

Homily 48 on the Acts of the Apostles

by St. John Chrysostom

Paul defends himself against the charge of being a troublemaker and explains his past persecution of Christians and his conversion to Christianity.

Scripture: Luke 16:19, John 5:45, Acts 22:17-23

Topics: "Christian Persecution", "Virtuous Living"

Description

John Chrysostom preaches on Paul's return to Jerusalem, highlighting his obedience to God's command despite the danger he faced, the rejection of his testimony by the Jews, and the unfolding of prophecies. Chrysostom emphasizes Paul's boldness in facing persecution, his defense of his Roman citizenship, and his adherence to the law even in challenging situations. He contrasts true virtues like gentleness, boldness, and magnanimity with their vices, urging the congregation to cultivate genuine virtues and avoid falling into the traps of selfishness and passion.

Transcript

Acts XXII. 17-20

And it came to pass, that, when I had come again to Jerusalem, even while I prayed in the temple, I was in a trance; and saw him saying unto me, Make haste, and get you quickly out of Jerusalem: for they will not receive your testimony concerning me. And I said, Lord, they know that I imprisoned and beat in every synagogue them that believed on you: and when the blood of your martyr Stephen was shed, I also was standing by, and consenting unto his death, and kept the raiment of them that slew him.

See how he thrusts himself (into danger), I came, he says, after that vision, to Jerusalem. I was in a trance, etc. Again, this is without witness: but observe, the witness follows from the result. He said, They will not receive your testimony: they did not receive it. And yet from calculations of reason the surmise should have been this, that they would assuredly receive him. For I was the man that made war upon the Christians: so that they ought to have received him. Here he establishes two things: both that they are without excuse, since they persecuted him contrary to all likelihood or calculation of reason; and, that Christ was God, as prophesying things contrary to expectation, and as not looking to past things, but fore-knowing the things to come.

How then does He say, He shall bear My name before the Gentiles and kings and children of Israel? Acts 9:15 Not, certainly persuade. Besides which, on other occasions we find the Jews were persuaded, but

here they were not. Where most of all they ought to have been persuaded, as knowing his former zeal (in their cause), here they were not persuaded. And when the blood of Your martyr Stephen, etc. See where again his discourse terminates, namely, in the forcible main point (ε■ζ τ■ ■σχυρ■ν κεφ■λαιον): that it was he that persecuted, and not only persecuted but killed, nay, had he ten thousand hands (μυρ■αις χερσ■ν ■ναιρ■ν) would have used them all to kill Stephen.

He reminded them of the murderous spirit heinously indulged (by him and them). Then of course above all they would not endure him, since this convicted them; and truly the prophecy was having its fulfilment: great the zeal, vehement the accusation, and the Jews themselves witnesses of the truth of Christ! And he said to me, Depart: for I will send you far hence unto the Gentiles. And they gave him audience unto this word, and then lifted up their voices, and said, Away with such a fellow from the earth: for it is not fit that he should live. (v. 21, 22.)

The Jews would not endure to hear out all his harangue, but excessively fired by their wrath, they shouted, it says, Away with him; for it is not fit that he should live. And as they cried out, and cast off their clothes, and threw dust into the air, the tribune commanded him to be brought into the castle, and bade that he should be examined by scourging; that he might know wherefore they cried so against him. (v. 23, 24.) Whereas both the tribune ought to have examined whether these things were so -- yes, and the Jews themselves too -- or, if they were not so, to have ordered him to be scourged, he bade examine him by scourging, that he might know for what cause they so clamored against him.

And yet he ought to have learned from those clamorers, and to have asked whether they laid hold upon anything of the things spoken: instead of that, without more ado he indulges his arbitrary will and pleasure, and acts with a view to gratify them: for he did not look to this, how he should do a righteous thing, but only how he might stop their rage unrighteous as it was. And as they bound him with thongs, Paul said to the centurion that stood by, Is it lawful for you to scourge a man that is a Roman and uncondemned?

Acts 22:25 Paul lied not, God forbid: for he was a Roman: if there was nothing else, he would have been afraid (to pretend this), lest he should be found out, and suffer a worse punishment. (See Sueton. Vit. Claud. §25.) And observe he does not say it peremptorily (■ πλ■ζ), but, Is it lawful for you? The charges brought are two, both its being without examination, and his being a Roman. They held this as a great privilege, at that time: for they say that (it was only) from the time of Hadrian that all were named Romans, but of old it was not so.

He would have been contemptible had he been scourged: but as it is, he puts them into greater fear (than they him). Had they scourged him, they would also have dismissed the whole matter, or even have killed him; but as it is, the result is not so. See how God permits many (good results) to be brought about quite in a human way, both in the case of the Apostles and of the rest (of mankind). Mark how they suspected the thing to be a pretext, and that in calling himself a Roman, Paul lied: perhaps surmising this from his poverty.

When the centurion heard that, he went and told the tribune, saying, Take heed what you do, for this man is a Roman. Then the tribune came, and said to him, Tell me, are you a Roman? He said, Yea. And the tribune answered, With a great sum obtained I this freedom. And Paul said, But I was free born. Then straightway they departed from him which should have examined him: and the tribune also was afraid, after he knew that he was a Roman, and because he had bound him. Acts 22:26-29-- But I, he says, was free born.

So then his father also was a Roman. What then comes of this? He bound him, and brought him down to the Jews. On the morrow, because he would have known the certainty whereof he was accused of the Jews, he loosed him from his bands, and commanded the chief priests and all their council to appear, and brought Paul down, and set him before them. Acts 22:30 He discourses not now to the multitude, nor to the people. And Paul, earnestly beholding the council, said, Men and brethren, I have lived in all good conscience before God until this day.

Acts 23:1 What he means is this: I am not conscious to myself of having wronged you at all, or of having done anything worthy of these bonds. What then said the high priest? Right justly, and ruler-like, and mildly: And the high priest Ananias commanded them that stood by him to smite him on the mouth. Then said Paul unto him, God shall smite you, you whited wall: for do you sit to judge me after the law, and commandest me to be smitten contrary to the law? And they that stood by said, Do you revile God's high priest?

Then said Paul, I knew not, brethren, that he was the high priest: for it is written, You shall not speak evil of the ruler of your people. Acts 23:3-5 Because I knew not that he was high priest. Some say, Why then does he defend himself as if it was matter of accusation, and adds, You shall not speak evil of the ruler of your people? For if he were not the ruler, was it right for no better reason than that to abuse (him or any) other? He says himself, Being reviled, we bless; being persecuted, we suffer it 1 Corinthians 4:12; but here he does the contrary, and not only reviles, but curses.

They are the words of boldness, rather than of anger; he did not choose to appear in a contemptible light to the tribune. For suppose the tribune himself had spared to scourge him, only as he was about to be delivered up to the Jews, his being beaten by their servants would have more emboldened him: this is why Paul does not attack the servant, but the person who gave the order. But that saying, Thou whited wall, and do you sit to judge me after the law? (is) instead of, Being (yourself) a culprit: as if he had said, And (yourself) worthy of stripes without number.

See accordingly how greatly they were struck with his boldness; for whereas the point was to have overthrown the whole matter, they rather commend him. (infra, v. 9.) For it is written, etc. He wishes to show that he thus speaks, not from fear, nor because (Ananias) did not deserve to be called this, but from obedience to the law in this point also. And indeed I am fully persuaded that he did not know that it was the high priest, sittest thou to judge me?--But he pretends ignorance: an ignorance which does no harm, but is an 'economy' (οικονομοσάν): for reserve (μεταχειρισμός) may be more forcible than speaking out (παρρησιάζομαι): an unseasonable παρρησιάζομαι often hinders the truth: a seasonable μεταχ. as often advances it."--> since he had returned now after a long interval, and was not in the habit of constant intercourse with the Jews; seeing him too in the midst among many others: for the high priest was no longer easy to be seen at a glance, there being many of them and diverse. So, it seems to me, in this also he spoke with a view to his plea against them: by way of showing that he does obey the law; therefore he (thus) exculpates himself.

(Recapitulation.) (b) But let us review what has been said. (a) And when I was came again to Jerusalem, etc. Acts 22:17 How was it, that being a Jew, and there brought up and taught, he did not stay there? Nor did he abide there, unless he had a mind to furnish numberless occasions against him: everywhere just like an exile, fleeing about from place to place. (c) While I prayed in the temple, he says, it came to pass that I was in a trance. (To show) that it was not simply a phantom of the imagination, therefore while he prayed (the Lord) stood by him.

And he shows that it was not from fear of their dangers that he fled, but because they would not receive his testimony. Acts 22:18 But why said he They know I imprisoned? Acts 22:19 Not to gainsay Christ, but because he wished to learn this which was so contrary to all reasonable expectation. Christ, however, did not teach him (this), but only bade him depart, and he obeys: so obedient is he. And they lifted up their voices, it says, and said, Away with him: it is not fit that this fellow should live.

Acts 22:22 Nay, you are the persons not fit to live; not he, who in everything obeys God. O villains and murderers! And shaking out their clothes, it says, they threw dust into the air Acts 22:23, to make insurrection more fierce, because they wished to frighten the governor. And observe; they do not say what the charge was, as in fact they had nothing to allege, but only think to strike terror by their shouting. The tribune commanded, etc. and yet he ought to have learned from the accusers, wherefore they cried so against him.

And as they bound him, etc. And the chief captain was afraid, after he learned that he was a Roman. Why then it was no falsehood. On the morrow, because he would know the certainty wherefore he was accused of the Jews, etc., he brought him down before the council. Acts 22:24-30 This he should have done at the outset. He brought him in, loosed. This above all the Jews would not know what to make of. And Paul, it says, earnestly beholding them. It shows his boldness, and how it awed them (τ■ ■ντρεπτικ■ν).

Then the high priest Ananias. etc. ch. 23:1, 2 Why, what has he said that was affronting? What is he beaten for? Why what hardihood, what shamelessness! Therefore (Paul) set him down (with a rebuke): God shall smite you thou whited wall. Acts 23:3 Accordingly (Ananias) himself is put to a stand, and dares not say a word: only those about him could not bear Paul's boldness. They saw a man ready to die * * * for if this was the case, (Paul) had but to hold his peace, and the tribune would have taken him, and gone his way; he would have sacrificed him to them.

He both shows that he suffers willingly what he suffers, and thus excuses himself before them, not that he wished to excuse himself to them -- since as for those, he even strongly condemns them -- but for the sake of the people. Violating the law, do you command me to be beaten? Well may he say so: for to kill a man who had done (them) no injury, and that an innocent person, was a violating of the law. For neither was it abuse that was spoken by him, unless one would call Christ's words abusive, when He says, Woe unto you, Scribes and Pharisees, for you are like whited walls.

Matthew 23:27 True, you will say: but if he had said it before he had been beaten, it would have betokened not anger, but boldness. But I have mentioned the reason of this. And (at this rate) we often find Christ Himself speaking abusively to the Jews when abused by them; as when He says, Do not think that I will accuse you. John 5:45 But this is not abuse, God forbid. See, with what gentleness he addresses these men: I knew not, he says, that he was God's high priest (v. 4, 5): and, (to show) that he was not dissembling (ε■ρωνε■εται) he adds, You shall not speak evil of the ruler of your people.

He even confesses him to be still ruler. Let us also learn the gentleness also, that in both the one and the other we may be perfect. For one must look narrowly into them, to learn what the one is and what the other: narrowly, because these virtues have their corresponding vices hard by them: mere forwardness passing itself off for boldness, mere cowardice for gentleness: and need being to scan them, lest any person possessing the vice should seem to have the virtue: which would be just as if a person should fancy that he was cohabiting with the mistress, and not know that it was the servant-maid.

What then is gentleness, and what mere cowardice? When others are wronged, and we do not take their part, but hold our peace, this is cowardice: when we are the persons ill-treated, and we bear it, this is gentleness. What is boldness? Again the same, when others are the persons for whom we contend. What forwardness? When it is in our own cause that we are willing to fight. So that magnanimity and boldness go together, as also (mere) forwardness and (mere) cowardice. For he that (does not) resent on his own behalf, will hardly but resent on behalf of others: and he that does not stand up for his own cause, will hardly fail to stand up for others.

For when our habitual disposition is pure from passion, it admits virtue also. Just as a body when free from fever admits strength, so the soul, unless it be corrupted by the passions, admits strength. It betokens great strength, this gentleness; it needs a generous and a gallant soul, and one of exceeding loftiness, this gentleness. Or, think you, is it a small thing to suffer ill, and not be exasperated? Indeed one would not err if in speaking of the disposition to stand up for our neighbors, one should call it the spirit of manly courage.

For he that has had the strength to be able to overcome so strong a passion (as this of selfishness), will have the strength to dare the attack on another. For instance, these are two passions, cowardice and anger: if you have overcome anger, it is very plain that you overcome cowardice also: but you get the mastery over anger, by being gentle: therefore (do so) with cowardice also, and you will be manly. Again, if you have not got the better of anger, you have become forward and pugnacious; but not having got the better of this, neither can you get the better of fear; consequently, you will be a coward too: and the case is the same as with the body; if it be weak, it is quickly overcome both by cold and heat: for such is the ill temperament, but the good temperament is able to stand all (changes).

Again, greatness of soul is a virtue, and hard by it stands prodigality: economy is a virtue, the being a good manager; hard by it stands parsimony and meanness. Come, let us again collate and compare the virtues (with their vices). Well, then, the prodigal person is not to be called great-minded. How should he? The man who is overcome by numberless passions, how should he be great of soul? For this is not despising money; it is only the being ordered about by other passions: for just as a man, if he were at the beck and bidding of robbers to obey their orders, could not be free (so it is here).

His large spending does not come of his contempt of money, but simply from his not knowing how to dispose of it properly: else, were it possible both to keep it and to lay it out on his pleasure, this is what he would like. But he that spends his money on fit objects, this is the man of high soul: for it is truly a high soul, that which is not in slavery to passion, which accounts money to be nothing. Again, economy is a good thing: for thus that will be the best manager, who spends in a proper manner, and not at random without management.

But parsimony is not the same thing with this. For the former indeed, not even when an urgent necessity demands, touches the principal of his money: but the latter will be brother to the former. Well, then, we will put together the man of great soul, and the prudent economist, as also the prodigal and the mean man: for both of these are thus affected from littleness of soul, as those others are (from the opposite). Let us not then call him high-souled, who simply spends, but him who spends aright: nor let us call the economical manager mean and parsimonious, but him who is unseasonably sparing of his money.

What a quantity of wealth that rich man spent, who was clothed in purple and fine linen? Luke 16:19 But he was not high-souled: for his soul was possessed by an unmerciful disposition and by numberless lusts: how then should it be great? Abraham had a great soul, spending as he did for the reception of his guests,

killing the calf, and, where need was, not only not sparing his property, but not even his life. If then we see a person having his sumptuous table, having his harlots and his parasites, let us not call him a man of a great mind, but a man of an exceedingly little mind. For see how many passions he is enslaved and subject to -- gluttony, inordinate pleasure, flattery: but him who is possessed by so many, and cannot even escape one of them, how can any one call magnanimous? Nay, then most of all let us call him little-minded, when he spends the most: for the more he spends, the more does he show the tyranny of those passions: for had they not excessively got the mastery over him, he would not have spent to excess. Again, if we see a person, giving nothing to such people as these, but feeding the poor, and succoring those in need, himself keeping a mean table -- him let us call an exceedingly high-souled man: for it is truly a mark of a great soul, to despise one's own comfort, but to care for that of others. For tell me, if you should see a person despising all tyrants, and holding their commands of no account, but rescuing from their tyranny those who are oppressed and evil entreated; would you not think this a great man? So let us account of the man in this case also. The passions are the tyrant: if then we despise them, we shall be great: but if we rescue others also from them, we shall be far greater, as being sufficient not only for ourselves, but for others also. But if any one, at a tyrant's bidding, beat some other of his subjects, is this greatness of soul? No, indeed: but the extreme of slavery, in proportion as he is great. And now also there is set before us (πρὸ κεῖται) a soul that is a noble one and a free: but this the prodigal has ordered to be beaten by his passions: the man then that beats himself, shall we call high-souled? By no means. Well then * *, but let us see what is greatness of soul, and what prodigality; what is economy, and what meanness; what is gentleness, and (what) dulness and cowardice; what boldness, and what forwardness: that having distinguished these things from each other, we may be enabled to pass (this life) well-pleasing to the Lord, and to attain unto the good things promised, through the grace and mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ, to Whom be the glory for ever and ever. Amen.

Source: <https://sermonindex.net/speakers/st-john-chrysostom/homily-48-on-the-acts-of-the-apostles/>

Grow in Your Walk with Christ

Listen and read messages that will stir your heart for Christ and point you to deeper repentance and devotion.

- 50,000+ Sermons from speakers past and present
- 3,900+ Classic Christian Books freely readable online
- 1,200+ Bible Translations and Commentaries
- Over 450k forum posts — Join our vibrant online Christian forum

www.sermonindex.net