

Homily 24 on Matthew

by St. John Chrysostom

The sermon emphasizes the importance of obedience to God's commands and living a virtuous life in order to achieve salvation and security in the present life.

Scripture: Matthew 7:21, Matthew 7:24-27

Topics: "Obedience To God", "Virtuous Living"

Description

John Chrysostom preaches about the importance of doing the will of the Father in Heaven to enter the kingdom, emphasizing the need for obedience in actions, not just hearing the teachings of Jesus. He contrasts the wise man who builds his house on the rock, representing those who obey Jesus' sayings, with the foolish man who builds on sand, symbolizing those who do not follow Jesus' teachings. Chrysostom warns about the consequences of wickedness and the strength of virtue, encouraging believers to live a life of virtue to withstand the storms of life and receive eternal rewards.

Transcript

Matt. VII. 21.

Not every one that says unto me, Lord, Lord, shall enter into the kingdom of Heaven, but he that does the will of my Father which is in Heaven.

Wherefore said He not, but he that does my will? Because for the time it was a great gain for them to receive even this first; yea it was very great, considering their weakness. And moreover He intimated the one also by the other. And withal this may be mentioned, that in fact there is no other will of the Son besides that of the Father.

And here He seems to me to be censuring the Jews chiefly, laying as they did the whole stress upon the doctrines, and taking no care of practice. For which Paul also blames them, saying, Behold you are called a Jew, and retest in the law, and makest your boast of God, and know His will: bearest the name of a Jew," etc., following the reading ε δ, which is abundantly attested. Chrysostom has [δε γπη.--R.]-->Who then are these men? you ask. Many of them that believed received gifts such as he that was casting out devils, and was not with Him; such as Judas; for even he too, wicked as he was, had a gift. And in the Old Testament also this may be found, in that grace has oftentimes wrought upon unworthy persons, that it might do good to others. That is, since all men were not meet for all things, but some were of a pure life, not having so great faith, and others just the contrary; by these sayings, while He urges the one to show

forth much faith, the others too He was summoning by this His unspeakable gift to become better men. Wherefore also with great abundance did He bestow that grace. For we wrought, it is said, many mighty works. But then will I profess unto them, I knew you not. For now indeed they suppose they are my friends; but then shall they know, that not as to friends did I give to them.

And why marvel if He has bestowed gifts on men that have believed on Him, though without life suitable to their faith, when even on those who have fallen from both these, He is unquestionably found working? For so Balaam was an alien both from faith and from a truly good life; nevertheless grace wrought on him for the service of other men. And Pharaoh too was of the same sort: yet for all that even to him He signified the things to come. And Nebuchadnezzar was very full of iniquity; yet to him again He revealed what was to follow after many generations. Daniel iii And again to the son of this last, though surpassing his father in iniquity, He signified the things to come, ordering a marvellous and great dispensation. Daniel v Accordingly because then also the beginnings of the gospel were taking place, and it was requisite that the manifestation of its power should be abundant, many even of the unworthy used to receive gifts. Howbeit, from those miracles no gain accrued to them; rather they are the more punished. Wherefore unto them did He utter even that fearful saying, I never knew you: there being many for whom His hatred begins already even here; whom He turns away from, even before the judgment.

Let us fear therefore, beloved; and let us take great heed to our life, neither let us account ourselves worse off, in that we do not work miracles now. For that will never be any advantage to us, as neither any disadvantage in our not working them, if we take heed to all virtue. Because for the miracles we ourselves are debtors, but for our life and our doings we have God our debtor.

3. Having now, you see, finished all, having discoursed accurately of all virtue, and pointed out the pretenders to it, of various kinds, both such as for display fast and make prayers, and such as come in the sheep's hide; and them too that spoil it, whom He also called swine and dogs: He proceeds to signify how great is the profit of virtue even here, and how great the mischief of wickedness, by saying,

Whosoever therefore hears these sayings of mine, and does them, shall be likened unto a wise man.

As thus: What they shall suffer who do not (although they work miracles), you have heard; but you should know also what such as obey all these sayings shall enjoy; not in the world to come only, but even here. For whosoever, says He, hears these sayings of mine, and does them, shall be likened to a wise man.

Do you see how He varies His discourse; at one time saying, Not every one that says unto me, Lord, Lord, and revealing Himself; at another time, He that does the will of my Father; and again, bringing in Himself as judge, For many will say to me in that day, Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in your name, and I will say, I know you not. And here again He indicates Himself to have the power over all, this being why He said, Whosoever hears these sayings of mine.

Thus whereas all His discourse had been touching the future; of a kingdom, and an unspeakable reward and consolation, and the like; His will is, out of things here also to give them their fruits, and to signify how great is the strength of virtue even in the present life. What then is this her strength? To live in safety, to be easily subdued by no terror, to stand superior to all that despitefully use us. To this what can be equal? For this, not even he that wears the diadem can provide for himself, but that man who follows after virtue. For he alone is possessed of it in full abundance: in the ebb and flow of the things present he enjoys a great calm. The truly marvellous thing being this, that not in fair weather, but when the storm is vehement, and the turmoil great, and the temptations continual, he cannot be shaken ever so little.

For the rain descended, says He, the floods came, the winds blew, and beat upon that house; and it fell not: for it was founded upon the rock. Matthew 7:25

By rain here, and floods, and winds, He is expressing metaphorically the calamities and afflictions that befall men; such as false accusations, plots, bereavements, deaths, loss of friends, vexations from strangers, all the ills in our life that any one could mention. But to none of these, says He, does such a soul give way; and the cause is, it is founded on the rock. He calls the steadfastness of His doctrine a rock; because in truth His commands are stronger than any rock, setting one above all the waves of human affairs. For he who keeps these things strictly, will not have the advantage of men only when they are vexing him, but even of the very devils plotting against him. And that it is not vain boasting so to speak, Job is our witness, who received all the assaults of the devil, and stood unmoveable; and the apostles too are our witnesses, for that when the waves of the whole world were beating against them, when both nations and princes, both their own people and strangers, both the evil spirits, and the devil, and every engine was set in motion, they stood firmer than a rock, and dispersed it all.

And now, what can be happier than this kind of life? For this, not wealth, not strength of body, not glory, not power, nor ought else will be able to secure, but only the possession of virtue. For there is not, nay there is not another life we may find free from all evils, but this alone. And you are witnesses, who know the plots in king's courts, the turmoils and the troubles in the houses of the rich. But there was not among the apostles any such thing.

What then? Did no such thing befall them? Did they suffer no evil at any man's hand? Nay, the marvel is this above all things, that they were indeed the object of many plots, and many storms burst upon them, but their soul was not overset by them, nor thrown into despair, but with naked bodies they wrestled, prevailed, and triumphed.

Thou then likewise, if you be willing to perform these things exactly, shall laugh all ills to scorn. Yea, for if you be but strengthened with such philosophy as is in these admonitions, nothing shall be able to hurt you. Since in what is he to harm you, who is minded to lay plots? Will he take away your money? Well, but before their threatening you were commanded to despise it, and to abstain from it so exceedingly, as not so much as even to ask any such thing of your Lord. But does he cast you into prison? Why, before your prison, you were enjoined so to live, as to be crucified even to all the world. But does he speak evil? Nay, from this pain also Christ has delivered you, by promising you without toil a great reward for the endurance of evil, and making you so clear from the anger and vexation hence arising, as even to command you to pray for them. But does he banish you and involve you in innumerable ills? Well, he is making the crown more glorious for you. But does he destroy and murder you? Even hereby he profits you very greatly, procuring for you the rewards of the martyrs, and conducting you more quickly into the untroubled haven, and affording you matter for a more abundant recompence, and contriving for you to make a gain of the universal penalty. Which thing indeed is most marvellous of all, that the plotters, so far from injuring at all, do rather make the objects of their despite more approved. To this what can be comparable? I mean, to the choice of such a mode of life as this, and no other, is.

Thus whereas He had called the way strait and narrow; to soothe our labors on this side also, He signifies the security thereof to be great, and great the pleasure; even as of the opposite course great is the unsoundness, and the detriment. For as virtue even from things here was signified by Him to have her rewards, so vice also her penalties. For what I am ever saying, that I will say now also: that in both ways He is everywhere bringing about the salvation of His hearers on the one hand by zeal for virtue, on the

other by hatred of vice. Thus, because there would be some to admire what He said, while they yield no proof of it by their works, He by anticipation awakens their fears, saying, Though the things spoken be good, hearing is not sufficient for security, but there is need also of obedience in actions, and the whole lies chiefly in this. And here He ends His discourse, leaving the fear at its height in them.

For as with regard to virtue, not only from the things to come did He urge them (speaking of a kingdom, and of Heaven, and an unspeakable reward, and comfort, and the unnumbered good things): but also from the things present, indicating the firm and immoveable quality of the Rock; so also with respect to wickedness, not from the expected things only does He excite their fears (as from the tree that is cut down, and the unquenchable fire, and the not entering into the kingdom, and from His saying, I know you not): but also from the things present, the downfall, I mean, in what is said of the house.

4. Wherefore also He made His argument more expressive, by trying its force in a parable; for it was not the same thing to say, The virtuous man shall be impregnable, but the wicked easily subdued, as to suppose a rock, and a house, and rivers, and rain, and wind, and the like.

And every one, says He, that hears these sayings of mine, and does them not, shall be likened to a foolish man, which built his house upon the sand.

And well did He call this man foolish: for what can be more senseless than one building a house on the sand, and while he submits to the labor, depriving himself of the fruit and refreshment, and instead thereof undergoing punishment? For that they too, who follow after wickedness, do labor, is surely manifest to every one: since both the extortioner, and the adulterer, and the false accuser, toil and weary themselves much to bring their wickedness to effect; but so far from reaping any profit from these their labors, they rather undergo great loss. For Paul too intimated this when he said, He that sows to his flesh, shall of his flesh reap corruption. Galatians 6:8 To this man are they like also, who build on the sand; as those that are given up to fornication, to wantonness, to drunkenness, to anger, to all the other things.

Such an one was Ahab, but not such Elijah (since when we have put virtue and vice along side of one another, we shall know more accurately the difference): for the one had built upon the rock, the other on the sand; wherefore though he were a king, he feared and trembled at the prophet, at him that had only his sheepskin. Such were the Jews but not the apostles; and so though they were few and in bonds, they exhibited the steadfastness of the rock; but those, many as they were, and in armor, the weakness of the sand. For so they said, What shall we do to these men? Acts 4:16 Do you see those in perplexity, not who are in the hands of others, and bound, but who are active in holding down and binding? And what can be more strange than this? Have you hold of the other, and art yet in utter perplexity? Yes, and very naturally. For inasmuch as they had built all on the sand, therefore also were they weaker than all. For this cause also they said again, What do ye, seeking to bring this man's blood upon us? Acts 5:28 What says he? Do you scourge, and are you in fear? Do you entreat despitefully, and art in dismay? Do you judge, and yet tremble? So feeble is wickedness.

But the Apostles not so, but how? We cannot but speak the things which we have seen and heard. Acts 4:20 Do you see a noble spirit? Do you see a rock laughing waves to scorn? Do you see a house unshaken? And what is yet more marvellous; so far from turning cowards themselves at the plots formed against them, they even took more courage, and cast the others into greater anxiety. For so he that smites adamant, is himself the one smitten; and he that kicks against the pricks, is himself the one pricked, the one on whom the severe wounds fall: and he who is forming plots against the virtuous, is himself the one

in jeopardy. For wickedness becomes so much the weaker, the more it sets itself in array against virtue. And as he who wraps up fire in a garment, extinguishes not the flame, but consumes the garment; so he that is doing despite to virtuous men, and oppressing them, and binding them, makes them more glorious, but destroys himself. For the more ills you suffer, living righteously, the stronger are you become; since the more we honor self-restraint, the less we need anything; and the less we need anything, the stronger we grow, and the more above all. Such a one was John; wherefore him no man pained, but he caused pain to Herod; so he that had nothing prevailed against him that ruled; and he that wore a diadem, and purple, and endless pomp, trembles, and is in fear of him that is stripped of all, and not even when beheaded could he without fear see his head. For that even after his death he had the terror of him in full strength, hear what He says, This is John, whom I slew. Now the expression, I slew, is that of one not exulting, but soothing his own terror, and persuading his troubled soul to call to mind, that he himself slew him. So great is the force of virtue, that even after death it is more powerful than the living. For this same cause again, when he was living, they that possessed much wealth came unto him, and said, What shall we do? Is so much yours, and are you minded to learn the way of your prosperity from him that has nothing? The rich from the poor? The soldiers from him that has not even a house?

Such an one was Elias too: wherefore also with the same freedom did he discourse to the people. For as the former said, You generation of vipers; Matthew 3:7 so this latter, How long will you halt upon both your hips? And the one said, Have you killed, and inherited? the other, It is not lawful for you to have your brother Philip's wife. Mark 6:18

Do you see the rock? Do you see the sand; how easily it sinks down, how it yields to calamities? How it is overthrown, though it have the support of royalty, of number, of nobility? For them that pursue it, it makes more senseless than all.

And it does not merely fall, but with great calamity: for great indeed, He says, was the fall of it. The risk not being of trifles, but of the soul, of the loss of Heaven, and those immortal blessings. Or rather even before that loss, no life so wretched as he must live that follows after this; dwelling with continual despondencies, alarms, cares, anxieties; which a certain wise man also was intimating when he said, The wicked flees, when no man is pursuing. Proverbs 28:1 For such men tremble at their shadows, suspect their friends, their enemies, their servants, such as know them, such as know them not; and before their punishment, suffer extreme punishment here. And to declare all this, Christ said, And great was the fall of it; shutting up these good commandments with that suitable ending, and persuading even by the things present the most unbelieving to flee from vice.

For although the argument from what is to come be vaster, yet is this of more power to restrain the grosser sort, and to withdraw them from wickedness. Wherefore also he ended with it, that the profit thereof might make its abode in them.

Conscious therefore of all these things, both the present, and the future, let us flee from vice, let us emulate virtue, that we may not labor fruitlessly and at random, but may both enjoy the security here, and partake of the glory there: unto which God grant we may all attain, by the grace and love towards man of our Lord Jesus Christ, to whom be the glory and the might forever and ever. Amen.

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