

Homily 47 on Matthew

by St. John Chrysostom

St. John Chrysostom's Homily 47 on Matthew explores the significance of Jesus' parables, emphasizing the value of the Kingdom of Heaven and the importance of humility and Scripture in the Christian life.

Scripture: Matthew 7:13, Matthew 13:34, Matthew 13:44, Matthew 13:47, Matthew 13:52, Matthew 25:32, Luke 22:30, Acts 5:41, 1 Thessalonians 4:17

Topics: "Parable Interpretation", "Kingdom Living"

Description

John Chrysostom preaches on the parables spoken by Jesus, emphasizing the importance of understanding the hidden truths revealed through these stories. He highlights the disciples' growing wisdom and confidence as they inquire about the deeper meanings behind the parables, showing their desire to know the mysteries of the kingdom of Heaven. Chrysostom delves into the significance of the parables of the tares, the treasure, the pearl, and the net, illustrating the value of the gospel and the consequences of wickedness. He concludes by exhorting his audience to imitate the virtues of humility, almsgiving, and spiritual richness portrayed in the Scriptures and exemplified by the disciples.

Transcript

Matthew 13:34-35.

All these things spoke Jesus unto the multitudes in parables, and without a parable spoke He not unto them; that it might be fulfilled which was spoken by the prophet, saying, I will open my mouth in parables; I will utter things that have been kept secret from the foundation of the world.

But Mark says, As they were able to hear it, He spoke the word unto them in parables. Matthew 4:33

Then pointing out that He is not making a new thing, He brings in the Prophet also, proclaiming beforehand this His manner of teaching. And to teach us the purpose of Christ, how He discoursed in this manner, not that they might be ignorant, but that He might lead them to inquiry, he added, And without a parable spoke He nothing unto them. Yet surely He did say many things without a parable; but then nothing. And for all this no man asked Him questions, whereas the Prophets, we know, they were often questioning: as Ezekiel, for instance; as many others: but these did no such thing. Yet surely His sayings were enough to cast them into perplexity, and to stir them up to the inquiry; for indeed a very sore punishment was threatened by those parables: however, not even so were they moved.

Wherefore also He left them and went away. For,

Then, says he, Jesus sent the multitudes away, and went into His house.

And not one of the Scribes follows Him; whence it is clear that for no other purpose did they follow, than to take hold of Him. But when they marked not His sayings, thenceforth He let them be.

And His disciples come unto Him, asking Him concerning the parable of the tares; although at times wishing to learn, and afraid Mark 9:32 to ask. Whence then arose their confidence in this instance? They had been told, To you it is given to know the mysteries of the kingdom of Heaven; and they were emboldened. Wherefore also they ask in private; not as grudging the multitude, but observing their Master's law. For, To these, says He, it is not given.

And why may it be that they let pass the parable of the leaven, and of the mustard seed, and inquire concerning this? They let those pass, as being plainer; but about this, as having an affinity to that before spoken, and as setting forth something more than it, they are desirous to learn (since He would not have spoken the same to them a second time); for indeed they saw how severe was the threatening therein uttered. Wherefore neither does He blame them, but rather completes His previous statements.

And, as I am always saying, the parables must not be explained throughout word for word, since many absurdities will follow; this even He Himself is teaching us here in thus interpreting this parable. Thus He says not at all who the servants are that came to Him, but, implying that He brought them in, for the sake of some order, and to make up the picture, He omits that part, and interprets those that are most urgent and essential, and for the sake of which the parable was spoken; signifying Himself to be Judge and Lord of all.

And He answered, so it is said, and said to them, He that sows the good seed is the Son of Man; the field is the world, the good seed, these are the children of the kingdom, but the tares are the children of the wicked one; the enemy that sows them is the devil; and the harvest is the end of the world, and the reapers are angels. As therefore the tares are gathered and burned in the fire; so shall it be in the end of this world. The Son of Man shall send His angels, and they shall gather out of His kingdom all things that offend, and them which do iniquity; and shall cast them into the furnace of fire, there shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth. Then shall the righteous shine forth as the sun in the kingdom of their Father.

For whereas He Himself is the sower, and that of His own field, and out of His own kingdom He gathers, it is quite clear that the present world also is His.

But mark His unspeakable love to man, and His leaning to bounty, and His disinclination to punishment; in that, when He sows, He sows in His own person, but when He punishes, it is by others, that is, by the angels.

Then shall the righteous shine forth as the sun in the kingdom of their Father. Not because it will be just so much only, but because this star is surpassed in brightness by none that we know. He uses the comparisons that are known to us.

And yet surely elsewhere He says, the harvest is already come; as when He says of the Samaritans, Lift up your eyes, and look on the fields; for they are white already to harvest. John 4:35 And again, The harvest truly is plenteous, but the laborers are few. How then says He there, that the harvest is already come, while here He said, it is yet to be? According to another signification.

And how having elsewhere said, One sows, and another reaps, John 4:37 does He here say, it is Himself that sows? Because there again, He was speaking, to distinguish the apostles, not from Himself, but from the prophets, and that in the case of the Jews and Samaritans. Since certainly it was He who sowed through the prophets also.

And at times He calls this self-same thing both harvest and sowing, naming it with relation, now to one thing, now to another. Thus when He is speaking of the conviction and obedience of His converts, He calls the thing a harvest, as though He had accomplished all; but when He is seeking after the fruit of their hearing, He calls it seed, and the end, harvest.

And how says He elsewhere, that the righteous are caught up first? 1 Thessalonians 4:17 Because they are indeed caught up first, but Christ having come, those others are given over to punishment, and then the former depart into the kingdom of heaven. For because they must be in heaven, but He Himself is to come and judge all men here; having passed sentence upon these, like some king He rises with His friends, leading them to that blessed portion. Do you see that the punishment is twofold, first to be burnt up, and then to fall from that glory?

2. But wherefore does He still go on, when the others have withdrawn, to speak to these also in parables? They had become wiser by His sayings, so as even to understand. At any rate, to them He says afterwards,

Have ye understood all these things? They say unto Him, Yea, Lord. So completely, together with its other objects, did the parable effect this too, that it made them more clear sighted. What then says He again?

The Kingdom of Heaven is like treasure hid in a field, the which when a man has found, he hides, and for joy thereof sells all that he has, and buys that field. Again, the Kingdom of Heaven is like a merchant man seeking goodly pearls, who, when he had found one pearl of great price, went and sold all that he had, and bought it.

Much as in the other place, the mustard seed and the leaven have but some little difference from each other, so here also these two parables, that of the treasure and that of the pearl. This being of course signified by both, that we ought to value the gospel above all things. And the former indeed, of the leaven and of the mustard seed, was spoken with a view to the power of the gospel, and to its surely prevailing over the world; but these declare its value, and great price. For as it extends itself like mustard seed, and prevails like leaven, so it is precious like a pearl, and affords full abundance like a treasure. We are then to learn not this only, that we ought to strip ourselves of everything else, and cling to the gospel, but also that we are to do so with joy; and when a man is dispossessing himself of his goods, he is to know that the transaction is gain, and not loss.

Do you see how both the gospel is hid in the world, and the good things in the gospel?

Unless you sell all, you buy not; unless you have such a soul, anxious and inquiring, you find not. Two things therefore are requisite, abstinence from worldly matters, and watchfulness. For He says One seeking goodly pearls, who when he had found one of great price, sold all and bought it. For the truth is one, and not in many divisions.

And much as he that has the pearl knows indeed himself that he is rich, but others know not, many times, that he is holding it in his hand (for there is no corporeal bulk); just so also with the gospel, they that have

hold of it know that they are rich, but the unbelievers, not knowing of this treasure, are in ignorance also of our wealth.

3. After this, that we may not be confident in the gospel merely preached, nor think that faith only suffices us for salvation, He utters also another, an awful parable. Which then is this? That of the net.

For the kingdom of Heaven is like a net, that was cast into the sea, and gathered of every kind; which, when it was full, they drew to shore, and sat down, and gathered the good into vessels, but cast the bad away.

And wherein does this differ from the parable of the tares? For there too the one are saved, the other perish; but there, for choosing of wicked doctrines; and those before this again, for not giving heed to His sayings, but these for wickedness of life; who are the most wretched of all, having attained to His knowledge, and being caught, but not even so capable of being saved.

Yet surely He says elsewhere, that the shepherd Himself separates them, but here He says the angels do this; Matthew 25:32 and so with respect to the tares. How then is it? At one time He discourses to them in a way more suited to their dullness, at another time in a higher strain.

And this parable He interprets without so much as being asked, but of His own motion He explained it by one part of it, and increased their awe. For lest, on being told, They cast the bad away, you should suppose that ruin to be without danger; by His interpretation He signified the punishment, saying, They will cast them into the furnace. Matthew 13:50 And He declared the gnashing of teeth, and the anguish, that it is unspeakable.

Do you see how many are the ways of destruction? By the rock, by the thorns, by the wayside, by the tares, by the net. Not without reason therefore did He say, Broad is the way that leads to destruction, and many there be which go away by it. Matthew 7:13

4. Having then uttered all this, and concluded His discourse in a tone to cause fear, and signified that these are the majority of cases (for He dwelt more on them). He says,

Have ye understood all these things? They say unto Him, Yea, Lord.

Then because they understood, He again praises them, saying,

Therefore every Scribe, which is instructed in the Kingdom of Heaven, is like a man that is an householder, which brings forth out of his treasure things new and old. Matthew 13:52

Wherefore elsewhere also He says, I will send you wise men and scribes. Matthew 23:34 Do you see how so far from excluding the Old Testament, He even commends it, and speaks publicly in favor of it, calling it a treasure?

So that as many as are ignorant of the divine Scriptures cannot be householders; such as neither have of themselves, nor receive of others, but neglect their own case, perishing with famine. And not these only, but the heretics too, are excluded from this blessing. For they bring not forth things new and old. For they have not the old things, wherefore neither have they the new; even as they who have not the new, neither have they the old, but are deprived of both. For these are bound up and interwoven one with another.

Let us then hear, as many of us as neglect the reading of the Scriptures, to what harm we are subjecting ourselves, to what poverty. For when are we to apply ourselves to the real practice of virtue, who do not so much as know the very laws according to which our practice should be guided? But while the rich, those who are mad about wealth, are constantly shaking out their garments, that they may not become moth-eaten; do you, seeing forgetfulness worse than any moth wasting your soul, neglect conversing with books? Do you not thrust away from you the pest, adorn your soul, look continually upon the image of virtue, and acquaint yourself with her members and her head? For she too has a head and members more seemly than any graceful and beautiful body.

What then, says one, is the head of virtue? Humility. Wherefore Christ also begins with it, saying, Blessed are the poor. This head has not locks and ringlets, but beauty, such as to gain God's favor. For, Unto whom shall I look, says He, but unto him that is meek and humble, and trembles at my words? Isaiah 66:2 And, My eyes are upon the meek of the earth. And, The Lord is near unto them that are of a contrite heart. This head, instead of locks, and flowing hair, bears sacrifices acceptable to God. It is a golden altar, and a spiritual place of sacrifice; For a contrite spirit is a sacrifice to God. This is the mother of wisdom. If a man have this, he will have the rest also.

Have you seen a head such as you had never seen? Will you see the face too, or rather mark it? Mark then for the present its color, how ruddy, and blooming, and very engaging; and observe what are its ingredients. Well, and what are they? Shame-facedness and blushing. Wherefore also some one says, Before a shamefaced man shall go favor. Sirach 32:10 This sheds much beauty over the other members also. Though thou mix ten thousand colors, you will not produce such a bloom.

And if you will see the eyes also, behold them exactly delineated with decency and temperance. Wherefore they become also so beautiful and sharp-sighted, as to behold even the Lord Himself. For, Blessed, says He, are the pure in heart, for they shall see God. Matthew 5:8

And her mouth is wisdom and understanding, and the knowledge of spiritual hymns. And her heart, acquaintance with Scripture, and maintenance of sound doctrines, and benevolence, and kindness. And as without this last there is no living, so without that other is never any salvation. Yea, for from that all her excellencies have birth. She has also for feet and hands the manifestations of her good works. She has a soul too, godliness. She has likewise a bosom of gold, and firmer than adamant, even fortitude; and all may be taken captive more easily than that bosom may be riven asunder. And the spirit that is in the brain and heart, is charity.

5. Will you that in her actual deeds also I show you her image? Consider, I pray you, this very evangelist: although we have not his whole life in writing, nevertheless even from a few facts one may see his image shine forth.

First, as to his having been lowly and contrite, hear him, after his gospel, calling himself a publican; for his being also merciful, see him stripping himself of all and following Jesus; and as to his piety, it is evident from his doctrines. And his wisdom again it is easy to see from the gospel which he composed, and his charity (for he cared for the whole world); and the manifestation of his good works, from the throne on which he is to sit; Luke 22:30 and his courage too, by his departing with joy from the presence of the council. Acts 5:41

Let us imitate then this virtue, and most of all his humility and almsgiving, without which one cannot be saved. And this is shown by the five virgins, and together with them by the Pharisee. For without virginity

indeed it is possible to see the kingdom, but without almsgiving it cannot be. For this is among the things that are essential, and hold all together. Not unnaturally then have we called it the heart of virtue. But this heart, unless it supply breath to all, is soon extinguished. In the same way then as the fountain also, if it confine its streams to itself, grows putrid; so it is with the rich also, when they keep their possessions to themselves. Wherefore even in our common conversation we say, great is the consumption of wealth with such a man; instead of saying, great is the abundance, great the treasure. For in truth there is a consumption, not of the possessors only, but of the riches themselves. Since both garments laid by spoil, and gold is cankered, and grain is eaten up, and the soul too of their owner is more than they all cankered and corrupted by the cares of them.

And if you be willing to produce in the midst a miser's soul; like a garment eaten by innumerable worms, and not having any sound part, even so will you find it, perforated on all sides by cares; rotted, cankered by sins.

But not such the poor man's soul, the soul of him, I mean, that is voluntarily poor; but it is resplendent as gold, it shines like a pearl, and it blooms like a rose. For no moth is there, no thief is there, no worldly care, but as angels converse, so do they.

Would you see the beauty of this soul? Would you acquaint yourself with the riches of poverty? He commands not men, but he commands evil spirits. He stands not at a king's side, but he has taken his stand near to God. He is the comrade, not of men, but of angels. He has not chests, two, or three, or twenty, but such an abundance as to account the whole world as nothing. He has not a treasure, but heaven. He needs not slaves, or rather has his passions for slaves, has for slaves the motives that rule over kings. For that which commands him who wears the purple, that motive shrinks before him. And royalty, and gold, and all such things, he laughs at, as at children's toys; and like hoops, and dice, and heads, and balls, so does he count all these to be contemptible. For he has an adorning, which they who play with these things cannot even see.

What then can be superior to this poor man? He has at least heaven for his pavement; but if the pavement be like this, imagine the roof! But has he not horses and chariots? Why, what need has he of these, who is to be borne upon the clouds, and to be with Christ?

Having these things then impressed on our minds, let us, both men and women, seek after that wealth, and the plenty that cannot be rifled; that we may attain also unto the kingdom of heaven, 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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