

Homily 46 on Matthew

by St. John Chrysostom

St. John Chrysostom's Homily 46 on Matthew explores the coexistence of good and evil, the importance of vigilance against heresy, and the transformative power of the gospel.

Scripture: Matthew 5:16, Matthew 10:9, Matthew 13:24, Matthew 13:31, Matthew 13:33, Matthew 19:27, Acts 8:10, 1 Corinthians 12:31, 1 Corinthians 16:13

Topics: "Discerning False Teachings", "Christian Virtue"

Description

John Chrysostom preaches on the parable of the wheat and tares, emphasizing the presence of false teachings and corrupters within the Kingdom of Heaven, warning against the devil's craft of mixing error with truth to deceive. He highlights the need for continual watchfulness and discernment to protect the purity of the faith. Chrysostom urges believers to focus on living virtuous lives, showing kindness, charity, and self-denial, rather than seeking after miracles as a sign of faith. He stresses that true greatness comes from imitating the apostles in forsaking worldly desires and dedicating oneself to Christ, ultimately leading to eternal life.

Transcript

Matt. XIII. 24-30.

Another parable put He forth unto them, saying, The Kingdom of Heaven is likened unto a man which sowed good seed in his field. But while men slept, his enemy came and sowed tares among the wheat, and went his way. But when the blade was sprung up, and brought forth fruit, then appeared the tares. So the servants of the householder came and said to him, Sir, did you not sow good seed in your field? Whence then has it tares? He said to them, An enemy has done this. The servants said to him, Will you then that we go and gather them up? But he said, Nay, lest while you gather up the tares, you root up also the wheat with them. Let both therefore grow together until the harvest.

What is the difference between this, and the parable before it? There He speaks of them that have not at all holden with Him, but have started aside, and have thrown away the seed; but here He means the societies of the heretics. For in order that not even this might disturb His disciples, He foretells it also, after having taught them why He speaks in parables. The former parable then means their not receiving Him; this, their receiving corrupters. For indeed this also is a part of the devil's craft, by the side of the truth always to bring in error, painting thereon many resemblances, so as easily to cheat the deceivable. Therefore He calls it not any other seed, but tares; which in appearance are somewhat like wheat.

Then He mentions also the manner of his device. For while men slept, says He. It is no small danger, which He hereby suspends over our rulers, to whom especially is entrusted the keeping of the field; and not the rulers only, but the subjects too.

And He signifies also that the error comes after the truth, which the actual event testifies. For so after the prophets, were the false prophets; and after the apostles, the false apostles; and after Christ, Antichrist. For unless the devil see what to imitate, or against whom to plot, he neither attempts, nor knows how. Now then also, having seen that one brought forth a hundred, another sixty, another thirty, he proceeds after that another way. That is, not having been able to carry away what had taken root, nor to choke, nor to scorch it up, he conspires against it by another craft, privily casting in his own inventions.

And what difference is there, one may say, between them that sleep, and them that resemble the wayside? That in the latter case he immediately caught it away; yea, he suffered it not even to take root; but here more of his craft was needed.

And these things Christ says, instructing us to be always wakeful. For, says He, though thou quite escape those harms, there is yet another harm. For as in those instances the wayside, and the rock, and the thorns, so here again sleep occasions our ruin; so that there is need of continual watchfulness. Wherefore He also said, He that endures to the end, the same shall be saved. Matthew 10:22

Something like this took place even at the beginning. Many of the prelates, I mean, bringing into the churches wicked men, disguised heresiarchs, gave great facility to the laying that kind of snare. For the devil needs not even to take any trouble, when he has once planted them among us.

And how is it possible not to sleep? One may say. Indeed, as to natural sleep, it is not possible; but as to that of our moral faculty, it is possible. Wherefore Paul also said, Watch ye, stand fast in the faith. 1 Corinthians 16:13

After this He points out the thing to be superfluous too, not hurtful only; in that, after the land has been tilled, and there is no need of anything, then this enemy sows again; as the heretics also do, who for no other cause than vainglory inject their proper venom.

And not by this only, but by what follows likewise, He depicts exactly all their acting. For, When the blade was sprung up, says He, and brought forth fruit, then appeared the tares also; which kind of thing these men also do. For at the beginning they disguise themselves; but when they have gained much confidence, and some one imparts to them the teaching of the word, then they pour out their poison.

But wherefore does He bring in the servants, telling what has been done? That He may pronounce it wrong to slay them.

And He calls him an enemy, because of his harm done to men. For although the despite is against us, in its origin it sprang from his enmity, not to us, but to God. Whence it is manifest, that God loves us more than we love ourselves.

And see from another thing also, the malicious craft of the devil. For he did not sow before this, because he had nothing to destroy, but when all had been fulfilled, that he might defeat the diligence of the Husbandman; in such enmity against Him did he constantly act.

And mark also the affection of the servants. I mean, what haste they are in at once to root up the tares, even though they do it indiscreetly; which shows their anxiety for the crop, and that they are looking to one thing only, not to the punishment of that enemy, but to the preservation of the seed sown. For of course this other is not the urgent consideration.

Wherefore how they may for the present extirpate the mischief, this is their object. And not even this do they seek absolutely, for they trust not themselves with it, but await the Master's decision, saying, Will You?

What then does the Master? He forbids them, saying, Lest haply ye root up the wheat with them. And this He said, to hinder wars from arising, and blood and slaughter. For it is not right to put a heretic to death, since an implacable war would be brought into the world. By these two reasons then He restrains them; one, that the wheat be not hurt; another, that punishment will surely overtake them, if incurably diseased. Wherefore, if you would have them punished, yet without harm to the wheat, I bid you wait for the proper season.

But what means, Lest ye root up the wheat with them? Either He means this, If you are to take up arms, and to kill the heretics, many of the saints also must needs be overthrown with them; or that of the very tares it is likely that many may change and become wheat. If therefore ye root them up beforehand, you injure that which is to become wheat, slaying some, in whom there is yet room for change and improvement. He does not therefore forbid our checking heretics, and stopping their mouths, and taking away their freedom of speech, and breaking up their assemblies and confederacies, but our killing and slaying them.

But mark thou His gentleness, how He not only gives sentence and forbids, but sets down reasons.

What then, if the tares should remain until the end? Then I will say to the reapers, Gather together first the tares, and bind them in bundles to burn them. Matthew 13:30 He again reminds them of John's words, Matthew 3:12 introducing Him as judge; and He says, So long as they stand by the wheat, we must spare them, for it is possible for them even to become wheat but when they have departed, having profited nothing, then of necessity the inexorable punishment will overtake them. For I will say to the reapers, says He, Gather ye together first the tares. Why, first? That these may not be alarmed, as though the wheat were carried off with them. And bind them in bundles to burn them, but gather the wheat into my barn.

2. Another parable put He forth unto them, saying, The Kingdom of Heaven is like to a grain of mustard seed.

That is, since He had said, that of the crop three parts are lost, and but one saved, and in the very part again which is saved so great damage ensues; lest they should say, And who, and how many will be the faithful? this fear again He removes, by the parable of the mustard seed leading them on to belief, and signifying that in any case the gospel shall be spread abroad.

Therefore He brought forward the similitude of this herb, which has a very strong resemblance to the subject in hand; Which indeed is the least, He says, of all seeds, but when it is grown, it is the greatest among herbs, and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and lodge in the branches thereof.

Thus He meant to set forth the most decisive sign of its greatness. Even so then shall it be with respect to the gospel too, says He. Yea, for His disciples were weakest of all, and least of all; but nevertheless,

because of the great power that was in them, It has been unfolded in every part of the world.

After this He adds the leaven to this similitude, saying,

The Kingdom of Heaven is like leaven, which a woman took, and hid in three measures of meal, until the whole was leavened.

For as this converts the large quantity of meal into its own quality, even so shall you convert the whole world.

And see His wisdom, in that He brings in things natural, implying that as the one cannot fail to take place, so neither the other. For say not this to me: What shall we be able to do, twelve men, throwing ourselves upon so vast a multitude? Nay, for this very thing most of all makes your might conspicuous, that you mix with the multitude and are not put to flight. As therefore the leaven then leavens the lump when it comes close to the meal, and not simply close, but so as to be actually mixed with it (for He said not, put, simply, but hid); so also ye, when you cleave to your enemies, and are made one with them, then shall you get the better of them. And as the leaven, though it be buried, yet is not destroyed, but little by little transmutes all into its own condition; of like sort will the event be here also, with respect to the gospel. Fear ye not then, because I said there would be much injurious dealing: for even so shall you shine forth, and get the better of all.

But by three measures, here, He meant many, for He is wont to take this number for a multitude.

And marvel not, if discoursing about the kingdom, He made mention of a little seed and of leaven; for He was discoursing with men inexperienced and ignorant, and such as needed to be led on by those means. For so simple were they, that even after all this, they required a good deal of explanation.

Where now are the children of the Greeks? Let them learn Christ's power, seeing the verity of His deeds, and on either ground let them adore Him, that He both foretold so great a thing, and fulfilled it. Yea, for it is He that put the power into the leaven. With this intent He mingled also with the multitude those who believe in Him, that we might impart unto the rest of our wisdom. Let no one therefore reprove us for being few. For great is the power of the gospel, and that which has been once leavened, becomes leaven again for what remains. And as a spark, when it has caught in timber, makes what has been burnt up already increase the flame, and so proceeds to the rest; even so the gospel likewise. But He said not fire, but leaven. Why might this be? Because in that case the whole effect is not of the fire, but partly of the timber too that is kindled, but in this the leaven does the whole work by itself.

3. Now if twelve men leavened the whole world, imagine how great our baseness, in that when we being so many are not able to amend them that remain; we, who ought to be enough for ten thousand worlds, and to become leaven to them. But they, one may say, were apostles. And what then? Were they not partakers with you? Were they not brought up in cities? Did they not enjoy the same benefits? Did they not practise trades? What, were they angels? What, came they down from Heaven?

But they had signs, it will be said. It was not the signs that made them admirable. How long shall we use those miracles as cloaks for our own remissness? Behold the choir of the Saints, that they shone not by those miracles. Why, many who had actually cast out devils, because they wrought iniquity, instead of being admired, did even incur punishment.

And what can it be then, he will say, that showed them great? Their contempt of wealth, their despising glory, their freedom from worldly things. Since surely, had they wanted these qualities, and been slaves of their passions, though they had raised ten thousand dead, so far from doing any good, they would even have been accounted deceivers. Thus it is their life, so bright on all sides, which also draws down the grace of the Spirit.

What manner of miracle did John work, that he fixed on himself the attention of so many cities? For as to the fact that he did no wondrous works, hear the evangelist, saying, John did no miracle. And whence did Elias become admirable? Was it not from his boldness towards the king? From his zeal towards God? From his voluntary poverty? From his garment of sheep's skin, and his cave, and his mountains? For his miracles he did after all these. And as to Job, what manner of miracle did he work in sight of the devil, that he was amazed at him? No miracle indeed, but a life that shone and displayed an endurance firmer than any adamant. What manner of miracle did David, yet being young, that God should say, I have found David the son of Jesse, a man after my own heart? Acts 13:22 And Abraham, and Isaac, and Jacob, what dead body did they raise? What leper did they cleanse? Do you not know that the miracles, except we be sober, do even harm in many cases? Thus many of the Corinthians were severed one from another; thus many of the Romans were carried away with pride; thus was Simon cast out. Thus he, who at a certain time had a desire to follow Christ, was rejected, when he had been told, The foxes have holes, and the birds of the air nests. Matthew 8:20 For each of these, one aiming at the wealth, another at the glory, which the miracles bring, fell away and perished. But care of practice, and love of virtue, so far from generating such a desire, does even take it away when it exists.

And Himself too, when He was making laws for His own disciples, what said He? Do miracles, that men may see you? By no means. But what? Let your light shine before men, that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father which is in Heaven. Matthew 5:16 And to Peter again He said not, If you love me, do miracles, but feed my sheep. John 21:16 And whereas He everywhere distinguishes him with James and John above all the rest, for what, I pray you, did He distinguish them? For their miracles? Nay, all alike cleansed the lepers, and raised the dead; and to all alike He gave that authority.

Whence then had these the advantage? From the virtue in their soul. Do you see how everywhere practice is required, and the proof by works? For by their fruits, says He, you shall know them. Matthew 7:16 And what commends our own life? Is it indeed a display of miracles, or the perfection of an excellent conversation? Very evidently it is the second; but as to the miracles, they both have their origin from hence, and terminate herein. For both he that shows forth an excellent life, draws to himself this gift, and he that receives the gift, receives it for this end, that he may amend other men's lives. Since even Christ for this end wrought those miracles, that having made Himself thereby credible, and drawn men unto Him, He might bring virtue into our life. Wherefore also He lays more stress of the two on this. For He is not at all satisfied with the signs only, but He also threatens hell, and promises a kingdom, and lays down those startling laws, and all things He orders to this end, that He may make us equal to the angels.

And why say I, that Christ does all for this object? Why, even thou, should one give you your choice, to raise dead men by His name, or to die for His name; which I pray you, of the two would you rather accept? Is it not quite plain, the latter? And yet the one is a miracle, the other but a work. And what, if one offered you to make grass gold, or to be able to despise all wealth as grass, would you not rather accept this latter? And very reasonably. For mankind would be attracted by this more than any way. For if they saw the grass changed into gold, they would covet themselves also to acquire that power, as Simon did, and the love of money would be increased in them; but if they saw us all contemning and neglecting gold, as

though it were grass, they would long ago have been delivered from this disease.

4. Do you see that our practice has more power to do good? By practice I mean, not your fasting, nor yet your strewing sackcloth and ashes under you, but if you despise wealth, as it ought to be despised; if you be kindly affectioned, if you give your bread to the hungry, if you control anger, if you cast out vainglory, if you put away envy. So He Himself used to teach: for, Learn of me, says He, for I am meek and lowly in heart. Matthew 11:29 He did not say, for I fasted, although surely He might have spoken of the forty days, yet He says not this; but, I am meek and lowly in heart. And again, when sending them out, He said not, Fast, but, Eat of all that is set before you. With regard to wealth, however, He required of them great strictness, saying, Provide not gold, or silver, or brass, in your purses. Matthew 10:9

And all this I say, not to depreciate fasting, God forbid, but rather highly to commend it. But I grieve when other duties being neglected, you think it enough for salvation, having but the last place in the choir of virtue. For the greatest thing is charity, and moderation, and almsgiving; which hits a higher mark even than virginity.

Wherefore, if you desire to become equal to the apostles, there is nothing to hinder you. For to have arrived at this virtue only suffices for your not at all falling short of them. Let no one therefore wait for miracles. For though the evil spirit is grieved, when he is driven out of a body, yet much more so, when he sees a soul delivered from sin. For indeed this is his great power. Acts 8:10 This power caused Christ to die, that He might put an end to it. Yea, for this brought in death; by reason of this all things have been turned upside down. If then thou remove this, you have cut out the nerves of the devil, you have bruised his head, you have put an end to all his might, you have scattered his host, you have exhibited a sign greater than all signs.

The saying is not mine, but the blessed Paul's. For when he had said, Covet earnestly the best gifts, and yet show I unto you a more excellent way; 1 Corinthians 12:31 he did not speak next of a sign, but of charity, the root of all our good things. If then we practise this, and all the self-denial that flows from it, we shall have no need of signs; even as on the other hand, if we do not practise it, we shall gain nothing by the signs.

Bearing in mind then all this, let us imitate those things whereby the apostles became great. And whereby did they become great? Hear Peter, saying, Behold we have forsaken all, and followed You; what shall we have therefore? Matthew 19:27 Hear also Christ saying to them, You shall sit upon twelve thrones, and, every one that has forsaken houses, or brethren, or father, or mother, shall receive an hundredfold in this world, and shall inherit everlasting life. From all worldly things, therefore, let us withdraw ourselves, and dedicate ourselves to Christ, that we may both be made equal to the apostles according to His declaration, and may enjoy eternal life; 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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