

Homily 23 on the Acts of the Apostles

by St. John Chrysostom

St. John Chrysostom's Homily emphasizes God's impartiality and the transformative power of faith and baptism through the example of Cornelius and Peter's teachings.

Scripture: Acts 10:34

Topics: "Gods Mercy", "Christian Living"

Description

John Chrysostom preaches on the story of Cornelius in Acts 10, highlighting the hospitality and humility shown by Cornelius as he eagerly awaits Peter's arrival and falls at his feet in worship. Peter, in turn, emphasizes God's mercy and impartiality, declaring that all who fear Him and work righteousness are acceptable. Chrysostom urges the congregation to appreciate the gift of forgiveness, to live virtuously, and to not be insolent towards God, emphasizing the importance of baptism, faith, and leading a life pleasing to God. He warns against complacency, encourages active participation in spiritual battles, and stresses the need to embrace challenges for the sake of eternal rewards.

Transcript

Acts X. 23, 24

Then called he them in, and lodged them. And on the morrow Peter went away with them, and certain brethren from Joppa accompanied him. And the morrow after they entered into Cæsarea. And Cornelius waited for them, and had called together his kinsmen and near friends.

He called them in, and lodged them. Good, that first he gives the men friendly treatment, after the fatigue of their journey, and makes them at home with him; and on the morrow, sets out with them. And certain accompany him: this too as Providence ordered it, that they should be witnesses afterwards when Peter would need to justify himself. And Cornelius was waiting for them, and had called together his kinsmen and near friends. This is the part of a friend, this the part of a devout man, that where such blessings are concerned, he takes care that his near friends shall be made partakers of all.

Of course (his near friends), those in whom he had ever full confidence; fearing, with such an interest at stake, to entrust the matter to others. In my opinion, it was by Cornelius himself that both friends and kinsmen had been brought to a better mind. And as Peter was coming in, Cornelius met him, and fell down at his feet, and worshipped him. Acts 10:25 This, both to teach the others, and by way of giving thanks to God, and showing his own humility: thereby making it plain, that though he had been commanded, yet in

himself he had great piety.

What then did Peter? But Peter took him up, saying, Stand up; I myself also am a man. Acts 10:26 Do you mark how, before all else (the Apostles) teach them this lesson, not to think great things of them? And as he talked with him, he went in, and found many that had come together. And he said to them, You know how that it is an unlawful thing for a man that is a Jew to keep company, or come unto one of another nation; but God has showed me that I should not call any man common or unclean. (v. 27, 28.)

Observe, he straightway speaks of the mercy of God, and points out to them that it is a great grace that God has shown them. Observe also how while he utters great things, at the same time he speaks modestly. For he does not say, We, being men who do not deign to keep company with any (such), have come to you: but what says he? You know-- God commanded this -- that it is against law to keep company with, or come unto, one of another nation. Then he goes on to say, And to me God has shown -- this he says, that none may account the thanks due to him -- that I should call no man -- that it may not look like obsequiousness to him, no human being, says he -- common or unclean.

Acts 10:29 Wherefore also -- that they may not think the affair a breach of the law on his part, nor (Cornelius) suppose that because he was in a station of command therefore he had complied, but that they may ascribe all to God --wherefore also I came without gainsaying as soon as I was sent for: (though) not only to keep company, but even to come unto (him) was not permitted. I ask therefore, for what intent you have sent for me. Already Peter had heard the whole matter from the soldiers also, but he wishes them first to confess, and to make them amenable to the Faith.

What then does Cornelius? He does not say, Why, did not the soldiers tell you? But observe again, how humbly he speaks. For he says, From the fourth day I was fasting until this hour; and at the ninth hour I prayed in my house, and, behold, a man stood before me in bright clothing, and said, Cornelius, your prayer is heard, and your alms have come up for a memorial before God. And at the ninth hour, he says, I was praying. (v. 30, 31.) It seems to me, that this man had also fixed for himself set times of a life under stricter rule, and on certain days.

For this is why he he says, From the fourth day. See how great a thing prayer is! When he advanced in piety, then the Angel appears to him. From the fourth day: i.e. of the week; not four days ago. For, on the morrow Peter went away with them, and on the morrow after they entered into Cæsarea: this is one day: and the day on which the persons sent came (to Joppa) one day: and on the third (the Angel) appeared: so that there are two days after that on which (Cornelius) had been praying.

And, behold, a man stood before me in bright clothing: he does not say, an Angel, so unassuming is he: and said, Cornelius, your prayer is heard, and your alms are had in remembrance in the sight of God. Send therefore to Joppa, and call hither Simon, whose surname is Peter: he is lodged in the house of one Simon a tanner by the seaside: who, when he comes, shall speak unto you. Immediately therefore I sent to you; and you have well done that you have come. Now therefore are we all here present before God, to hear all things that are commanded you of God.

Acts 10:31-33 (b) See what faith, what piety! He knew that it was no word of man that Peter spoke, when he said, God has shown me. Then says the man, We are present to hear all things that are commanded you of the Lord. (a) Therefore it was that Peter asked, For what intent have ye sent for me? on purpose that he might so speak these very words. (d) Then Peter opened his mouth, and said, Of a truth I perceive that God is no respecter of persons: but in every nation he that fears Him, and works righteousness, is

acceptable to him. (v. 34, 35.)

That is, be he uncircumcised or circumcised. (c) This also Paul declaring, says, For there is no respect of persons with God. Romans 2:11 (e) What then? (it may be asked) is the man yonder in Persia acceptable to Him? If he be worthy, in this regard he is acceptable, that it should be granted him to be brought unto faith (τὸ κατὰ ξιῶθι νομιεῖται πνευματικῶς). The Eunuch from Ethiopia He overlooked not. What shall one say then of the religious men who have been overlooked? It is not the case, that any (such) ever was overlooked.

But what he says is to this effect, that God rejects no man. In every nation, he that fears God and works righteousness: (by righteousness) he means, all virtue. Mark, how he subdues all elation of mind in him. That (the Jews) may not seem to be in the condition of persons cast off (he adds), The word which He sent unto the children of Israel, preaching peace by Jesus Christ: He is Lord of all Acts 10:36: this he says also for the sake of those present (of the Jews), that He may persuade them also: this is why he forces Cornelius to speak.

He, says he, is Lord of all. But observe at the very outset, The word, says he, which He sent unto the children of Israel; he gives them the preëminence. Then he adduces (these Gentiles) themselves as witnesses: ye know, says he, the matter which came to pass throughout all Judea, beginning at Galilee-- then he confirms it from this also -- after the baptism which John preached Acts 10:37-- even Jesus of Nazareth, how God anointed Him with the Holy Ghost and with power. Acts 10:38 He does not mean, You know Jesus, for they did not know Him, but he speaks of the things done by Him: Who went about doing good, and healing all that were oppressed of the devil: by this he shows that many cases of lost senses or paralyzed limbs are the devil's work, and a wrench given to the body by him: as also Christ said.

For God was with Him. Again, lowly terms. And we are witnesses of all things which He did, both in the country of the Jews, and in Jerusalem Acts 10:39: both we, says he, and you. Then the Passion, and the reason why they do not believe: Whom also they slew, and hanged on a tree. Him God raised up the third day, and showed Him openly; not to all the people, but unto witnesses chosen before of God, even to us, who ate and drank with Him after He rose from the dead. (v. 40, 41.)

This is a proof of the Resurrection. And he commanded us to preach unto the people, and to testify that it is He which was ordained of God to be the Judge of quick and dead. Acts 10:42 This is great. Then he adduces the testimony from the Prophets: To Him give all the prophets witness, that through His name, whosoever believes in Him shall receive remission of sins. Acts 10:43 This is a proof of that which was about to be: this is the reason why he here cites the Prophets.

But let us look over again what relates to Cornelius. (Recapitulation.) He sent, it says, to Joppa to fetch Peter. He was waiting for him, etc; see how fully he believed that Peter would certainly come: (b) and fell down at his feet, and worshipped him. (v. 24, 25.) (a) Mark how on every side it is shown how worthy he is! (So) the Eunuch there desired Philip to come up and sit in the chariot Acts 8:31, although not knowing who he was, upon no other introduction (παγγελίας) than that given by the Prophet.

But here Cornelius fell at his feet. (c) Stand up, I myself also am a man. Acts 10:26 Observe how free from adulation his speech is on all occasions, and how full of humility. And conversing with him, he came in. (a) Acts 10:27 Conversing about what? I suppose saying these words: I myself also am a man. (e) Do you mark (Peter's) unassuming temper? He himself also shows that his coming is God's doing: You know that it is unlawful for a man that is a Jew, etc. Acts 10:28 And why did he not speak of the linen sheet?

Observe Peter's freedom from all vainglory: but, that he is sent of God, this indeed he mentions; of the manner in which he was sent, he speaks not at present; when the need has arisen, seeing he had said, You know that it is unlawful for a man that is a Jew to keep company with, or to come unto, one of another nation, he simply adds, but to me God has shown, etc. There is nothing of vainglory here. All you, he says, know. He makes their knowledge stand surety for him. But Cornelius says, We are present before God to hear all things that are commanded you of the Lord Acts 10:33: not, Before man, but, Before God.

This is the way one ought to attend to God's servants. Do you see his awakened mind? Do you see how worthy he was of all these things? And Peter, it says, opened his mouth, and said, Of a truth I perceive that God is no respecter of persons. Acts 10:34 This he said also by way of justifying himself with the Jews then present. For, being at the point to commit the Word to these (Gentiles), he first puts this by way of apology. What then? Was He a respecter of persons beforetime?

God forbid! For beforetime likewise it was just the same: Every one, as he says, that fears Him, and works righteousness, would be acceptable to Him. As when Paul says, For when the Gentiles which have not the Law, do by nature the things of the Law. Romans 2:14 That fears God and works righteousness: he assumes both doctrine and manner of life: is accepted with Him; for, if He did not overlook the Magi, nor the Ethiopian, nor the thief, nor the harlot, much more them that work righteousness, and are willing, shall He in anywise not overlook.

What say you then to this, that there are likely persons (■ πεικε■ς), men of mild disposition, and yet they will not believe? (Above, p. 149, note 2.) Lo, you have yourself named the cause: they will not. But besides the likely person he here speaks of is not this sort of man, but the man that works righteousness: that is, the man who in all points is virtuous and irreproachable, when he has the fear of God as he ought to have it. But whether a person be such, God only knows.

See how this man was acceptable: see how, as soon as he heard, he was persuaded. Yes, and now too, say you, every one would be persuaded, be who he may. But the signs that are now, are much greater than those, and more wonderful.-- Then Peter commences his teaching, and reserves for the Jews the privilege of their birth. The word, he says, which He sent unto the children of Israel, preaching peace Acts 10:36, not bringing judgment. He is sent to the Jews also: yet for all this He did not spare them.

Preaching peace through Jesus Christ. He is Lord of all. First he discourses of His being Lord and in exceeding elevated terms, seeing he had to deal with a soul more than commonly elevated, and that took all in with ardor. Then he proves how He was Lord of all, from the things which He achieved throughout all Judea. For you know, says he, the matter which came to pass throughout all Judea: and, what is the wonderful part of it, beginning at Galilee: after the baptism which John preached.

Acts 10:37 First he speaks of His success, and then again he says concerning Him, Jesus of Nazareth. Why, what a stumbling-block, this birthplace! How God anointed Him with the Holy Ghost and with power. Acts 10:38 Then again the proof-- how does that appear?-- from the good that He did. Who went about doing good, and healing all that were oppressed of the devil: and the greatness of the power shown when He overcomes the devil; and the cause, Because God was with Him. Therefore also the Jews spoke thus: We know that You are a teacher come from God: for none can do these miracles except God be with him.

John 3:2 Then, when he has shown that He was sent from God, he next speaks of this, that He was slain: that you may not imagine anything absurd. Do you see how far they are from hiding the Cross out of view, nay, that together with the other circumstances they put also the manner? Whom also, it says, they slew

by hanging on a tree. And gave Him, it is added, to be made manifest not to all the people, but to witnesses before ordained of God, even unto us: and yet it was (Christ) Himself that elected them; but this also he refers to God.

To the before-ordained, he says, even to us, who ate and drank with Him after that He was risen from the dead. (v. 39, 41.) See whence he fetches his assurance of the resurrection. What is the reason that being risen he did no sign, but only ate and drank? Because the Resurrection itself was a great sign, and of this nothing was so much a sign as the eating and drinking. To testify, says he -- in a manner calculated to alarm -- that they may not have it in their power to fall back upon the excuse of ignorance: and he does not say, that He is the Son of God, but, what would most alarm them, that it is He which is ordained of God, to be the Judge of quick and dead.

Acts 10:42 To him give all the Prophets witness, etc. Acts 10:43 When by the terror he has agitated them, then he brings in the pardon, not spoken from himself but from the Prophets. And what is terrifying is from him, what is mild from the Prophets.

All you that have received this forgiveness, all you to whom it has been vouchsafed to attain unto faith, learn, I beseech you, the greatness of the Gift, and study not to be insolent to your Benefactor. For we obtained forgiveness, not that we should become worse, but to make us far better and more excellent. Let none say that God is the cause of our evil doings, in that He did not punish, nor take vengeance. If (as it is said) a ruler having taken a murderer, lets him go, say, is he (not) judged to be the cause of the murders afterwards committed?

See then, how we expose God to the tongues of the wicked. For what do they not say, what leave unuttered? (God) Himself, say they, allowed them; for he ought to have punished them as they deserved, not to honor them, nor crown them, nor admit them to the foremost privileges, but to punish and take vengeance upon them: but he that, instead of this, honors them, has made them to be such as they are. Do not, I beseech and implore you, do not let any man utter such speech as far as we are concerned.

Better to be buried ten thousand times over, than that God through us should be so spoken of! The Jews, we read, said to (Christ) Himself, Thou that destroyest the Temple, and in three days buildest it up, come down from the Cross Matthew 27:40: and again, If Thou be the Son of God: but the reproaches here are more grievous than those, that through us He should be called a teacher of wickedness! Let us cause the very opposite to be said, by having our conversation worthy of Him that calls us, and (worthily) approaching to the baptism of adoption.

For great indeed is the might of baptism (φωτισματου): it makes them quite other men than they were, that partake of the gift; it does not let the men be men (and nothing more). Make thou the Gentile (την Ελληνα), to believe that great is the might of the Spirit, that it has new-moulded, that it has fashioned you anew. Why do you wait for the last gasp, like a runaway slave, like a malefactor, as though it were not your duty to live unto God? Why do you stand affected to Him, as if you had in Him a ruthless, cruel Master?

What can be more heartless (ψυχροτερον), what more miserable, than those who make that the time to receive baptism? God made you a friend, and vouchsafed you all His good things, that you may act the part of a friend. Suppose you had done some man the greatest of wrongs, had insulted him, and brought upon him disgraces without end, suppose you had fallen into the hands of the person wronged, and he, in return for all this, had honored you, made you partaker of all that he had, and in the assembly of his

friends, of those in whose presence he was insulted, had crowned you, and declared that he would hold you as his own begotten son, and then straightway had died: say, would you not have bewailed him?

Would you not have deemed his death a calamity? Would you not have said, Would that he were alive, that I might have it in my power to make the fit return, that I might requite him, that I might show myself not base to my benefactor? So then, where it is but man, this is how you would act; and where it is God, are you eager to be gone, that you may not requite your benefactor for so great gifts? Nay rather, choose the time for coming to Him so that you shall have it in your power to requite Him like for like.

True, say you, but I cannot keep (the gift). Has God commanded impossibilities? Hence it is that all is clean reversed, hence that, all the world over, every thing is marred -- because nobody makes it his mark to live after God. Thus those who are yet Catechumens, because they make this their object, (how they may defer baptism to the last,) give themselves no concern about leading an upright life: and those who have been baptized (φωτισθεντες), whether it be because they received it as children, or whether it be that having received it in sickness, and afterwards recovered (■ νενεγκ■ντες), they had no hearty desire to live on (to the glory of God), so it is, that neither do these make an earnest business of it: nay, even such as received it in health, have little enough to show of any good impression, and warmly affected for the time, these also presently let the fire go out.

Why do you flee? Why do you tremble? What is it you are afraid of? You do not mean to say that you are not permitted to follow your business? I do not part you from your wife! No, it is from fornication that I bar you. I do not debar you from the enjoyment of your wealth? No, but from covetousness and rapacity. I do not oblige you to empty out all your coffers? No, but to give some small matter according to your means to them that lack, your superfluities to their need, and not even this unrewarded.

We do not urge you to fast? We do but forbid you to besot yourselves with drunkenness and gormandizing. The things we would retrench are but the very things which bring you disgrace; things which even here, on this side of hell-fire, you yourselves confess to be things to be shunned and hated. We do not forbid you to be glad and to rejoice? Nay, only rejoice not with a disgraceful and unbecoming merriment. What is it you dread, why are you afraid, why do you tremble? Where marriage is, where enjoyment of wealth, where food in moderation, what matter of sin is there in these things?

And yet, they that are without enjoin the opposites to these, and are obeyed. For they demand not according to your means, but they say, You must give thus much: and if you allege poverty, they will make no account of that. Not so Christ: Give, says He, of what you have, and I inscribe you in the first rank. Again those say, If you will distinguish yourself, forsake father, mother, kindred, friends, and keep close attendance on the Palace, laboring, toiling, slaving, distracted, suffering miseries without number.

Not so Christ; but keep thou, says He, at home with your wife, with your children, and as for your daily occupations reform and regulate them on the plan of leading a peaceable life, free from cares and from perils. True, say you, but the other promises wealth. Aye, but Christ a kingdom, and more, He promises wealth also with it. For, Seek ye, says He, the kingdom of Heaven, and all these things shall be added unto you Matthew 6:33: throwing in, by way of additional boon, what the other holds out as the main thing: and the Psalmist says, he has never seen the righteous forsaken, nor his seed begging their bread.

Psalm 37:25 Let us set about practising virtue, let us make a beginning; let us only lay hold on it, and you shall see what the good will be. For surely in these (worldly) objects you do not succeed so without labor, that you should be so faint-hearted for these (higher) objects -- that you should say, Those are to be had

without labor, these only with toil. Nay -- what need to tell you what is the true state of the case?-- those are had only with greater labor. Let us not recoil from the Divine Mysteries, I beseech you.

Look not at this, that one who was baptized before you, has turned out ill, and has fallen from his hope: since among soldiers also we see some not doing their duty by the service, while we see others distinguishing themselves, and we do not look only at the idle ones, but we emulate these, the men who are successful. But besides, consider how many, after their baptism, have of men become angels!

Fear the uncertainty of the future. As a thief in the night, so death comes: and not merely as a thief, but while we sleep it sets upon us, and carries us off while we are idling. To this end has God made the future uncertain, that we may spend our time in the practice of virtue, because of the uncertainty of expectation. But He is merciful, say you. How long shall we hear this senseless, ridiculous talk? I affirm not only that God is merciful, but that nothing can be more merciful than He, and that He orders all things concerning us for our good.

How many all their life do you see afflicted with the worst form of leprosy! (■ ν ■ λ ■ φαντι δι■ γοντας, Elephantiasis,) how many blind from their earliest youth even to old age! Others who have lost their eyesight, others in poverty, others in bonds, others again in the mines, others entombed (καταχωσθ■ ντας) together, others (slaughtered) in wars! These things say you, do not look like mercy. Say, could He not have prevented these things had He wished, yet He permits them? True, say you.

Say, those who are blind from their infancy, why are they so? I will not tell you, until you promise me to receive baptism, and, being baptized, to live aright. It is not right to give you the solution of these questions. The preaching is not meant just for amusement. For even if I solve this, on the back of this follows another question: of such questions there is a bottomless deep. Therefore do not get into a habit of looking to have them solved for you: else we shall never stop questioning.

For look, if I solve this, I do but lead the way to question upon question, numberless as the snowflakes. So that this is what we learn, rather to raise questions, not to solve the questions that are raised. For even if we do solve them, we have not solved them altogether, but (only) as far as man's reasoning goes. The proper solution of such questions is faith: the knowing that God does all things justly and mercifully and for the best: that to comprehend the reason of them is impossible.

This is the one solution, and another better than this exists not. For say, what is the use of having a question solved? This, that one needs no longer to make a question of the thing which is solved. And if you get yourself to believe this, that all things are ordered by the Providence of God, Who, for reasons known to Himself, permits some things and actively works others, you are rid of the need of questioning, and hast gotten the gain of the solution. But let us come back to our subject.

Do you not see such numbers of men suffering chastisements? God (say you) permits these things to be. Make the right use of the health of the body, in order to the health of the soul. But you will say, What is the use to me of labors and toil, when it is in my power to get quit of all (my sins) without labor? In the first place, this is not certain. It may happen, that a person not only does not get quit of his sins without labor, but that he departs hence with all his sins upon him.

However, even if this were certain, still your argument is not to be tolerated. He has drawn you to the contests: the golden arms lie there. When you ought to take them, and to handle them, you wish to be ingloriously saved, and to do no good work! Say, if war broke out, and the Emperor were here, and you

saw some charging into the midst of the phalanxes of the enemy, hewing them down, dealing wounds by thousands, others thrusting (with the sword's point), others hounding (now here, now there), others dashing on horseback, and these praised by the Emperor, admired, applauded, crowned: others on the contrary thinking themselves well off if they take no harm, and keeping in the hindmost ranks, and sitting idly there; then after the close of the war, the former sort summoned, honored with the greatest gifts, their names proclaimed by the heralds: while of the latter, not even the name becomes known, and their reward of the good obtained is only that they are safe: which sort would you wish to belong to?

Why, if you were made of stone, if you were more stupid even than senseless and lifeless things, would you not ten thousand times rather belong to the former? Yea, I beseech and implore you. For if need were to fall fighting, ought you not eagerly to choose this? See you not how it is with them that have fallen in the wars, how illustrious they are, how glorious? And yet they die a death, after which there is no getting honor from the emperor. But in that other war, there is nothing of the kind, but you shall in any wise be presented with your scars.

Which scars, even without persecutions, may it be granted all us to have to exhibit, through Jesus Christ our Lord, with Whom to the Father and the Holy Ghost together be glory, dominion, honor, now and ever, and world without end. Amen.

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