

# Homily 26 on Romans

by St. John Chrysostom

*St. John Chrysostom's Homily 26 on Romans emphasizes the importance of charity, unity, and the spiritual well-being of others over personal freedoms in the Christian faith.*

**Topics:** "Christian Unity", "Conscience Matters"

## Description

John Chrysostom preaches on the importance of considering the weaker brethren in matters of conscience, emphasizing that nothing is unclean in itself but becomes so based on one's perception. He urges believers to prioritize peace, edification, and charity over personal preferences, highlighting the significance of faith and avoiding actions that may cause stumbling. Chrysostom encourages believers to lead lives that reflect the teachings of Christ, showing love and consideration for others to avoid causing offense and to promote unity within the Church.

## Transcript

Rom. XIV. 14

I know, and am persuaded by (Gr. in) the Lord Jesus, that there is nothing unclean of itself, but to him that esteems anything to be unclean, to him it is unclean.

After first rebuking the person who judges his brother, and moving him to leave off this reproaching, he then explains himself further upon the doctrinal part, and instructs in a dispassionate tone the weaker sort, displaying in this case too a great deal of gentleness. For he does not say he shall be punished, nor anything of the sort, but merely disburdens him of his fears in the matter, and that with a view to his being more easily persuaded with what he tells him; and he says, I know, and am persuaded. And then to prevent any of those who did not trust him (or believe, ἴσθι, ἴσθι, ἴσθι) saying, And what is it to us if you are persuaded? For you are no trustworthy evidence to be set in competition with so great a law, and with oracles brought down from above, he proceeds, in the Lord. That is, as having learned from Him, as having my confidence from Him. The judgment then is not one of the mind of man. What is it that you are persuaded of and know? Tell us. That there is nothing unclean of itself. By nature, he says, nothing is unclean but it becomes so by the spirit in which a man uses it. Therefore it becomes so to himself only, and not to all. For to him that esteems anything to be unclean, to him it is unclean. What then? Why not correct your brother, that he may think it not unclean? Why not with full authority call him away from this habit of mind and conception of things, that he may never make it common? My reason is, he says, I am afraid to grieve him. Wherefore he proceeds,

Ver. 15. But if your brother be grieved with your meat, now you do not walk charitably.

You see how far, for the present, he goes in affection for him, showing that he makes so great account of him, that with a view not to grieve him he does not venture even to enjoin things of great urgency, but by yieldingness would rather draw him to himself, and by charity. For even when he has freed him of his fears, he does not drag him and force him, but leaves him his own master. For keeping a person from meats is no such matter as overwhelming with grief. You see how much he insists upon charity. And this is because he is aware that it can do everything. And on this ground he makes somewhat larger demand upon them. For so far he says from its being proper for them to distress you at all, they ought even, if need be, not to hesitate at condescending to you. Whence he proceeds to say, Destroy not him with your meat, for whom Christ died. Or do you not value your brother enough even to purchase his salvation at the price of abstinence from meats? And yet Christ refused not to become a slave, nor yet to die for him; but thou dost not despise even food, that you may save him. And yet with it all Christ was not to gain all, yet still He died for all; so fulfilling His own part. But are you aware that by meat you are overthrowing him in the more important matters, and yet makest a disputing? And him who is the object of such care unto Christ, do you consider so contemptible, and dishonor one whom He loves? Yet He died not for the weak only, but even for an enemy. And will you not refrain from meats even, for him that is weak? Yet Christ did what was greatest even, but thou not even the less. And He was Master, thou a brother. These words then were enough to tongue-tie him. For they show him to be of a little spirit, and after having the benefit of great things from God, not to give in return even little ones.

Ver. 16, 17. Let not then your good be evil spoken of. For the kingdom of God is not meat and drink.

By their good, he means here either their faith, or the hope of rewards hereafter, or the perfectness of their religious state. For it is not only that you fail to profit your brother, he means, but the doctrine itself, and the grace of God, and His gift, you cause to be evil spoken of. Now when you fight, when you quarrel, when you are vexatious, when you make schism in the Church, and reproachest your brother, and are distant with him, those that are without will speak evil of you. And so good is so far from coming of this, that just the opposite is the case. For your good is charity, love of the brotherhood, being united, being bound together, living at peace, living in gentleness (ἀλάτρητον ἀγαπᾶν ἀλλήλους). He again, to put an end to his fears and the other's disputatiousness, says, For the kingdom of God is not meat and drink. Is it by these, he means, that we are to be approved? As he says in another passage too, Neither if we eat are we the better, neither if we eat not are we the worse. And he does not need any proof, but is content with stating it. And what he says is this, If you eat, does this lead you to the Kingdom? And this was why, by way of satirizing them as mightily pleased with themselves herein, he said, not meat only, but drink. What then are the things that do bring us here? Righteousness, and peace, and joy, and a virtuous life, and peace with our brethren (whereto this quarrelsomeness is opposed), the joy from unanimity, which this rebuking puts an end to. But this he said not to one party only, but to both of them, it being a fit season for saying it to both. Then as he had mentioned peace and joy, but there is a peace and joy over bad actions also, he adds, in the Holy Ghost. Since he that ruins his brother, has at once subverted peace, and wronged joy, more grievously than he that plunders money. And what is worse is, that Another saved him, and you wrong and ruinest him. Since then eating, and the supposed perfect state, does not bring in these virtues, but the things subversive of them it does bring in, how can it be else than right to make light of little things, in order to give firmness to great ones? Then since this rebuking took place in some degree out of vanity, he proceeds to say,

Ver. 18. For he that in these things serves Christ, is acceptable to God, and approved of men.

For they will not admire you so much for your perfect state, as all will for peace and amity. For this is a goodly thing, that all will have the benefit of, but of that not one even will.

Ver. 19. Let us therefore follow after the things which make for peace, and things wherewith one may edify one another.

This applies to the other, that he may grow peaceable. But the other to the latter too, that he may not destroy his brother. Still he has made both apply to either again, by saying, one another, and showing that without peace it is not easy to edify.

Ver. 20. For meat destroy not the work of God.

Giving this name to the salvation of a brother, and adding greatly to the fears, and showing that he is doing the opposite of that he desires. For thou, he says, art so far from building up as you intend, that you dost even destroy, and that a building too not of man but of God, and not for any great end either, but for a trivial thing. For it was for meat, he says. Then lest so many indulgences should confirm the weaker brother in his misconception, he again becomes doctrinal, as follows,

All things indeed are pure, but it is evil for that man who eats with offense.

Who does it, that is, with a bad conscience. And so if you should force him, and he should eat, there would be nothing gained. For it is not the eating that makes unclean, but the intention with which a man eats. If then thou dost not set that aright, you have done all to no purpose, and hast made things worse: for thinking a thing unclean is not so bad as tasting it when one thinks it unclean. Here then you are committing two errors, one by increasing his prejudice through your quarrelsomeness, and another by getting him to taste of what is unclean. And so, as long as you do not persuade him, do not force him.

Ver. 21. It is good neither to eat flesh, nor to drink wine, nor anything whereby your brother stumbles, or is offended, or is made weak.

Again, he requires the greater alternative, that they should not only not force him, but even condescend to him. For he often did this himself also, as when he circumcised Acts 16:3, when he was shorn Acts 18:18, when he sacrificed that Jewish sacrifice. Acts 21:26. And he does not say to the man do so, but he states it in the form of a sentiment to prevent again making the other, the weaker man, too listless. And what are his words? It is good not to eat flesh. And why do I say flesh? If it be wine, or any other thing of the sort besides, which gives offense, refrain. For nothing is so important as your brother's salvation. And this Christ shows us, since He came from Heaven, and suffered all that He went through, for our sakes. And let me beg you to observe, how he also drives it home upon the other, by the words stumbles, or is offended, or is made weak. And do not tell me (he means) that he is so without reason but, that you have power to set it right. For the other has a sufficient claim to be helped in his weakness, and to you this were no loss, not being a case of hypocrisy, but of edification and economy. For if you force him, he is at once destroyed, and will condemn you, and fortify himself the more in not eating. But if you condescend to him, then he will love you, and will not suspect you as a teacher, and you will afterwards gain the power of sowing imperceptibly in him the right views. But if he once hate you, then you have closed the entrance for your reasoning. Do not then compel him, but even yourself refrain for his sake, not refraining from it as unclean, but because he is offended, and he will love you the more. So Paul also advises when he says, It is good not to eat flesh, not because it was unclean, but because the brother is offended and is weak.

Ver. 22. Have you faith? Have it to yourself.

Here he seems to me to be giving a gentle warning to the more advanced on the score of vanity. And what he says is this, Do you wish to show me that you are perfect, and fully furnished? Do not show it to me, but let your conscience suffice. And by faith, he here means that concerned not with doctrines, but with the subject in hand. For of the former it says, With the mouth confession is made unto salvation Romans 10:10; and, Whosoever shall deny Me before men, him will I also deny. Luke 9:26 For the former by not being confessed, ruins us; and so does this by being confessed unseasonably. Happy is he that condemns not himself in the thing which he allows. Again he strikes at the weaker one, and gives him (i.e. the stronger) a sufficient crown, in that of his conscience. Even if no man see, that is, you are able to be happy in yourself. For after saying, Have it to yourself, to prevent his thinking this a contemptible tribunal, he tells him this is better to you than the world. And if all accuse you, and thou condemn not yourself, and your conscience lay no charge against you, you are happy. But this is a statement he did not make to apply to any person whatever. For there are many that condemn not themselves, and yet are great transgressors: and these are the most miserable of men. But he still keeps to the subject in hand.

Ver. 23. And he that doubts is condemned if he eat.

Again, it is to exhort him to spare the weaker, that he says this. For what good is it if he eat in doubt, and condemn himself? For I approve of him, who both eats, and does it not with doubting. See how he induces him not to eating only, but to eating with a good conscience too. Then he mentions likewise the reason why he is condemned continuing in these words,

Because he eats not of faith. Not because it is unclean, but because it is not of faith. For he did not believe that it is clean, but though unclean he touched it. But by this he shows them also what great harm they do by compelling men, and not persuading them, to touch things which had hitherto appeared unclean to them, that for this at all events they might leave rebuking. For whatsoever is not of faith is sin. For when a person does not feel sure, nor believe that a thing is clean, how can he do else than sin? Now all these things have been spoken by Paul of the subject in hand, not of everything. And observe what care he takes not to offend any; and he had said before, If your brother be grieved with your meat, now you do not walk charitably. But if one should not grieve him, much less ought one to give him offense. And again, For meat destroy not the work of God. For if it were a grievous act of iniquity to throw down a Church, much more so is it to do so to the spiritual Temple. Since a man is more dignified than a Church: for it was not for walls that Christ died, but for these temples.

Let us then watch our own conduct on all sides, and afford to no one ever so little handle. For this life present is a race-course and we ought to have thousands of eyes Hilary in Psalm 119 on every side, and not even to fancy that ignorance will be an adequate excuse. For there is such a thing, there certainly is, as being punished for ignorance, when the ignorance is inexcusable. Since the Jews too were ignorant, yet not ignorant in an excusable way. And the Gentiles were ignorant, but they are without excuse.

Romans 1:20 For when you are ignorant of those things which it is not possible to know, you will not be subject to any charge for it: but when of things easy and possible, you will be punished with the utmost rigor. Else if we be not excessively supine, but contribute our own share to its full amount, God will also reach forth His hand unto us in those things which we are ignorant of. And this is what Paul said to the Philippians likewise. If in anything ye be otherwise minded, God shall reveal even this unto you.

Philippians 3:15 But when we are not willing to do even what we are masters of, we shall not have the benefit of His assistance in this either. And this was the case with the Jews too. For this cause, He says, speak I unto them in parables, because seeing they see not. Matthew 13:13 In what sense was it that seeing they saw not? They saw devils cast out, and they said, He has a devil. They saw the dead raised, and they worshipped not, but attempted to kill Him. But not of this character was Cornelius.

Matthew 12:24 For this reason then, when he was doing the whole of his duty with sincerity, God added unto him that which was lacking also. Say not then, how came God to neglect such and such a one who was no formalist (ἀ¼,, ἱεῖ»ἰ±ἰῖἰ,,ἰῖἰ,) and a good man, though a Gentile? For in the first place no man can possibly know for certain whether a person is no formalist, but He only who formed (ἱεῖ»ἰ-ἰῖἰ±ἰῖἰ,,ἰῖἰ) the hearts severally. Psalm 33:15 And then there is this to be said too, that perchance (ἱεῖῖἰ»ἰ»ἰ-ἰῖἰῖἰ,) such an one was neither thoughtful nor earnest.

And how, it may be said, could he, as being very uninformed? (ἀ¼,, ἱεῖ»ἰ±ἰῖἰ,,ἰῖἰ.) Let me beg you to consider then this simple and single-hearted man, and take notice of him in the affairs of life, and you will see him a pattern of the utmost scrupulousness, such that if he would have shown it in spiritual matters he would not have been overlooked: for the facts of the truth are clearer than the sun. And wherever a man may go, he might easily lay hold of his own salvation, if he were minded, that is, to be heedful, and not to look on this as a by-work.

For were the doings shut up into Palestine, or in a little corner of the world? Have you not heard the prophet say, All shall know Me from the least even to the greatest? Jeremiah 31:34; Hebrews 8:11 Do not you see the things themselves uttering the truth? How then are these to be excused, seeing as they do the doctrine of the truth spread far and wide, and not troubling themselves, or caring to learn it? And do you require all this, it is asked, of a rude savage? Nay not of a rude savage only, but of any who is more savage than men of the present day.

For why is it, pray, that in matters of this world he knows how to answer when he is wronged, and to resist when he has violence done him, and do and devise everything to prevent his ever having his will thwarted even in the slightest degree; but in spiritual concerns he has not used this same judgment? And when a man worships a stone, and thinks it a god, he both keeps feasts to it, and spends money on it, and shows much fear towards it, and in no case becomes listless from his simpleness.

But when he has to seek to the very and true God, do you then mention singleness and simpleness to me? These things are not so, assuredly they are not! For the complaints are those of mere listlessness. For which do you think the most simple and rude, those in Abraham's day or those now? Joshua 24:2 Clearly the former. And when that it was easiest to find religion out now or then? Clearly now. For now the Name of God is proclaimed even by all men, and the Prophets have preached, the things come to pass, the Gentiles been convinced.

Genesis 32:29; Judges 13:18 But at that day the majority were still in an un instructed state, and sin was dominant. And there was no law to instruct, nor prophets, nor miracles, nor doctrine, nor multitude of men acquainted with it, nor anything else of the kind, but all things then lay as it were in a deep darkness, and a night moonless and stormy. And yet even then that wondrous and noble man, though the obstacles were so great, still knew God and practised virtue, and led many to the same zeal; and this though he had not even the wisdom of those without.

For how should he, when there were no letters even yet invented? Yet still he brought his own share in, and God joined to bring in what was lacking to him. For you cannot say even this, that Abraham received his religion from his fathers, because he Terah, see Joshua 24:2 was an idolater. But still, though he was from such forefathers and was uncivilized, and lived among uncivilized people, and had no instructor in religion, yet he attained to a knowledge of God, and in comparison with all his descendants, who had the advantage both of the Law and the Prophets, he was so much more illustrious as no words can express.

Why was it then? It was because in things of this world he did not give himself any great anxiety, but in things of the spirit he applied his whole attention. (In Gen. Hom. 33, etc.) And what of Melchizedek? Was not he also born about those times, and was so bright as to be called even a priest of God? (In Gen. Hom. 35, 36.) For it is impossible in the extreme, that the sober-minded (ἰσχυροφρονῶν) should ever be overlooked. And let not these things be a trouble to us, but knowing that it is the mind with which in each case the power lies, let us look to our own duties, that we may grow better.

Let us not be demanding an account of God or enquire why He let such an one alone, but called such an one. For we are doing the same as if a servant that had given offense were to pry into his master's housekeeping. Wretched and miserable man, when you ought to be thoughtful about the account you have to give, and how you will reconcile your master, do you call him to account for things that you are not to give an account of, passing over those things of which you are to give a reckoning?

What am I to say to the Gentile? He asks. Why, the same that I have been saying. And look not merely to what you shall say to the Gentile, but also to the means of amending yourself. When he is offended by examining into your life, then consider what you will say. For if he be offended, you will not be called to a reckoning for him, but if it be your way of life by which he is injured, you will have to undergo the greatest danger. When he sees you philosophizing about the kingdom, and fluttering at the things of this life, and at once afraid about hell, and trembling at the calamities of this life, then lay it to mind.

When he sees this, and accuses you, and says, If you are in love with the Kingdom, how is it thou dost not look down upon the things of this life? If you are expecting the awful judgment, why do you not despise the terrors of this world? If you hope for immortality, why do you not think scorn of death? When he says this, be thou anxious what defense you will make. When he sees you trembling at the thought of losing your money, you that expectest the heavens, and exceedingly glad about a single penny, and selling your soul again for a little money, then lay it to mind.

For these are the things, just these, that make the Gentiles stumble. And so, if you are thoughtful about his salvation, make your defense on these heads, not by words, but by actions. For it is not through that question that anybody ever blasphemed God, but through men's bad lives it is, that there are thousands of blasphemies in all quarters. Set him right then. For the Gentile will next ask you, How am I to know that God's commands are feasible? For thou that art of Christian extraction, and hast been brought up in this fine religion, dost not do anything of the kind.

And what will you tell him? You will be sure to say, I will show you others that do; monks that dwell in the deserts. And are you not ashamed to confess to being a Christian, and yet to send to others, as unable to show that you display the temper of a Christian? For he also will say directly, What need have I to go to the mountains, and to hunt up the deserts? For if there is no possibility for a person who is living in the midst of cities to be a disciple, this is a sad imputation on this rule of conduct, that we are to leave the cities, and run to the deserts.

But show me a man who has a wife, and children, and family, and yet pursues wisdom. What are we then to say to all this? Must we not hang down our heads, and be ashamed? For Christ gave us no such commandment; but what? Let your light shine before men Matthew 5:16, not mountains, and deserts, and wildernesses, and out-of-the-way places. And this I say, not as abusing those who have taken up with the mountains, but as bewailing those that dwell in cities, because they have banished virtue from thence.

Wherefore I beseech you let us introduce the discipline they have there here also, that the cities may become cities indeed. This will improve the Gentile. This will free him from countless offenses. And so if you would set him free from scandal, and yourself enjoy rewards without number, set your own life in order, and make it shine forth upon all sides, that men may see your good works, and glorify your Father which is in heaven. For so we also shall enjoy that unutterable and great glory, which God grant that we may all attain to, by the grace and love toward man, etc.

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