

Homily 27 on the Acts of the Apostles

by St. John Chrysostom

The sermon emphasizes the importance of self-control, discipline, and moderation in avoiding the dangers of luxury and excess, and in nourishing the soul.

Topics: "Holy Spirit", "Godly Humility"

Description

John Chrysostom preaches on the events surrounding Peter's miraculous escape from prison and Herod's subsequent downfall, highlighting the consequences of arrogance and the importance of giving glory to God. He emphasizes the power of the Holy Spirit in guiding and appointing Barnabas and Saul for their apostolic work, showing the authority and grace of God in their ministry. Chrysostom also delves into the dangers of luxury and the benefits of fasting, urging his listeners to prioritize nourishing their souls over indulging in temporary pleasures.

Transcript

Acts XII. 18, 19

Now as soon as it was day, there was no small stir among the soldiers, what was become of Peter. And when Herod had sought for him, and found him not, he examined the keepers, and commanded that they should be put to death. And he went down from Judea to Cæsarea, and there abode.

Some persons, it is likely, are at a loss how to explain it, that God should quietly look on while (His) champions are put to death, and now again the soldiers on account of Peter: and yet it was possible for Him after (delivering) Peter to rescue them also. But it was not yet the time of judgment, so as to render to each according to his deserts. And besides, it was not Peter that put them into his hands. For the thing that most annoyed him was the being mocked; just as in the case of his grandfather when he was deceived by the wise men, that was what made him (feel) cut to the heart -- the being (eluded and) made ridiculous.

And having put them to the question, it says, he ordered them to be led away to execution. Matthew 2:16 And yet he had heard from them -- for he had put them to the question -- both that the chains had been left, and that he had taken his sandals, and that until that night he was with them. Having put them to the question: but what did they conceal? Why then did they not themselves also flee? He ordered them to be led away to execution: and yet he ought to have marvelled, ought to have been astonished at this.

The consequence is, by the death of these men (the thing), is made manifest to all: both his wickedness is exposed to view, and (it is made clear that) the wonder (is) of God. And he went down from Judea to Cæsarea, and there abode: and Herod was highly displeased with them of Tyre and Sidon: but they came with one accord to him, and, having made Blastus the king's chamberlain their friend, desired peace; because their country was nourished by the king's country. And upon a set day Herod, arrayed in royal apparel, sat upon his throne, and made an oration unto them.

And the people gave a shout, saying, 'It is the voice of a god, and not of a man,' And immediately the angel of the Lord smote him, because he gave not God the glory: and he was eaten of worms, and gave up the ghost. Acts 12:20:23 * * But see how (the writer) here does not hide these things. Why does he mention this history? Say, what has it to do with the Gospel, that Herod is incensed with the Tyrians and Sidonians? It is not a small matter, even this, how immediately justice seized him; although not because of Peter, but because of his arrogant speaking.

And yet, it may be said, if those shouted, what is that to him? Because he accepted the acclamation, because he accounted himself to be worthy of the adoration. Through him those most receive a lesson, who so thoughtlessly flattered him (al. ο■ κολακε■οντες). Observe again, while both parties deserve punishment, this man is punished. For this is not the time of judgment, but He punishes him that had most to answer for, leaving the others to profit by this man's fate. And the word of God, it says, grew, i.e. in consequence of this, and multiplied.

Acts 12:24 Do you mark God's providential management? But Barnabas and Saul returned from Jerusalem, when they had fulfilled their ministry, and took with them John, whose surname was Mark. Acts 12:25 Now there were in the Church that was at Antioch, certain prophets and teachers; as Barnabas, and Simeon that was called Niger, and Lucius of Cyrene, and Manaën, which had been brought up with Herod the tetrarch, and Saul. Acts 13:1 He still mentions Barnabas first: for Paul was not yet famous, he had not yet wrought any sign.

As they ministered to the Lord, and fasted, the Holy Ghost said, Separate Me Barnabas and Saul for the work whereunto I have called them. And when they had fasted and prayed, and laid their hands on them, they sent them away. (v. 2, 3.) What means, Ministering? Preaching. Separate for Me, it says, Barnabas and Saul. What means, Separate for Me? For the work, for the Apostleship. See again by what persons he is ordained (γυμνοτ■ρα . Cat. σεμνοτ■ρα, more awful.) By Lucius the Cyrenean and Manaën, or rather, by the Spirit.

The less the persons, the more palpable the grace. He is ordained henceforth to Apostleship, so as to preach with authority. How then does he himself say, Not from men, nor by man? Galatians 1:1 Because it was not man that called or brought him over: this is why he says, Not from men. Neither by man, that is, that he was not sent by this (man), but by the Spirit. Wherefore also (the writer) thus proceeds: So they, being sent forth by the Holy Ghost, departed unto Seleucia; and from thence they sailed to Cyprus. Acts 13:4 But let us look over again what has been said.

(Recapitulation.) And when it was day, etc. Acts 12:18 For if the Angel had brought out the soldiers also, along with Peter, it would have been thought a case of flight. Then why, you may ask, was it not otherwise managed? Why, where is the harm? Now, if we see that they who have suffered unjustly, take no harm, we shall not raise these questions. For why do you not say the same of James? Why did not (God) rescue him? There was no small stir among the soldiers. So (clearly) had they perceived nothing (of what had

happened).

Lo, I take up the plea in their defense. The chains were there, and the keepers within, and the prison shut, nowhere a wall broken through, all told the same tale: the man had been carried off: why do you condemn them? Had they wished to let him off, they would have done it before, or would have gone out with him. But he gave them money? Acts 3:6 And how should he, who had not to give even to a poor man, have the means to give to these? And then neither had the chains been broken, nor were they loosed.

He ought to have seen, that the thing was of God, and no work of man. And he went down from Judea to Cæsarea, and there abode. And Herod was highly displeased with them of Tyre and Sidon, etc. Acts 12:19 He is now going to mention (a matter of) history: this is the reason why he adds the names, that it may be shown how he keeps to the truth in all things. And, it says, having made Blastus the king's chamberlain their friend, they desired peace; because their country was nourished by the king's country. (v. 20, 21.)

For probably there was a famine. And on a set day, etc. (Joseph. Ant. xix.) Josephus also says this, that he fell into a lingering disease. Now the generality were not aware of this, but the Apostle sets it down: yet at the same time their ignorance was an advantage, in regard that they imputed what befell (Agrippa) to his putting James and the soldiers to death. Observe, when he slew the Apostle, he did nothing of this sort but when (he slew) these; in fact he knew not what to say about it: as being at a loss, then, and feeling ashamed, he went down from Judea to Cæsarea.

I suppose it was also to bring those (men of Tyre and Sidon) to apologize, that he withdrew (from Jerusalem): for with those he was incensed, while paying such court to these. See how vainglorious the man is: meaning to confer the boon upon them, he makes an harangue. But Josephus says, that he was also arrayed in a splendid robe made of silver. Observe both what flatterers those were, and what a high spirit was shown by the Apostles: the man whom the whole nation so courted, the same they held in contempt.

Acts 12:24 But observe again a great refreshing granted to them, and the numberless benefits accruing from the vengeance inflicted upon him. But if this man, because it was said to him, It is the voice of God and not of a man Acts 12:22 although he said nothing himself, suffered such things: much more should Christ, had He not Himself been God (have suffered) for saying always as He did, These words of mine are not Mine John 14:10; 18:36 and, Angels minister to Me, and such like.

But that man ended His life by a shameful and miserable death, and thenceforth no more is seen of him. And observe him also, easily talked over even by Blastus, like a poor creature, soon incensed and again pacified, and on all occasions a slave of the populace, with nothing free and independent about him. But mark also the authority of the Holy Ghost: As they ministered to the Lord, and fasted, the Holy Ghost said, Separate Me Barnabas and Saul. Acts 13:2 What being would have dared, if not of the same authority, to say this?

Separate, etc. But this is done, that they may not keep together among themselves. The Spirit saw that they had greater power, and were able to be sufficient for many. And how did He speak to them? Probably by prophets: therefore the writer premises, that there were prophets also. And they were fasting and ministering: that you may learn that there was need of great sobriety. In Antioch he is ordained, where he preaches. Why did He not say, Separate for the Lord, but, For me? It shows that He is of one authority and power. And when they had fasted, etc. Do you see what a great thing fasting is? So they being sent forth

by the Holy Ghost: it shows that the Spirit did all.

A great, yes a great good is fasting: it is circumscribed by no limits. When need was to ordain, then they fast: and to them while fasting, the Spirit spoke. Thus much only do I enjoin: (I say) not fast, but abstain from luxury. Let us seek meats to nourish, not things to ruin us; seek meats for food, not occasions of diseases, of diseases both of soul and body: seek food which has comfort, not luxury which is full of discomfort: the one is luxury, the other mischief; the one is pleasure, the other pain; the one is agreeable to nature, the other contrary to nature.

For say, if one should give you hemlock juice to drink, would it not be against nature? If one should give you logs and stones, would you not reject them? Of course, for they are against nature. Well, and so is luxury. For just as in a city, under an invasion of enemies when there has been siege and tumult, great is the uproar, so is it in the soul, under invasion of wine and luxury. Who has woe? Who has tumults? Who has discomforts and babblings? Are they not they that tarry long at the wine?

Whose are bloodshot eyes? Proverbs 23:29-30 But yet, say what we will, we shall not bring off those who give themselves up to luxury, unless we bring into conflict therewith a different affection. And first, let us address ourselves to the women. Nothing uglier than a woman given to luxury, nothing uglier than a woman given to drink. The bloom of her complexion is faded: the calm and mild expression of the eyes is rendered turbid, as when a cloud intercepts the rays of the sunshine.

It is a vulgar, (■ νελε■θερον) slave-like, thoroughly low-lived habit. How disgusting is a woman when from her breath you catch sour whiffs of fetid wine: a woman belching, giving out a fume (χυμ■ν) of decomposing meats; herself weighed down, unable to keep upright; her face flushed with an unnatural red; yawning incessantly, and everything swimming in a mist before her eyes! But not such, she that abstains from luxurious living: no (this abstinence makes her look) a more beautiful, well-bred (σωφρονεστ■ρα) woman.

For even to the body, the composure of the soul imparts a beauty of its own. Do not imagine that the impression of beauty results only from the bodily features. Give me a handsome girl, but turbulent (τεταραγμ■νην), loquacious, railing, given to drink, extravagant, (and tell me) if she is not worse-looking than any ugly woman? But if she were bashful, if she would hold her peace, if she learned to blush, if to speak modestly (συμμ■τρως), if to find time for fastings; her beauty would be twice as great, her freshness would be heightened, her look more engaging, fraught with modesty and good breeding (σωφροσ■νης κα■ κοσμι■τητος).

Now then, shall we speak of men? What can be uglier than a man in drink? He is an object of ridicule to his servants, of ridicule to his enemies, of pity to his friends; deserving condemnation without end: a wild beast rather than a human being; for to devour much food is proper to panther, and lion, and bear. No wonder (that they do so), for those creatures have not a reasonable soul. And yet even they, if they be gorged with food more than they need, and beyond the measure appointed them by nature, get their whole body ruined by it: how much more we? Therefore has God contracted our stomach into a small compass; therefore has He marked out a small measure of sustenance, that He may instruct us to attend to the soul.

Let us consider our very make, and we shall see there is in us but one little part that has this operation -- for our mouth and tongue are meant for singing hymns, our throat for voice -- therefore the very necessity of nature has tied us down, that we may not, even involuntarily, get into much trouble (πραγματε■αν) (in

this way). Since, if indeed luxurious living had not its pains, nor sickness and infirmities, it might be tolerated: but as the case is, He has stinted you by restrictions of nature, that even if you wish to exceed, you may not be able to do so.

Is not pleasure your object, beloved? This you shall find from moderation. Is not health? This too you shall so gain. Is not easiness of mind? This too. Is not freedom? Is not vigor and good habit of body, is not sobriety and alertness of mind? (All these you shall find); so entirely are all good things there, while in the other are the contraries to these, discomfort, distemper, disease, embarrassment -- waste of substance (■ $\nu\epsilon\lambda\epsilon\upsilon\theta\epsilon\rho\alpha$). Then how comes it, you will ask, that we all run eagerly after this?

It comes of disease. For say, what is it that makes the sick man hanker after the thing that does him harm? Is not this very hankering a part of his disease? Why is it that the lame man does not walk upright? This very thing, does it come of his being lazy, and not choosing to go to the physician? For there are some things, in which the pleasure they bring with them is temporary, but lasting the punishment: others just the contrary, in which the endurance is for a time, the pleasure perpetual.

He, therefore, that has so little solidity and strength of purpose as not to slight present sweets for future, is soon overcome. Say, how came Esau to be overcome? How came he to prefer the present pleasure to the future honor? Through want of solidity and firmness of character. Genesis 25:33 And this fault itself, say you, whence comes it? Of our ourselves: and it is plain from this consideration. When we have the mind, we do rouse ourselves, and become capable of endurance.

Certain it is, if at any time necessity comes upon us, nay, often only from a spirit of emulation, we get to see clearly what is useful for us. When therefore you are about to indulge in luxury, consider how brief the pleasure, consider the loss -- for loss it is indeed to spend so much money to one's own hurt -- the diseases, the infirmities: and despise luxury. How many shall I enumerate who have suffered evils from indulgence? Noah was drunken, and was exposed in his nakedness, and see what evils came of this.

Genesis 9:20 Esau through greediness abandoned his birthright, and was set upon fratricide. The people of Israel sat down to eat and to drink, and rose up to play. Exodus 32:6 Therefore says the Scripture, When you have eaten and drunken, remember the Lord your God. Deuteronomy 6:12 For they fell over a precipice, in falling into luxury. The widow, he says, that lives in pleasure, is dead while she lives 1 Timothy 5:6: and again, The beloved waxed sleek, grew thick, and kicked Deuteronomy 32:15: and again the Apostle, Make not provision for the flesh, to fulfil the lusts thereof.

Romans 13:14 I am not enacting as a law that there shall be fasting, for indeed there is no one who would listen; but I am doing away with daintiness, I am cutting off luxury for the sake of your own profit: for like a winter torrent, luxury overthrows all: there is nothing to stop its course: it casts out from a kingdom: what is the gain of it ($\tau\alpha\ \tau\alpha\ \pi\lambda\alpha\upsilon\sigma\tau\alpha$)? Would you enjoy a (real) luxury? Give to the poor; invite Christ, so that even after the table is removed, you may still have this luxury to enjoy.

For now, indeed, you have it not, and no wonder: but then you will have it. Would you taste a (real) luxury? Nourish your soul, give to her of that food to which she is used: do not kill her by starvation.-- It is the time for war, the time for contest: and do you sit enjoying yourself? Do you not see even those who wield sceptres, how they live frugally while abroad on their campaigns? We wrestle not against flesh and blood Ephesians 6:12; and are you fattening yourself when about to wrestle?

The adversary stands grinding his teeth, and are you giving a loose to jollity, and devoting yourself to the table? I know that I speak these things in vain, yet not (in vain) for all. He that has ears to hear, let him hear. Luke 8:8 Christ is pining through hunger, and are you frittering yourself away (δίασπ■ς) with gluttony? Two inconsistencies (Δ■ο ■μετρ■αι). For what evil does not luxury cause? It is contrary to itself: so that I know not how it gets its name: but just as that is called glory, which is (really) infamy, and that riches, which in truth is poverty, so the name of luxury is given to that which in reality is nauseousness.

Do we intend ourselves for the shambles, that we so fatten ourselves? Why cater for the worm that it may have a sumptuous larder? Why make more of their humors (■χ■ρας)? Why store up in yourself sources of sweat and rank smelling? Why make yourself useless for everything? Do you wish your eye to be strong? Get your body well strung? For in musical strings, that which is coarse and not refined, is not fit to produce musical tones, but that which has been well scraped, stretches well, and vibrates with full harmony.

Why do you bury the soul alive? Why make the wall about it thicker? Why increase the reek and the cloud, with fumes like a mist steaming up from all sides? If none other, let the wrestlers teach you, that the more spare the body, the stronger it is: and (then) also the soul is more vigorous. In fact, it is like charioteer and horse. But there you see, just as in the case of men giving themselves to luxury, and making themselves plump, so the plump horses are unwieldy, and give the driver much ado.

One may think one's self (■ γαπητ■ν) well off, even with a horse obedient to the rein and well-limbed, to be able to carry off the prize: but when the driver is forced to drag the horse along, and when the horse falls, though he goad him ever so much, he cannot make him get up, be he ever so skilful himself, he will be deprived of the victory. Then let us not endure to see our soul wronged because of the body, but let us make the soul herself more clear-sighted, let us make her wing light, her bonds looser: let us feed her with discourse, with frugality, (feeding) the body only so much that it may be healthy, that it may be vigorous, that it may rejoice and not be in pain: that having in this sort well ordered our concerns, we may be enabled to lay hold upon the highest virtue, and to attain unto the eternal good things by the grace and loving-kindness of our Lord Jesus Christ, with Whom, to the Father and Holy Ghost together, be glory, dominion, honor, now and ever, world without end. Amen.

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