

Homily 46 on the Acts of the Apostles

by St. John Chrysostom

St. John Chrysostom's homily emphasizes the balance between adhering to Jewish law and the freedom found in Christ, as exemplified by Paul's actions in Jerusalem.

Scripture: Matthew 5:16, Acts 21:20-37, 1 Corinthians 11:19, 2 Corinthians 8:21, Galatians 1:10, Galatians 2:11

Topics: "Christian Humility", "Persevering Faith"

Description

John Chrysostom preaches on Paul's actions in Acts 21, highlighting his humility and willingness to accommodate Jewish customs to avoid unnecessary offense. Paul's actions demonstrate the importance of considering others' sensitivities without compromising core beliefs. Despite facing false accusations and threats, Paul remains steadfast in his faith and mission, showing resilience in the face of adversity. Chrysostom emphasizes the need to prioritize God's approval over human opinions and to navigate situations with wisdom and discernment to avoid causing unnecessary stumbling blocks. The sermon underscores the balance between accommodating others for the sake of peace and standing firm in one's convictions for the sake of truth.

Transcript

Acts XXI. 18, 19

And the day following Paul went in with us unto James: and all the elders were present. And when he had saluted them, he declared particularly what things God had wrought among the Gentiles by his ministry.

This was the Bishop of Jerusalem; and to him (Paul) is sent on an earlier occasion. This (James) was brother of the Lord; a great and admirable man. (To him, it says,) Paul entered in with us. Mark the (Bishop's) unassuming behavior: and the elders (were present). Again Paul relates to them the things relating to the Gentiles, not indulging in vainglory, God forbid, but wishing to show forth the mercy of God, and to fill them with great joy. Acts 15 See accordingly: when they heard it, it says, they glorified God,-- not praised nor admired Paul: for in such wise had he narrated, as referring all to Him -- and said to him, You see, brother, how many thousands of Jews there are which believed.

Observe with what modest deference they too speak: they said to him: not (James) as Bishop discourses authoritatively, but they take Paul as partner with them in their view; You see, brother: as though immediately and at the outset apologizing for themselves, and saying, We did not wish this. Do you see the necessity of the thing? 'how many thousands,' say they, 'of Jews there are which' have come together.

And they say not, how many thousands we have made catechumens, but, there are.

And these, say they, are all zealous for the law. Acts 21:20 Two reasons -- the number of them, and their views. For neither had they been few, would it have been right to despise them: nor, if they were many and did not all cling to the law, would there have been need to make much account of them. Then also a third cause is given: And they all, it says, have been informed of you-- they say not, have heard, but κατηχθησαν, that is, so they have believed, and have been taught, that you teach apostasy from Moses to all the Jews which are among the Gentiles, by telling them not to circumcise their children, neither to walk after the customs.

Acts 21:21 What is it therefore? The multitude must needs come together: for they will hear that you have come. Do therefore this that we say to you (v. 22, 23): they say these things as advising, not as commanding. We have four men which have a vow on them; them take, and purify yourself with them, and be at charges with them. Make your defense in act, not in word -- that they may shave themselves, it says, and all may know that those things, whereof they were informed concerning you, are nothing; but that you yourself also walkest orderly, and keepest the law (v. 23, 24): they say not, teachest, but, of superabundance, that you yourself also keepest the law.

For of course not this was the matter of chief interest, whether he did not teach others, but, that he did himself observe the law. What then (he might say), if the Gentiles should learn it? I shall injure them. How so? Say they, seeing that even we, the teachers of the Jews, have sent unto them. As touching the Gentiles which believe, we have written and concluded that they observe no such thing, save only that they keep themselves from things offered to idols, and from blood, and from strangled, and from fornication.

Acts 21:25 Here with a kind of remonstrance (■ ντρεπτικ■ς), As we, say they, commanded them, although we are preachers to the Jews, so do thou, although a preacher to the Gentiles, cooperate with us. Observe Paul: he does not say, Well, but I can bring forward Timothy, whom I circumcised: well, but I can satisfy them by what I have to say (of myself): but he complied, and did all: for in fact thus was it expedient (to do). teachest apostasy from Moses, etc., was true or not.

There certainly was truth in the charge. Paul maintained that the Mosaic law, as such, was not binding upon Christians. But it was against those who made it a yoke of bondage upon believers, that he waged a polemic. Where there was no imposition of the law as necessary to salvation, Paul in no way antagonized it, but rather trusted to the free working of the principles of the gospel to gradually accomplish the abolition of its rites and forms. The truth seems to be that Paul was tolerant of Judaism where it did not impose burdens upon believers or threaten the completeness and sufficiency of the gospel; he even accommodated himself to Jewish requirements, as in shaving his head at Cenchrea and circumcising Timothy.

He never unnecessarily opposed the law of Moses, but taught that it had been fulfilled in Christ. So far as he accommodated himself to its ceremonies, it was only that he might remove prejudice and so win the Jews to Christ.--G.B.S.}--> For it was one thing to take (effectual) measures for clearing himself, and another to have done these things without the knowledge of any (of the parties). It was a step open to no suspicion, the fact of his even bearing the expenses. Then Paul took the men, and the next day purifying himself with them entered into the temple, signifying the accomplishment of the days of purification, until that an offering should be offered for every one of them.

Acts 21:26 Signifying, διαγγελλων, i.e. καταγγελλων, publicly notifying: so that it was he who made himself conspicuous. And when the seven days were about to be completed, the Jews from Asia -- for (his arrival) most keeps times with theirs -- when they saw him in the temple, stirred up all the people, and laid hands on him, crying out, Men of Israel, help: This is the man, that teaches all men everywhere against the people, and the law, and this place: and further brought Greeks also into the temple, and has polluted this holy place. (v. 27, 28.)

Mark their habitual conduct, how turbulent we everywhere find it, how men who with or without reason make a clamor in the midst. For they had seen before with him in the city Trophimus an Ephesian, whom they supposed that Paul had brought into the temple. And all the city was moved, and the people ran together: and they took Paul, and drew him out of the temple and immediately the doors were shut. (v. 29, 30.) Men of Israel, it says, help: this is the man that (teaches) against the people, and the law, and this place.-- the things which most trouble them, the Temple and the Law.

And Paul does not tax the Apostles with being the cause of these things to him. And they drew him, it says, out of the Temple: and the doors were shut. For they wished to kill him; and therefore were dragging him out, to do this with greater security. And as they went about to kill him, tidings came unto the tribune of the cohort, that all Jerusalem was in an uproar. Who immediately took soldiers and centurions, and ran down unto them: and when they saw the tribune and the soldiers, they left beating of Paul.

Then the tribune came near, and took him, and commanded him to be bound with two chains; and demanded who he was, and what he had done. And some cried one thing, some another, among the multitude. Acts 21:31-34 But the tribune having come down delivered him, and commanded him to be bound with two chains: (hereby) appeasing the anger of the people. And when he could not know the certainty for the tumult, he commanded him to be carried into the castle. And when he came upon the stairs, so it was, that he was borne of the soldiers for the violence of the people.

For the multitude of the people followed after, crying, Away with him! Acts 21:34-36 What means, Away with him? that is, what they say with us according to the Roman custom, To the standards with him! And as Paul was to be led into the castle, he said to the tribune, May I speak unto you? Acts 21:37 In the act of being borne along up the stairs, he requests to say something to the tribune: and observe how quietly he does it. May I speak unto you? he says. Who said, Can you speak Greek?

Are you not then that Egyptian, which before these days made an uproar, and leddest out into the wilderness four thousand men that were murderers? Acts 21:38 For (this Egyptian) was a revolutionary and seditious person. With regard to this then Paul clears himself, and * *

(Recapitulation.) Do therefore this that we say unto you, etc. (v. 23, 24.) He shows that it was not necessary to do this upon principle (προηγουμινως)-- whence also they obtain his compliance -- but that it was economy and condescension. As touching the Gentiles, etc. Acts 21:25 Why, then, this was no hindrance to the preaching, seeing they themselves legislated for them to this effect. Why, then, in his taking Peter to task he does not absolutely (πληρως) charge him with doing wrong: for precisely what he does on this occasion himself, the same does Peter on that occasion, (merely) holding his peace, and establishing his doctrine.

Galatians 2:11 And he says not, For why? It is not right to teach those among the Gentiles. It is not enough to have not (so) preached there, but there was need also to do something more, that those may be persuaded that you observe the law. The affair is one of condescension, be not alarmed. They do not

advise him (to this course) sooner, until they have first spoken of the economy and the gain. And besides, the doing this in Jerusalem, is a thing to be borne. 'Do thou this thing therefore' here, that it may be in your power abroad to do the other. (b) The next day, it says, he took them Acts 21:26: he deferred it not; for when there is economy in the case, this is the way of it. (a) Jews from Asia having seen him, for it was natural that they were spending some days there, in the Temple.

Acts 21:27 (c) Mark the economy (of Providence) that appeared (in this). (p. 279, note 1) After the (believing) Jews had been persuaded (concerning him), then it is that those (Jews of Asia) set upon him in order that those (believing Jews) may not also set upon him. Help, say they, ye men of Israel! as though it were some (monster) difficult to be caught, and hard to be overcome, that has fallen into their hands. All men, they say, everywhere, he ceases not to teach; not here only.

And then the accusation (is) more aggravated by the present circumstances. And yet more, say they, he has polluted the temple, having brought into it men who are Greeks. Acts 21:28 And yet in Christ's time there came up (Greeks) to worship John 12:20: true, but here it speaks of Greeks who had no mind to worship. And they seized Paul, etc. Acts 21:30-35 They no longer wanted laws nor courts of justice: they also beat him. But he forbore to make his defense then; he made it afterward: with reason; for they would not even have heard him then.

Pray, why did they cry, Away with him? Acts 21:36 They feared he might escape them. Observe how submissively Paul speaks to the tribune. May I speak unto you? Then art not thou that Egyptian? (v. 37, 38.) This Egyptian, namely, was a cheat and impostor, and the devil expected to cast a cloud over (the Gospel) through him, and implicate both Christ and His Apostles in the charges pertaining to those (impostors): but he prevailed nothing, nay the truth became even more brilliant, being nothing defeated by the machinations of the devil, nay rather shining forth all the more.

Since if there had not been impostors, and then these (Christ and His Apostles) had prevailed, perhaps some one might have laid hold upon this: but when those impostors did actually appear, this is the wonder. In order, says (the Apostle), that they which are approved may be made manifest. 1 Corinthians 11:19 And Gamaliel says, Before these days stood up Theudas. Then let us not grieve that heresies exist, seeing that false Christs wished to attack even Christ both before this and after; with a view to throw Him into the shade, but on every occasion we find the truth shining out transparent.

So it was with the Prophets: there were false prophets, and by contrast with these they shone the more: just as disease enhances health, and darkness light, and tempest calm. There is no room left for the Greeks to say that (our teachers) were impostors and mountebanks: for those (that were such) were exposed. It was the same in the case of Moses: God suffered the magicians, on purpose that Moses might not be suspected to be a magician: He let them teach all men to what length magic can go in making a fantastic show: beyond this point they deceived not, but themselves confessed their defeat.

Impostors do us no harm, rather do us good, if we will apply our mind to the matter. What then, you will say, if we are partners with them in common estimation? The estimation is not among us, but with those who have no judgment. Let not us greatly care for the estimation of the many, nor mind it more than needs. To God we live, not to men: in heaven we have our conversation, not on earth: there lie the awards and the prizes of our labors, thence we look for our praises, thence for our crowns.

Thus far let us trouble ourselves about men -- that we do not give and afford them a handle against us. But if, though we afford none, those choose to accuse us thoughtlessly and without discrimination, let us

laugh, not weep. Provide thou things honest before the Lord and before men 2 Corinthians 8:21: if, though thou provide things honest, that man derides, give yourself no more concern (for that). You have your patterns in the Scriptures. For, says he, do I now persuade men or God?

Galatians 1:10 and again, We persuade men, but we are made manifest unto God. 2 Corinthians 5:11 And Christ (spoke) thus of them that take offense: Let them alone, they be blind guides of the blind Matthew 15:14; and again, Woe unto you, when all men speak well of you Luke 6:26: and again, Let your works shine, that men may see, and glorify your Father which is in heaven. Matthew 5:16 And, Whoever shall offend one of these little ones, it were better for him that a millstone were hanged about his neck, and he were drowned in the depths of the sea. Matthew 18:6

These sayings are not contrary, nay, they are exceedingly in accord. For when the offense is with us, then woe unto us, but when not with us, not so. And again, Woe to (that man) through whom the name of God is blasphemed. Romans 2:24 How then if I do what is right in anything, but another blasphemes? That is nothing to me, but only to him: for through him (God) was blasphemed. And how is it possible to do what is right in anything, and yet give a handle to the rest? Whence will you that I bring examples -- from present, or from old times?

Not to be easily scared (ψοφοδεῖς), shall we speak to the very point now in hand? Paul judaized in Jerusalem, but in Antioch not so: he judaized, and they were offended (p. 282, note 3), but those had no right to be offended. He is said to have saluted both Nero's cupbearer and his concubine: what, think ye, must they have said against him because of this? But they had no right to do so. Since, if he drew them to him for loose living or any wicked acts, one might well be offended: but if in order to right living, what is there to be offended at?

Let me mention something that happened to one of my acquaintance. The wrath of God once fell upon (a city), and he being very young (was) in the order of deacon. The bishop was absent at the time, and of the presbyters none took thought for the matter, but indiscriminately they caused in one night immense numbers of people to be baptized all at once, and they did indiscriminately receive baptism, all of them ignorant of everything: these he took apart by a hundred or two hundred together, and discoursed to them, not upon any other subject, but only on the sacraments, so that the unbaptized also were not allowed to be present.

Many thought he did this because he coveted rule. But he cared not for that: neither however did he continue the thing for a (longer) time, but immediately desisted. When then? Was he the cause of the scandal? I think not. For if indeed he had done this without cause, they might with reason have ascribed it to him: and so again, if he had continued to do so. For when anything of what is pleasing to God is hindered by another's taking offense, it is right to take no notice: but then is the time to mind it, when we are not forced because of him to offend God.

For, say, if, while we are discoursing and putting drunkards to shame (σκωπτῶντων), any one take offense -- am I to give over speaking? Hear Christ say, Will ye also go away? John 6:67 So then, the right thing is, neither to take no notice, nor to take too much, of the weakness of the many. Do we not see the physicians acting thus: how, when it may be done, they humor the whims of their patients, but when the gratification does harm, then they will not spare? Always it is good to know the right mean.

Many reviled, because a certain beautiful virgin stayed, and they railed upon those who catechised (her). What then? Was it their duty to desist for that? By no means. For let us not look to this only, whether some

be offended, but whether they are justly offended, and so that it is no hurt to ourselves (to give way). If meat, says (Paul), offend my brother, I will eat no meat as long as the world lasts. 1 Corinthians 8:13 With reason: for the not eating did (him) no harm. If however it offend him, that I wish to renounce (■ ποτ■ξασθαί) (the world), it is not right to mind him.

And whom, you will ask, does this offend? Many, to my knowledge. When therefore the hindrance is a thing indifferent, let (the thing) be done. Else, if we were to look only to this, many are the things we have to desist from: just as, on the other hand, if we should despise (all objections), we have to destroy many (brethren). As in fact Paul also took thought beforehand concerning offense: Lest, he says, in this liberality which is administered by us: for it was attended with no loss (to him) to obviate an ill surmise.

But when we fall into such a necessity as that great evils should ensue through the other's taking offense let us pay no heed to that person. He has to thank himself for it, and we are not now accountable, for it was not possible to spare him without hurt (to ourselves). Some were offended, because certain believers sat down to meat in (heathen) temples. It was not right to sit down: for no harm came of this (their not doing it). They were offended, because Peter ate with the Gentiles.

But he indeed spared them, but (Paul) not so. On all occasions it behooves us in following the laws of God to take great pains that we give no matter of offense; that both ourselves may not have to answer for it, and may have mercy vouchsafed us from God, by the grace and loving-kindness of His only-begotten Son, with Whom to the Father and Holy Ghost together be glory, dominion, honor, now and ever, world without end. Amen.

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