

Homily 50 on the Acts of the Apostles

by St. John Chrysostom

St. John Chrysostom's Homily 50 emphasizes Paul's steadfastness in faith and the importance of maintaining a clear conscience amidst false accusations.

Scripture: Matthew 5:45, John 8:49, Acts 24:10, Acts 24:15, Romans 12:20

Topics: "Forgiveness", "Reconciliation"

Description

John Chrysostom preaches on the importance of forgiveness and overcoming anger towards our enemies. He emphasizes the need to imitate Christ in responding to insults and injuries with kindness and reconciliation, rather than retaliation. Chrysostom encourages his listeners to control their anger, avoid escalating conflicts, and strive for peace and reconciliation even in the face of provocation and injustice.

Transcript

Acts XXIII. 31, 32, 33

Then the soldiers, as it was commanded them, took Paul, and brought him by night to Antipatris. On the morrow they left the horsemen to go with him, and returned to the castle: who, when they came to Cæsarea, and delivered the epistle to the governor, presented Paul also before him.

Like some king whom his body-guards escort, so did these convey Paul; in such numbers too, and by night, for fear of the wrath of the people. Now then you will say that they have got him out of the city, they desist from their violence? No indeed. But (the tribune) would not have sent him off with such care for his safety, but that while he himself had found nothing amiss in him, he knew the murderous disposition of his adversaries. And when the governor had read the letter, he asked of what province he was.

And when he understood that he was of Cilicia; I will hear you, said he, when your accusers are also come. Already Lysias has spoken for his exculpation; (but the Jews seek to) gain the hearer beforehand. And he ordered him to be kept in custody in Herod's prætorium (v. 34, 35): again Paul is put in bonds. And after five days came down the high priest Ananias with the elders. See how for all this they do not desist; hindered as they were by obstacles without number, nevertheless they come, only to be put to shame here also.

And with an orator, one Tertullus. And what need was there of an orator? Which (persons) also informed the governor against Paul. Acts 24:1 See how this man also from the very outset (b) with his praises seeks

to gain the judge beforehand. And when he was called forth, Tertullus began to accuse him, saying, Seeing that by you we enjoy great quietness, and that very worthy deeds are done unto this nation by your providence, we accept it always, and in all places, most noble Felix, with all thankfulness. (v. 2, 3.)

Then as having much to say, he passes by the rest: Notwithstanding, that I be not further tedious unto you, I pray you that you would hear us of your clemency a few words. For we have found this man a pestilent fellow, and a mover of sedition among all the Jews throughout the world. (a) As a revolutionary and seditious person he wishes to deliver him up. And yet, it might be answered, it is ye that have done this. (c) And see how he would put up the judge to a desire of punishing, seeing he had here an opportunity to coerce the man that turned the world upside down!

As if they had achieved a meritorious action, they make much of it: Having found this fellow, etc., a mover of sedition, say they, among all the Jews throughout the world. (Had he been such), they would have proclaimed him as a benefactor and saviour of the nation! And a ringleader of the sect of the Nazarenes. (v. 4, 5.) They thought this likely to tell as a reproach -- of the Nazarenes: and by this also they seek to damage him -- for Nazareth was a mean place. And, we have found him, say they: see how maliciously they calumniate him: (found him), as if he had been always giving them the slip, and with difficulty they had succeeded in getting him: though he had been seven days in the Temple!

Who also has gone about to profane the temple; whom we took, [and would have judged according to our law.] Acts 24:6 See how they insult even the Law; it was so like the Law, forsooth, to beat, to kill, to lie in wait! And then the accusation against Lysias: though he had no right, say they, to interfere, in the excess of his confidence he snatched him from us: [But the tribune Lysias came upon us, and with great violence took him away out of our hands, commanding his accusers to come unto you]: by examining of whom yourself may take knowledge of all these things, where of we accuse him.

And the Jews also assented, saying that these things were so. Acts 24:7-9. What then says Paul? Then Paul; after that the governor had beckoned unto him to speak, answered, Forasmuch as I know that you have been of many years a just judge unto this nation, I do the more cheerfully answer for myself. Acts 24:10 This is not the language of flattery, his testifying to the judge's justice: no, the adulation was rather in that speech of the orator, By you we enjoy great quietness.

If so, then why are you seditious? What Paul sought was justice. Knowing you to be a just judge, I cheerfully, says he, answer for myself. Then also he enforces this by the length of time: that (he had been judge) of many years. Because that you may understand, that there are yet but twelve days since I went up to Jerusalem for to worship. Acts 24:11 And what is this? (It means), that I could not immediately have raised a commotion. Because the accuser had nothing to show (as done) in Jerusalem, observe what he said: among all the Jews throughout the world.

Therefore it is that Paul here forcibly attracts him -- to worship, he says, I came up, so far am I from raising sedition -- and lays a stress upon this point of justices being the strong point. And they neither found me in the Temple disputing with any man, neither raising up the people, neither in the synagogues, nor in the city Acts 24:12; which in fact was the truth. And the accusers indeed use the term ringleader, as if it were a case of fighting and insurrection; but see how mildly Paul here answers.

But this I confess unto you, that after the way which they call heresy, so worship I the God of my fathers, believing all things which are written in the Law and the Prophets: and have hope toward God, which they themselves also allow, that there shall be a resurrection of the dead, both of the just and unjust. (v. 14,

15.) The accusers were separating him (as an alien), but he identifies himself with the Law, as one of themselves. And in this, says he, do I exercise myself, to have always a conscience void of offense toward God and toward men.

Now after many years I came to bring alms to my nation, and offerings. In which they found me purified in the temple, not with multitude, neither with tumult. (v. 16, 17, 18.) Why then did you come up? What brought you here? To worship, says he; to do alms. This was not the act of a factious person. Then also he casts out their person: but, says he, (they that found me, were) certain Jews from Asia, who ought to have been here before you, and object, if they had ought against me.

Or else let these same here say, if they have found any evil doing in me while I stood before the council, except it be for this one voice, that I cried, standing among them, Touching the resurrection of the dead I am called in question by you this day. (v. 19, 20, 21.) For this is justification in superabundance, not to flee from his accusers, but to be ready to give account to all. Of the resurrection of the dead, says he, am I this day called in question. And not a word said he of what he had to say, how they had conspired against him, had violently kept him, had laid wait for him -- for these matters are course spoken of by the tribune -- but by Paul, though there was danger, not so: no, he is silent, and only defends himself, though he had very much to say. (b) In which (alms), says he, they found me in course of purifying in the Temple.

Then how did he profane it? For it was not the part of the same man both to purify himself and worship and come for this purpose, and then to profane it. This has with it a surmise of the justice of his cause, that he does not fall into a long discourse. And he gratifies the judge, I suppose, by that also (namely, by), making his defense compendious: (d) seeing that Tertullus before him did make a long harangue. (f) And this too is a proof of mildness, that when one has much to say, in order not to be troublesome one says but few words. (c) But let us look again at what has been said.

(Recapitulation.) Then the soldiers, etc. Acts 23:31-33 (a) This also made Paul famous in Cæsarea, his coming with so large a force.-- But, says Tertullus, that I be not further tedious, (e) showing that (Felix) does find him tedious (■ γκ■πτεταλ): I beseech you, he does not say, Hear the matter, but, hear us of your clemency. Acts 24:4 Probably it is to pay court, that he thus lays out his speech. (g) For having found this man, a pestilent fellow, and a mover of sedition among all the Jews throughout the world Acts 24:5: how then, it might be said, if he did this elsewhere (and not here)?

No, says he; among us also he has profaned the Temple; attempted, says he, to profane it: but the how, he leaves untold. Whom also we took. etc. But the tribune, etc. And while he thus exaggerates what relates to the tribune, see how he extenuates the part of the accusers themselves. We took him, he says, and would have judged him according to our Law. Acts 24:6 He shows that it is a hardship to them that they have to come to foreign tribunals, and that they would not have troubled him had not the tribune compelled them, and that he, having no concern in the matter, had seized the man by force: for in fact the wrongs done were against us, and with us the tribunal ought to have been.

For that this is the meaning, see what follows: with great violence Acts 24:7, he says. For this conduct is violence. From whom you may know. He neither dares to accuse him (the tribune)-- for the man was indulgent (forsooth)-- nor does he wholly pass it by. Then again, lest he should seem to be lying, he adduces Paul himself as his own accuser. From whom, by examining him, you may take knowledge of all these things. Acts 24:8 Next, as witnesses also of the things spoken, the accusers, the same persons themselves both witnesses and accusers: And the Jews also assented, etc.

Acts 24:9 But Paul, Forasmuch as I know that you have been of many years a just judge. Acts 24:10 Why then, he is no stranger or alien or revolutionary person, seeing he had known the judge for many years. And he does well to add the epithet just, that he (Felix) might not look to the chief priest, nor to the people, nor the accuser. See, how he did not let himself be carried away into abuse, although there was strong provocation. Believing, he says, that there will be a resurrection: now a man who believed a resurrection, would never have done such things -- which (resurrection) they themselves also allow.

Acts 24:15 He does not say it of them, that they believe all things written in the Prophets: it was he that believed them all, not they: but how all, it would require a long discourse to show. And he nowhere makes mention of Christ. Here by saying, Believing, he does (virtually) introduce what relates to Christ; for the present he dwells on the subject of the resurrection, which doctrine was common to them also, and removed the suspicion of any sedition. And for the cause of his going up, I came, he says, to bring alms to my nation and offerings.

Acts 24:17 How then should I have troubled those, for the bringing offerings to whom I had come so long a journey? Neither with multitude, nor with tumult. Acts 24:18 Everywhere he does away the charge of sedition. And he also does well to challenge his accusers who were from Asia, Who ought to accuse before you, etc., but he does well also not to reject this either; or else, says he, let these same here say. Touching the resurrection of the dead, etc. (v. 19, 20, 21): for in fact it was on this account they were sore troubled from the first, because he preached the Resurrection.

This being proved, the things relating to Christ also were easily introduced, that He was risen. What evil doing, he says, they found in me. In the council Acts 4:2 he says: the examination not having taken place in private. That these things which I say are true, those witness who bring this charge against me. Having, he says, a conscience void of offense both toward God, and toward men. Acts 24:16 This is the perfection of virtue, when even to men we give no handle against us, and are careful to be void of offense with God.

That I cried, he says, in the council. He also shows their violence. They have it not to say, Thou did these things under the pretext of alms: for (it was) not with multitude, nor with tumult: especially as upon enquiry made concerning this thing, nothing further was found. Do you observe his moderation, though there were dangers? Do you observe how he keeps his tongue from evil-speaking, how he seeks only one thing, to free himself from the charges against himself, not that he may criminate them, except so far as he might be obliged to do so while defending himself? Just as Christ also said: I have not a devil, but I honor My Father: but you do dishonor Me. John 8:49

Let us imitate him, since he also was an imitator of Christ. If he, with enemies, who went even to the length of murder and slaughter, said nothing offensive to them, what pardon shall we deserve, who in reviling and abuse become infuriated, calling our enemies villains, detestable wretches? What pardon shall we deserve, for having enemies at all? Hear you not, that to honor (another) is to honor one's self? So it is: but we disgrace ourselves. You accuse (some one) that he has abused you: then why do you bring yourself under the same accusation?

Why inflict a blow on yourself? Keep free from passion, keep unwounded: do not, by wishing to smite another, bring the hurt upon yourself. What, is the other tumult of our soul not enough for us, the tumult that is stirred up, though there be none to stir it up -- for example, its outrageous lusts, its griefs and sorrows, and such like -- but we must needs heap up a pile of others also? And how, you will say, is it possible, when one is insulted and abused, to bear this? And how is it not possible, I ask?

Is a wound got from words; or do words inflict bruises on our bodies? Then where is the hurt to us? So that, if we will, we can bear it. Let us lay down for ourselves a law not to grieve, and we shall bear it: let us say to ourselves, It is not from enmity; it is from infirmity -- for it is indeed owing to an infirmity, since, for proof that it comes not from enmity nor from malignity of disposition, but from infirmity, the other also would fain have restrained (his anger), although he had suffered numberless wrongs.

If we only have this thought in our minds, that it is from infirmity, we shall bear it, and while we forgive the offending person, we shall try not to fall into it ourselves. For I ask all you who are present: would you have wished to be able to exercise such a philosophic temper, as to bear with those who insult you? I think so. Well, then, he insulted unwillingly; he would rather not have done so, but he did it, forced by his passion: refrain yourself. Do you not see (how it is with) the demoniacs (in their fits)?

Just then as it is with them, so with him: it is not so much from enmity, as from infirmity (that he behaves as he does): endure it. And as for us -- it is not so much from the insults as they are in themselves that we are moved, as from our own selves: else how is it that when madmen offer us the same insults, we bear it? Again, if those who insult us be our friends, in that case too we bear it: or also our superiors, in that case also we bear it: how then is it not absurd, that in the case of these three, friends, madmen, and superiors, we bear it, but where they are of the same rank or our inferiors, we do not bear it?

I have oftentimes said: It is but an impulse of the moment, something that hurries us away on the sudden: let us endure it for a little, and we shall bear the whole thing. The greater the insults, the more weak the offender. Do you know when it behooves us to grieve? When we have insulted another, and he keeps silence: for then he is strong, and we weak: but if the contrary be the case, you must even rejoice: you are crowned, you are proclaimed conqueror, without having even entered into the contest, without having borne the annoyance of sun, and heat, and dust, without having grappled with an antagonist and let him close with you; nothing but a mere wish on your part, sitting or standing, and you have got a mighty crown: a crown far greater than those (combatants earn): for to throw an enemy standing to the encounter, is nothing like so great as to overcome the darts of anger.

You have conquered, without having even let him close with you, you have thrown down the passion that was in you, have slain the beast that was roused, have quelled the anger that was raging, like some excellent herdsman. The fight was like to have been an intestine one, the war a civil war. For, as those who sit down to besiege from without (endeavor to), embroil (the besieged) in civil discords, and then overcome them; so he that insults, unless he rouse the passion within us, will not be able to overcome us: unless we kindle the flame in ourselves, he has no power.

Let the spark of anger be within us, so as to be ready for lighting at the right moment, not against ourselves, nor so as to involve us in numberless evils. See ye not how the fire in houses is kept apart, and not thrown about at random everywhere, neither among straw, nor among the linen, nor just where it may chance, that so there may not be danger, if a wind blow on it, of its kindling a flame: but whether a maid-servant have a lamp, or the cook light a fire, there is many an injunction given, not to do this in the draught of the wind, nor near a wooden panel, nor in the night-time: but when the night has come on, we extinguish the fire, fearing lest perchance while we are asleep and there is none to help, it set fire, and burn us all.

Let this also be done with regard to anger; let it not be scattered everywhere up and down in our thoughts, but let it be in some deep recess of the mind, that the wind arising from the words of him who is opposing

us may not easily reach to it, but that it receive the wind (which is to rouse it) from ourselves, who know how to rouse it in due measure and with safety. If it receive the wind from without, it knows no moderation; it will set everything on fire: oftentimes when we are asleep this wind will come upon it, and will burn up all.

Let it therefore be with us (in safe keeping) in such sort as only to kindle a light: for anger does kindle a light when it is managed as it ought to be: and let us have torches against those who wrong others, against the devil. Let not the spark lie anywhere as it may chance, nor be thrown about; let us keep it safe under ashes: in lowly thoughts let us keep it slumbering. We do not want it at all times, but when there is need to subdue and to make tender, to mollify obduracy, and convict the soul.

What evils have angry and wrathful passions wrought! And what makes it grievous indeed is, that when we have parted asunder, we have no longer the power to come together again, but we wait for others (to do this): each is ashamed, and blushes to come back himself and reconcile the other. See, he is not ashamed to part asunder and to be separated; no, he takes the lead as author of the evil: but to come forward and patch that which is rent, this he is ashamed to do: and the case is just the same, as if a man should not shrink from cutting off a limb, but should be ashamed to join it together again.

What do you say, O man? Have you committed great injuries, and yourself been the cause of the quarrel? Why, then, you would justly be the first to go and be reconciled, as having yourself furnished the cause. But he did the wrong, he is the cause of the enmity? Why then, for this reason also you must do it, that men may the more admire you, that in addition to the former, you may get the first prize in the latter also: as you were not the cause of the enmity, so neither of its being extended further.

Perhaps also the other, as conscious within himself of numberless evils, is ashamed and blushes. But he is haughty? On this account above all, do not hesitate to run and meet him: for if the ailment in him be twofold, both haughtiness and anger, in this you have mentioned the very reason why you ought to be the first to go to him, you that are the one in sound health, the one who is able to see: as for him, he is in darkness: for such is anger and false pride. But do you, who art free from these and in sound health, go to him -- you the physician, go to the sick.

Does any of the physicians say, Because such an one is sick, I do not go to him? No, this is the very reason above all why they do go, when they see that he is not able to come to them. For of those who are able (to come) they think less, as of persons not extremely ill, but not so of those who lie at home sick. Or are not pride and anger, think you, worse than any illness? Is not the one like a sharp fever, the other like a body swollen with inflammation? Think what a thing it is to have a fever and inflammation: go to him, extinguish the fire, for by the grace of God you can, go, assuage the heat as it were with water.

But, you will say, how if he is only the more set up by my doing this very thing? This is nothing to you: you have done your part, let him take account for himself: let not our conscience condemn us, that this thing happens in consequence of any omission of what ought to have been done on our part. In so doing, says the Scripture, you shall heap coals of fire on his head. Romans 12:20, cf. Hom. in l. xxii. §3 And yet, for all that this is the consequence, it bids us go and be reconciled and do good offices -- not that we may heap coals of fire, but that (our enemy) knowing that future consequence, may be assuaged by the present kindness, that he may tremble, that he may fear our good offices rather than our hostilities, and our friendships rather than our ill designs.

For one does not so hurt his hater by showing his resentment as an enemy, as by doing him good and showing kindness. For by his resentment, he has hurt both himself and perhaps the other also in some

little degree: but by doing good offices, he has heaped coals of fire on his head. Why then, you will say, for fear of thus heaping coals one ought not to do this (b) but to carry on the enmity to greater lengths. By no means: it is not you that cause this, but he with his brutish disposition.

For if, when you are doing him good, and honoring him, and offering to be reconciled, he persists in keeping up the enmity, it is he has kindled the fire for himself, he has set his own head on fire; you are guiltless. Do not want to be more merciful than God (b), or rather, if you wish it, you will not be able, not even in the least degree. How should you? As far as the heaven is from the earth, Scripture says, so far are My counsels from your counsels Isaiah 45:8: and again, If you, He says, being evil, know how to give good gifts unto your children, how much more your heavenly Father Matthew 7:11?

But in fact this talk is mere pretext and subterfuge. Let us not prevaricate with God's commandments. And how do we prevaricate, you will say? He has said, In so doing, you will heap coals of fire on his head: and you say, I do not like to do this. (a) But are you willing to heap coals after another fashion, that is upon your own head? For in fact this is what resentment does: (c) since you shall suffer evils without number. (e) You say, I am afraid for my enemy, because he has done me great injuries: in reality is it this you say?

But how came you to have an enemy? But how came you to hate your enemy? You fear for him that has injured you, but do you not fear yourself? Would that you had a care for yourself! Do not act (the kindness) with such an aim as this: or rather do it, though it be but with such an aim. But you do it not at all. I say not to you, you will heap coals of fire: no, I say another and a greater thing: only do it. For Paul says this only by way of summoning you (if only), in hope of the vengeance, to put an end to the enmity.

Because we are savage as wild beasts in disposition, and would not otherwise endure to love our enemy, unless we expected some revenge, he offers this as a cake, so to say, to a wild beast. For to the Apostles (the Lord) says not this, but what says He? That ye may be like to your Father which is in heaven. Matthew 5:45 And besides, it is not possible that the benefactor and the benefited should remain in enmity. This is why Paul has put it in this way. Why, affecting a high and generous principle in your words, why in your deeds do you not even observe (common) moderation? (It sounds) well; you do not feed him, for fear of thereby heaping upon him coals of fire: well then, you spare him?

Well then, you love him, you act with this object in view? God knows, whether you have this object in so speaking, and are not palming this talk upon us as a mere pretence and subterfuge. You have a care for your enemy, you fear lest he be punished, then would you not have extinguished your anger? For he that loves to that degree that he overlooks his own interest for the sake of the other's advantage, that man has no enemy. (Then indeed) you might say this. How long shall we trifle in matters that are not to be trifled with, and that admit of no excuse?

Wherefore I beseech you, let us cut off these pretexts; let us not despise God's laws: that we may be enabled with well-pleasing to the Lord to pass this life present, and attain unto the good things promised, through the grace and mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ, with Whom to the Father and the Holy Ghost together be glory, might, honor, now and ever, world without end. Amen.

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