

Homily 47 on the Acts of the Apostles

by St. John Chrysostom

St. John Chrysostom's homily emphasizes the importance of living a life that reflects one's faith and serves as a witness to the truth of the Gospel.

Scripture: Luke 21:13, Acts 22:1-14, Titus 1:16

Topics: "Christian Witness", "Virtuous Living"

Description

John Chrysostom preaches about Paul's defense before the people, highlighting his use of the Hebrew tongue to gain their attention and his conversion story from persecutor to believer through a divine encounter with Jesus. Chrysostom emphasizes the importance of being trustworthy witnesses for Christ, urging believers to live a life of virtue and good deeds to strengthen their testimony and persuade others. He warns against the dangers of living a corrupt life, which can lead to accepting false doctrines and denying the faith, ultimately impacting one's eternal destiny.

Transcript

Acts XXI. 39, 40

But Paul said, I am a man which am a Jew of Tarsus, a city in Cilicia, a citizen of no mean city: and I beseech you, suffer me to speak unto the people. And when he had given him license, Paul stood on the stairs, and beckoned with the hand unto the people. And when there was made a great silence, he spoke unto them in the Hebrew tongue, saying.

Observe how, when he discourses to those that are without, he does not decline availing himself of the aids afforded by the laws. Here he awes the tribune by the name of his city. And again, elsewhere he said, Openly, uncondemned, Romans as we are, they have cast us into prison. Acts 19:37 For since the tribune said, Are you that Egyptian? he immediately drew him off from that surmise: then, that he may not be thought to deny his nation, he says at once, I am a Jew: he means his religion. (b) What then?

He did not deny (that he was a Christian): God forbid: for he was both a Jew and a Christian, observing what things he ought: since indeed he, most of all men, did obey the law: (a) as in fact he elsewhere calls himself, Under the law to Christ. 1 Corinthians 9:21 What is this, I pray? (c) The man that believes in Christ. And when discoursing with Peter, he says: We, Jews by nature. -- But I beseech you, suffer me to speak unto the people. Galatians 2:15 And this is a proof, that he does not speak lies, seeing he takes all as his witnesses.

Observe again how mildly he speaks. This again is a very strong argument that he is chargeable with no crime, his being so ready to make his defense, and his wishing to come to discourse with the people of the Jews. See a man well-prepared (τεταγμ■νον ■νδρα)!-- Mark the providential ordering of the thing: unless the tribune had come, unless he had bound him, he would not have desired to speak for his defense, he would not have obtained the silence he did. Standing on the stairs.

Then there was the additional facility afforded by the locality, that he should have a high place to harangue them from -- in chains too! What spectacle could be equal to this, to see Paul, bound with two chains, and haranguing the people! (To see him,) how he was not a whit perturbed, not a whit confused; how, seeing as he did so great a multitude all hostility against him, the ruler standing by, he first of all made them desist from their anger: then, how prudently (he does this).

Just what he does in his Epistle to the Hebrews, the same he does here: first he attracts them by the sound of their common mother tongue: then by his mildness itself. He spoke unto them, it says, in the Hebrew tongue, saying, Men, brethren, and fathers, hear ye my defense which I make now unto you. Acts 22:1 Mark his address, at once so free from all flattery, and so expressive of meekness. For he says not, Masters, nor Lords, but, Brethren, just the word they most liked: I am no alien from. you, he says, nor against you.

Men, he says, brethren, and fathers: this, a term of honor, that of kindred. Hear ye, says he, my-- he says not, teaching, nor harangue, but, my defense which I now make unto you. He puts himself in the posture of a suppliant. And when they heard that he spoke in the Hebrew tongue to them, they kept the more silence. Acts 22:2 Do you observe how the using the same tongue subdued them? In fact, they had a sort of awe for that language. Observe also how he prepares the way for his discourse, beginning thus: I am verily a man which am a Jew, born in Tarsus, a city in Cilicia, yet brought up in this city at the feet of Gamaliel, and taught according to the perfect manner of the law of the fathers, and was zealous toward God, as you all are this day.

Acts 22:3 I am a man, he says, which am a Jew: which thing they liked most of all to hear; born in Tarsus, a city of Cilicia. That they may not again think him to be of another nation, he adds his religion: but brought up in this city. (p. 282, note 4.) He shows how great was his zeal for the worship, inasmuch as having left his native city, which was so great and so remote too, he chose to be brought up here for the Law's sake. See how from the beginning he attached himself to the law.

But this he says, not only to defend himself to them, but to show that not by human intent was he led to the preaching of the Gospel, but by a Divine power: else, having been so educated, he would not have suddenly changed. For if indeed he had been one of the common order of men, it might have been reasonable to suspect this: but if he was of the number of those who were most of all bound by the law, it was not likely that he should change lightly, and without strong necessity.

But perhaps some one may say: To have been brought up here proves nothing: for what if you came here for the purpose of trading, or for some other cause? Therefore he says, at the feet of Gamaliel: and not simply, by Gamaliel, but at his feet, showing his perseverance, his assiduity, his zeal for the hearing, and his great reverence for the man. Taught according to the perfect manner of the law of the fathers. Not simply, the law, but the law of the fathers; showing that he was such from the beginning, and not merely one that knew the Law.

All this seems indeed to be spoken on their side, but in fact it told against them, since he, knowing the law, forsook it. Yes: but what if you indeed knew the law accurately, but did not vindicate it, no, nor love it? Being a zealot, he adds: not simply (one that knew it). Then, since it was a high encomium he had passed upon himself, he makes it theirs as well as his, adding, As ye all are this day. For he shows that they act not from any human object, but from zeal for God; gratifying them, and preoccupying their minds, and getting a hold upon them in a way that did no harm.

Then he brings forward proofs also, saying, and I persecuted this way unto the death, binding and delivering into prisons both men and women. As also the high priest does bear me witness, and all the estate of the elders (v. 4, 5): How does this appear. As witnesses he brings forward the high-priest himself and the elders. He says indeed, Being a zealot, as you (Hom. xix. p. 123): but he shows by his actions, that he went beyond them. For I did not wait for an opportunity of seizing them: I both stirred up the priests, and undertook journeys: I did not confine my attacks, as you did, to men, I extended them to women also: both binding, and casting into prisons both men and women.

This testimony is incontrovertible; the (unbelief) of the Jews (is left) without excuse. See how many witnesses he brings forward, the elders, the high-priest, and those in the city. Observe his defense, how it is not of cowardly fear (for himself, that he pleads), no, but for teaching and indoctrination. For had not the hearers been stones, they would have felt the force of what he was saying. For up to this point he had themselves as witnesses: the rest, however, was without witnesses: From whom also I received letters unto the brethren, and went to Damascus, to bring them which were there bound unto Jerusalem, for to be punished.

And it came to pass, that, as I made my journey, and had come near unto Damascus about noon, suddenly there shone from heaven a great light round about me. And I fell unto the ground, and heard a voice saying unto me, Saul, Saul, why do you persecute Me? And I answered, Who are Thou, Lord? And he said to me, I am Jesus of Nazareth, Whom you persecute. (v. 6, 7, 8.) Why then, these very things ought to have been held worthy of credit, from those that went before: otherwise he would not have undergone such a revolution.

How if he is only making a fine story of it, say you? Answer me, Why did he suddenly fling away all this zeal? Because he looked for honor? And yet he got just the contrary. But an easy life, perhaps? No, nor that either. Well but something else? Why it is not in the power of thought to invent any other object. So then, leaving it to themselves to draw the inference, he narrates the facts. As I came near, he says, unto Damascus, about noontide. See how great was the excess of the light.

What if he is only making a fine story, say you? Those who were with him are witnesses, who led him by the hand, who saw the light. And they that were with me saw indeed the light, and were afraid; but they heard not the voice of Him that spoke to me. Acts 22:9 But in another place he says, Hearing the voice, but seeing no man. Acts 9:7 It is not at variance: no, there were two voices, that of Paul and the Lord's voice: in that place, the writer means Paul's voice (Hom. xix. p. 124, note 2); as in fact (Paul) here adds, The voice of Him that spoke unto me.

Seeing no man: he does not say, that they did not see the light: but, no man, that is, none speaking. And good reason that it should be so, since it behooved him alone to have that voice vouchsafed unto him. For if indeed they also had heard it, (the miracle) would not have been so great. Since persons of grosser minds are persuaded more by sight, those saw the light, and were afraid. In fact, neither did the light take

so much effect on them, as it did on him: for it even blinded his eyes: by that which befell him, (God) gave them also an opportunity of recovering their sight, if they had the mind.

It seems to me at least, that their not believing was providentially ordered, that they might be unexceptionable witnesses. And he said to me it says, I am Jesus of Nazareth, Whom you persecute. comp. Acts 9:5 Well is the name of the city (Nazareth) also added, that they might recognize (the Person): moreover, the Apostles also spoke thus. ch. 2:22; 4:10; 10:38 And Himself bore witness, that they were persecuting Him. And they that were with me saw indeed the light, and were afraid, but they heard not the voice of Him that spoke to me.

And I said, What shall I do, Lord? And the Lord said to me, Arise, and go into Damascus; and there it shall be told you of all things which are appointed for you to do. And when I could not see for the glory of that light, being led by the hand of them that were with me, I came into Damascus. And one Ananias, a devout man according to the law, having a good report of all the Jews which dwelt there, came unto me, and stood, and said to me, Brother Saul, receive your sight. And the same hour I looked up upon him.

Enter into the city, it says, and there it shall be spoken to you of all that is appointed for you to do. Acts 22:10-13 Lo! Again another witness. And see how unexceptionable he makes him also. And one Ananias, he says, a devout man according to the law, -- so far is it from being anything alien!-- having a good report of all the Jews that dwelt (there). And I in the same hour received sight. Then follows the testimony borne by the facts. Observe how it is interwoven, of persons and facts; and the persons, both of their own and of aliens: the priests, the elders, and his fellow-travellers: the facts, what he did and what was done to him: and facts bear witness to facts, not persons only.

Then Ananias, an alien; then the fact itself, the recovery of sight; then a great prophecy. And he said, The God of our fathers has chosen you, that you should know His will, and see That Just One. Acts 22:14 It is well said, Of the fathers, to show that they were not Jews, but aliens from the law, and that it was not from zeal (for the law) that they were acting. That you should know His will. Why then His will is this. See how in the form of narrative it is teaching. And see That Just One, and hear the voice of His mouth.

For you shall be His witness unto all men of what you have seen and heard. And see, he says, that Just One. Acts 22:15 For the present he says no more than this: if He is Just, they are guilty. And hear the voice of His mouth. See how high he raises the fact! For you shall be His witness-- for this, because you will not betray the sight and hearing (i.e. prove false to) -- both of what you have seen, and of what you have heard: by means of both the senses he claims his faith, fullness -- to all men.

And now why do you tarry? Arise, and be baptized, and wash away your sins, calling on His name. Acts 22:16 Here it is a great thing he has uttered. For he said not, Be baptized in His name: but, calling on the name of Christ. It shows that He is God: since it is not lawful to call upon any other, save God. Then he shows also, that he himself was not compelled: for, I said, says he, What must I do? Nothing is (left) without witness: no; he brings forward the witness of a whole city, seeing they had beheld him led by the hand.

But see the prophecy fulfilled. To all men, it is said. For he did become a witness to Him, and a witness as it ought to be; by what he suffered, by what he did, and by what he said. Such witnesses ought we also to be, and not to betray the things we have been entrusted withal: I speak not only of doctrines, but also of the manner of life.

For observe: because he had seen, because he had heard, he bears witness to all men, and nothing hindered him. We too bear witness (Mod. text have heard) that there is a Resurrection and numberless good things: we are bound to bear witness of this to all men. Yes, and we do bear witness, you will say, and do believe. How; when you act the contrary? Say now: if any one should call himself a Christian, and then having apostatized should hold with the Jews, would this testimony suffice?

By no means: for men would desire the testimony which is borne by the actions. Just so, if we say that there is a Resurrection and numberless good things, and then despise those things and prefer the things here, who will believe us? Not what we say, but what we do, is what all men look to. You shall be a witness, it says, unto all men: not only to the friendly, but also to the unbelievers: for this is what witnesses are for; not to persuade those who know, but those who know not.

Let us be trustworthy witnesses. But how shall we be trustworthy? By the life we lead. The Jews assaulted him: our passions assault us, bidding us abjure our testimony. But let us not obey them: we are witnesses from God. (Christ) is judged that He is not God: He has sent us to bear witness to Him. Let us bear witness and persuade those who have to decide the point: if we do not bear witness, we have to answer for their error also. But if in a court of justice, where worldly matters come in question, nobody would receive a witness full of numberless vices, much less here, where such (and so great) are the matters to be considered.

We say, that we have heard Christ, and that we believe the things which He has promised: Show it, say they, by your works: for your life bears witness of the contrary -- that you do not believe. Say, shall we look at the money-getting people, the rapacious, the covetous? The people that mourn and wail, that build and busy themselves in all sorts of things, as though they were never to die? You do not believe that you shall die, a thing so plain and evident: and how shall we believe you when you bear witness?

For there are, there are many men, whose state of mind is just as if they were not to die. For when in a lengthened old age they set about building and planting, when will they take death into their calculations? It will be no small punishment to us that we were called to bear witness, but were not able to bear witness of the things that we have seen. We have seen Angels with our eyes, yea, more clearly than those who have (visibly) beheld them. We shall be (Mod. text Then let us be) witnesses to Christ: for not those only are martyrs, (or witnesses, whom we so call), but ourselves also.

This is why they are called martyrs, because when bidden to abjure (the faith), they endure all things, that they may speak the truth: and we, when we are bidden by our passions to abjure, let us not be overcome. Gold says: Say that Christ is not Christ. Then listen not to it as to God, but despise its biddings. The evil lusts profess that they know God, but in works they deny Him. Titus 1:16 For this is not to witness, but the contrary. And indeed that others should deny (Him) is nothing wonderful: but that we who have been called to bear witness should deny Him, is a grievous and a heinous thing: this of all things does the greatest hurt to our cause.

It shall be to (your)selves for a testimony. Luke 21:13, He says: but (this is) when we ourselves stand to it firmly. If we would all bear witness to Christ, we should quickly persuade the greater number of the heathen. It is a great thing, my beloved, the life (one leads). Let a man be savage as a beast, let him openly condemn you on account of your doctrine, yet he secretly approves, yet he will praise, yet he will admire. For say, whence can an excellent life proceed? From no source, except from a Divine Power working in us.

What if there be heathen also of such a character? If anywhere any of them be such, it is partly from nature, partly from vainglory. Will you learn what a brilliancy there is in a good life, what a force of persuasion it has? Many of the heretics have thus prevailed, and while their doctrines are corrupt, yet the greater part of men out of reverence for their (virtuous) life did not go on to examine their doctrine: and many even condemning them on account of their doctrine, reverence them on account of their life: not rightly indeed, but still so it is, that they do thus feel (towards them).

This has brought slanders on the awful articles of our creed, this has turned everything upside down, that no one takes any account of good living: this is a mischief to the faith. We say that Christ is God; numberless other arguments we bring forward, and this one among the rest, that He has persuaded all men to live rightly: but this is the case with few. The badness of the life is a mischief to the doctrine of the Resurrection, to that of the immortality of the soul, to that of the Judgment: many other (false doctrines) too it draws on with itself, fate, necessity, denial of a Providence.

For the soul being immersed in numberless vices, by way of consolations to itself tries to devise these, that it may not be pained in having to reflect that there is a Judgment, and that virtue and vice lie in our own power. (Such a) life works numberless evils, it makes men beasts, and more irrational than beasts: for what things are in each several nature of the beasts, these it has often collected together in one man, and turned everything upside down. This is why the devil has brought in the doctrine of Fate: this is why he has said that the world is without a Providence (Hom. ii. p. 15): this is why he advances his hypothesis of good natures, and evil natures, and his hypothesis of evil (uncreated and) without beginning, and material (in its essence): and, in short, all the rest of it, that he may ruin our life.

For it is not possible for a man who is of such a life either to recover himself from corrupt doctrines, or to remain in a sound faith: but of inevitable necessity he must receive all this. For I do not think, for my part, that of those who do not live aright, there could be easily found any who do not hold numberless satanical devices -- as, that there is a nativity (or birth-fate) (γενεσις), that things happen at random, that all is hap-hazard and chance-medley. Wherefore I beseech you let us have a care for good living, that we may not receive evil doctrines.

Cain received for punishment that he should be (ever) groaning and trembling. Genesis 4:14 Such are the wicked, and being conscious within themselves of numberless bad things, often they start out of their sleep, their thoughts are full of tumult, their eyes full of perturbation; everything is fraught for them with misgivings, everything alarms them, their soul is replete with grievous expectation and cowardly apprehension, contracted with impotent fear and trembling. Nothing can be more effeminate than such a soul, nothing more inane.

Like madmen, it has no self-possession. For it were well for it that in the enjoyment of calm and quiet it were enabled to take knowledge of its proper nobility. But when all things terrify and throw it into perturbation, dreams, and words, and gestures, and forebodings, indiscriminately, when will it be able to look into itself, being thus troubled and amazed? Let us therefore do away with its fear, let us break asunder its bonds. For were there no other punishment, what punishment could exceed this -- to be living always in fear, never to have confidence, never to be at ease?

Therefore knowing these things assuredly, let us keep ourselves in a state of calm and be careful to practise virtue, that maintaining both sound doctrines and an upright life, we may without offense pass through this life present, and be enabled to attain unto the good things which God has promised to them

that love Him, through the grace and mercy of His only-begotten Son, with Whom to the Father and the Holy Ghost together be glory, might, honor, now and ever, world without end. Amen.

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