

Homily 43 on Matthew

by St. John Chrysostom

Jesus teaches that the sign of Jonah is a reference to His resurrection, and that the consequences of not believing in Him include greater suffering and punishment.

Scripture: Matthew 12:38-46

Topics: "Unbelief And Consequences", "Repentance And Obedience"

Description

John Chrysostom preaches about the foolishness and wickedness of seeking signs from Jesus despite witnessing many miracles, highlighting the hypocrisy and flattery of the Scribes and Pharisees. Jesus rebukes them for their unbelief and adulterous generation, indicating that the only sign they will receive is the sign of Jonah, alluding to His resurrection. He warns of the severe consequences of continued unbelief and disobedience, comparing the impending punishment to the destruction of Jerusalem and emphasizing the importance of repentance and living a virtuous life to avoid eternal damnation.

Transcript

Matthew 12:38-39.

Then certain of the Scribes and Pharisees answered Him, saying, Master, we would see a sign from You. But He answered and said, An evil and adulterous generation seeks after a sign, and there shall no sign be given to it, but the sign of the Prophet Jonas.

Could then anything be more foolish than these men (not more impious only), who after so many miracles, as though none had been wrought, say, We would see a sign from You? With what intent then did they so speak? That they might lay hold of Him again. For since by His words He had stopped their mouths, once and twice and often, and had checked their shameless tongue, they come to His works again. At which also the evangelist marvelling again, said,

Then certain of the scribes answered Him, asking a sign.

Then, when? When they ought to be stooping before Him, to admire, to be amazed and give way, then they desist not from their wickedness.

And see their words too, teeming with flattery and dissimulation. For they thought to draw Him towards them in that way. And now they insult, now they flatter Him; now calling Him a demoniac, now again Master, both out of an evil mind, how contrary soever the words they speak.

Wherefore also He rebukes them severely. And when they were questioning Him roughly and insulting Him, He reasoned with them gently; when they were flattering; reproachfully, and with great severity; implying that He is superior to either passion, and is neither at the one time moved to anger, nor at the other softened by flattery. And see His reproach, that it is not merely hard words, but contains a demonstration of their wickedness. For what says He?

An evil and adulterous generation seeks after a sign. Now what He says is to this effect: What marvel if you behave so to me who have been hitherto unknown to you when even to the Father, of whom you have had so much experience, you have done the very same? Forsaking Him, you have run unto the devils, drawing to yourselves wicked lovers. With this Ezekiel too was continually upbraiding them.

Now by these sayings He signified Himself to be of one accord with His Father, and them to be doing nothing new; He was also unfolding their secrets, how with hypocrisy and as enemies they were making their demand. Therefore He called them an evil generation, because they have been always ungrateful towards their benefactors; because upon favors they become worse, which belongs to extreme wickedness.

And He called it adulterous, declaring both their former and their present unbelief; whereby He implies Himself again to be equal to the Father, if at least the not believing Him makes it adulterous.

2. Then, after His reproach, what says He? There shall no sign be given to it, but the sign of Jonas the prophet. Now is He striking the first note of the doctrine of His resurrection, and confirming it by the type.

What then? One may say; was no sign given it? None was given to it on asking. For not to bring in them did He work His signs (for He knew them to be hardened), but in order to amend others. Either then this may be said, or that they were not to receive such a sign as that was. For a sign did befall them, when by their own punishment they learned His power. Here then He speaks as threatening, and with this very meaning obscurely conveyed: as if He said, innumerable benefits have I showed forth, none of these has drawn you to me, neither were ye willing to adore my power. You shall know therefore my might by the contrary tokens, when you shall see your city cast down to the ground, the walls also dismantled, the temple become a ruin; when you shall be cast out both from your former citizenship and freedom, and shall again go about everywhere, houseless and in exile. (For all these things came to pass after the cross.) These things therefore shall be to you for great signs. And indeed it is an exceeding great sign, that their ills remain unchanged; that although ten thousand have attempted it, no one has been able to reverse the judgment once gone forth against them.

All this however He says not, but leaves it to after time to make it clear to them, but for the present He is making trial of the doctrine of His resurrection, which they were to come to know by the things which they should afterwards suffer.

For as Jonas, says He, was three days and three nights in the whale's belly, so shall the Son of Man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth. Matthew 22:40 Thus, He said not indeed openly that He should rise again, since they would have even laughed Him to scorn, but He intimated it in such manner, that they might believe Him to have foreknown it. For as to their being aware of it, they say to Pilate, That deceiver said, these are their words, while He was yet alive, After three days I will rise again; and yet we know His disciples were ignorant of this; even as they had been beforehand more void of understanding than these: wherefore also these became self-condemned.

But see how exactly He expresses it, even though in a dark saying. For He said not, In the earth, but, In the heart of the earth; that He might designate His very sepulchre, and that no one might suspect a mere semblance. And for this intent too did He allow three days, that the fact of His death might be believed. For not by the cross only does He make it certain, and by the sight of all men, but also by the time of those days. For to the resurrection indeed all succeeding time was to bear witness; but the cross, unless it had at the time many signs bearing witness to it, would have been disbelieved; and with this disbelief would have gone utter disbelief of the resurrection also. Therefore He calls it also a sign. But had He not been crucified, the sign would not have been given. For this cause too He brings forward the type, that the truth may be believed. For tell me, was Jonah in the whale's belly a mere appearance? Nay, you can not say so. Therefore neither was Christ in the heart of the earth such. For surely the type is not in truth, and the truth in mere appearance. For this cause we every where show forth His death, both in the mysteries, and in baptism, and in all the rest. Therefore Paul also cries with a clear voice, God forbid that I should glory, save in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Whence it is clear, that they who are diseased in Marcion's way are children of the devil, blotting out these truths, to avoid the annulling whereof Christ did so many things, while to have them annulled the devil took such manifold pains: I mean, His cross and His passion.

3. Therefore He said elsewhere also, Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up: John 2:19 and, The days will come when the Bridegroom shall be taken away from them: Matthew 9:15 and here, There shall no sign be given it, but the sign of Jonas the prophet: declaring both that He should die and the ox that knows his owner, and the ass that remembers his crib. Isaiah 1:3 Even so here too, when He had by a comparison set forth their perverseness, He speaks afterwards of their punishment also.

What then can the saying mean? As the possessed, says He, when delivered from that infirmity, should they be at all remiss, draw upon themselves their delusion more grievous than ever: even so is it with you. For before also you were possessed by a devil, when you were worshipping idols, and were slaying your sons to the devils, exhibiting great madness; nevertheless I forsook you not, but cast out that devil by the prophets; and again in my own person I have come, willing to cleanse you more entirely. Since then you will not attend, but have wrecked yourselves in greater wickedness (for to kill prophets was a crime not nearly so great and grievous as to slay Him); therefore your sufferings will be more grievous than the former, those at Babylon, I mean, and in Egypt, and under the first Antiochus. Because what things befell them in the time of Vespasian and Titus, were very far more grievous than those. Wherefore also He said, There shall be great tribulation, such as never was, neither shall be. Matthew 24:21 But not this only does the illustration declare, but that they should be also utterly destitute of all virtue, and more assailable by the power of the devils, than at that time. For then even although they sinned, yet were there also among them such as acted uprightly, and God's providence was present with them, and the grace of the Spirit, tending, correcting, fulfilling all its part; but now of this guardianship too they shall be utterly deprived; so He tells them; so that there is now both a greater scarcity of virtue, and a more intense affliction, and a more tyrannical operation of the devils.

You know accordingly even in our generation, when he who surpassed all in impiety, I mean Julian, was transported with his fury, how they ranged themselves with the heathens, how they courted their party. So that, even if they seem to be in some small degree chastened now, the fear of the emperors makes them quiet; since, if it were not for that, far worse than the former had been their daring. For in all their other evil works they surpass their predecessors; sorceries, magic arts, impurities, they exhibit in great excess. And among the rest, moreover, strong as is the curb which holds them down, they have often made seditions,

and risen up against kings, which has resulted in their being pierced through with the worst of evils.

Where now are they that seek after signs? Let them hear that a considerate mind is needed, and if this be wanting, signs are of no profit. See, for instance, how the Ninevites without signs believed, while these, after so many miracles, grew worse, and made themselves an habitation of innumerable devils, and brought on themselves ten thousand calamities; and very naturally. For when a man, being once delivered from his ills, fails to be corrected, he will suffer far worse than before. Yea, therefore He said, he finds no rest, to indicate, that positively and of necessity such an one will be overtaken by the ambush of the devils. Since surely by these two things he ought to have been sobered, by his former sufferings, and by his deliverance; or rather a third thing also is added, the threat of having still worse to endure. But yet by none of these were they made better.

5. All this might be seasonably said, not of them only, but of us also, when after having been enlightened, Hebrews 6:4 and delivered from our former ills, we again cleave unto the same wickedness, for more grievous also thenceforth will be the punishment of our subsequent sins. Therefore to the sick of the palsy also Christ said, Behold, you are made whole; sin no more, lest a worse thing come unto you; John 5:14 and this to a man who was thirty-eight years in his infirmity. And what, one might ask, was he to suffer worse than this? Something far worse, and more intolerable. For far be it from us, that we should endure as much as we are capable of enduring. For God is at no loss for inflictions. For according to the greatness of His mercy, so also is His wrath.

With this He charges Jerusalem also by Ezekiel. I saw you, says He, polluted in blood; and I washed you, and anointed you; and you had renown for your beauty; and you poured out your fornications, says He, on those who dwell near you, wherefore also the more grievous are His threatenings to you when you sin.

But from hence infer not your punishment only, but also the boundless longsuffering of God. How often at least have we put our hands to the same evil deeds, and yet He suffers long! But let us not be sanguine, but fear; since Pharaoh too, had he been taught by the first plague, would not have experienced the later ones; he would not afterwards have been drowned, his host and all together.

And this I say, because I know many, who like Pharaoh are even now saying, I know not God, Exodus 5:2 and making those that are in their power cleave to the clay and to the bricks. How many, though God bids them assuage their threatening, Ephesians 6:9 cannot bear so much as to relax the toil!

But we have no Red Sea now, to pass through afterwards. But we have a sea of fire, a sea not like that, either in kind or in size, but far greater and fiercer, having its waves of fire, of some strange and horrible fire. A great abyss is there, of most intolerable flame. Since everywhere fire may be seen roving quickly round, like some savage wild beast. And if here this sensible and material fire leaped like a wild beast out of the furnace, and sprang upon those who were sitting without, Daniel 3:22 what will not that other fire do to such as have fallen into it?

Concerning that day, hear the prophets, saying, The day of the Lord is incurable, full of anger and wrath. Isaiah 13:9 For there will be none to stand by, none to rescue, nowhere the face of Christ, so mild and calm. But as those who work in the mines are delivered over to certain cruel men, and see none of their friends, but those only that are set over them; so will it be then also: or rather not so, but even far more grievous. For here it is possible to go unto the king, and entreat, and free the condemned person: but there, no longer; for He permits it not, but they continue in the scorching torment, and in so great anguish, as it is not possible for words to tell. For if, when any are in flames here, no speech can describe their

sharp pangs, much less theirs, who suffer it in that place: since here indeed all is over in a brief point of time, but in that place there is burning indeed, but what is burnt is not consumed.

What then shall we do there? For to my self also do I say these things.

6. But if you, says one, who art our teacher, speak so of yourself, I care no more; for what wonder, should I be punished? Nay, I entreat, let no man seek this consolation; for this is no refreshment at all. For tell me; was not the devil an incorporeal power? Was he not superior to men? Yet he fell away. Is there any one who will derive consolation from being punished along with him? By no means. What of all who were in Egypt? Did they not see those also punished who were in high places, and every house in mourning? Were they then hereby refreshed, and comforted? No surely; and it is manifest by what they did afterwards, as men tortured by some kind of fire, rising up together against the king, and compelling him to cast out the people of the Hebrews.

Yea, and very unmeaning is this saying, to suppose that it gives comfort to be punished with all men, to say, As all, so I too. For why should I speak of hell? Think, I pray you, of those that are seized with gout, how, when they are racked by sharp pain, though you show them ten thousand suffering worse, they do not so much as take it into their mind. For the intensity of their anguish allows not their reason any leisure for thinking of others, and so finding consolation. Let us not then feed ourselves with these cold hopes. For to receive consolation from the ills of our neighbors, takes place in ordinary sufferings; but when the torment is excessive, and all our inward parts full of tempest, and the soul is now come to be unable so much as to know itself, whence shall it derive consolation? So that all these sayings are an absurdity, and fables of foolish children. For this, of which you speak, takes place in dejection, and in moderate dejection, when we are told, the same thing has befallen such an one; but sometimes not even in dejection: now if in that case it has no strength, much less in the anguish and burden unspeakable, which the gnashing of teeth indicates.

And I know that I am galling you, and giving you pain by these words; but what can I do? For I would fain not speak thus, but be conscious of virtue both in myself, and in all of you; but since we are in sins, the more part of us, who will grant me ability to pain you indeed, and to penetrate the understanding of them that hear me? Then might I so be at rest. But now I fear lest any despise my sayings, and their punishments become the greater for their indifferent way of hearing. Since, when a master utters a threat, should one of the fellow-servants hear and make light of his menace, not without punishment would he hasten by him, provoked as he is, but rather it would be a ground for increasing his chastisement. Wherefore I entreat you, let us pierce our own hearts, when we hear His sayings regarding hell. For nothing is more delightful than this discourse, by how much nothing is more bitter than the reality. But how delightful to be told of hell? One may ask. Because it were so far from delight to fall into hell, which result, our words that appear so galling, keep off. And before this they furnish another pleasure: in that they brace up our souls, and make us more reverent, and elevate the mind, and give wings to the thoughts, and cast out the desires that so mischievously beset us; and the thing becomes a cure.

7. Wherefore, to proceed, together with the punishment let me speak also of the shame. For as the Jews shall then be condemned by the Ninevites, so we too by many that seem beneath us now.

Let us imagine then how great the mockery, how great the condemnation; let us imagine, and cast some foundation at length, some door of repentance.

To myself I say these things, to myself first I give this advice, and let no one be angry, as though he were condemned. Let us enter upon the narrow way. How long shall it be luxury? How long sloth? Have we not had enough of indolence, mirth, procrastination? Will it not be the same over again, feasting, and surfeiting, and expense, and wealth, and acquisitions, and buildings? And what is the end? Death. What is the end? Ashes, and dust, and coffins, and worms.

Let us show forth then a new kind of life. Let us make earth, heaven; let us hereby show the Greeks, of how great blessings they are deprived. For when they behold in us good conversation, they will look upon the very face of the kingdom of Heaven. Yea, when they see us gentle, pure from wrath, from evil desire, from envy, from covetousness, rightly fulfilling all our other duties, they will say, If the Christians have become angels here, what will they be after their departure hence? If where they are strangers they shine so bright, how great will they become when they shall have won their native land! Thus they too will be reformed, and the word of godliness will have free course, 2 Thessalonians 3:1 not less than in the apostles' times. For if they, being twelve, converted entire cities and countries; were we all to become teachers by our careful conduct, imagine how high our cause will be exalted. For not even a dead man raised so powerfully attracts the Greek, as a person practising self-denial. At that indeed he will be amazed, but by this he will be profited. That is done, and is past away; but this abides, and is constant culture to his soul.

Let us take heed therefore to ourselves, that we may gain them also. I say nothing burdensome. I say not, do not marry. I say not, forsake cities, and withdraw yourself from public affairs; but being engaged in them, show virtue. Yea, and such as are busy in the midst of cities, I would fain have more approved than such as have occupied the mountains. Wherefore? Because great is the profit thence arising. For no man lights a candle, and sets it under the bushel. Therefore I would that all the candles were set upon the candlestick, that the light might wax great.

Let us kindle then His fire; let us cause them that are sitting in darkness to be delivered from their error. And tell me not, I have a wife, and children belonging to me, and am master of a household, and cannot duly practise all this. For though you had none of these, yet if you be careless, all is lost; though you are encompassed with all these, yet if you be earnest, you shall attain unto virtue. For there is but one thing that is wanted, the preparation of a generous mind; and neither age, nor poverty, nor wealth, nor reverse of fortune, nor anything else, will be able to impede you. Since in fact both old and young, and men having wives, and bringing up children, and working at crafts, and serving as soldiers, have duly performed all that is enjoined. For so Daniel was young, and Joseph a slave, and Aquila wrought at a craft, and the woman who sold purple was over a workshop, and another was the keeper of a prison, and another a centurion, as Cornelius; and another in ill health, as Timothy; and another a runaway, as Onesimus; but nothing proved an hindrance to any of these, but all were approved, both men and women, both young and old, both slaves and free, both soldiers and people.

Let us not then make vain pretexts, but let us provide a thoroughly good mind, and whatsoever we may be, we shall surely attain to virtue, and arrive at the good things to come; by the grace and love towards man of our Lord Jesus Christ, with whom be unto the Father, together with the Holy Ghost, glory, might, honor, now and ever, and world without end. Amen.

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