

Homily 49 on Matthew

by St. John Chrysostom

Jesus teaches the multitudes to wait upon Him, not for material blessings, but for the heavenly bread and to cast away worldly care.

Topics: "Compassion Of Christ", "Spiritual Discipline"

Description

John Chrysostom preaches on the miracle of Jesus feeding the five thousand with five loaves and two fishes, highlighting the compassion and mercy of Jesus towards the hungry multitude. He emphasizes the disciples' faith and obedience in bringing what little they had to Jesus, showcasing the importance of self-denial, humility, and sharing with others. Chrysostom warns against being consumed by material possessions and vanity, urging the congregation to focus on spiritual matters and seek the heavenly bread of life. He addresses the folly of extravagance, the dangers of neglecting the poor, and the need for self-control and virtue in all aspects of life.

Transcript

Matt. XIV. 13.

But when Jesus heard of it, He departed thence by ship into a desert place apart; and when the multitudes had heard thereof, they followed Him on foot out of all the cities.

See Him on every occasion departing, For not by His appearance only, but by His actions He would have this confirmed, because He knew the devil's craft, and that he would leave nothing undone to destroy this doctrine.

He then for this end retires; but the multitudes not even so withdraw themselves from Him, but they follow, riveted to Him, and not even John's tragical end alarmed them. So great a thing is earnest desire, so great a thing is love; in such wise does it overcome and dispel all dangers.

Therefore they straightway also received their reward. For Jesus, it is said, went forth, and saw a great multitude, and was moved with compassion toward them, and He healed their sick. Matthew 14:14

For great as their assiduity was, yet nevertheless His doings exceeded what any diligence could earn. Wherefore He sets forth also His motive for so healing them, His mercy, intense mercy: and He heals all.

And He requires not faith here. For both by coming to Him, and by leaving their cities, and by diligently seeking Him, and by abiding with Him even when hunger was pressing, they display their own faith.

But He is about to feed them also. And He does not this of Himself, but waits to be entreated; on every occasion, as I have said, maintaining this rule, not to spring onward to His miracles, preventing them, but upon some call.

And why did none of the multitude come near and speak for them? They revered Him exceedingly, and felt not even their hunger, through their longing to stay with Him. Neither indeed do His disciples, when they had come to Him, say, Feed them; for as yet they were rather in an imperfect state; but what?

And when it was evening, it is said, His disciples came to Him, saying, This is a desert place, and the time is now passed; send the multitude away, that they may go and buy themselves victuals. Matthew 14:15

For if even after the miracle they forgot what had been done, and after the baskets, supposed Him to be speaking of loaves, when He gave the name of leaven to the doctrine of the Pharisees; Matthew 16:6 much less, when they had never yet had experience of such a miracle, would they have expected any such thing. And yet He had made a beginning by actually healing many sick; but nevertheless, not even from this did they expect the miracle of the loaves; so imperfect were they as yet.

But mark thou, I pray, the Teacher's skill, how distinctly He summons them on towards believing. For He said not at once, I feed them; which indeed would not have been easily received; but what?

But Jesus, so it is written, said to them, They need not depart; give ye them to eat. Matthew 14:16

He said not, I give them, but, Give ye them; for as yet their regard to Him was as to a man. But they not even so are awakened, but still reason as with a man, saying,

We have but five loaves, and two fishes. Matthew 14:17

Wherefore Mark also says, They understood not the saying, for their heart was hardened.

They continuing therefore to crawl on the ground, then at length He brings in His own part, and says, Bring them hither to me. For although the place be desert, yet He that feeds the world is here; and although the time be now past, yet He that is not subject to time is discoursing with you.

But John says also, that they were barley loaves, John 6:9 not mentioning it without object, but teaching us to trample under foot the pride of costly living. Such was the diet of the prophets also.

2. He took therefore the five loaves, and the two fishes, and commanded the multitude, it is said, to sit down upon the grass, and looking up to Heaven, He blessed, and broke, and gave to His disciples, and the disciples to the multitude. And they did all eat and were filled, and they took up of the fragments that remained twelve baskets full. And they that had eaten were about five thousand men, beside women and children.

Wherefore did He look up to Heaven, and bless? It was to be believed of Him, both that He is of the Father, and that He is equal to Him. But the proofs of these things seemed to oppose one another. For while His equality was indicated by His doing all with authority, of His origin from the Father they could no otherwise be persuaded, than by His doing all with great lowliness, and with reference to Him, and invoking Him on His works. Wherefore we see that He neither did these actions only, nor those, that both

might be confirmed; and now He works miracles with authority, now with prayer.

Then again, that what He did might not seem an inconsistency, in the lesser things He looks up to Heaven, but in the greater does all with authority; to teach you in the lesser also, that not as receiving power from elsewhere, but as honoring Him that begot Him, so He acts. For example: when He forgave sins, and opened paradise, and brought in the thief, and most utterly set aside the old law, and raised innumerable dead, and bridled the sea, and reproved the un-uttered thoughts of men, and created an eye -- which are achievements of God only and of none else -- we see Him in no instance praying: but when He provided for the loaves to multiply themselves, a far less thing than all these, then He looks up to Heaven; at once establishing these truths which I have spoken of, and instructing us not to touch a meal, until we have given thanks to Him who gives us this food.

And why does He not make it of things that are not? Stopping the mouth of Marcion, and of Manichæans, who alienate His creation from Him, and teaching by His very works, that even all the things that are seen are His works and creatures, and signifying that it is Himself who gives the fruits, who said at the beginning, Let the earth put forth the herb of grass, and Let the waters bring forth things moving with living souls.

For this is not at all a less work than the other. For though those were made of things that are not, yet nevertheless were they of water; and it was no greater thing to produce fruits out of the earth, and moving things with life out of the water, than out of five loaves to make so many; and of fishes again, which was a sign that He was ruler both of the earth and of the sea.

Thus, since the sick were constantly the subject of His miracles, He works also a general benefit, that the many might not be spectators only of what befell others, but themselves also partakers of the gift.

And that which in the wilderness seemed to the Jews marvellous, (they said at least, Can He give bread also? Or prepare a table in the wilderness?) this He shows forth in His works. With this view also He leads them into the wilderness, that the miracle might be very far beyond suspicion, and that no one might think that any village lying near contributed ought to the meal. For this reason He mentions the hour also, not the place only.

And another thing too we learn, the self-restraint of the disciples which they practised in necessary things, and how little they accounted of food. For being twelve, they had five loaves only and two fishes; so secondary to them were the things of the body: so did they cling to the things spiritual only.

And not even that little did they hold fast, but gave up even it when asked. Whereby we should be taught, that though we have but little, this too we ought to give up to them that are in need. Thus, when commanded to bring the five loaves, they say not, and whence are we to have food? Whence to appease our own hunger? but they obey at once.

And besides what I have mentioned, to this end, as I at least think, He makes it out of the materials which they had, namely, that He might lead them to faith; for as yet they were rather in a weak state.

Wherefore also He looks up to Heaven. For of the other miracles they had many examples, but of this none.

3. He took the loaves, therefore, and broke them, and gave them by His disciples, hereby to honor them; and not in honor to them only, but also that, when the miracle had been done they might not disbelieve it,

nor forget it when it had past, their own hands bearing them witness.

Wherefore also He suffers the multitudes first to have a sense of hunger, and waits for these to come to Him first and ask Him, and by them makes the people sit down, and by them distributes; being minded by their own confessions and actions to prepossess them every one.

Therefore also, from them He receives the loaves, that the testimonies of what was doing might be many, and that they might have memorials of the miracle. For if even after these occurrences they forgot, Matthew 16:9 what would not have been their case, had He omitted those provisions?

And He commands them to sit down on the trampled grass, instructing the multitudes in self-denial. For His will was not to feed their bodies only, but also to instruct their souls. As well by the place therefore, as by His giving them nothing more than loaves and fishes, and by setting the same before all, and making it common, and by affording no one more than another, He was teaching them humility, and temperance, and charity, and to be of like mind one towards another, and to account all things common.

And He broke and gave to the disciples, and the disciples to the multitude. The five loaves He broke and gave, and the five multiplied themselves in the hands of the disciples. And not even here does He stay the miracle, but He made them even to exceed; to exceed, not as whole loaves, but as fragments; to signify that of those loaves these were remains, and in order that the absent might learn what had been done.

For this purpose indeed He suffered the multitudes to hunger, that no one might suppose what took place to be illusion.

For this also He caused just twelve baskets to remain over, that Judas also might bear one. For He was able indeed to have appeased their hunger, but the disciples would not have known His power, since in Elijah's case also this took place. 1 Kings 17:16

At all events, so greatly were the Jews amazed at Him for this, that they wished even to make Him a king, John 6:15 although with regard to the other miracles they did not so in any instance.

What reasoning now may set forth, how the loaves multiplied themselves; how they flowed together in the wilderness; how they were enough for so many (for there were five thousand men beside women and children; which was a very great commendation of the people, that both women and men attended Him); how the remnants had their being (for this again is not less than the former), and became so abundant, that the baskets were equal in number to the disciples, and neither more nor less?

Having then taken the fragments, He gave them not to the multitudes, but to the disciples, and that, because the multitudes were in a more imperfect state than the disciples.

And, having wrought the miracle, straightway He constrained His disciples to get into a ship, and to go before Him unto the other side, while He sent the multitudes away.

For even if He had seemed, when in sight, to be presenting an illusion, and not to have wrought a truth; yet surely not in His absence also. For this cause then, submitting His proceedings to an exact test, He commanded those that had got the memorials, and the proof of the miracles, to depart from Him.

And besides this, when He is doing great works, He disposes elsewhere of the multitudes and the disciples, instructing us in nothing to follow after the glory that comes from the people, nor to collect a

crowd about us.

Now by saying, He constrained them, He indicates the very close attendance of the disciples.

And His pretext indeed for dismissing them was the multitude, but He was Himself minded to go up into the mountain; and He did this, instructing us neither to be always in intercourse with multitudes, nor always to fly from the crowd, but each of the two as may be expedient, and giving each duly his turn.

4. Let us learn therefore ourselves also to wait upon Jesus; but not for His bounty in things sensible, lest we be upbraided like the Jews. For ye seek me, says He, not because ye saw the miracles, but because ye did eat of the loaves, and were filled. John 6:26 Therefore neither does He work this miracle continually, but a second time only; that they might be taught not to be slaves to their belly, but to cling incessantly to the things of the Spirit.

To these then let us also cling, and let us seek the heavenly bread, and having received it, let us cast away all worldly care. For if those men left houses, and cities, and kinsmen, and all, and abode in the wilderness, and when hunger was pressing, withdrew not; much more ought we, when approaching such a table, to show forth a more abundant self-command, and to set our love on the things of the Spirit, and to seek the things of sense as secondary to these.

Since even they were blamed, not because they sought Him for the bread, but because it was for this only they sought Him, and for this primarily. For should any one despise the great gifts, but cling to the small, and to those which the giver would have him despise, he loses these latter too: as on the other hand, if we love those, He adds these also. For these are but an appendage to the others; so vile are they and trifling, compared with those, although they be great. Let us not therefore spend our diligence on them, but account both the acquisition and loss of them alike indifferent, even as Job also neither clung to them when present, nor sought them absent. For on this account, they are called χρματα, not that we should bury them in the earth, but that we should use them aright.

And as of artisans every one has his peculiar skill, even so the rich man, as he knows not how to work in brass, nor to frame ships, nor to weave, nor to build houses, nor any such thing -- let him learn then to use his wealth aright, and to pity the poor; so shall he know a better art than all those.

For indeed this is above all those arts. Its workshop is built in Heaven. It has its tools not of iron and brass, but of goodness and of a right will. Of this art Christ is the Teacher, and His Father. For be ye merciful, says He, as your Father which is in Heaven. Luke 6:36

And what is indeed marvellous, being so much superior to the rest, it needs no labor, no time for its perfection; it is enough to have willed, and the whole is accomplished.

But let us see also the end thereof, what it is. What then is the end of it? Heaven, the good things in the heavens, that unspeakable glory, the spiritual bride-chambers, the bright lamps, the abiding with the Bridegroom; the other things, which no speech, nor even understanding, is able to set forth.

So that herein likewise great is its difference from all others. For most of the arts profit us for the present life, but this for the life to come also.

5. But if it so far excels the arts that are necessary to us for the present, as medicine, for instance, and house-building, and all others like them: much more the rest, which if any one were nicely to examine, he

would not even allow them to be arts. Wherefore I at least would not call those others, as they are unnecessary, so much as arts at all. For wherein is delicate cookery and making sauces profitable to us? Nowhere: yea, they are greatly unprofitable and hurtful, doing harm both to body and soul, by bringing upon us the parent of all diseases and sufferings, luxury, together with great extravagance.

But not these only, but not even painting, or embroidery, would I for one allow to be an art, for they do but throw men into useless expense. But the arts ought to be concerned with things necessary and important to our life, to supply and work them up. For to this end God gave us skill at all, that we might invent methods, whereby to furnish out our life. But that there should be figures either on walls, or on garments, wherein is it useful, I pray you? For this same cause the sandal-makers too, and the weavers, should have great retrenchments made in their art. For most things in it they have carried into vulgar ostentation, having corrupted its necessary use, and mixed with an honest art an evil craft; which has been the case with the art of building also. But even as to this, so long as it builds houses and not theatres, and labors upon things necessary, and not superfluous, I give the name of an art; so the business of weaving too, as long as it makes clothes, and coverlids, but does not imitate the spiders, and overwhelm men with much absurdity, and unspeakable effeminacy, so long I call it an art.

And the sandal-makers' trade, so long as it makes sandals, I will not rob of the appellation of art; but when it perverts men to the gestures of women, and causes them by their sandals to grow wanton and delicate, we will set it amidst the things hurtful and superfluous, and not so much as name it an art.

And I know well, that to many I seem over-minute in busying myself about these things; I shall not however refrain for this. For the cause of all our evils is this, such faults being at all counted trifling, and therefore disregarded.

And what sin, say you, can be of less account than this, of having an ornamented and glittering sandal, which fits the foot; if indeed it seem right at all to denominate it a sin?

Will ye then that I let loose my tongue upon it, and show its unseemliness, how great it is? And will you not be angry? Or rather, though ye be angry, I care not much. Nay, for yourselves are to blame for this folly, who do not so much as think it is a sin, and hereby constrain us to enter upon the reproof of this extravagance. Come then, let us examine it, and let us see what sort of an evil it is. For when the silken threads, which it is not seemly should be even inwoven in your garments, these are sewn by you into your shoes, what reproach, what derision do these things deserve?

And if you despise our judgments, hear the voice of Paul, with great earnestness forbidding these things, and then you will perceive the absurdity of them. What then says he? Not with braided hair, or gold, or pearls, or costly array. 1 Timothy 2:9 Of what favor then can you be worthy; when, in spite of Paul's prohibiting the married woman to have costly clothing, you extend this effeminacy even to your shoes, and hast no end of contrivances for the sake of this ridicule and reproach? Yes: for first a ship is built, then rowers are mustered, and a man for the prow, and a helmsman, and a sail is spread, and an ocean traversed, and, leaving wife and children and country, the merchant commits his very life to the waves, and comes to the land of the barbarians, and undergoes innumerable dangers for these threads, that after it all you may take them, and sew them into your shoes, and ornament the leather. And what can be done worse than this folly?

But the old ways are not like these, but such as become men. Wherefore I for my part expect that in process of time the young men among us will wear even women's shoes, and not be ashamed. And what

is more grievous, men's fathers seeing these things are not much displeased, but do even account it an indifferent matter.

Would ye that I should add what is still more grievous; that these things are done even when there are many poor? Would ye that I bring before you Christ, an hungered, naked, wandering everywhere, in chains? And how many thunderbolts must ye not deserve, overlooking Him in want of necessary food, and adorning these pieces of leather with so much diligence? And He indeed, when He was giving law to His disciples, would not so much as suffer them to have shoes at all, but we cannot bear to walk, I say not barefooted, but even with feet shod as they ought to be.

7. What then can be worse than this unseemliness, this absurdity? For the thing marks a soul, in the first place effeminate, then unfeeling and cruel, then curious and idly busy. For when will he be able to attend to any necessary matter, who is taken up with these superfluous things? When will such a youth endure to take heed to his soul, or to consider so much as that he has a soul? Yes, he surely will be a trifler who cannot help admiring such things; he cruel, who for their sake neglects the poor; he void of virtue, who spends all his diligence on them.

For he that is curious about the beauty of threads, and the bloom of colors, and the tendrils made of such woven work, when will he be able to look upon the heaven? When will he admire the beauty there, who is excited about a kind of beauty that belongs to pieces of leather, and who is bending to the earth? And whereas God has stretched out the Heaven, and lighted up the sun, drawing your looks upwards; you constrain yourself to look downwards, and to the earth, like the swine, and obeyest the devil. For indeed this wicked demon has devised this unseemliness, to draw you off from that beauty. For this intent has he drawn you this way; and God, showing Heaven, is outvied by a devil showing certain skins, or rather not even skins (for indeed these too are God's works), but effeminacy and a bad kind of skill.

And the young man goes about bending down towards the earth, he that is required to seek wisdom concerning the things in Heaven; priding himself more on these trifles than if he had accomplished some great and good work, and walking on tiptoe in the forum, and hereby begetting to himself superfluous sorrows and distresses, lest he should stain them with the mud when it is winter; lest he should cover them with the dust, when summer has come.

What do you say, O man? Have you cast your whole soul into the mire through this extravagance, and do you overlook it trailing on the ground, and are you so anxious about a pair of shoes? Mark their use, and respect the verdict you pass on them. For to tread on mud and mire, and all the spots on the pavement, for this were your shoes made. Or if you can not bear this, take and hang them from your neck, or put them on your head.

And ye indeed laugh at hearing this. But I am inclined to weep for these men's madness, and their earnest care about these matters. For in truth they would rather stain their body with mud, than those pieces of leather.

Triflers then they become in this way, and fond of money again in another way. For he that has been used to be frantic and eager upon such matters, requires also for his clothes and for all other things much expense, and a large income.

And if he have a munificent father, his thralldom becomes worse, his absurd fancy more intense; but if a parsimonious one, he is driven to other unseemliness, by way of getting together a little money for such

expenses.

Hence many young men have even sold their manhood, and have become parasites to the rich, and have undertaken other servile offices, purchasing thereby the fulfillment of such desires.

So then, that this man is sure to be at once fond of money, and a trifler, and about important things the most indolent of all men, and that he will be forced to commit many sins, is hereby evident. And that he is cruel and vainglorious, neither this will any one gainsay: cruel, in that when he sees a poor man, through the love of finery he makes as though he did not even see him, but while he is decking out these things with gold, overlooks him perishing of hunger; vainglorious, since even in such little matters he trains himself to hunt after the admiration of the beholders. For I suppose no general prides himself so much on his legions and trophies, as our profligate youths on the decking out of their shoes, on their trailing garments, on the dressing of their hair; yet surely all these are works of other persons, in their trades. But if men do not cease from vain boasting in the works of others, when will they cease from it in their own?

8. Shall I mention yet other things more grievous than these? Or are even these enough for you? Well then; I must end my speech here; since even this have I said, because of the disputatious, who maintain the thing not to be so very wrong.

And although I know that many of the young will not so much as attend to what I have said, being once for all intoxicated with this fancy, I yet ought not therefore to keep silence. For such fathers as have understanding, and are as yet sound, will be able to force them, even against their will, to a becoming decency.

Say not then, this is of no consequence, that is of no consequence; for this, this has ruined all. For even hereby ought you to train them, and by the things which seem trifling to make them grave, great of soul, superior to outward habiliments; so shall we find them approved in the great things also. For what is more ordinary than the learning of letters? Nevertheless thereby do men become rhetoricians, and sophists, and philosophers, and if they know not their letters, neither will they ever have that knowledge.

And this we have spoken not to young men only, but to women also, and to young damsels. For these too are liable to the like charges, and much more, inasmuch as seemliness is a thing appropriate to a virgin.

What has been said therefore to the others; do ye account to have been said to you also, that we may not repeat again the same things.

For it is full time now to close our discourse with prayer. All of you then pray with us, that the young men of the church above all things may be enabled to live orderly, and to attain an old age becoming them. Since for those surely who do not so live, it were well not to come to old age at all. But for them that have grown old even in youth, I pray that they may attain also to the very deep of gray hairs, and become fathers of approved children, and may be a joy to them that gave them birth, and above all surely to the God that made them, and may exterminate every distempered fancy, not that about their shoes, nor about their clothes only, but every other kind also.

For as untilled land, such is also youth neglected, bringing forth many thorns from many quarters. Let us then send forth on them the fire of the Spirit, and burn up these wicked desires, and let us break up our fields, and make them ready for the reception of the seed, and the young men among us let us exhibit with soberer minds than the old elsewhere. For this in fact is the marvellous thing, when temperance shines

forth in youth; since he surely that is temperate in old age cannot have a great reward, having in perfection the security from his age. But what is wonderful, is to enjoy a calm amidst waves, and in a furnace not to be burnt, and in youth not to run wanton.

With these things then in our minds, let us emulate that blessed Joseph, who shone through all these trials, that we may attain unto the same crowns with him; unto which may we all attain, by the grace and love towards man of our Lord Jesus Christ, with whom be glory unto the Father, together with the Holy Ghost, now and always, and world without end. Amen.

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