

Homily 3 on Matthew

by St. John Chrysostom

The sermon emphasizes the importance of humility and forgetting good deeds, and encourages listeners to focus on their relationship with God rather than boasting about their accomplishments.

Scripture: 2 Samuel 16:10, Proverbs 22:4, Ezekiel 36:22, Matthew 1:1-11, Luke 5:8, Luke 18:14, 1 Corinthians 15:9, James 4:10

Topics: "Humility And Pride", "Christ's Genealogy"

Description

John Chrysostom preaches on the genealogy of Jesus Christ, emphasizing the mystery and significance behind tracing Joseph's genealogy and the Virgin Mary's betrothal to him, highlighting the divine purpose of concealing Christ's virgin birth from the Jews. He delves into the importance of humility, urging believers to forget their good deeds and avoid seeking recognition, but rather to focus on virtuous actions without pride. Chrysostom uses biblical examples like David's humility and self-restraint to illustrate the power of a contrite heart and the blessings of lowliness before God.

Transcript

Matt. I. 1.

The book of the generation of Jesus Christ, the Son of David, the Son of Abraham.

Behold a third discourse, and we have not yet made an end of the prefatory matter. It was not then for nought that I said, It is the nature of these thoughts to have a great depth.

Come, then, let us speak today what remains. What is it then that is now required? Why Joseph's genealogy is traced, who had no part in the birth. And one cause we have mentioned already; but it is necessary to mention likewise the other, that which is more mystical and secret than the first. What then is this? He would not that it should be manifest to the Jews, at the time of the birth, that Christ was born of a virgin.

Nay, be not troubled at the strangeness of the saying. For it is no statement of mine, but of our fathers, wonderful and illustrious men. For if He disguised many things from the first, calling Himself Son of Man, and has not everywhere clearly unfolded to us even His equality with the Father; why do you wonder at His having for a time disguised this also, taking order as He was for a certain great and marvellous purpose? and would have condemned her for adultery. For if in regard to the other matters, for which they

had frequent precedents likewise in the old dispensation, they were quite shameless in their obstinacy (for so, because He had cast out devils, they called Him possessed; and because He healed on the Sabbath day, they supposed Him to be an adversary of God; and yet oftentimes even before this had the Sabbath been broken), what would they not have said, if this had been told them? Especially as they had all time before this on their side, in that it never had produced any such thing. For if after so many miracles they still called Him son of Joseph, how before the miracles would they have believed that He was born of a virgin?

It is then for this reason that both Joseph has his genealogy traced, and the Virgin betrothed to him. For if even he, who was both a just and wondrous man, required many things, in order that he should receive that which had come to pass; an angel, and the vision in dreams, and the testimony from the prophets; how could the Jews, being both dull and depraved, and of so unfriendly spirit towards Him, have admitted this idea into their minds? For the strangeness and novelty thereof would be sure greatly to disturb them, and the fact that they had never so much as heard of such a thing having happened in the times of their forefathers. For as the man who was once persuaded that He is Son of God, would after that have no cause to doubt concerning this too; so he who was accounting Him to be a deceiver and an adversary of God, how could he but have been yet more offended by this, and have been led on unto the opposite notion? For this cause neither do the apostles at the first directly say this, but while of His resurrection they discourse much and often (forasmuch as of this there were examples in the times before, although not such as this); that He was born of a virgin they do not say always: nay, not even His mother herself ventured to utter this. See, for instance, what says the Virgin even to Himself: Behold, Your father and I have sought You. Luke 2:48 For if this suspicion had been entertained, neither would He any longer have been accounted to be a Son of David, and this opinion not being held, many other evils besides would have arisen. For this cause neither do the angels say these things to all, but to Mary only, and Joseph; but when showing to the shepherds the glad tidings of that which had come to pass, they no longer added this.

2. But why is it, that having mentioned Abraham, and having said that he begot Isaac, and Isaac, Jacob; and not having made any mention of his brother; when he has come to Jacob, he remembers both Judah, and his brethren? Now there are some that say, it was because of the perverseness of Esau, and of the rest that came before. But I should not say this; for if it were so, how is it that he a little after mentions such women? It being out of contraries, in this place, that His glory is manifested; not by having great forefathers, but low and of little account. For to the lofty One it is a great glory to be able to abase Himself exceedingly. Wherefore then did He not mention them? Because Saracens, and Ishmaelites, and Arabians, and as many as are sprung from those ancestors, have nothing in common with the race of the Israelites. For this cause then he passes over those in silence, and hastens on to His forefathers, and those of the Jewish people. Wherefore he says, And Jacob begot Judas and his brethren. For at this point the race of the Jews begins to have its peculiar mark.

3. And Judas begot Phares and Zara of Thamar. Matthew 1:3 What are you doing, O man, putting us in remembrance of a history that contains an unlawful intercourse? But why is this said? Since, if we were recounting the race of a mere man, one might naturally have been silent touching these things; but if of God Incarnate, so far from being silent, one ought to make a glory of them, showing forth His tender care, and His power. Yea, it was for this cause He came, not to escape our disgraces, but to bear them away. Therefore as He is the more admired, in that He not only died, but was even crucified (though the thing be opprobrious, yet the more opprobrious the more does it show Him full of love to man), so likewise may we

speak touching His birth; it is not only because He took flesh upon Him, and became man, that we justly stand amazed at Him, but because He vouchsafed to have also such kinsfolk, being in no respect ashamed of our evils. And this He was proclaiming from the very beginnings of His birth, that He is ashamed of none of those things that belong to us; while He teaches us also hereby, never to hide our face at our forefathers' wickedness, but to seek after one thing alone, even virtue. For such a man, though he have an alien for his ancestor, though he have a mother who is a prostitute, or what you will, can take no hurt thereby. For if the whoremonger himself, being changed, is nothing disgraced by his former life, much more will the wickedness of his ancestry have no power to bring to shame him that is sprung of an harlot or an adulteress, if he be virtuous.

But he did these things not only to instruct us, but also to bring down the haughtiness of the Jews. For since they, negligent about virtue in their own souls, were parading the name of Abraham, thinking they had for a plea their forefathers' virtue; he shows from the very beginning that it is not in these things men ought to glory, but in their own good deeds.

Besides this, he is establishing another point also, to show that all are under sin, even their forefathers themselves. At least their patriarch and namesake is shown to have committed no small sin, for Tamar stands against him, to accuse his whoredom. And David too had Solomon by the wife whom he corrupted. But if by the great ones the law was not fulfilled, much more by the less. And if it was not fulfilled, all have sinned, and Christ's coming has become necessary.

For this cause he made mention also of the twelve patriarchs, by this again bringing down their pride at the noble birth of their fathers. Because many of these also were born of women that were slaves; but nevertheless the difference of the parents did not make a difference in the children. For all were equally both patriarchs and heads of tribes. For this is the precedence of the Church, this the prerogative of the nobility that is among us, taking its type from the beginning. So that whether thou be bond or free, you have from thence nothing more nor less; but the question is all about one thing only, namely, the mind, and the disposition of the soul.

4. But besides what we have said, there is another cause also, wherefore he has mentioned even this history; for to be sure, Zara's name was not cast at random on that of Phares. (For indeed it was irrelevant, and superfluous, when he had mentioned Phares, from whom he was to trace Christ's genealogy, to mention Zara also.) Wherefore then did he mention him? When Tamar was on the point of giving birth to them, the pangs having come upon her, Zara put forth his hand first. Genesis 38:27 Then the midwife, when she saw this, in order that the first should be known, bound his hand with scarlet; but the child, when he was bound, drew in his hand, and when he had drawn it in, Phares came forth first, and then Zara. The midwife when she saw this said, Why was the hedge broken up for you?

Do you see the dark expression of mysteries? For it was not without purpose that these things were recorded for us: since neither was it worth our study to learn, what it might be that the midwife said; nor worth a narrative to know, that he who came out second, put forth his hand first. What then is the mysterious lesson? First, from the name of the child we learn what is inquired, for Phares is a division, and a breach. And moreover from the thing itself, which took place; for it was not in the order of nature that, having thrust out his hand, he should draw it in again when bound; these things neither belonged to a movement directed by reason, nor did they take place in the way of natural consequence. For after the hand had found its way out, that another child should come forth before was perhaps not unnatural; but that he should draw it back, and give a passage for another, was no longer after the manner of children at

the birth, but the grace of God was present with the children, ordering these things, and sketching out for us by them a sort of image of the things that were to come.

What then? Some of those who have examined these things accurately say, that these children are a type of the two nations. And so in order that you might learn that the polity of the latter people shone forth previously to the origin of the former, the child that has the hand stretched forth does not show itself entire, but draws even it in again; and after his brother had glided forth whole, then he too appears entire. And this took place also with regard to the two nations. I mean, that after the polity of the Church had been manifested in the times of Abraham, and then had been withdrawn in the midst of its course, the Jewish people came, and the legal polity, and then the new people appeared entire with their own laws. Wherefore also the midwife says, Why was the hedge broken up for you? because the law coming in had broken in upon the freedom of the polity. For indeed the Scripture is ever wont to call the law a hedge; as the prophet says: You have broken down her hedge, so that all they which pass by the way do pluck off her grapes: and, I have set a hedge about it: and Paul, Having broken down the middle wall of the hedge. But others say, that the saying, Why was the hedge broken up for you? was spoken touching the new people: for this at its coming put down the law.

5. Do you see that it was not for few nor small causes that he brought to our remembrance the whole history concerning Judah? For this end he has mentioned Ruth also and Rahab, the one an alien, the other an harlot, that you may learn that He came to do away with all our ills. For He has come as a Physician, not as a Judge. Therefore in like manner as those of old took harlots for wives, even so God too espoused unto Himself the nature which had played the harlot: and this also prophets from the beginning declare to have taken place with respect to the Synagogue. But that spouse was ungrateful towards Him who had been an husband to her, whereas, the Church, when once delivered from the evils received from our fathers, continued to embrace the Bridegroom.

See, for instance, what befell Ruth, how like it is to the things which belong to us. For she was both of a strange race, and reduced to the utmost poverty, yet Boaz when he saw her neither despised her poverty nor abhorred her mean birth, as Christ having received the Church, being both an alien and in much poverty, took her to be partaker of the great blessings. But even as Ruth, if she had not before left her father, and renounced household and race, country and kindred, would not have attained unto this alliance; so the Church too, having forsaken the customs which men had received from their fathers, then, and not before, became lovely to the Bridegroom. Of this therefore the prophet discourses unto her, and says, Forget your people, and your father's house, so shall the king have pleasure in your beauty. This Ruth did too, and because of this she became a mother of kings, even as the Church did likewise. For of her David himself sprung. So then to shame them by all these things, and to prevail on them not to be high-minded, he has both composed the genealogy, and brought forward these women. Yes, for this last, through those who intervened, was parent to the great king, and of these David is not ashamed. For it cannot, nay, it cannot be that a man should be good or bad, obscure or glorious, either by the virtue or by the vice of his forefathers; but if one must say somewhat even paradoxical, he shines forth the more, who not being of worthy ancestors, has yet become excellent.

6. Let no one therefore be high-minded on account of these matters, but let him consider the forefathers of the Lord, and put away all his haughtiness, and let good actions be his pride; or rather, not even these. For thus it was that the Pharisee came to be inferior to the Publican. Thus, if you would show the good work to be great, have no high thought, and you have proved it so much the greater. Make account that you have done nothing, and then you have done all. For if, being sinners, when we account ourselves to

be what we are, we become righteous, as indeed the Publican did; how much more, when being righteous we account ourselves to be sinners. Since if out of sinners men are made righteous by a lowly mind (although this were not to be lowly-minded but to be right-minded); if then to be right-minded avails so much in the case of sinners, consider what will not lowliness of mind do with respect to righteous men.

Do not then mar your labors, nor cast away from you the fruits of your toils, neither run thou in vain, making frustrate all your labor after the many courses you have run. Nay, for your Lord knows your good works better than you do. Though thou give but a cup of cold water, not even this does He overlook; though thou contribute but a farthing, though you should utter a sigh only, He receives it all with great favor and is mindful thereof, and assigns for it great rewards.

But wherefore do you search out your own doings, and bring them out before us continually? Do you not know, that if you praise yourself, God will no more praise you? Even as if you bewail yourself, He will not cease proclaiming you before all. For it is not at all His will that your labors should be disparaged. Why do I say, disparaged? Nay, He is doing and contriving all things, so that even for little He may crown you; and He goes about seeking excuses, whereby you may be delivered from hell. For this cause, though you should work but the eleventh hour of the day, He gives your wages entire; and though thou afford no ground of salvation, He says, I do it for my own sake, that my name be not profaned: Ezekiel 36:22 though you should sigh only, though you should only weep, all these things He quickly catches hold of, for an occasion of saving you.

Let us not therefore lift up ourselves, but let us declare ourselves unprofitable, that we may become profitable. For if you call yourself approved, you have become unprofitable, though thou were approved; but if useless, you have become profitable, even though thou were reprobate.

7. Wherefore it is necessary to forget our good actions. Yet how is it possible, one may say, not to know these things with which we are well acquainted? How do you say? Offending your Lord perpetually, you live delicately, and laugh, and dost not so much as know that you have sinned, but hast consigned all to oblivion; and of your good actions can you not put away the memory? And yet fear is a stronger kind of thing. But we do the very contrary; on the one hand, while each day we are offending, we do not so much as put it before our mind; on the other, if we give a little money to a poor person, this we are ever revolving. This kind of conduct comes of utter madness, and it is a very great loss to him who so makes his reckoning. For the secure storehouse of good works is to forget our good works. And as with regard to raiment and gold, when we expose them in a market-place, we attract many ill-meaning persons; but if we put them by at home and hide them, we shall deposit them all in security: even so with respect to our good deeds; if we are continually keeping them in memory, we provoke the Lord, we arm the enemy, we invite him to steal them away; but if no one know of them, besides Him who alone ought to know, they will lie in safety.

Be not therefore for ever parading them, lest some one should take them away. As was the case with the Pharisee, for bearing them about upon his lips; whence also the devil caught them away. And yet it was with thanksgiving he made mention of them, and referred the whole to God. But not even did this suffice Him. For it is not thanksgiving to revile others, to be vainglorious before many, to exalt one's self against them that have offended. Rather, if you are giving thanks to God, be content with Him only, and publish it not unto men, neither condemn your neighbor; for this is not thanksgiving. Would you learn words of thanksgiving? Harken unto the Three Children, saying, We have sinned, we have transgressed. You are righteous, O Lord, in all that you have done unto us, because you have brought all things upon us by a

true judgment. For to confess one's own sins, this is to give thanks with confession unto God: a kind of thing which implies one to be guilty of numberless offenses, yet not to have the due penalty exacted. This man most of all is the giver of thanks.

8. Let us beware therefore of saying anything about ourselves, for this renders us both odious with men and abominable to God. For this reason, the greater the good works we do, the less let us say of ourselves; this being the way to reap the greatest glory both with men and with God. Or rather, not only glory from God, but a reward, yea, a great recompense. Demand not therefore a reward that you may receive a reward. Confess yourself to be saved by grace, that He may profess Himself a debtor to you; and not for your good works only, but also for such rightness of mind. For when we do good works, we have Him debtor for our good works only; but when we do not so much as think we have done any good work, then also for this disposition itself; and more for this, than for the other things: so that this is equivalent to our good works. For should this be absent, neither will they appear great. For in the same way, we too, when we have servants, Luke 17:10 do then most approve them when, after having performed all their service with good will, they do not think they have done anything great. Wherefore, if you would make your good deeds great, do not think them to be great, and then they will be great.

It was in this way that the centurion also said, I am not fit that you should enter under my roof; because of this, he became worthy, and was marvelled at Matthew 8:8 above all Jews. On this wise again Paul says, I am not meet to be called an apostle; 1 Corinthians 15:9 because of this he became even first of all. So likewise John: I am not meet to loose the latchet of His shoe; because of this he was the friend of the Bridegroom, and the hand which he affirmed to be unworthy to touch His shoes, this did Christ draw unto His own head. So Peter too said, Depart from me, for I am a sinful man; Luke 5:8 because of this he became a foundation of the Church.

For nothing is so acceptable to God as to number one's self with the last. This is a first principle of all practical wisdom. For he that is humbled, and bruised in heart, will not be vainglorious, will not be wrathful, will not envy his neighbor, will not harbor any other passion. For neither when a hand is bruised, though we strive ten thousand times, shall we be able to lift it up on high. If therefore we were thus to bruise our heart likewise, though it were stirred by ten thousand swelling passions, it could not be lifted up, no, not ever so little. For if a man, by mourning for things pertaining to this life, drives out all the diseases of his soul, much more will he, who mourns for sins, enjoy the blessing of self-restraint.

9. But who, one may say, will be able thus to bruise his own heart? Listen to David, who became illustrious chiefly because of this, and see the contrition of his soul. How after ten thousand good works, and when he was on the point of being deprived of country, and home, and life itself, at the very season of his calamity, seeing a vile and outcast common soldier trample on the turn of his fortunes and revile him; so far from reviling him again, he utterly forbade one of his captains, who was desirous to have slain him, saying, Let him alone, for the Lord has bidden him. 2 Samuel 16:10 And again, when the priests desired to carry about the ark of God with him, he did not permit it; but what does he say? Let me set it down in the temple, and if God deliver me from the dangers that are before me, I shall see the beauty thereof; but if He say to me, I have no delight in you, behold, here am I, let Him do to me as seems good unto Him. And that which was done with regard to Saul, again and again, even oftentimes, what excellence of self-restraint does it not show? Yea, for he even surpassed the old law, and came near to the apostolic injunctions. For this cause he bore with contentedness all that came from the Lord's hands; not contending against what befell him, but aiming at one object alone, namely, in everything to obey, and follow the laws set by Him. And when after so many noble deeds on his part, he saw the tyrant, the parricide, the murderer of his own

brother, that injurious, that frenzied one, possessing in his stead his own kingdom, not even so was he offended. But if this please God, says he, that I should be chased, and wander, and flee, and that he should be in honor, I acquiesce, and accept it, and do thank God for His many afflictions. Not like many of the shameless and impudent ones, who when they have not done, no not the least part of his good works, yet if they see any in prosperity, and themselves enduring a little discouragement, ruin their own souls by ten thousand blasphemies. But David was not such an one; rather he showed forth all modesty. Wherefore also God said, I have found David, the son of Jesse, a man after my own heart.

Such a spirit as this let us too acquire, and whatever we may suffer we shall bear it easily, and before the Kingdom, we shall reap here the gain accruing from lowliness of mind. Thus learn, says He, of me, for I am meek and lowly in heart, and you shall find rest unto your souls. Matthew 11:29 Therefore in order that we may enjoy rest both here and hereafter, let us with great diligence implant in our souls the mother of all things that are good, I mean humility. For thus we shall be enabled both to pass over the sea of this life without waves, and to end our voyage in that calm harbor; by the grace and love towards man of our Lord Jesus Christ, to whom be glory and might for ever and ever. Amen.

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