

Homily 44 on the Acts of the Apostles

by St. John Chrysostom

St. John Chrysostom's Homily emphasizes the importance of humility, fortitude, and vigilance in church leadership, as exemplified by Paul's farewell address to the Ephesian elders.

Topics: "Church Leadership", "Spiritual Warfare"

Description

John Chrysostom preaches to the elders of the Church in Ephesus, emphasizing his humble and tearful service to the Lord amidst trials and temptations. He highlights the importance of testifying repentance toward God and faith in Jesus Christ to both Jews and Greeks. Chrysostom encourages the elders to be vigilant overseers of the Church, warning them of future challenges and heresies that may arise, urging them to feed and protect the flock purchased by God's own blood. He expresses his deep concern and dedication to their spiritual well-being, exhorting them to remain steadfast in the face of trials and to fulfill their ministry with joy and boldness.

Transcript

Acts XX. 17-21

And from Miletus he sent to Ephesus, and called the elders of the Church. And when they had come to him, he said to them, You know, from the first day that I came into Asia, after what manner I have been with you at all seasons, serving the Lord with all humility of mind, and with many tears, and temptations, which befell me by the lying in wait of the Jews: and how I kept back nothing that was profitable unto you, but have showed you, and have taught you publicly, and from house to house, testifying both to the Jews, and also to the Greeks, repentance toward God and faith toward our Lord Jesus Christ.

See him, hasting to sail by, and yet not overlooking them, but taking order for all. Having sent for the rulers, through those he discourses to them (the Ephesians): but it is worthy of admiration, how finding himself under a necessity of saying certain great things about himself, he tries to make the least he can of it (περὶ τὰ μετρίως εἰν). You know. For just as Samuel, when about to deliver up the government to Saul says in their presence, Have I taken anything of your hands?

You are witnesses, and God also 1 Samuel 12:3-5; (so Paul here). David also, when disbelieved, says, I was with the flock keeping my father's sheep: and when the bear came, I scared her away with my hands 1 Samuel 17:34-35: and Paul himself too says to the Corinthians, I have become a fool; you have compelled me. 2 Corinthians 12:11 Nay, God Himself also does the same, not speaking of himself upon

any and every occasion, but only when He is disbelieved, then He brings up His benefits.

Accordingly, see what Paul does here: first he adduces their own testimony: that you may not imagine his words to be mere boasting, he calls the hearers themselves as witnesses of the things he says, since he was not likely to speak lies in their presence. This is the excellence of a teacher, to have for witnesses of his merits those who are his disciples. And what is wonderful, Not for one day nor for two, says he, have I continued doing this. He wishes to cheer them for the future, that they may bravely bear all things, both the parting from him, and the trials about to take place -- just as it was in the case of Moses and Joshua.

And see how he begins: How I have been with you the whole time, serving the Lord with all humility of mind. Observe, what most becomes rulers: hating pride Exodus 18:21, Septuagint, says (Moses): which (qualification) is especially in point for rulers, because to them there is (almost) a necessity of becoming arrogant. This (humility) is the groundwork of all that is good, as in fact Christ says, Blessed are the poor in spirit. Matthew 5:3 And (here) not simply, with humility of mind, but, with all humility.

For there are many kinds of humility, in word and in action, towards rulers, and toward the ruled. Will you that I mention to you some kinds of humility? There are some who are lowly towards those who are lowly, and high towards the high: this is not the character of humility. Some then are such. Then, that he may not seem to be arrogant, he lays a foundation beforehand, removing that suspicion: For, if, says he, I have acted 'with all humility of mind,' it is not from arrogance that I say the things I say.

Then for his gentleness, ever with much condescension making them his fellows. With you, he says, have I been, serving the Lord; he makes the good works common to them with himself: none of it his own peculiar. What? (you will say) why, against God could he possibly bear himself arrogantly? And yet there are many who do bear themselves arrogantly against God: but this man not even against his own disciples. This is the merit of a teacher, by his own achievements of virtue to form the character of his disciples.

Then for his fortitude, upon which also he is very concise. With many tears, he says, and temptations which befell me by the lying in wait of the Jews. Do you see that he grieves at their doings? But here too he seems to show how sympathizing he was: for he suffered for those who were going to perdition, for the doers themselves: what was done to himself, he even rejoiced at it; for he belonged to that band which rejoiced that they were counted worthy to suffer shame for that Name Acts 5:41: and again he says, Now I rejoice in my sufferings for you Colossians 1:24: and again, For our light affliction, which is but for the moment, works for us a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory. 2 Corinthians 4:17.

These things, however, he says, by way of making the least of his merits (μετριζων). But there he shows his fortitude, not so much of daring, as of enduring: I, says he, have been evil entreated, but it was with you: and what is indeed the grievous part of the business, at the hands of Jews. Observe, he puts here both love and fortitude. Mark, here, I pray you, a character of teaching: I kept back nothing, he says, ungrudging fullness, unshrinking promptness -- of what was profitable unto you: because there were things which they did not need to learn.

For as the hiding some things would have been like grudging, so the saying all things would be folly. This is why he adds, that was profitable unto you. But have showed you, and have taught you: have not only said, but also taught: not doing this either as a mere matter of form. For that this is what he means, observe what he says: publicly, and from house to house: thereby representing the exceeding toil, the great earnestness and endurance. Both Jews, and Greeks. Not (addressing myself) to you alone.

Testifying: here, the boldness of speech: and that, even though we do no good, yet we must speak: for this is the meaning of testifying, when we speak to those who do not pay attention: and so the word διαμαρτυρασθαι is for the most part used. I call heaven and earth to witness Deuteronomy 4:26, διαμαρτυρομαι, Moses says: and now Paul himself, Διαμαρτυρομενος both to Jews and Greeks repentance toward God. What do you testify? That they should be careful about their manner of life: that they should repent, and draw near to God.

Both to Jews and Greeks -- for neither did the Jews know Him -- both by reason of their works, he says, repentance towards God, and, by reason that they knew not the Son, he adds, and faith in the Lord Jesus. To what end, then, do you say these things? To what end do you put them in mind of them? What has come of it? Have you anything to lay to their charge? Having first alarmed their feeling, then he adds, And now, behold, I go bound in the Spirit unto Jerusalem, not knowing the things that shall befall me there: save that the Holy Ghost witnesses in every city, saying that bonds and afflictions abide me.

But none of these things move me, neither count I my life dear unto myself, so that I might finish my course with joy, and the ministry, which I have received of the Lord Jesus, to testify the Gospel of the grace of God. Acts 20:22-24. Wherefore says he this? By way of preparing them to be always ready to meet dangers, whether seen or unseen, and in all things to obey the Spirit. He shows that it is for great objects that he is led away from them. Save that the Holy Ghost, he says, in every city witnesses to me saying -- to show that he departs willingly; that (see Hom. xlv. p. 273) you may not imagine it any bond or necessity, when he says, bound in the Spirit-- that in every city bonds and afflictions await me.

Then also he adds this, I count not my life dear, until I shall have fulfilled my course and the ministry, which I received of the Lord Jesus. Until I shall have finished my course, says he, with joy. Do you mark how (clearly) these were the words not of one lamenting, but of one who forbore to make the most (of his troubles) (μετριζοντος), of one who would instruct those (whom he addressed), and sympathize with them in the things which were befalling He says not, I grieve indeed, but one must needs bear it: but, says he, of none of those things do I make account, neither do I have, i.e. account my life dear to me.

Why this again? Not to extol himself, but to teach them, as by the former words, humility, so by these, fortitude and boldness: I have it not precious, i.e. I love it not before this: I account it more precious to finish my course, to testify. And he says not, to preach, to teach -- but what says he? to testify (διαμαρτυρασθαι)-- the Gospel of the grace of God. He is about to say something more uncomfortable (φορτικτερον), namely, I am pure from the blood of all men (because on my part) there is nothing lacking: he is about to lay upon them the whole weight and burden: so he first mollifies their feelings by saying, And now behold I know that you shall see my face no more.

The consolation is twofold: both that my face you shall see no more, for in heart I am with you: and that it was not they alone (who should see him no more): for, you shall see my face no more, you all, among whom I have gone about preaching the Kingdom. So that he may well (say), "Wherefore I take you to record (read διμαρτ. for διαμαρτ.) -- seeing I shall be with you no more -- that I am pure from the blood of all men. Acts 20:26 Do you mark how he terrifies them, and troubled and afflicted as their souls are, how hard he rubs them (πιτυβει)?

But it was necessary. For I have not shunned, he says, to declare unto you all the counsel of God. Acts 20:27 Why then, he who does not speak, has blood to answer for: that is, murder! Nothing could be more terrifying than this. He shows that they also, if they do it not, have blood to answer for. So, whereas he

seems to be justifying himself, in fact he is terrifying them. Take heed therefore unto yourselves, and to all the flock, over the which the Holy Ghost has made you overseers (or, bishops) to feed the Church of God (see note 3), which He has purchased with His own blood.

Acts 20:28 Do you mark? He enjoins them two things. Neither success in bringing others right of itself is any gain -- for, I fear, he says, lest by any means, when I have preached to others, I myself should be a cast-away 1 Corinthians 9:27; nor the being diligent for one's self alone. For such an one is selfish, and seeks his own good only, and is like to him who buried his talent. Take heed to yourselves: this he says, not because our own salvation is more precious than that of the flock, but because, when we take heed to ourselves, then the flock also is a gainer.

In which the Holy Ghost has made you overseers, to feed the Church of God. See, it is from the Spirit you have your ordination. This is one constraint: then he says, To feed the Church of the Lord. Lo! Another obligation: the Church is the Lord's. And a third: which He has purchased with His own blood. It shows how precious the concern is; that the peril is about no small matters, seeing that even His own blood He spared not. He indeed, that he might reconcile those who were enemies, poured out even His blood: but thou, even when they have become your friends, are not able to retain them.

For I know this, that after my departing shall grievous wolves enter in among you, not sparing the flock. Acts 20:29 Again he engages (■ πιστρ■φει) them from another quarter, from the things which should come after: as when he says, We wrestle not against flesh and blood. After my departing, he says, grievous wolves shall enter in among you Ephesians 6:12; twofold the evil, both that he himself would not be present, and that others would assail them. Then why depart, if you know this beforehand?

The Spirit draws me, he says. Both wolves, and grievous, not sparing the flock; and what is worse, even from among your own selves: the grievous thing (this), when the war is moreover an intestine war. The matter is exceeding serious, for it is the Church of the Lord: great the peril for with blood He redeemed it: mighty the war, and twofold. Also of your own selves shall men arise, speaking perverse things, to draw away disciples after them. Acts 20:30 How then? What comfort shall there be?

Therefore watch, and remember, that by the space of three years I ceased not to warn every one night and day with tears. Acts 20:31 See how many strong expressions are here: with tears, and night and day, and every one. For it was not that if he saw many, then he came in (to the work), but even were it for a single soul, he was capable of doing everything (for that one soul). So it was, in fact, that he compacted them together (συνεκρ■τησεν) (so firmly as he did). Enough done on my part: three years have I remained: they had establishing enough, he says; enough of roofing.

With tears, he says. Do you see that the tears were on this account? The bad man grieves not: grieve thou: perhaps he will grieve also. As, when the sick man sees his physician partaking of food, he also is incited to do the same: so likewise here, when he sees you weeping, he is softened: he will be a good and great man.

(Recapitulation.) Not knowing, he says, the things that shall befall me. (v. 22, 23.) Then is this why you depart? By no means; on the contrary (I know that), bonds and afflictions await me. That (there are) trials, I know, but of what kind I know not: which was more grievous. But none of these things move me Acts 20:24: for do not suppose that I say these things as lamenting them: for I hold not my own life dear. It is to raise up their minds that he says all this, and to persuade them not only not to flee, but also to bear nobly.

Therefore it is that he calls it a course and a ministry, on the one hand, showing it to be glorious from its being a race, on the other, showing what was due from it, as being a ministry. I am a minister: nothing more. Having comforted them, that they might not grieve that he was so evil entreated, and having told them that he endured those things with joy, and having shown the fruits of them, then (and not before) he brings in that which would give them pain, that he may not overwhelm their minds.

And now behold, etc. Wherefore I take you to record, that I am pure from the blood of all men, because I have not shrunk from declaring unto you the whole counsel of God Acts 20:25-27: * * * that (counsel) which concerns the present matter. For I know this, etc. Acts 20:29 What then, someone might say, thinkest you yourself so great? If you should depart, are we to die? I say not this, he replies, that my absence causes this: but what? That there should rise up against you certain of another sort: he says not, because of my departing, but after my departing: that is, after his going on his journey.-- And yet this thing has happened already: much more (then will it happen) hereafter.

Then we have the cause, to draw away disciples after them. Acts 20:30. That there are heresies, this is the cause, and no other than this. Then comes also consolation. But if He purchased it with His own blood, He will assuredly stand forward in its defense. Night and day, he says, I cease not to warn with tears. Acts 20:31 This might well be said in our case also: and though the speech seems to refer peculiarly to the teachers, it is common also to the disciples. For what, though I speak and exhort and weep night and day, while the disciple obeys not?

Therefore it is that he says, I take you to record: since also himself says, I am pure from the blood of all men: for I have not shunned to declare unto you. (v. 26, 27.) Why then, this only is to be a teacher, to declare, to preach, to instruct, shrink from nothing, to exhort night and day: but if, while one is doing all this, nothing comes of it, you know what remains. Then you have another justification: I am pure from the blood of all men. Think not that these words are spoken to us only: for indeed this speech is addressed to you also, that you should attend to the things spoken, that you should not start away from the hearing.

What can I do? Lo! each day I rend myself with crying out, Depart from the theatres: and many laugh at us: Desist from swearing, from covetousness: numberless are our exhortations, and there is none to hear us. But I do not discourse during night? Fain would I do this also in the night time, and at your tables, if it were possible that one could be divided into ten thousand pieces, so as to be present with you and discourse. But if once in the week we call to you, and you shrink back, and some of you do not even come here, and you that do come, depart having received no profit -- what shall we do?

Many I know even sneer at us, that we are forever discoursing about the same things: so wearisome are we become to you by very satiety. But for this not we are to blame, but the hearers may thank themselves. For he indeed who is making good progress, rejoices to hear the same things always; it seems to be his praises that he hears spoken: but he who does not wish to get on, seems even to be annoyed, and though he hear the same thing but twice, it seems to him that he is hearing it often.

I am pure, he says, from the blood of all men. Acts 20:26 This was fit and proper for Paul to say, but we dare not say it, conscious as we are of numberless faults. Wherefore for him the ever vigilant, ever at hand, the man enduring all things for the sake of the salvation of his disciples, it was fit and proper to say this: but we must say that of Moses, The Lord was angry with me for your sakes Deuteronomy 3:26, because ye lead us also into many sins. For when we are dispirited at seeing you make no progress, is not the greater part of our strength struck down?

For what, I ask you has been done? Lo! By the grace of God we also have now passed the space of three years, not indeed night and day exhorting you, but doing this, often every third day, or every seventh. What more has come of it? We accuse, we rebuke, we weep, we are in anguish, although not openly, yet in heart. But those (inward) tears are far more bitter than these (outward ones): for these indeed bring a kind of relief to the feelings of the sorrowful, whereas those aggravate it, and bind it fast.

Since when there is any cause of grief, and one cannot give vent to the sorrow, lest he should seem to be vainglorious, think what he suffers! Were it not that people would tax me with excessive love of display, you would see me each day shedding fountains of tears: but to those my chamber is witness, and my hours of solitude. For believe me I have (at times) despaired of my own salvation, but from my mourning on your account, I have not even leisure to bemoan my own evils: so entirely are you all in all to me.

And whether I perceive you to be advancing, then, for very delight, I am not sensible of my own evils: or whether I see you not advancing, such is my grief, I again dismiss my own cares from my thoughts: brightening up on account of your good things, though I myself have evils without number, and saddened on account of your painful things, though my own successes are without number. For what hope is there for the teacher, when his flock is destroyed? What kind of life, what kind of expectation is there for him?

With what sort of confidence will he stand up before God? What will he say? For grant that he has nothing laid to his charge, has no punishment to suffer, but is pure from the blood of all men: yet even so will he suffer a grief incurable: since fathers also though they be not liable to be called to account for their children's sins, nevertheless have grief and vexation. And this profits them nothing, nor shields them (προσταται). For it is they that watch for our souls, as those that must give account.

Hebrews 13:17 This seems to be a fearful thing: to me this gives no concern after your destruction. For whether I give account, or not, it is no profit to me. Might it be, that you were saved, and I to give account because of you: ye saved, and I charged with not having fulfilled my part! For my anxiety is not that you should be saved through me as the means, but only that you should be saved, no matter by what person as the instrument. You know not the pangs of spiritual childbirth, how overpowering they are; how he who is in travail with this birth, would rather be cut into ten thousand pieces, than see one of those to whom he has given birth perishing and undone.

Whence shall we persuade you? By no other argument indeed, but by what has been done, in all that regards you we shall clear ourselves. We too shall be able to say, that in nothing have we shrunk from declaring to you the whole truth: nevertheless we grieve: and that we do grieve, is manifest from the numberless plans we lay and contrivances we devise. And yet we might say to ourselves, What matters it to me? I have done my part, I am pure from (their) blood: but this is not enough for comfort.

If we could tear open our heart, and show it to you, you would see with what largeness it holds (you) within it, both women and children and men; for such is the power of love, that it makes the soul more spacious than the heaven. Receive us, says (Paul): we have wronged no man, you are not straitened in us. 2 Corinthians 7:2; 6:12 He had all Corinth in his heart, and says, You are not straitened: be ye also enlarged 2 Corinthians 6:13; but I myself could not say this, for I well know, that you both love me and receive me.

But what is the profit either from my love or from yours, when the things pertaining to God thrive not in us? It is a ground for greater sorrow, an occasion of worse mischief (λαμψ, al. λαμψ). I have nothing to lay to your charge: for I bear you record, that, if it had been possible, you would have plucked out your own eyes, and have given them to me. Galatians 4:15 We yearn not only to give you the Gospel, but also our

own souls. 1 Thessalonians 2:8 We are loved and we love (you): but this is not the question.

But let us love Christ, for the first commandment is, You shall love the Lord your God: and the second is like it, And your neighbor as yourself. Matthew 22:37-39 We have the second, we need the first: need the first, exceedingly, both I and you. We have it, but not as we ought. Let us love Him: ye know how great a reward is laid up for them that love Christ: let us love Him with fervor of soul, that, enjoying his goodwill, we may escape the stormy waves of this present life, and be found worthy to obtain the good things promised to them that love Him, through the grace and mercy of His only-begotten Son, with whom to the Father, together with the Holy Ghost, be glory, might, honor, now and ever, world without end. Amen.

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