill, he says), and the working of good deeds. For it is, he says, the fulfilling (or filling up) of the Law; not bringing before us instruction only on moral duties in a concise form, but making the accomplishment of them easy also. For that we should become acquainted with things profitable to us was not all that he was careful for (which is the Law's

care), but also with a view to the doing of them it brought us great assistance; accomplishing not some part of the commandments, but the whole sum of virtue in us.

Let us then love one another, since in this way we shall also love God, Who loves us. For in the case of men, if you love a man's beloved, he that loves him is contentious at it. But here He deems you worthy to share His love, and hates you when you share not. For man's love is laden with envy and grudging; but God's is free from all passion, whence also He seeks for those to share His love. For He says, love thou with Me, and then yourself also will I love the more. You see the words of a vehement lover!

If you love My beloved, then will I also reckon Myself to be greatly beloved of you. For He vehemently desires our salvation, and this He showed from of old. Now hear what He says when He was forming the man, Let Us make man in Our Image: and again, Let Us make an help meet for him. It is not good for him to be alone. Genesis 1:26 And when he had transgressed, He rebuked him, observe how gently; and He does not say, Wretch! Thou very wretch! After receiving so great benefits, have you after all trusted to the devil?

And left your Benefactor, to take up with the evil spirit? But what says He? Who told you that you are naked, unless you have eaten of the Tree, from which alone I commanded you not to eat? Genesis 3:11 As if a father were to say to a child, who was ordered not to touch a sword, and then disobeyed and got hurt, How did you get hurt? By not listening to me. You see they are the words of a friend rather than a master, of a friend despised, and not even then forsaking. Let us then imitate Him, and when we rebuke, let us preserve this moderation.

For even the woman He also rebukes again with the same gentleness. Or rather what He said was not so much rebuke as admonition and correction, and security against the future. This is why He says nothing to the serpent. For he was the designer of the mischiefs, and had it not in his power to put off the accusation on any one else, wherefore He punished him severely: and even here He did not come to a pause, but made the earth also to share in the curse. But if He cast them out of paradise, and condemned them to labor, even for this we ought to adore and reverence Him the most.

For since self-indulgence issues in listlessness, He trenches upon the pleasure by building a fort of pain against listlessness, that we may return to the love of Him. And what of Cain's case? Does he not meet with the same gentleness? For being by him also insulted, He does not reproach (same word as insult) in return, but entreats, (or comforts) him, and says, Why is your countenance fallen? Genesis 4:6 And yet what he had done allowed of no excuse whatever. And this the younger brother shows.

But still even then He does not rebuke him: but what says He? Have you sinned: keep peace; do so no more. To you shall his turning be, and you shall rule over him Genesis 4:7, Septuagint, meaning his brother. For if you are afraid, lest for this sacrifice, He means, I should deprive you of the preëminence of the first-born, be of good cheer, for the entire command over him do I put into your hands. Only be thou better, and love him that has done you no wrong; for I have an interest in you both.

And what makes Me most glad is, that you be not at variance one with another. For as a devoted mother, so does God do and plan everything to keep one from being torn from another; but that you may get a clearer view, by an example, of my meaning, call to your mind, pray, Rebecca in her trouble, and running about everywhere, when the elder son was at enmity with the younger. For if she loved Jacob, still she did not feel averse to Esau. And therefore she said, Lest by any means I be deprived of both of you, my children, in one day.

Genesis 27:45 Therefore also God upon that occasion said, You have sinned: be at peace: unto you shall his turning be Genesis 4:7, so repressing the murder beforehand, and aiming at the peace of them both. But when he had murdered him, He did not even then bring His care for him to a close, but again answers the fratricide in gentle terms, saying, Where is your brother Abel? that even now, if he would, he might make a full confession. But he struggled in defense of his former misdeeds, with a greater and sadder shamelessness.

But even then God does not leave him, but again speaks the language of an injured and despised lover, and says, The voice of your brother's blood cries unto Me. Genesis 4:10 And again He rebukes the earth with the murderer, turning His wrath off to it, and saying, Cursed be the earth, which opened her mouth to receive your brother's blood (ib. ii.); and doing like those who lament (■ νακαλο■ντας), as David also did when Saul was fallen. For he made an address to the mountains which received him as he died, in the words, You mountains of Gilboa, let there fall on you neither rain nor dew, because there were the shields of the mighty cast away. 2 Samuel 1:21 And thus God also, as though singing some solitary dirge (μὲν■δ■αυ), says, The voice of your brother's blood cries unto Me; and now are you cursed from the earth, which has opened her mouth to receive your brother's blood from your hand.

And this He said to humble his fiery passion, and to persuade him to love him at least now he had gone. Have you extinguished his life? He would say; why do you not now extinguish the hatred also? But what does He do? He loves both the one and the other, since He made them both. What then? does (4 manuscripts will) He let the murderer go unpunished? Nay, he would but have grown worse. Will He punish him then? Nay, He has more tenderness than a father. See then how He at once punishes and also displays, even in this, His love.

Or rather, He does not so much as punish, but only corrects. For He does not kill him, but only fetters him with trembling, that he may divest himself of the crime, that so at least he may come back to a natural tenderness for the other, and that so at last he may make a truce with him now he has gone; for He were fain he should not go away to the other world in enmity with him that was deceased. This is the way wherein they that love, when in doing acts of kindness they meet with no love in return, are led on to be vehement and to threaten, not with their will indeed, but led by their love to do this: that at least in this way they may win over those that scorn them.

Yet affection of this sort is one of compulsion, and still this even solaces them, through the vehemency of their love. And so punishment itself comes from affection, since unless pained at being hated, they would not choose to punish either. Now observe, how this is what Paul says to the Corinthians. For who is he (says he) that makes me glad, but the same which is made sorry by me? 2 Corinthians 2:2 And so when he is going to the full extent of punishment, then he shows his love.

Thus the Egyptian woman too, from her vehement love, as vehemently punished Joseph: and she indeed did so for mischief, the love being unchaste; but God for good, since the love was worthy of Him who loved. This is why He does not refuse even to condescend to grosser words, and to speak the names of human passions, and to call Himself jealous. For I am a jealous God Exodus 20:5, He says, that you may learn the intenseness of the love. Let us then love Him as He would have us: for He sets great store thereby.

And if we turn away, He keeps inviting us, and if we will not be converted, He chastens us through His affection, not through a wish to exact punishment of us. And see what He says in Ezekiel to the city that

was beloved, yet had despised Him. I will bring your lovers against you, and will deliver you into their hands, and they shall stone you, and shall slay you, and My jealousy shall be taken away from you, and I will rest, and I will not trouble Myself any more. From Ezekiel 16:37-42 What more than this could a vehement lover have said, when despised by his beloved, and after all again ardently loving her?

For God does everything that He may be loved by us, and owing to this He spared not even His Son. But we are unbending, and savage. Yet let us become gentle at last, and love God as we ought to love Him, that we may with pleasure enjoy virtue. For if any that has a beloved wife does not perceive any of the vexations that come day by day, He that loves with this divine and pure love, only consider what great pleasure he will have to enjoy! For this is, indeed it is, the kingdom of Heaven; this is fruition of good things, and pleasure, and cheerfulness, and joy, and blessedness.

Or rather, say as many things as I may, I shall still be unable to give you any such representation of it as should be, but the trial of it alone can give a knowledge of this goodly thing. Wherefore also the Prophet says, Delight yourself in the Lord Psalm 37:4, and, Taste and see that the Lord is gracious. Psalm 34:8 Let us then be persuaded, and indulge ourselves in His love. For in this way we shall both see His Kingdom even from out of this life, and shall be living the life of Angels, and while we abide on earth, we shall be in as goodly a condition as they that dwell in heaven; and after our departing hence, shall stand the brightest of beings by the judgment-seat of Christ, and shall enjoy that glory unutterable, which may we all attain unto, by the grace and love toward man of our Lord Jesus Christ. For to Him is the glory forever, Amen.

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