

Homily 42 on Matthew

by St. John Chrysostom

This sermon emphasizes the importance of self-examination, accountability, and the consequences of sin, and encourages listeners to choose virtue and avoid vice.

Scripture: Job 1:5, Matthew 12:33, Matthew 12:36-37, 1 Corinthians 11:31

Topics: "Self Reflection", "Repentance"

Description

John Chrysostom preaches about the importance of judging ourselves before being judged by God, emphasizing the power of our words to reveal the condition of our hearts and souls. He warns against slander and idle words, highlighting that every word spoken will be accounted for in the day of judgment. Chrysostom urges self-reflection, urging listeners to sit in judgment upon their own conscience daily, seeking repentance and cleansing from sins. He emphasizes the need to prioritize the purity of the soul over worldly matters, urging the congregation to choose virtue over vice to attain both present and eternal blessings.

Transcript

Matt. XII. 33.

Either make the tree good, and his fruit good, or else make the tree corrupt, and his fruit corrupt; for the tree is known by his fruit.

Again in another way He shames them, and is not content with His former refutations. But this He does, not freeing Himself from accusations, (for what went before was quite enough), but as wishing to amend them.

Now His meaning is like this: none of you has either found fault about the persons healed, as not being healed; nor has said, that it is an evil thing to deliver one from a devil. For though they had been ever so shameless, they could not have said this.

Since therefore they brought no charge against the works, but were defaming the Doer of them, He signifies that this accusation is against both the common modes of reasoning, and the congruity of the circumstances. A thing of aggravated shamelessness, not only to interpret maliciously, but also to make up such charges as are contrary to men's common notions.

And see how free He is from contentiousness. For He said not, Make the tree good, forasmuch as the fruit also is good; but, most entirely stopping their mouths, and exhibiting His own considerateness, and their insolence, He says, Even if you are minded to find fault with my works, I forbid it not at all, only bring not inconsistent and contradictory charges. For thus were they sure to be most clearly detected, persisting against what was too palpable. Wherefore to no purpose is your maliciousness, says He, and your self-contradictory statements. Because in truth the distinction of the tree is shown by the fruit, not the fruit by the tree; but you do the contrary. For what if the tree be the origin of the fruit; yet it is the fruit that makes the tree to be known. And it were consistent, either in blaming us to find fault with our works too, or praising these, to set us who do them free from these charges. But now ye do the contrary; for having no fault to find with the works, which is the fruit, you pass the opposite judgment upon the tree, calling me a demoniac; which is utter insanity.

Yea, and what He had said before, Matthew 7:16-18 this He establishes now also; that a good tree cannot bring forth evil fruit, nor again can the converse be. So that their charges were against all consistency and nature.

Then since He is arguing not for Himself, but for the Spirit, He has dealt out His reproof even as a torrent, saying, O generation of vipers, how can you, being evil, speak good things? Matthew 12:34

Now this is at once to accuse, and to give demonstration of His own sayings from their case. For behold, says He, you being evil trees, cannot bring forth good fruit. I do not then marvel at your talking thus: for you were both ill nurtured, being of wicked ancestors, and you have acquired a bad mind.

And see how carefully, and without any hold for exception, He has expressed His accusations: in that He said not, How can you speak good things, being a generation of vipers? (for this latter is nothing to the former): but, How can you, being evil, speak good things?

But He called them broods of vipers, because they prided themselves on their forefathers. To signify therefore that they had no advantage thereby, He both casts them out from their relationship to Abraham, and assigns them forefathers of kindred disposition, having stripped them of that ground of illustriousness.

For out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks. Here again He indicates His Godhead, which knew their secrets: and that not for words only, but also for wicked thoughts, they shall suffer punishment; and that He knows it all, as God. And He says, that it is possible even for men to know these things; for this is a natural consequence, that when wickedness is overflowing within, its words should be poured forth through the lips. So that when you hear a man speak wicked words, do not suppose only so much wickedness to be in him as the words display, but conjecture the fountain to be much more abundant; for that which is spoken outwardly, is the superabundance of that which is within.

See how vehemently He reprehends them. For if what they had said is so evil, and is of the very mind of the devil, consider the root and well-spring of their words, how far that must reach. And this is naturally the case; for while the tongue through shame often pours not forth all its wickedness at once, the heart having no human witness, fearlessly gives birth to whatever evils it will; for of God it has not much regard. Since then men's sayings come to examination and are set before all, but the heart is concealed; therefore the evils of the former grow less, while those of the latter increase. But when that within is multiplied, all that has been awhile hidden comes forth with a violent gushing. And as persons vomiting strive at first to keep down the humors that force their way out, but, when they are overcome, cast forth much abomination; so do they that devise evil things, and speak ill of their neighbors.

A good man out of his good treasure, says He, brings forth good things, and an evil man out of his evil treasure brings forth evil things.

For think not by any means, says He, that it is so in respect of wickedness only, for in goodness also the same occurs: for there too the virtue within is more than the words without. By which He signified, that both they were to be accounted more wicked than their words indicated, and Himself more perfectly good than His sayings declared. And He calls it a treasure, indicating its abundance.

Then again He fences them in with great terror. For think not at all, says He, that the thing stops at this, that is, at the condemnation of the multitude; nay, for all that do wickedly in such things shall suffer the utmost punishment. And He said not, ye, partly in order to instruct our whole race, partly to make His saying the less burdensome.

But I say unto you, this is His word, that every idle word that men shall speak, they shall give account thereof in the day of judgment. Matthew 12:36

And that is idle, which is not according to the fact, which is false, which has in it unjust accusation; and some say, that which is vain also, for instance, provoking inordinate laughter, or what is filthy, and immodest, and coarse.

For by your words you shall be justified, and by your words you shall be condemned. Matthew 12:37

Do you see how far the tribunal is from invidiousness? How favorable the account required? For not upon what another has said of you, but from what you have yourself spoken, will the Judge give His sentence; which is of all things the very fairest: since surely with you it rests, either to speak, or not to speak.

2. Wherefore not those that are slandered, but the slanderers, have need to be anxious and to tremble. For the former are not constrained to answer for themselves touching the evil things which are said of them, but the latter will, for the evil they have spoken; and over these impends the whole danger. So that the persons censured should be without anxiety, not being to give account of the evil that others have said; but the censurers have cause to be in anxiety, and to tremble, as being themselves to be dragged before the judgment-seat in that behalf. For this is indeed a diabolical snare, and a sin having in it no pleasure, but harm only. Yea, and such an one is laying up an evil treasure in his soul. And if he that has an evil humor in him does himself first reap the fruits of the malady, much more he that is treasuring up in himself what is more bitter than any bile, I mean, wickedness, will suffer the utmost evils, gathering unto himself a grievous disease. And it is evident from the things that He vomits out. For if they pain others so much, far more the soul that gives them birth.

Thus the plotter destroys himself first; just as he that treads on fire burns up himself, and he that smites adamant spites himself, and he that kicks against the pricks draws blood from himself. For somewhat of this kind is he that knows how to suffer wrong, and to bear it manfully; he is adamant, and the pricks, and fire; but he that has used himself to do wrong is feebler than any clay.

Not therefore to suffer wrong is evil, but to do it, and not to know how to bear being wronged. For instance, how great wrongs did David endure! How great wrongs did Saul commit! Which then was the stronger and happier? Which the more wretched and miserable? Was it not he that did wrong? And mark it. Saul had promised, if David should slay the Philistine, to take him for his son-in law, and to give him his daughter with great favor. He slew the Philistine; the other broke his engagements, and so far from bestowing her,

did even go about to slay him. Which then became the more glorious? Was not the one choking with despair and the evil demon, while the other shone brighter than the sun with his trophies, and his loyalty to God? Again, before the choir of the women, was not the one suffocated with envy, while the other enduring all in silence, won all men, and bound them unto himself? And when he had even gotten him into his hands, and spared him, which again was happy? And which wretched? Which was the weaker? Which the more powerful? Was it not this man, who did not avenge himself even justly? And very naturally. For the one had armed soldiers, but the other, righteousness, that is more mighty than ten thousand armies, for his ally and helper. And for this reason, though unjustly conspired against, he endured not to slay him even justly. For he knew by what had taken place before, that not to do evil, but to suffer evil, this is what makes men more powerful. So it is with bodies also, so also with trees.

And what did Jacob? Was he not injured by Laban, and suffered evil? Which then was the stronger? He that had gotten the other into his hands, and dared not touch him, but was afraid and trembling; Genesis 31:29 or he whom we see without arms and soldiers proving more terrible to him than innumerable kings?

But that I may give you another demonstration of what I have said, greater than this, let us again in the instance of David himself try the reasoning on the opposite side. For this man who being injured was so strong, afterwards upon committing an injury became on the contrary the weaker party. At least, when he had wronged Uriah, his position was changed again, and the weakness passed to the wrong doer, and the might to the injured; for he being dead laid waste the other's house. And the one being a king, and alive, could do nothing, but the other, being but a soldier, and slain, turned upside down all that pertained to his adversary.

Would ye that in another way also I should make what I say plainer? Let us look into their case, who avenge themselves even justly. For as to the wrong doers, that they are the most worthless of all men, warring against their own soul; this is surely plain to every one.

But who avenged himself justly, yet kindled innumerable ills, and pierced himself through with many calamities and sorrows? The captain of David's host. For he both stirred up a grievous war, and suffered unnumbered evils; not one whereof would have happened, had he but known how to command himself.

Let us flee therefore from this sin, and neither in words nor deeds do our neighbors wrong. For He said not, If you slander, and summon a court of justice, but simply, If you speak evil, though within yourself, even so shall you suffer the utmost punishment. Though it be true which you have said, though thou have spoken upon conviction, even so shall vengeance come upon you. For not according to what the other has done, but according to what you have spoken, will God pass sentence; for by your words you shall be condemned, says He. Are you not told that the Pharisee also spoke the truth, and affirmed what was manifest to all men, without discovering what was hidden? Nevertheless, he paid the utmost penalty.

But if we ought not to accuse men of things which are acknowledged, much less of those which are disputed; nay, for the offender has a judge. Do not now, I warn you, seize upon the privilege of the Only Begotten. For Him is the throne of judgment reserved.

3. Would you however be a judge? You have a court of judgment which has great profit, and bears no blame. Make consideration, as judge, to sit down upon your conscience, and bring before it all your transgressions, search out the sins of your soul, and exact with strictness the account thereof, and say, wherefore did you dare to do this and that? And if she shun these, and be searching into other men's matters, say to her, Not about these am I judging you, not for these are you come here to plead. For what,

if such a one be a wicked man? Thou, why did you commit this and that offense? Answer for yourself, not to accuse; look to your own matters, do not those of others. And be thou continually urging her to this anxious trial. Then, if she have nothing to say, but shrink back, wear her out with the scourge, like some restless and unchaste handmaid. And this tribunal do thou cause to sit every day, and picture the river of fire, the venomous worm, the rest of the torments.

And permit her not to be with the devil any more, nor bear with her shameless sayings, he comes to me, he plots against me, he tempts me; but tell her, If you were not willing, all that would be to no purpose. And if she say again, I am entangled with a body, I am clothed with flesh, I dwell in the world, I abide on earth; tell her, All these are excuses and pretexts. For such an one too was encompassed with flesh, and such another dwelling in the world, and abiding on earth, is approved; and you yourself too, when you do well, doest it encompassed with flesh. And if she be pained at hearing this, take not off your hand; for she will not die, if you smite her, but you will save her from death. And if she say again, Such an one provoked me, tell her, But it is in your power not to be provoked; often at least you have restrained your anger. And if she say, The beauty of such a woman moved me; tell her, Yet were you able to have mastered yourself. Bring forward those that have got the better, bring forward the first woman, who said, The serpent beguiled me, Genesis 3:13 and yet was not acquitted of the blame.

And when you are searching out these things, let no man be present, let no man disturb you; but as the judges sit under curtains to judge, so do thou too, instead of curtains, seek a time and place of quiet. And when after your supper you are risen up, and art about to lie down, then hold this your judgment; this is the time convenient for you, and the place, your bed, and your chamber. This the prophet likewise commanded, saying, For the things which you say in your hearts, be ye moved to compunction upon your beds. And for small offenses require great satisfaction, that unto the great you may never even approach. If you do this every day, you will with confidence stand at that fearful judgment-seat.

In this way Paul became clean; therefore also he said, For if we judged ourselves, we should not be judged. 1 Corinthians 11:31 Thus did Job cleanse his sons. Job 1:5 For he that offered sacrifices for secret sins, much more did he require an account of such as were manifest.

4. But we do not so, but altogether the contrary. For as soon as we are laid down to rest, we rather think over all our worldly matters; and some introduce unclean thoughts, some usuries, and contracts, and temporal cares.

And if we have a daughter, a virgin, we watch her strictly; but that which is more precious to us than a daughter, our soul, her we suffer to play the harlot and defile herself, introducing to her innumerable wicked thoughts. And whether it be the love of covetousness, or that of luxury, or that of fair persons, or that of wrath, or be it what you will else that is minded to come in, we throw open the doors, and attract and invite it, and help it to defile our soul at its leisure. And what can be more barbarous than this, to overlook our soul that is more precious than all, abused by so many adulterers, and so long companying with them, even until they are sated? Which will never be. So it is, therefore, that when sleep overtakes us, then only do they depart from her; or rather not even then, for our dreams and imaginations furnish her with the same images. Whence also, when day has come, the soul stored with such images often falls away to the actual performance of those fancies.

And thou, while into the apple of your eye you suffer not so much as a grain of dust to enter, do you pass unnoticed your soul, gathering to itself a heap of so great evils? When shall we then be able to clear out

this filth, which we are daily laying up within us? When to cut up the thorns? When to sow the seed? Do you not know that henceforth the time of harvest is at hand? But we have not yet so much as ploughed our fields. If then the husbandman should come and find fault, what shall we say? And what answer shall we make? That no man gave us the seed? Nay, this is sown daily. That no man, then, has cut up the thorns? Nay, every day we are sharpening the sickle. But do the necessary engagements of life distract you? And why have you not crucified yourself to the world? For if he that repays that only, which is given him, is wicked, because he did not double it; he that has wasted even this, what will be said to him? If that person was bound, and cast out where is gnashing of teeth, what shall we have to suffer, who, when numberless motives are drawing us toward virtue, shrink back and are unwilling?

For what is there, that has not enough in it to persuade you? Do you see not the vileness of the world, the uncertainty of life, the toil, the sweat, for things present? What? Is it the case that virtue must be toiled for, but may vice be had without toil? If then both in the one and in the other there is toil, why did you not choose this, which has so great profit?

Or rather, there are some parts of virtue, which are free even from toil. For what kind of toil is it, not to calumniate, not to lie, not to swear, to lay aside our anger against our neighbor? Nay, on the contrary, to do these things is toilsome, and brings much anxiety.

What plea then shall we have, what excuse, not doing right even in these matters? For hereby it is plain, that out of remissness and sloth the more toilsome duties also altogether escape us.

All these things let us consider; let us flee vice, let us choose virtue, that we may attain both unto the good things that are present, and unto those that are to come, 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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