

Homily 5 on Ephesians

by St. John Chrysostom

The sermon emphasizes the loving-kindness of God in reconciling Jews and Gentiles through Christ, creating a new man in Himself, and abolishing the enmity that cut us off from God.

Scripture: Romans 8:6, Romans 10:6, Ephesians 2:11-16

Topics: "Reconciliation", "Salvation"

Description

John Chrysostom preaches about the loving-kindness of God in saving us, emphasizing how He saved us by Himself, exalted us to a new place, and reconciled Jews and Gentiles through Christ. Chrysostom highlights the significance of being reconciled to God through the Cross, abolishing enmity and creating a new unity. He urges believers to live in the Spirit, not in the flesh, to attain the promised blessings in Jesus Christ.

Transcript

Chapter II. Verses 11, 12

Wherefore remember, that aforetime ye the Gentiles in the flesh, who are called Uncircumcision by that which is called Circumcision in the flesh made by hands; that you were at that time separate from Christ, alienated from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers from the covenants of the promise, having no hope, and without God in the world.

There are many things to show the loving-kindness of God. First, the fact, that by Himself He has saved us, and by Himself through such a method as this. Secondly, that He has saved us, as being what we were. Thirdly, that He has exalted us to the place where we are. For all these things both contain in themselves the greatest demonstration of His loving-kindness, and they are the very subjects which Paul is now agitating in his Epistle. He had been saying, that when we were dead through our trespasses, and children of wrath, He saved us; He is now telling us further, to whom He has made us equal. Wherefore, says he, remember; because it is usual with us, one and all, when we are raised from a state of great meanness to corresponding, or perhaps a greater, dignity, not so much as even to retain any recollection of our former condition, being nourished in this our new glory. On this account it is that he says, Wherefore remember.-- Wherefore. Why, wherefore? Because we have been created unto good works, and this were sufficient to induce us to cultivate virtue; remember,-- for that remembrance is sufficient to make us grateful to our Benefactor -- that you were aforetime Gentiles. Observe how he lowers the superior advantages of the Jews and admires the disadvantages of the Gentiles; disadvantage indeed it was not,

but he is arguing with each respectively from their character and manner of life.

Who are called Uncircumcision.

The honor then of the Jews is in names, their prerogative is in the flesh. For uncircumcision is nothing, and circumcision is nothing.

By that which is called, says he, Circumcision in the flesh made by hands, that you were at that time separate from Christ, alienated from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers from the covenants of the promise, having no hope, and without God in the world.

You, says he, who were thus called by the Jews. But why when he is about to show that the benefit bestowed upon them consisted in this, in having fellowship with Israel, does he disparage the Israelitish prerogative? He does not disparage it. In essential points he enhances it, but only in these points, in which they had no fellowship, he disparages it. For further on he says, You are fellow citizens of the saints and of the household of God. Mark, how far he is from disparaging it. These points, says he, are indifferent. Never think, says he, that because ye happen not to be circumcised, and are now in uncircumcision, that there is any difference in this. No, the real trouble was this, the being without Christ, the being aliens from the commonwealth of Israel. Whereas this circumcision is not the commonwealth. Again, the being strangers from the covenants of promise, the having no hope to come, the being without God in this world, all these were parts of their condition. He was speaking of heavenly things; he speaks also of those which are upon earth; since the Jews had a great opinion of these. Thus also Christ in comforting His disciples, after saying, Blessed are they that have been persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven, adds the lesser point of consolation, for so, says He, persecuted they the prophets which were before you. Matthew 5:10-12 For this, compared with the greatness of the other, is far less, yet in regard to the being near, and believing, it is great and sufficient, and has much force. This then was the sharing in the commonwealth. His word is not, separated, but alienated from the commonwealth. His word is not, ye took no interest in, but, ye had not so much as any part in, and were strangers. The expressions are most emphatic, and indicate the separation to be very wide. Because the Israelites themselves were without this commonwealth, not however as aliens, but as indifferent to it, and they fell from the covenants, not however as strangers, but as unworthy.

But what were the covenants of the promise? To you and to your seed, says He, will I give this land, Genesis 17:8 and whatever else He promised.

Having no hope, he adds, and without God. Though gods indeed they worshipped, but they were no gods: for an idol is not any thing. 1 Corinthians 10:19

Ver. 13-15. But now, in Christ Jesus, you that once were far off, are made near in the blood of Christ. For He is our peace, who made both one, and broke down the middle wall of partition, having abolished in His flesh the enmity.

Is this then the great privilege, it may be said, that we are admitted into the commonwealth of the Jews? What are you saying? He has summed up all things that are in heaven, and that are in earth, and now do you tell us about Israelites? Yes, he would say. Those higher privileges we must apprehend by faith; these, by the things themselves. But now, says he, in Christ Jesus, you that once were far off, are made near, in reference to the commonwealth. For the far off, and the near, are matters of will and choice only.

For He is our peace, Who made both one.

What is this, both one? He does not mean this, that He has raised us to that high descent of theirs, but that he has raised both us and them to a yet higher. Only that the blessing to us is greater, because to these it had been promised, and they were nearer than we; to us it had not been promised, and we were farther off than they. Therefore it is that he says, And that the Gentiles might glorify God for His mercy. Romans 15:9 The promise indeed He gave to the Israelites, but they were unworthy; to us He gave no promise, nay, we were even strangers, we had nothing in common with them; yet has He made us one, not by knitting us to them, but by knitting both them and us together into one. I will give you an illustration. Let us suppose there to be two statues, the one of silver, the other of lead, and then that both shall be melted down, and that the two shall come out gold. Behold, thus has He made the two one. Or put the case again in another way. Let the two be, one a slave, the other an adopted son: and let both offend Him, the one as a disinherited child, the other as a fugitive, and one who never knew a father. Then let both be made heirs, both trueborn sons. Behold, they are exalted to one and the same dignity, the two have become one, the one coming from a longer, the other from a nearer distance, and the slave becoming more noble than he was before he offended.

And broke down, he proceeds, the middle wall of partition.

What the middle wall of partition is, he interprets by saying, the enmity having abolished in His flesh, even the law of commandments contained in ordinances. Some indeed affirm that he means the wall of the Jews against the Greeks, because it did not allow the Jews to hold intercourse with the Greeks. To me, however, this does not seem to be the meaning, but rather that he calls the enmity in the flesh, a middle wall, in that it is a common barrier, cutting us off alike from God. As the Prophet says, Your iniquities separate between you and Me; Isaiah 59:2 for that enmity which He had both against Jews and Gentiles was, as it were, a middle wall. And this, while the law existed, was not only not abolished, but rather was strengthened; for the law, says the Apostle, works wrath. Romans 4:15 Just in the same way then as when he says in that passage, the law works wrath, he does not ascribe the whole of this effect to the law itself, but it is to be understood, that it is because we have transgressed it; so also in this place he calls it a middle wall, because through being disobeyed it wrought enmity. The law was a hedge, but this it was made for the sake of security, and for this reason was called a hedge, to the intent that it might form an inclosure. For listen again to the Prophet, where he says, I made a trench about it. Isaiah 5:2 And again, You have broken down her fences, so that all they which pass by the way do pluck her. Psalm 80:12 Here therefore it means security and so again, I will take away the hedge thereof, and it shall be trodden down. Isaiah 5:5 And again, He gave them the law for a defense. Isaiah 8:20 And again, The Lord executes righteous acts and made known His ways unto Israel. Psalm 103:6-7 It became, however, a middle wall, no longer establishing them in security, but cutting them off from God. Such then is the middle wall of partition formed out of the hedge. And to explain what this is, he subjoins, the enmity in His flesh having abolished, the law of commandments.

How so? In that He was slain and dissolved the enmity therein. And not in this way only but also by keeping it. But what then, if we are released from the former transgression, and yet are again compelled to keep it? Then were the case the same over again, whereas He has destroyed the very law itself. For he says, Having abolished the law of commandments contained in ordinances. Oh! amazing loving-kindness! He gave us a law that we should keep it, and when we kept it not, and ought to have been punished, He even abrogated the law itself. As if a man, who, having committed a child to a schoolmaster, if he should turn out disobedient, should set him at liberty even from the schoolmaster, and take him away. How great

loving-kindness were this! What is meant by,

Having abolished by ordinances?

For he makes a wide distinction between commandments and ordinances. He either then means faith, calling that an ordinance, (for by faith alone He saved us,) or he means precept, such as Christ gave, when He said, But I say unto you, that you are not to be angry at all. Matthew 5:22 That is to say, If you shall believe that God raised Him from the dead, you shall be saved. Romans 10:6-9 And again, The word is near you, in your mouth, and in your heart. Say not, Who shall ascend into heaven, or who shall descend into the abyss? or, who has brought Him again from the dead? Instead of a certain manner of life, He brought in faith. For that He might not save us to no purpose, He both Himself underwent the penalty, and also required of men the faith that is by doctrines.

That he might create in Himself of the two, one new man.

Observe thou, that it is not that the Gentile has become a Jew, but that both the one and the other are entered into another condition. It was not with a view of merely making this last other than he was, but rather, in order to create the two anew. And well does he on all occasions employ the word create, and does not say change, in order to point out the power of what was done, and that even though the creation be invisible, yet it is no less a creation than that is, and that we ought not henceforward start away from this, as from natural things.

That He might in Himself of the two.

That is, by Himself. He gave not this charge to another, but Himself, by Himself, melted both the one and the other, and produced a glorious one, and one greater than the first creation; and that one, first, was Himself. For this is the meaning of in Himself. He Himself first gave the type and example. Laying hold on the one hand of the Jew, and on the other of the Gentile, and Himself being in the midst, He blended them together, made all the estrangement which existed between them to disappear, and fashioned them anew from above by fire and by water; no longer with water and earth, but with water and fire. He became a Jew by circumcision, He became accursed, He became a Gentile without the law, and was over both Gentiles and Jews.

One new man, says he, so making peace.

Peace for them both towards God, and towards each other. For so long as they continued still Jews and Gentiles, they could not have been reconciled. And had they not been delivered each from his own peculiar condition, they would not have arrived at another and a higher one. For the Jew is then united to the Gentile when he becomes a believer. It is like persons being in a house, with two chambers below, and one large and grand one above: they would not be able to see each other, till they had got above.

Making peace, more especially towards God; for this the context shows, for what says he?

Ver. 16. And might reconcile them both in one body unto God through the Cross.

He says, not merely might reconcile, (καταλλ■ξ■) but might reconcile thoroughly (■ ποκαταλλ■ξ■) indicating that heretofore human nature had been easily reconciled, as, e.g., in the case of the saints and before the time of the Law.

In one body, says he, and that His own, unto God. How is this effected? By Himself, he means, suffering the due penalty.

Through the cross having slain the enmity thereby.

Nothing can be more decisive, nothing more expressive than these words. His death, says the Apostle, has slain the enmity. He has wounded and killed it, not by giving charge to another, nor by what He wrought only, but also by what He suffered. He does not say having dissolved, he does say having cancelled, but what is stronger than all, having slain, so that it never should rise again. How then is it that it does rise again? From our exceeding depravity. For as long as we abide in the body of Christ, as long as we are united, it rises not again, but lies dead; or rather that former enmity never rises again at all. But if we breed another, it is no longer because of Him, who has destroyed and put to death the former one. It is thou, forsooth, that travailest with a fresh one. For the mind of the flesh, says he, is enmity against God; Romans 8:6 if we are in nothing carnally-minded, there will be no fresh enmity produced, but that peace shall remain.

Moral. Think then, how vast an evil is it, when God has employed so many methods to reconcile us, and has effected it, that we should again fall back into enmity! This enmity no fresh Baptism, but hell itself awaits; no fresh remission, but searching trial. The mind of the flesh is luxury and indolence, the mind of the flesh is covetousness and all kinds of sin. Why is it said the mind of the flesh? While yet the flesh could do nothing without the soul. He does not say this to the disparagement of the flesh, any more than when he says the natural man, 1 Corinthians 2:14 he uses that expression to the disparagement of the soul, for neither body nor soul in itself, if it receive not the impulse which is far above, is able to achieve any thing great or noble.

Hence he calls those acts which the soul performs of herself, natural; ψυχικα and those which the body performs of itself carnal. Not because these are natural, but because, inasmuch as they receive not that direction from heaven, they perish. So the eyes are good, but without light, will commit innumerable errors; this, however, is the fault of their weakness, not of nature. Were the errors natural, then should we never be able to use them aright at all. For nothing that is natural is evil.

Why then does he call carnal affections sins? Because whenever the flesh exalts herself, and gets the mastery over her charioteer, she produces ten thousand mischiefs. The virtue of the flesh is, her subjection to the soul. It is her vice to govern the soul. As the horse then may be good and nimble, and yet this is not shown without a rider; so also the flesh will then show her goodness, when we cut off her prancings. But neither again is the rider shown, if he have not skill.

Nay he himself will do mischief yet more fearful than that before named. So that on all hands we must have the Spirit at hand. This being at hand will impart new strength to the rider; this will give beauty both to body and soul. For just as the soul, while dwelling in the body, makes it beautiful, but when she leaves it destitute of her own native energy and departs, like a painter confounding his colors together, the greatest loathsomeness ensues, every one of the several parts hastening to corruption, and dissolution:-- so is it also when the Spirit forsakes the body and the soul, the loathsomeness which ensues is worse and greater.

Do not then, because the body is inferior to the soul, revile it, for neither do I endure to revile the soul because it has no strength without the Spirit. If one need say anything at all, the soul is deserving of the greater censure than the body; for the body indeed can do no grievous harm without the soul, whereas the

soul can do much without the body. Because, we know, when the one is even wasting away, and has no wantonness, the soul is busily employed. Even as those sorcerers, magicians, envious persons, enchanters, especially cause the body to waste away.

But besides this, not even luxury is the effect of the necessity of the body, but rather of the inattentiveness of the soul; for food, not feasting, is the object of the necessity of the body. For if I have a mind to put on a strong curb, I stop the horse; but the body is unable to check the soul in her evil courses. Wherefore then does he call it the carnal mind? Because it comes to be wholly of the flesh, for when she has the mastery, then she goes wrong, as soon as ever she has deprived herself of reason, and of the supremacy of the soul.

The virtue therefore of the body consists in this, in its submission to the soul, since of itself the flesh is neither good nor evil. For what could the body ever do of itself? It is then by its connection that the body is good, good because of its subjection, but of itself neither good nor evil, with capacity, however, both for one and for the other, and having an equal tendency either way. The body has a natural desire, not however of fornication, nor of adultery, but of pleasure; the body has a desire not of feasting, but of food; not of drunkenness, but of drink.

For in proof that it is not drunkenness that is the natural desire of the body, mark how, whenever you exceed the measure, when you go beyond the boundary-lines, it cannot hold out a moment longer. Up to this point it is of the body, but all the rest of the excesses, as e.g., when she is hurried away into sensualities, when she becomes stupefied, these are of the soul. For though the body be good, still it is vastly inferior to the soul, as lead is less of value than gold, and yet gold needs lead to solder it, and just so has the soul need also of the body.

Or in the same way as a noble child requires a conductor, so again does the soul stand in need of the body. For, as we speak of childish things, not to the disparagement of childhood, but only of those acts which are done during childhood; so also are we now speaking of the body.

Yet it is in our power, if we will, no longer to be in the flesh, no, nor upon the earth, but in heaven, and in the Spirit. For our being here or there, is not determined so much by our position, as by our disposition. Of many people, at least, who are in some place, we say they are not there, when we say, You were not here. And again You are not here. And why do I say this? We often say, You are not at (■ v) yourself, I am not at (■ v) myself, and yet what can be more material (a stronger instance of corporeal locality) than this, that a man is near to himself? And yet, notwithstanding, we say that he is not at himself. Let us then be in ourselves, in heaven, in the Spirit. Let us abide in the peace and in the grace of God, that we may be set at liberty from all the things of the flesh, and may be able to attain to those good things which are promised in Jesus Christ our Lord, with whom to the Father, together with the Holy Spirit, be glory, and might, and honor, now and henceforth, and for ever and ever. Amen.

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