

Homily 25 on the Acts of the Apostles

by St. John Chrysostom

The persecution of Stephen and the scattering of the Church turned out to be a benefit, leading to the preaching of the word to the Gentiles and the appointment of Paul and Barnabas.

Topics: "Early Christianity", "Evangelism"

Description

John Chrysostom preaches on the early Christians who were scattered due to persecution, spreading the word to various regions, focusing on the Jews initially. The providential wisdom behind the preaching to Gentiles is highlighted, showing God's plan to reach all nations. Barnabas and Saul play crucial roles in Antioch, leading to the naming of Christians. Almsgiving is emphasized as a means of salvation and blessing, with Paul and Barnabas exemplifying generosity and care for the poor.

Transcript

Acts XI. 19

Now they which were scattered abroad upon the persecution that rose about Stephen travelled as far as Phenice, and Cyprus, and Antioch, preaching the word to none but unto the Jews only.

The persecution turned out to be no slight benefit as to them that love God all things work together for good. Romans 8:28 If they had made it their express study how best to establish the Church, they would have done no other thing than this -- they dispersed the teachers. Mark in what quarters the preaching was extended. They travelled, it says, as far as Phenice and Cyprus and Antioch; to none however did they preach the word but to Jews only. Do you mark with what wise purposes of Providence so much was done in the case of Cornelius?

This serves both to justify Christ, and to impeach the Jews. When Stephen was slain, when Paul was twice in danger, when the Apostles were scourged, then the Gentiles received the word, then the Samaritans. Which Paul also declares: To you it was necessary that the Word of God should first be spoken; but since you thrust it from you, and judge yourselves unworthy, lo, we turn unto the Gentiles. Acts 13:46 Accordingly they went about, preaching to Gentiles also. But some of them were men of Cyprus and Cyrene, who, when they had come to Antioch, spoke unto the Greeks, preaching the Lord Jesus: Acts 11:20 for it is likely both that they could now speak Greek, and that there were such men in Antioch.

And the hand of the Lord, it says, was with them, that is, they wrought miracles; and a great number believed, and turned unto the Lord. Acts 11:21 Do you mark why now also there was heed of miracles (namely) that they might believe? Then tidings of these things came unto the ears of the church which was in Jerusalem: and they sent forth Barnabas, that he should go as far as Antioch. Acts 11:22 What may be the reason that, when such a city received the word, they did not come themselves?

Because of the Jews. But they send Barnabas. However, it is no small part of the providential management even so that Paul comes to be there. It is both natural, and it is wisely ordered, that they are averse to him, and (so) that Voice of the Gospel, that Trumpet of heaven, is not shut up in Jerusalem. Do you mark how on all occasions, Christ turns their ill dispositions to needful account and for the benefit of the Church? Of their hatred to the man, He availed Himself for the building up of the Church.

But observe this holy man -- Barnabas, I mean -- how he looked not to his own interests, but hasted to Tarsus. Who, when he came, and had seen the grace of God, was glad, and exhorted them all, that with purpose of heart, they would cleave unto the Lord. For he was a good man, and full of the Holy Ghost, and of faith: and much people was added unto the Lord. (v. 23, 24.) He was a very kind man, and single-hearted, and considerate (συγγνωμονικῶς). Then departed Barnabas to Tarsus, for to seek Saul.

Acts 11:25 He came to the athletic wrestler, the general (fit to lead armies), the champion of single combat, the lion -- I am at a loss for words, say what I will -- the hunting-dog, killer of lions, bull of strength, lamp of brightness, mouth sufficing for a world. And when he had found him, he brought him to Antioch. Acts 11:26 Verily this is the reason why it was there they were appointed to be called Christians, because Paul there spent so long time! And it came to pass, that a whole year they assembled themselves with the Church, and taught much people.

And the disciples were first called Christians at Antioch. No small matter of praise to that city! This is enough to make it a match for all, that for so long a time it had the benefit of that mouth, it first, and before all others: wherefore also it was there in the first place that men were accounted worthy of that name. Do you observe the benefit resulting (to that city) from Paul, to what a height that name, like a standard (σημεῖον), exalted it? Where three thousand, where five thousand, believed, where so great a multitude, nothing of the sort took place, but they were called they of the way: here they were called Christians.

And in these days came prophets from Jerusalem unto Antioch. Acts 11:27 It was need that the fruit of alms should also be planted there. And see how of necessity (■ ναγκα■ως) (it comes about that) none of the men of note becomes their teacher. They got for their teachers, men of Cyprus, and Cyrene, and Paul-- though he indeed surpassed (the Apostles) themselves -- since Paul also had for teachers Ananias and Barnabas. But here of necessity (this was the case). And there stood up one of them named Agabus, and signified by the spirit that there would be great dearth throughout the world, which also came to pass in the days of Claudius Cæsar.

Acts 11:28 By the Spirit, it says: for, that they may not imagine that this was the reason why the famine came, (namely) because Christianity had come in, because the demons were departed, the Holy Ghost foretells it: this, however, was nothing wonderful, for in fact Christ predicted it. Not this was the reason, else this must have been the case from the beginning: but it was because of the evils done to the Apostles -- and God had borne long with them; but, when they pressed upon them, a great famine ensues, betokening to the Jews the coming woes.

If it was because of them, in any wise it ought to have stopped (there), when it did exist. What harm had the Gentiles done, that they should have their share in the evils? They ought rather to have been marked as approved (εδοκιμῶσαι), because they were doing their part, were slaying, punishing, taking vengeance, persecuting on every side. And mark also at what time the famine comes: precisely when the Gentiles were thenceforth added to the Church. But if, as you say, it was because of the evils (done by the Jews), these ought to have been exempted.

How so? Christ, forestalling this objection, said, You shall have tribulation. John 16:33 (It is) just as if you should say, They ought not to have been scourged either. Then the disciples, every man according to his ability, determined to send relief unto the brethren which dwelt in Judea. Acts 11:29 Mark how the famine becomes to them the means of salvation, an occasion of almsgiving, a harbinger of many blessing. And (so it might have been) to you, one may say, if you were so minded, but you would not.

But it is predicted, that they might be prepared beforehand for almsgiving. Unto the brethren which dwelt in Judæa; for they were enduring great hardships, but before this, they were not suffering from famine. Which also they did, and sent it to the elders by the hands of Barnabas and Saul. Acts 11:30 Do you mark them, that no sooner do they believe than they bring forth fruit, not only for their own but for those afar off? And Barnabas is sent and Saul, to minister (the same.)

Of this occasion (ἐνταῦθα) he says (to the Galatians), And James, Cephas, and John gave to me and Barnabas the right hands of fellowship, only (they would) that we should remember the poor. Galatians 2:9 James was yet living.

Now they which were scattered abroad upon the persecution, etc. (Recapitulation.) Do you mark how even in the tribulation instead of falling to lamentations and tears, as we do, they give themselves up to a great and good work? Travelled as far as Phenice, and Cyprus, and Antioch, and there with more security preached the word. And some of them, which were men of Cyprus and Cyrene, etc. Acts 11:20 And they did not say, (What), we, Cyrenians and Cyprians, to attack this splendid and great city! but trusting in the grace of God, they applied themselves to the work of teaching, nor did these (Gentiles) themselves think scorn to learn anything of them.

Mark how by small means all is brought about: mark the preaching how it spreads: mark those in Jerusalem, having like care for all, holding the whole world as one house. They heard that Samaria had received the word, and Acts 8:14 to Samaria they send the Apostles: they heard what had befallen at Antioch, and to Antioch they send Barnabas: they also send again, and (these) prophets. For the distance was great, and it was not meet the Apostles at present should separate from thence, that they might not be thought to be fugitives, and to have fled from their own people.

But then, almost precisely, is the time of their parting from Jerusalem, when the state (of the Jews) was shown to be past remedy, when the war was close at hand, and they must needs perish: when the sentence was made absolute. For, until Paul went to Rome, the Apostles were there (at Jerusalem). But they depart, not because afraid of the war-- how should it be so?-- seeing those they went to, were those that should bring the war: and moreover the war breaks out only after the Apostles were dead.

For of them (the Apostles) says, The wrath has come upon them unto the end. 1 Thessalonians 2:16 The more insignificant the persons, the more illustrious the grace, working great results by small means.-- And he exhorted them to cleave unto the Lord, for he was a good man. (v. 23, 24.) By good man, I take it, he means one that is kind, (χρηστῶν) sincere, exceedingly desirous of the salvation of his neighbors -- for he

was a good man, and full of the Holy Ghost and of faith. To cleave unto the Lord with purpose of heart (this is said): with encomium and praise.

And much people was added unto the Lord: for like rich land this city received the word, and brought forth much fruit. Then departed Barnabas to Tarsus, etc. Acts 11:25 But why did he take him off from Tarsus and bring him here? Not without good reason; for here were both good hopes, and a greater city, and a great body of people. See how grace works all, not Paul: by small means the affair was taking its commencement. When it has become difficult the Apostles take it up. Why did they not before this seen Barnabas?

Because they had enough to do (σχηληντο) with Jerusalem. Again they justified themselves to the Jews, that the Gentiles were receiving (προσελημβανε) the word, even without enjoying so great attention. There is about to be a questioning: therefore the affair of Cornelius forestalled it. Then indeed they say, That we to the Gentiles, and they to the Circumcision. Galatians 2:9 Observe, henceforth the very stress of the famine introduces the fellowship on the part of the Gentiles, namely, from the alms. For they receive the offerings sent from them.

Now they which were scattered abroad, etc. Acts 11:19 and not as we who pass our time in lamentations and tears, in our calamities; but with more fearlessness they passed their time, as having got to a distance from those hindering them, and as being among men not afraid of the Jews: which also helped. And they came to Cyprus, where they had the sea between them, and greater freedom from anxiety: so they made no account of the fear of men, but (still) they gave the precedence to the regard of the Law: they spoke to Jews only. But there were in Antioch certain men of Cyprus and Cyrene: these, of all others, least cared for the Jews: who spoke unto the Greeks, preaching the Lord Jesus. Acts 11:20 Probably it was because of their not knowing Hebrew, that they called them Greeks. And when Barnabas, it says, came and had seen the grace of God,-- not the diligence of men -- he exhorted them to cleave unto the Lord Acts 11:23: and by this he converted more. And much people was added unto the Lord. Why do they not write to Paul, but send Barnabas? They did not yet know the virtue of the man: but it is providentially ordered that Barnabas should come. As there was a multitude, and none to hinder, well might the faith grow, and above all because they had no trials to undergo. Paul also preaches, and is no longer compelled to flee. And it is well ordered, that not they speak of the famine, but the prophets. The men of Antioch also did not take it amiss that they sent not the Apostles, but were content with their teachers: so fervent were they all for the word. They did not wait for the famine to come, but before this they sent: according as each had the ability. And observe, among the Apostles, others are put in charge with this trust, but here Paul and Barnabas. For this was no small order (οικονομια) of Providence. Besides, it was the beginning, and it was not fit they should be offended.

As each had the ability, they sent. But now, none does this, although there is a famine more grievous than that. For the cases are not alike, for (all) to bear the calamity in common, and, while all (the rest) abound, for the poorer to be famishing. And the expression shows that the givers also were poor, for, it says, as each of them had the means. A twofold famine, even as the abundance is twofold: a severe famine, a famine not of hearing the word of the Lord, but of being nourished by alms.

Then, both the poor in Judea enjoyed the benefit, and so did those in Antioch who gave their money; yea, these more than those: but now, both we and the poor are famishing: they being in lack of necessary sustenance, and we in luxurious living, lacking the mercy of God. But this is a food, than which nothing can be more necessary. This is not a food, from which one has to undergo the evils of repletion: not a

food, of which the most part ends in the draught. (■ φεδρ■να.) Nothing more beautiful, nothing more healthful, than a soul nurtured by this food: it is set high above all disease, all pestilence, all indigestion and distemper: none shall be able to overcome it, (■ λε■ν) but just as, if one's body were made of adamant, no iron, nor anything else, would have power to hurt it, even so when the soul is firmly compact by almsgiving, nothing at all shall be able to overcome it.

For say, what shall spoil this? Shall poverty? It cannot be, for it is laid up in the royal treasuries. But shall robber and housebreaker? Nay, those are walls which none shall be able to break through. But shall the worm? Nay, this treasure is set far above the reach of this mischief also. But shall envy and the evil eye? Nay, neither by these can it be overcome. But shall false accusations and plottings of evil? No, neither shall this be, for safe as in an asylum is this treasure.

But it were a shame should I make it appear as if the advantages which belong to almsgiving were only these (the absence of these evils), and not (the presence of) their opposites. For in truth it is not merely that it is secure from ill-will; it also gets abundant blessing from those whom it benefits. For as the cruel and unmerciful not only have for enemies those whom they have injured, but those also who are not themselves hurt, partake the grief and join in the accusation: so those that have done great good have not only those who are benefited, but those also who are not themselves affected, to speak their praises.

Again (that), it is secure from the attacks of the evil-disposed, and robbers, and housebreakers -- what, is this all the good, or is it this -- that besides the not suffering diminution, it grows also and increases into multitude? What more shameful than Nebuchadnezzar, what more foul, what more iniquitous? The man was impious; after tokens and signs without number he refused to come to his senses (ανενεγκε■ν), but cast the servants of God into a furnace: and (yet) after these doings, he worshipped.

What then said the Prophet? Wherefore, says he, O king let my counsel be acceptable unto you, ransom (λ■τρωσαι) your sins by alms, and your iniquities by mercies to the poor: perhaps there shall be pardon for your transgressions. Daniel 3:27 In so speaking, he said it not doubting, nay, with entire confidence, but wishing to put him in greater fear, and to make a stronger necessity of doing these things. For if he had spoken it as a thing unquestionable, the king would have been more supine: just as it is with us, we then most urge some person (whom we wish to persuade), when they say to us, Exhort such an one, and do not add, he will be sure to hear, but only, perhaps he will hear: for by leaving it doubtful, the fear is made greater, and urges him the more.

This is the reason why the Prophet did not make the thing certain to him. What do you say? For so great impieties shall there be pardon? Yes. There is no sin, which alms cannot cleanse, none, which alms cannot quench: all sin is beneath this: it is a medicine adapted for every wound. What worse than a publican? The very matter (■ π■θεσις) (of his occupation) is altogether one of injustice: and yet Zaccheus washed away all these (sins). Mark how even Christ shows this, by the care taken to have a purse, and to bear the contributions put into it.

And Paul also says, Only that we remember the poor Galatians 2:10: and everywhere the Scripture has much discourse concerning this matter. The ransom, it says, of a man's soul is his own wealth Proverbs 13:8: and with reason: for, says (Christ), if you would be perfect, sell what you have, and give to the poor, and come, follow Me. Matthew 19:21 This may well be part of perfection. But alms may be done not only by money, but by acts. For example: one may kindly stand (προστ■ναι) by a person (to succor and defend him), one may reach to him a helping hand: the service rendered (προστασ■α) by acts has often

done more good even than money.

Let us set to work all the different kinds of almsgiving. Can you do alms by money? Be not slack. Can you by good offices? Say not, Because I have no money, this is nothing. This is a very great point: look upon it as if you had given gold. Can you do it by kind attentions (θεραπειά)? Do this also. For instance, if you be a physician, (give) your skill: for this also is a great matter. Can you by counsel? This (service) is much greater than all: this (alms) is better than all, or it is also more, by how much the gain it has is greater.

For in so doing you put away not starvation, but a grievous death. ch. 3:6; 6:4 With such alms the Apostles above measure abounded: therefore it was that the distribution of money they put into the hands of those after them, themselves exhibiting the (mercy) shown by words. Or is it, think you, a small alms, to a lost, castaway soul, a soul in uttermost jeopardy, possessed by a burning fever (πυρσεως), to be able to rid it of its disease? For example, do you see one possessed by love of money?

Pity the man. Is he in danger of suffocation? Quench his fire. What if he will not be persuaded? Do your part, and be not remiss. Have you seen him in bonds? -- for wealth is indeed bonds. Matthew 25:35 ff. Go to him, visit him, console him, try to release him of his bonds. If he refuse, he shall bear the blame himself. Have you seen him naked, and a stranger?-- for he is indeed naked, and a stranger to heaven. Bring him to your own inn, clothe him with the garment of virtue, give him the city which is in heaven.

What if I myself be naked? say you. Clothe also yourself first: if you know that you are naked, assuredly you know that you need to be clothed; if you know what sort of nakedness this is. What numbers of women now wear silken apparel but are indeed naked of the garments of virtue! Let their husbands clothe these women. But they will not admit those garments; they choose to have these. Then do this also first: induce them to have a longing for those garments: show them that they are naked: speak to them of judgment to come: answer me, what is the clothing we shall need there?

But if you will bear with me, I also will show you this nakedness. He that is naked, when it is cold, shrinks and shudders, and stands there cowering, and with his arms folded: but in summer heat, not so. If then I shall prove to you that your rich men, and rich women, the more they put on, the more naked they are, do not take it amiss. How then, I ask you, when we raise the subject of hell-fire, and of the torments there? Do not these shrink and shudder more than those naked ones? Do they not bitterly groan and condemn themselves? What? When they come to this or that man, and say to him, Pray for me, do they not speak the same words as those (naked wretches)?

Now indeed, after all that we can say, the nakedness is not yet apparent: but it will be plain enough there. How, and in what way? When these silken garments and precious stones shall have perished, and it shall be only by the garments of virtue and of vice that all men are shown, when the poor shall be clad with exceeding glory, but the rich, naked and in disgraceful sort, shall be haled away to their punishments. What more naked (Edd. more dainty) than that rich man who arrayed himself in purple? What poorer than Lazarus? Then which of them uttered the words of beggars? Which of them was in abundance? Say, if one should deck his house with abundance of tapestry hangings, and himself sit naked within, what were the benefit? So it is in the case of these women. Truly, the house of the soul, the body I mean, they hang round with plenty of garments: but the mistress of the house sits naked within. Lend me the eyes of the soul, and I will show you the soul's nakedness. For what is the garment of the soul? Virtue, of course. And what its nakedness? Vice. For just as, if one were to strip any decent person, that person would be ashamed, and would shrink and cower out of sight; just so the soul, if we wish to see it, the soul which has

not these garments, blushes for shame. How many women, think you, at this moment feel ashamed, and would fain sink to the very depth, as if seeking some sort of curtain, or screen, that they may not hear these words? But those who have no evil conscience, are exhilarated, rejoice, find delight, and gayly deck themselves (■ γκαλλωπ■ζονται) with the things said. Hear concerning that blessed Thekla, how, that she might see Paul, she gave even her gold: and you will not give even a farthing that you may see Christ: you admire what she did, but dost not emulate her. Do you not hear that Blessed are the merciful, for they shall obtain mercy? Matthew 5:7 What is the gain of your costly garments? How long shall we continue agape for this attire? Let us put on the glory of Christ: let us array ourselves with that beauty, that both here we may be praised, and there attain unto the eternal good things, by the grace and mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ, with Whom, to the Father and the Holy Ghost together, be glory, dominion, honor, now and ever, world without end. Amen.

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