

Homily 36 on Matthew

by St. John Chrysostom

In Homily 36 on Matthew, St. John Chrysostom explores the interplay of faith and doubt through the inquiry of John the Baptist and Jesus' miraculous works.

Scripture: John 1:29

Topics: "Faith And Doubt", "Christ's Resurrection"

Description

John Chrysostom preaches on the account of John the Baptist sending his disciples to inquire if Jesus is truly the awaited Messiah. He delves into the reasons behind this inquiry, highlighting the disciples' jealousy towards Jesus and their struggle to accept Him. Chrysostom emphasizes the importance of faith and understanding the prophecies regarding Christ's crucifixion and resurrection, refuting the idea that John was ignorant of these truths. He challenges the congregation to reflect on their own sins and the severity of judgment, urging them to live a life of strict virtue and avoid self-deception in God's justice.

Transcript

Matt. XI. 1.

And it came to pass, when Jesus had made an end of commanding His twelve disciples, He departed thence to teach and to preach in their cities.

That is, after He had sent them, He proceeded to withdraw Himself, to give them room and opportunity to do what He had enjoined. For while He was present and healing, no one would be willing to approach them.

Now when John had heard in the prison the works of Jesus, he sent two of his disciples, and asked Him, saying, Are you He that should come, or do we look for another? Matthew 11:2-3

But Luke says, they also told John of the miracles, and then he sent them. Luke 7:18 However, this contains no matter of difficulty, but of consideration only; for this, among other things, indicates their jealousy towards Him.

But what follows is completely among the controverted points. Of what nature then is this? Their saying, Are You He that should come, or do we look for another? That is, he that knew Him before His miracles, he that had learned it of the Spirit, he that heard it of the Father, he who had proclaimed Him before all men; does he now send to learn of Him, whether it be Himself or no? And if yet thou did not know that it is

surely He, how thinkest you yourself credible, affirming as thou dost concerning things, whereof you are ignorant? For he that is to bear witness to others, must be first worthy of credit himself. Did you not say, I am not meet to loose the latchet of His shoe? John 1:27 Did you not say, I knew Him not, but He that sent me to baptize with water, the same said to me, Upon whom you shall see the Spirit descending and resting upon Him, the same is He which baptizes with the Holy Ghost? John 1:33 Did you not see the Spirit in form of a dove? Did you not hear the voice? Did you not utterly forbid Him, saying, I have need to be baptized by You? Matthew 3:14 Did you not say even to your disciples, He must increase, I must decrease? John 3:30 Did you not teach all the people, that He should baptize them with the Holy Ghost and with fire? Matthew 3:11 and that He is the Lamb of God that takes away the sin of the world? Did you not before His signs and miracles proclaim all these things? How then now, when He has been made manifest to all, and the fame of Him has gone out everywhere, and dead men have been raised, and devils driven away, and a display made of so great miracles, do you after this send to learn of Him?

What then is the fact? Were all these sayings a kind of fraud: a stage play and fables? Nay, who that has any understanding would say so? I say not, John, who leaped in the womb, who before his own birth proclaimed Him, the citizen of the wilderness, the exhibitor of the conversation of angels; but even though he were one of the common sort, and of them that are utterly outcast, he would not have hesitated, after so many testimonies, both on his own part and on the part of others.

Whence it is evident, that neither did he send as being himself in doubt, nor did he ask in ignorance. Since no one surely could say this, that though he knew it fully, yet on account of his prison he was become rather timid: for neither was he looking to be delivered therefrom, nor if he did look for it, would he have betrayed his duty to God, armed as he was against various kinds of death. For unless he had been prepared for this, he would not have evinced so great courage towards a whole people, practised in shedding blood of prophets; nor would he have rebuked that savage tyrant with so much boldness in the midst of the city and the forum, severely chiding him, as though he were a little child, in hearing of all men. And even if he were grown more timid, how was he not ashamed before his own disciples, in whose presence he had so often borne witness unto Him, but asked his question by them, which he should have done by others? And yet surely he knew full well, that they too were jealous of Christ, and desired to find some handle against Him. And how could he but be abashed before the Jewish people, in whose presence he had proclaimed such high things? Or what advantage accrued to him thereby, towards deliverance from his bonds? For not for Christ's sake had he been cast into prison, nor for having proclaimed His power, but for his own rebuke touching the unlawful marriage. And what child so silly, what person so frantic, but that so he would have put on himself their character?

2. What then is it which he is bringing about? For that it belongs not to John to have doubt hereupon, no nor to any ordinary person, nor even to one extremely foolish and frenzied; so much is evident from what we have said. And now we have only to add the solution.

For what intent then did he send to ask? John's disciples were starting aside from Jesus, and this surely any one may see, and they had always a jealous feeling towards Him. And it is plain, from what they said to their master: He that was with you, it is said, beyond Jordan, to whom you bore witness, behold, the same baptizes, and all men come unto Him. John 3:26 And again, There arose a question between John's disciples and the Jews about purifying. And again they came unto Him, and said, Why do we and the Pharisees fast oft, but Your disciples fast not? Matthew 9:14 For as yet they knew not who Christ was, but imagining Jesus to be a mere man, but John greater than after the manner of man, were vexed at seeing the former held in estimation, but the latter, as he had said, now ceasing. And this hindered them from

coming unto Him, their jealousy quite blocking up the access. Now so long as John was with them, he was exhorting them continually and instructing them, and not even so did he persuade them; but when he was now on the point of dying, he uses the more diligence: fearing as he did lest he might leave a foundation for bad doctrine, and they continue broken off from Christ. For as he was diligent even at first to bring to Christ all that pertained to himself; so on his failing to persuade them, now towards his end he does but exert the more zeal.

Now if he had said, Go away unto Him, He is better than I, he would not have persuaded them, minded as they were not easily to be separated from him, but rather he would have been thought to say it out of modesty, and they would have been the more riveted to him; or if he had held his peace, then again nothing was gained. What then does he? He waits to hear from them that Christ is working miracles, and not even so does he admonish them, nor does he send all, but some two (whom he perhaps knew to be more teachable than the rest); that the inquiry might be made without suspicion, in order that from His acts they might learn the difference between Jesus and himself. And he says, Go, and say, Are you He that should come, or do we look for another? Matthew 11:3

But Christ knowing the purpose of John, did not say, I am He; for this would again have offended the hearers, although this was what it naturally followed for Him to say, but He leaves them to learn it from His acts. For it says, when these had come to Him, then He cured many. Luke 7:21 And yet what congruity was there, that being asked, Are you He, He should say nothing to that, but should presently cure them that were sick; unless it had been His mind to establish this which I have mentioned? Because they of course would account the testimony of His deeds surer, and more above suspicion than that of His words.

Knowing therefore, as being God, the mind with which John had sent them, He straightway cured blind, lame, and many others; not to teach him (for how should He him that was convinced), but these that were doubting; and having healed them, He says,

Go and show John again those things which you do hear and see; the blind receive their sight, and the lame walk, and the lepers are cleansed, and the deaf hear, and the dead are raised up, and the poor have the gospel preached unto them. Matthew 4:5 And he added, And blessed is he, whosoever shall not be offended in me; implying that He knows even their unuttered thoughts. For if He had said, I am He, both this would have offended them, as I have already said; and they would have thought, even if they had not spoken, much as the Jews said to Him, You bear record of Yourself. Wherefore He says not this Himself, but leaves them to learn all from the miracles, freeing what He taught from suspicion, and making it plainer. Wherefore also He covertly added His reproof of them. That is, because they were offended in Him, He by setting forth their case and leaving it to their own conscience alone, and by calling no witness of this His accusation, but only themselves that knew it all, did thus also draw them the more unto Himself, in saying, Blessed is he, whosoever shall not be offended in me. For indeed His secret meaning was of them when He said this.

3. But in order to our making the truth more evident to you by the comparison of the several statements, producing not only our own sayings, but also what is stated by others; we must needs add some account of them.

What then do some affirm? That this which we have stated was not the cause, but that John was in ignorance, yet not in ignorance of all; but that He was the Christ, he knew, but whether He was also to die for mankind, he knew not, therefore he said, Are You He that should come? that is, He that is to descend

into hell. But this is not tenable; for neither of this was John ignorant. This at least he proclaimed even before all the others, and bare record of this first, Behold, says he, the Lamb of God, which takes away the sin of the world. John 1:29 Now he called Him a lamb, as proclaiming the cross, and again in saying, That takes away the sin of the world, he declared this same thing. For not otherwise than by the cross did He effect this; as Paul likewise said: And the handwriting which was contrary to us, even it He took out of the way, nailing it to His cross. And his saying too, He shall baptize you with the Spirit, Matthew 3:11 is that of one who was foretelling the events after the resurrection.

Well: that He was to rise again, he knew, say they, and that He was to give the Holy Ghost; but that He should likewise be crucified, he knew not. How then was He to rise again, who had not suffered, nor been crucified? And how was this man greater than a prophet, who knew not even what the prophets knew? For that he was greater than a prophet, even Christ Himself bare record, Matthew 11:9 but that the prophets knew of the passion is surely plain to every one. For so Isaiah says, He is brought as a lamb to the slaughter, and as a sheep before her shearer is dumb. Isaiah 53:7 And before this testimony also he says, There shall be a root of Jesse, and He that shall rise again to rule the Gentiles, in Him shall the Gentiles trust. Isaiah 11:10 Then speaking of His passion, and of the ensuing glory, he added, And His rest shall be honor. And this prophet foretold not only that He should be crucified, but also with whom. For, says he, He was numbered with the transgressors. Isaiah 53:12 And not this only, but that He should not even plead for Himself; For this man, he says, opens not His mouth: and that He should be unjustly condemned; For in His humiliation, says he, His judgment was taken away. And before this again, David both says this, and describes the judgment hall. Why, says he, do the heathen rage, and the people imagine a vain thing? The kings of the earth stand up, and the rulers are gathered together against the Lord, and against His anointed. And elsewhere he mentions also the image of the cross, saying on this wise, They pierced my hand and my feet, and those things which the soldiers were emboldened to do, he adds with all exactness, For they parted my garments, says he, among them, and for my vesture they did cast lots. And elsewhere again he says, that they also offered Him vinegar; For they gave me, says He, gall for my meat, and for my thirst they made me drink vinegar.

So then the prophets, so many years before, speak of the hall of judgment, and of the condemnation, and of them that were crucified with Him, and of the division of the garments, and of the lot cast upon them, and of many more things besides (for indeed it is unnecessary to allege all now, lest we make our discourse long): and was this man, greater than them all, ignorant of all these things? Nay, how should this be reasonable?

And why did he not say, Are you He that should come to hell, but simply, He that should come? Although this were far more absurd than the others, I mean their saying, he therefore said these things, that he might preach there also after his departure. To whom it were seasonable to say, Brethren, be not children in understanding, howbeit in malice be ye children. 1 Corinthians 14:20 For the present life indeed is the season for right conversation, but after death is judgment and punishment. For in hell, it is said, who will confess unto you?

How then were the gates of brass burst, and the bars of iron broken in sunder? By His body; for then first was a body shown, immortal, and destroying the tyranny of death. And besides, this indicates the destruction of the might of death, not the loosing of the sins of those who had died before His coming. And if this were not so, but He have delivered all that were before Him from hell, how says He, It shall be more tolerable for the land of Sodom and Gomorrha? Matthew 10:15 For this saying supposes that those are also to be punished; more mildly indeed, yet still that they are to be punished. And yet they did also suffer

here the most extreme punishment, nevertheless not even this will deliver them. And if it is so with them, much more with such as have suffered nothing.

What then? one may say, were they wronged, who lived before His coming? By no means, for men might then be saved, even though they had not confessed Christ. For this was not required of them, but not to worship idols, and to know the true God. For the Lord your God, it is said, is one Lord. Deuteronomy 6:4 Therefore the Maccabees were admired, because for the observance of the law they suffered what they did suffer; and the three children, and many others too among the Jews, having shown forth a very virtuous life, and having maintained the standard of this their knowledge, had nothing more required of them. For then it was sufficient for salvation, as I have said already, to know God only; but now it is so no more, but there is need also of the knowledge of Christ. Therefore He said, If I had not come and spoken unto them, they had not had sin, but now they have no cloak for their sin.

So likewise with regard to the rule of practice. Then murder was the destruction of him that committed it, but now even to be angry. And then to commit adultery, and to lie with another man's wife, brought punishment, but now even to look with unchaste eyes. For as the knowledge, so also the rule of life is now made stricter. So that there was no need of a forerunner there.

And besides, if unbelievers are after death to be saved on their believing, no man shall ever perish. For all will then repent and adore. And in proof that this is true, hear Paul saying, Every tongue shall confess, and every knee shall bow, of things in heaven, and things in earth, and things under the earth. Philippians 2:10-11 And, The last enemy that shall be destroyed is death. 1 Corinthians 15:26 But there is no advantage in that submission, for it comes not of a rightly disposed choice, but of the necessity of things, as one may say, thenceforth taking place.

Let us not then any more bring in such old wives' doctrines, and Jewish fables. Hear at least what Paul says touching these things. For as many as have sinned without law, shall also perish without law; Romans 2:12 where his discourse is of those who lived in the time before the law; and, As many as have sinned in the law, shall be judged by the law, Romans 2:12 speaking of all after Moses. And, That the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness, and unrighteousness of men, Romans 1:18 and, indignation and wrath, tribulation and anguish upon every soul of man that works evil, of the Jew first, and also of the Gentile. Romans 2:8-9 And yet countless were the evils which the Gentiles have suffered in this world, and this is declared alike by the histories of the heathens, and by the Scriptures that are in our hands. For who could recount the tragic calamities of the Babylonians, or those of the Egyptians? But in proof that they who, not having known Christ before His coming in the flesh, yet refrained from idolatry and worshipped God only, and showed forth an excellent life, shall enjoy all the blessings; hear what is said: But glory, and honor, and peace to every one that works good, to the Jew first, and also to the Gentile. Do you see that for their good deeds there are many rewards, and chastisements again, and penalties for such as have done the contrary?

4. Where now, tell me, are the utter unbelievers in hell? Why, if those before Christ's coming, who had not so much as heard the name of hell, nor of a resurrection, and were punished here, shall suffer punishment there also; how much more we that have been nurtured in so many lessons of strict virtue?

And how is it reasonable, asks one, that they that have never heard of hell, should fall into hell? For they will say, If you had threatened hell, we should have feared more, and have been sobered. To be sure; (is it not so?) at our rate of living now, who hear daily the sayings about hell, and give no heed at all.

And besides, there is this also to be said; that he who is not restrained by the judgments in sight, much less will he be restrained by those others. For the less reasonable sort, and those of a grosser disposition, are wont to be sobered rather by things which are at hand, and straightway to happen, than by such as will come to pass a long time after. But over us, one may say, a greater fear is suspended, and herein were they wronged. By no means. For first, there are not the same measures set to us as to them, but much greater for us. Now they that have undertaken greater labors, ought to enjoy greater help. And it is no little help, that our fear has been increased. And if we have an advantage over them in knowing things to come, they have an advantage over us in that the severe punishments are presently laid upon them.

But there is something else, which the multitude say with respect to this also. For where, say they, is God's justice, when any one for sinning here, is punished both here and there? Would ye then I should put you in mind of your own sayings, that you may no longer give us trouble, but furnish the solution from within yourselves. I have heard many of our people, if haply they were told of a murderer cut off in a court of justice, how they had indignation, and talked in this way: This unholy and accursed wretch, having perpetrated thirty murders, or even many more, has himself undergone one death only; and where is the justice of it? So that you yourselves confess, that one death is not sufficient for punishment; how give ye then an opposite sentence now. Because not others but yourselves are the objects of your judgment: so great a hindrance is self-love to our perceiving what is just. Because of this, when we are judging others, we search out all things with strictness, but when we are sitting in judgment on ourselves, we are blinded. Since if we were to search into these things in our own case too, as we do with regard to other men, we should give an uncorrupt sentence. For we also have sins, deserving not two or three, but ten thousand deaths. And to pass over all the rest, let us recollect ourselves, as many of us as partake unworthily of the mysteries; such men being guilty of the body and blood of Christ. Wherefore, when you are talking of the murderer, take account of yourself also. For he indeed has murdered a man, but you are under the guilt of slaying the Lord; and he, not having partaken of mysteries, but we, while enjoying the benefit of the sacred table.

And what are they that bite and devour their brethren, and pour out such abundance of venom? What is he that robs the poor of their food? For if he who imparts not of his own, is such as I have said, much more he that takes the things of others. How many robbers do the covetous surpass in wickedness! How many murderers and robbers of tombs, the rapacious! And how many after spoiling men are desirous even of their blood!

Nay, says he, God forbid. Now you say, God forbid. When you have an enemy, then say, God forbid, and call to mind what has been said, and show forth a life full of great strictness; lest the portion of Sodom await us also, lest we suffer the lot of Gomorrha, lest we undergo the ills of the Tyrians and Sidonians; or rather, lest we offend Christ, which were a thing more grievous and more to be feared than all.

For though to many hell seem to be a fearful thing, yet I for my part will not cease continually to say, that this is more grievous and fearful than any hell; and you I entreat to be of the same mind. For so shall we both be delivered from hell, and enjoy the glory that is bestowed of Christ; unto which may we all attain, by the grace and love towards man of our Lord Jesus Christ, to whom be glory and might forever and ever. Amen.

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