

Homily 32 on the Acts of the Apostles

by St. John Chrysostom

St. John Chrysostom's sermon emphasizes the importance of humility and gentleness in dealing with others, especially in matters of faith, and highlights the significance of faith and grace in salvation.

Scripture: Psalm 82:6, Acts 15:1, Acts 15:8-11, Romans 4:2, 1 Corinthians 7:19, Ephesians 2:5, 1 Peter 5:8

Topics: "Faith Alone", "Salvation By Grace"

Description

John Chrysostom preaches on the importance of understanding the true essence of faith and salvation, emphasizing the need to focus on the heart rather than external rituals like circumcision. He highlights the unity and equality of believers, both Jews and Gentiles, in the eyes of God, emphasizing that salvation comes through faith alone. Chrysostom addresses the Pharisees' insistence on the Law, pointing out that salvation is by grace through faith in Jesus Christ, not by works or adherence to the Mosaic Law.

Transcript

Acts XV. 1

And certain men which came down from Judea taught the brethren, and said, Unless you are circumcised after the manner of Moses, you cannot be saved.

Mark how at every step of the right progress in respect of the Gentiles, the beginning is brought in as matter of necessity. Before this (Peter) being found fault with, justified himself, and said all that he said in the tone of apology, which was what made his words acceptable: then, the Jews having turned away, upon this (Paul) came to the Gentiles. Here again, seeing another extravagance coming in, upon this (the apostle) enacts the law. For as it is likely that they, as being taught of God, discoursed to all indifferently, this moved to jealousy them of the Jews (who had believed).

And they did not merely speak of circumcision, but they said, You cannot even be saved. Whereas the very opposite to this was the case, that receiving circumcision they could not be saved. Do you mark how closely the trials succeed each other, from within, from without? It is well ordered too, that this happens when Paul is present, that he may answer them. When therefore Paul and Barnabas had no small dissension and disputation with them, they determined that Paul and Barnabas, and certain other of them, should go up to Jerusalem unto the apostles and elders about this question.

Acts 15:2 And Paul does not say, What? Have I not a right to be believed after so many signs? But he complied for their sakes. And being brought on their way by the Church, they passed through Phenice and Samaria, declaring the conversion of the Gentiles: and they caused great joy unto all the brethren. Acts 15:3 And observe, the consequence is that all the Samaritans also, learn what has come to the Gentiles: and they rejoiced. And when they had come to Jerusalem, they were received of the Church, and of the apostles and elders, and they declared all things that God had done with them.

Acts 15:4 See what a providence is here! But there rose up certain of the sect of the Pharisees which believed, saying, That it was needful to circumcise them, and to command them to keep the law of Moses. And the apostles and elders came together to consider of this matter. And when there had been much disputing, Peter rose up and said to them, Men and brethren, you know how that of old days God made choice among us, that the Gentiles by my mouth should hear the word of the Gospel, and believe.

Acts 15:5-7 Observe Peter from the first standing aloof (κεχωρισμ■νον) from the affair, and even to this time judaizing. And yet (says he) ye know. ch. 10:45; 11:2 Perhaps those were present who of old found fault with him in the matter of Cornelius, and went in with him (on that occasion): for this reason he brings them forward as witnesses. From old days, he says, did choose among you. What means, Among you? Either, in Palestine, or, you being present. By my mouth. Observe how he shows that it was God speaking by him, and no human utterance.

And God, that knows the hearts, gave testimony unto them: he refers them to the spiritual testimony: by giving them the Holy Ghost even as unto us. Acts 15:8 Everywhere he puts the Gentiles upon a thorough equality. And put no difference between us and them, having purified their hearts by faith. Acts 15:9 From faith alone, he says, they obtained the same gifts. This is also meant as a lesson to those (objectors); this is able to teach even them that faith only is needed, not works nor circumcision.

For indeed they do not say all this only by way of apology for the Gentiles, but to teach (the Jewish believers) also to abandon the Law. However, at present this is not said. Now therefore why do you tempt God, to put a yoke upon the neck of the disciples? Acts 15:10 What means, Tempt ye God? As if He had not power to save by faith. Consequently, it proceeds from a want of faith, this bringing in the Law. Then he shows that they themselves were nothing benefited by it, and he turns the whole (stress of his speech) against the Law, not against them, and (so) cuts short the accusation of them: which neither our fathers nor we were able to bear.

But we believe that through the grace of the Lord Jesus we shall be saved, even as they. Acts 15:11 How full of power these words! The same that Paul says at large in the Epistle to the Romans, the same says Peter here. For if Abraham, says (Paul), was justified by works, he has whereof to glory, but not before God. Romans 4:2 Do you perceive that all this is more a lesson for them than apology for the Gentiles? However, if he had spoken this without a plea for speaking, he would have been suspected: an occasion having offered, he lays hold of it, and speaks out fearlessly. See on all occasions how the designs of their foes are made to work with them. If those had not stirred the question, these things would not have been spoken, nor what follows.

(Recapitulation.) (b) But let us look more closely at what has been said. And certain men, etc. In Jerusalem, then, there were not any believers from among the Gentiles: but in Antioch of course there were. Therefore there came down certain yet laboring under this disease of the love of rule, and wishing to have those of the Gentiles attached to them. And yet Paul, though he too was learned in the Law, was not

thus affected. When therefore Paul and Barnabas had no small disputation with them, etc.

Acts 15:2 But when he returned from thence, the doctrine also became more exact. For if they at Jerusalem enjoin no such thing, much more these (have no right to do so). And being brought on their way, etc, they caused no small joy to the brethren. Acts 15:3 Do you mark, as many as are not enamoured of rule, rejoiced in their believing? It was no ambitious feeling that prompted their recitals, neither was it for display, but in justification of the preaching to the Gentiles.

Acts 15:4 Thus they say nothing of what had happened in the matter of the Jews. But there arose up certain of the sect of the Pharisees which believed, etc. Acts 15:5 (a) But even if they would needs bring over the Gentiles to their side, they learn that neither must the Apostles overlook it. And the Apostles and elders, etc. Acts 15:6 Among us, he says, God chose: and from old days: long ago, he says, not now. And this too is no small point -- at a time when Jews believed, not turned away (from the Gospel).

Among us; an argument from the place: of old days, from the time. And that expression, Chose: just as in their own case he says not, (so) willed it, but, Chose that the Gentiles by my mouth should hear the word of the Gospel and believe. Whence is this proved? From the Spirit. Then he shows that the testimony given them is not of grace merely, but of their virtue. And God which knows the hearts bare them witness Acts 15:8; having afforded to them nothing less (than to us), for, he says, Put no difference between us and them.

Acts 15:9 Why then, hearts are what one must everywhere look to. And it is very appositely said, God that knows the hearts bare them witness: as in the former instance, You, Lord, that know the hearts of all men. Acts 1:24 For to show that this is the meaning, observe what he adds, Put no difference between us and them. When he has mentioned the testimony borne to them, then he utters that great word, the same which Paul speaks, Neither circumcision avails anything, nor uncircumcision. 1 Corinthians 7:19 That he may make the two one in Himself.

Ephesians 2:5 Of all these the seeds lie in Peter's discourse. And he does not say (between) them of the circumcision, but Between us, that is the Apostles, and them. Then, that the expression, no difference may not seem an outrage, After faith, he says -- Having purified their hearts by faith Acts 15:10-- He thoroughly cleansed them first. Then he shows, not that the Law was evil, but themselves weak.-- But we believe that through the grace of the Lord Jesus we shall be saved even as they.

Acts 15:11 Mark how he ends with a fearful consideration. He does not discourse to them from the Prophets, but from things present, of which themselves were witnesses. Of course (the Prophets) also themselves anon add their testimony (infra v. 15), and make the reason stronger by what has now come to pass. And observe, he first permits the question to be moved in the Church, and then speaks. And put no difference between -- he said not, them of the circumcision, but us and them, i.e. the Gentiles: for this (gradual advance) little by little is stronger.

Why therefore do you tempt God? who has become (the) God of the Gentiles: for this was tempting: * * * whether He is able to save even after the Law. See what he does. He shows that they are in danger. For if, what the Law could not do, faith had power to do, we believe that through the grace of the Lord Jesus we shall be saved even as they comp. : but faith falling off, behold, themselves (are) in destruction. And he did not say, Why do ye disbelieve? Which was more harsh, but, Tempt God, and that when the fact is demonstrated.

(c) Great effrontery this, of the Pharisees, that even after faith they set up the Law, and will not obey the Apostles. But see these, how mildly they speak, and not in the tone of authority: such words are amiable, and more apt to fix themselves in the mind. Observe, it is nowhere a display of words, but demonstration by facts, by the Spirit. And yet, though they have such proofs, they still speak gently. And observe they do not come accusing those at Antioch, but declaring all things that God had done with them: Acts 15:4 but thence again these men lay hold upon the occasion (to compass their own objects), but there rose up, etc. Acts 15:1 Such were the pains they took in their love of power: and it was not with the knowledge of the Apostles that they Paul and Barnabas were blamed. But still they brought forward none of these charges: but when they have proved the matter, then (the Apostles) write in stronger terms.

For gentleness is everywhere a great good: gentleness, I say, not stupid indifference; gentleness, not adulation: for between these there is a vast difference. Nothing ruffled Paul, nothing discomposed Peter. When you have convincing proofs, why lose your temper, to render these of none effect? It is impossible for one who is out of temper ever to persuade. Yesterday also we discoursed about anger; but there is no reason why we should not today also; perchance a second exhortation coming directly after the first will effect somewhat.

For indeed a medicine though of virtue to heal a wound, unless it be constantly renewed, mars all. And think not that our continual discoursing about the same things is a condemning of you: for if we condemned you, we should not discourse; but now, hoping that you will gain much, we speak these things. Would indeed that we did speak constantly of the same things: would that there were no other subject of our discourses, than how we might overcome our passions. For is it not contrary to all reason, that while emperors, living in luxury and so great honor, have no subject of discourse either while sitting at table, or at any other time, save only how to overcome their enemies -- and therefore it is that they hold their assemblies each day, and appoint generals and soldiers, and demand taxes and tributes; and that of all state affairs, the moving causes are these two, the overcoming of those who make war upon them, and the establishing of their subjects in peace -- we have no mind for such themes as this, nor ever even dream of conversing upon them: but how we may buy land, or purchase slaves, and make our property greater, these are subjects we can talk about every day, and never be tired of them: while concerning things in ourselves and really our own, we neither wish to speak ourselves, nor so much as dream of tolerating advice, nor of enduring to hear others speaking about them?

But answer me, what do you talk about? About dinner? Why that is a subject for cooks. Of money? Nay, that is a theme for hucksters and merchants. Of buildings? That belongs to carpenters and builders. Of land? That talk is for husbandmen. But for us, there is no other proper business, save this, how we may make wealth for the soul. Then let not the discourse be wearisome to you. Why is it that none finds fault with the physician for always discoursing of the healing art, nor with people of other crafts for talking about their peculiar arts?

If indeed the mastery over our passions were really achieved, so that there were no need of putting us in mind, we might reasonably be taxed with ambition and display: or rather, not then either. For even if it were gained, for all that, there would be need of discoursing, that one might not relapse and remain uncorrected: as in fact physicians discourse not only to the sick, but also to the whole, and they have books on this subject, on the one part how to free from disease, on the other how to preserve health.

So that even if we are well, still we must not give over, but must do all in order to the preserving of our health. And when we are sick there is a twofold necessity for advice: first, that we may be freed from the

disease; secondly, that having been freed, we may not fall into it again. Well then, we are discoursing now by the method of treating the sick, not by the rules for the treatment of the healthy.

How then may one root out this evil passion? How subdue (■ ποσκελ■σειε) this violent fever? Let us see whence it had its birth, and let us remove the cause. Whence is it wont to arise? From arrogance and much haughtiness. This cause then let us remove, and the disease is removed together with it. But what is arrogance? Whence does it arise? For perhaps we are likely to have to go back to a still higher origin. But whatever course the reason of the thing may point out, that let us take, that we may go to the bottom of the mischief, and pluck it up by the roots.

Whence then comes arrogance? From our not looking into our own concerns, but instead of that, busying ourselves about the nature of land, though we are not husbandmen, and the nature of gold, though we are not merchants, and concerning clothing, and everything else: while to ourselves and our own nature we never look at all. And who, you will say, is ignorant of his own nature? Many: perhaps all, save a few: and if you will, I will show the proof of it. For, tell me, what is man?

If one were asked, will he be able to answer outright to the questions, In what he differs from the brutes, in what he is akin to the heavenly inhabitants, what can be made of man? For as in the case of any other material, so also in this case: man is the subject-matter, but of this can be made either an angel or a beast. Does not this seem a strange saying? And yet you have often heard it in the Scriptures. For of certain human beings it was said, he is the angel of the Lord Malachi 2:7: and from his lips, says it, they shall seek judgment Malachi 3:1: and again, I send My angel before Your face: but of some, Serpents, generation of vipers.

Matthew 12:34 So then, it all depends upon the use. Why do I say, an angel? The man can become God, and a child of God. For we read, I have said, You are gods, and all of you are children of the Most High. Psalm 82:6 And what is greater, the power to become both God and angel and child of God is put into his own hands. Yea, so it is, man can be the maker of an angel. Perchance this saying has startled you? Hear however Christ saying: In the Resurrection they neither marry nor are given in marriage, but are like the angels.

Matthew 22:30 And again, He that is able to receive it, let him receive it. Matthew 19:12 In a word, it is virtue which makes angels: but this is in our power: therefore we are able to make angels, though not in nature, certainly in will. For indeed if virtue be absent, it is no advantage to be an angel by nature; and the Devil is a proof of this, who was an angel once: but if virtue be present, it is no loss to be a man by nature; and John is a proof of this, who was a man, and Elias who went up into heaven, and all those who are about to depart there.

For these indeed, though with bodies, were not prevented from dwelling in heaven: while those others, though without bodies, could not remain in heaven. Let no one then grieve or be vexed with his nature as if it were a hindrance to him, but with his will. He (the Devil) from being incorporeal became a lion: for lo! It says, Our adversary, as a roaring lion, walks about, seeking whom he may devour 1 Peter 5:8: we from being corporeal, become angels. For just as if a person, having found some precious material, should despise it, as not being an artificer, it will be a great loss to him, whether it be pearls, or a pearl shell, or any other such thing that he has seen; so we likewise, if we are ignorant of our own nature, shall despise it much: but if we know what it is, we shall exhibit much zeal, and reap the greatest profits.

For from this nature is wrought a king's robe, from this a king's house, from this nature are fashioned a king's members: all are kingly. Let us not then misuse our own nature to our hurt. He has made us a little lower than the angels, Psalm 8:5, I mean, by reason of death: but even that little we have now recovered. There is nothing therefore to hinder us from becoming near to the angels, if we will. Let us then will it, let us will it, and having exercised ourselves thoroughly, let us return honor to the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit, now and ever, world without end, Amen.

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