

Homily 51 on Matthew

by St. John Chrysostom

In Homily 51 on Matthew, St. John Chrysostom emphasizes the importance of inner purity and the dangers of adhering to human traditions over God's commandments.

Topics: "Heart Purity", "Hypocrisy"

Description

John Chrysostom preaches about the importance of purity of heart and the dangers of defilement, emphasizing that true defilement comes from evil thoughts and words that proceed from the heart, rather than external actions like eating with unwashed hands. He rebukes the Pharisees for their hypocrisy in prioritizing traditions over God's commandments, particularly in dishonoring parents. Chrysostom urges believers to focus on cleansing their hearts and tongues, to approach God with humility, and to avoid wrath and evil-speaking. He highlights the significance of prayer and the need to present a clean soul to God, rather than just outward cleanliness.

Transcript

Matt. XV. 1.

Then came to Jesus Scribes and Pharisees, which were of Jerusalem, saying, Why do Your disciples, etc.

Then; when? When He had wrought His countless miracles; when He had healed the infirm by the touch of the hem of His garment. For even with this intent does the evangelist mark the time, that He might signify their unspeakable wickedness, by nothing repressed.

But what means, The Scribes and Pharisees, which were of Jerusalem? In every one of the tribes were they scattered abroad, and divided into twelve parts; but they who occupied the chief city were worse than the others, as both enjoying more honor, and having contracted much haughtiness.

But mark, I pray you, how even by the question itself they are convicted; in not saying, Why do they transgress the law of Moses, but, the tradition of the elders. Whence it is evident that the priests were inventing many novelties, although Moses, with much terror and with much threatening, had enjoined neither to add nor take away. For you shall not add, says he, unto the word which I command you this day, and you shall not take away from it. Deuteronomy 4:2

But not the less were they innovating; as in this instance, that one ought not to eat with unwashed hands, that we must wash cups and brazen vessels, that we must wash also ourselves. Thus, when men were

henceforth, as time advanced, to be freed from their observances, at that very time they bound them with the same in more and more instances, fearing lest any one should take away their power, and wishing to strike more dread, as though they were themselves also lawgivers. The thing in fact proceeded so far in enormity, that while their own commandments were kept, those of God were transgressed; and they so far prevailed, that the matter had actually become a ground of accusation. Which was a twofold charge against them, in that they both invented novelties, and were so strict exactors on their own account, while of God they made no reckoning.

And omitting to speak of the other things, the pots and the brazen vessels (for it was too ridiculous), what seemed more reasonable than the rest, that they bring forward, wishing, as seems at least to me, in that way to provoke Him to anger. Wherefore also they made mention of the elders, in order that He, as setting them at nought, might give occasion against Himself.

But it were meet first to inquire, why the disciples ate with unwashen hands. Wherefore then did they so eat? Not as making a point of it, but as overlooking henceforth the things that are superfluous, and attending to such as are necessary; having no law to wash or not to wash, but doing either as it happened. For they that despised even their own necessary food, how were they to hold these things worth much consideration? This then having often happened unintentionally -- for instance, when they ate in the wilderness, when they plucked the ears of grain -- is now put forward as a charge by these persons, who are always transgressing in the great things, and making much account of the superfluous.

2. What then says Christ? He did not set Himself against it, neither made He any defense, but straightway blames them again, plucking down their confidence, and signifying that he who commits great sins ought not to be strict with others concerning small matters. What? When you ought to be blamed, says He, do ye even blame?

But do thou observe, how when it is His will to set aside any of the things enjoined by the law, He does it in the form of an apology; and so He did in that case. For by no means does He proceed at once to transgress it, nor does He say, It is nothing; for surely He would have made them more audacious; but first He clean cuts away their boldness, bringing forward the far heavier charge, and directing it upon their head. And He neither says, they do well in transgressing it, lest He should give them a hold on Him; nor does He speak ill of their proceeding, lest He should confirm the law: nor again, on the other hand, does He blame the elders, as lawless and unholy men; for doubtless they would have shunned Him as a reviler and injurious: but all these things He gives up, and proceeds another way. And He seems indeed to be rebuking the persons themselves who had come to Him, but He is reprehending them that enacted these laws; nowhere indeed making mention of the elders, but by His charge against the Scribes casting down them also, and signifying that their sin is twofold, first in disobeying God, next in doing so on men's account; as though He had said, Why this, this has ruined you, your obeying the elders in all things.

Yet He says not so, but this is just what He intimates, by answering them as follows:

Why do ye also transgress the commandment of God by your tradition? For God commanded, saying, Honor your father and your mother: and, He that curses father or mother, let him die the death. But ye say, Whosoever shall say to his father or his mother, It is a gift, by whatsoever you might be profited by me, and honor not his father or his mother -- And you have made void the commandment of God by your tradition.

And He said not, the elders' tradition, but your own. And, ye say; again He said not, the elders say: in order to make His speech less galling. That is, because they wanted to prove the disciples transgressors of the law, He signifies that they themselves are doing so, but that these are free from blame. For of course that is not a law, which is enjoined by men (wherefore also He calls it a tradition), and especially by men that are transgressors of the law.

And since this had no shade of contrariety to the law, to command men to wash their hands, He brings forward another tradition, which is opposed to the law. And what He says is like this. They taught the young, under the garb of piety, to despise their fathers. How, and in what way? If one of their parents said to his child, Give me this sheep that you have, or this calf, or any such thing, they used to say, 'This is a gift to God, whereby you would be profited by me, and you can not have it.' And two evils hence arose: on the one hand they did not bring them to God, on the other they defrauded their parents under the name of the offering, alike insulting their parents for God's sake, and God for their parents' sake. But He does not say this at once, but first rehearses the law, by which He signifies His earnest desire that parents should be honored. For, honor, says He, your father and your mother, that you may live long upon the earth. And again, He that curses father or mother, let him die the death. Exodus 21:17

But He, omitting the first, the reward appointed for them that honor their parents, states that which is more awful, the punishment, I mean, threatened to such as dishonor them; desiring both to dismay them, and to conciliate such as have understanding; and He implies them to be for this worthy of death. For if he who dishonors them in word is punished, much more ye, who do so in deed, and who not only dishonor, but also teach it to others. You then who ought not so much as to live, how find ye fault with the disciples?

And what wonder is it, if you offer such insults to me, who am as yet unknown, when even to the Father you are found doing the like? For everywhere He both asserts and implies, that from Him they began with this their arrogance.

But some do also otherwise interpret, It is a gift, by whatsoever you might be profited by me; that is, I owe you no honor, but it is a free gift from me to you, if indeed I do honor you. But Christ would not have mentioned an insult of that sort.

And Mark again makes this plainer, by saying, It is Corban, by whatsoever you might be profited by me; Mark 7:11 which means, not a gift and present, but properly an offering.

Having then signified that they who were trampling on the law could not be justly entitled to blame men for transgressing a command of certain elders, He points out this same thing again from the prophet likewise. Thus, having once laid hold of them severely, He proceeds further: as on every occasion He does, bringing forward the Scriptures, and so evincing Himself to be in accordance with God.

And what says the prophet? This people honors me with their lips, but their heart is far from me. But in vain do they worship me, teaching for doctrines the commandments of men.

Do you see a prophecy in exact accordance with His sayings, and from the very first proclaiming beforehand their wickedness? For what Christ laid to their charge now, of this Isaiah also spoke from the very first; that the words of God they despise, for in vain do they worship me, says He; but of their own they make much account, teaching, says He, for doctrines the commandments of men. Therefore with reason the disciples keep them not.

3. Having, you see, given them their mortal blow; and from the facts first, then from their own suffrage, then from the prophet having aggravated the charge, with them indeed He discourses not at all, incorrigibly disposed as they are now come to be, but directs His speech to the multitudes, so as to introduce His doctrine, great and high, and full of much strictness; and taking occasion from the former topic, He proceeds to insert that which is greater, casting out also the observance of meats.

But see when. When He had cleansed the leper, when He had repealed the Sabbath, when He had shown Himself King of earth and sea, when He had made laws, when He had remitted sins, when He had raised dead men, when He had afforded them many proofs of His Godhead, then He discourses of meats.

For indeed all the religion of the Jews is comprised in this; if you take this away, you have even taken away all. For hereby He signifies, that circumcision too must be abrogated. But of Himself He does not prominently introduce this (forasmuch as that was older than the other commandments, and had higher estimation), but He enacts it by His disciples. For so great a thing was it, that even the disciples after so long a time being minded to do it away, first practise it, and so put it down. Acts 16:3

But see how He introduces His law: how He called the multitude, and said to them, Hear and understand. Matthew 15:11

Thus He does by no means simply reveal it to them, but by respect and courtesy, first, He makes His saying acceptable (for this the evangelist declares by saying, He called them unto Him): and secondly, by the time also; in that after their refutation, and His victory over them, and the accusation by the prophet, then He begins His legislation, when they too would more easily receive His sayings.

And He does not merely call them unto Him, but also makes them more attentive. For understand, says He, that is, consider, rouse yourselves; for of that sort is the law now about to be enacted. For if they set aside the law, even unseasonably, for their own tradition, and you hearkened; much more ought ye to hearken unto me, who at the proper season am leading you unto a higher rule of self restraint.

And He did not say, The observance of meats is nothing, neither that Moses had given wrong injunctions, nor that of condescension He did so; but in the way of admonition and counsel, and taking His testimony from the nature of the things, He says: Not the things that go into the mouth, defile the man, but the things that go out of the mouth; Matthew 15:11 resorting to nature herself both in His enactment and in His demonstration. Yet they hearing all this, made no reply, neither did they say, What sayest Thou? When God has given charges without number concerning the observance of meats, do you make such laws? But since He had utterly stopped their mouths, not by refuting them only, but also by publishing their craft, and exposing what was done by them in secret, and revealing the secrets of their mind; their mouths were stopped, and so they went away.

But mark, I pray you, how He does not yet venture distinctly to set Himself with boldness against the meats. Therefore neither did He say the meats, but, the things that enter in defile not the man; which it was natural for them to suspect concerning the unwashed hands also. For He indeed was speaking of meats, but it would be understood of these matters too.

Why, so strong was the feeling of scruple about the meats, that even after the resurrection Peter said, Not so, Lord, for I have never eaten anything common or unclean. Acts 10:14 For although it was for the sake of others that He said this, and in order to leave Himself a justification against his censurers, by pointing out that he actually remonstrated, and not even so was excused, nevertheless it implies the depth of their

impression on that point.

Wherefore you see He Himself also at the beginning spoke not openly concerning meats, but, The things that go into the mouth; and again, when He had seemed afterwards to speak more plainly, He veiled it by His conclusion, saying, But to eat with unwashed hands defiles not the man: Matthew 15:20 that He might seem to have had His occasion from thence, and to be still discoursing of the same. Therefore He said not, To eat meats defiles not a man, but is as though He were speaking on that other topic; that they may have nothing to say against it.

4. When therefore they had heard these things, the Pharisees, it is said, were offended, Matthew 15:12 not the multitudes. For His disciples, so it is said, came and said to Him, Do you know that the Pharisees were offended, when they heard the saying? Yet surely nothing had been said to them.

What then says Christ? He did not remove the offense in respect of them, but reproveth them, saying, Every plant which my heavenly Father has not planted, shall be rooted up. Matthew 15:13 For He is wont both to despise offenses, and not to despise them. Elsewhere, for example, He says, But lest we should offend them, cast an hook into the sea: Matthew 17:27 but here He says, Let them alone, they be blind leaders of the blind: and if the blind lead the blind, both shall fall into the ditch.

But these things His disciples said, not as grieving for those men only, but as being themselves also slightly perplexed. But because they dared not say so in their own person, they would fain learn it by their telling Him of others. And as to its being so, hear how after this the ardent and ever-forward Peter came to Him, and says, Declare unto us this parable, Matthew 15:15 discovering the trouble in his soul, and not indeed venturing to say openly, I am offended, but requiring that by His interpretation he should be freed from his perplexity; wherefore also he was reproveth.

What then says Christ? Every plant which my heavenly Father has not planted, shall be rooted up.

This, they that are diseased with the Manichæan pest affirm to be spoken of the law; but their mouths are stopped by what had been said before. For if He was speaking of the law, how does He further back defend it, and fight for it, saying, Why do ye transgress the commandments of God for your tradition? And how does He bring for ward the prophet? But of themselves and of their traditions He so speaks. For if God said, Honor your father and your mother, how is not that of God's planting, which was spoken by God?

And what follows also indicates, that of themselves it was said, and of their traditions. Thus He added, They are blind leaders of the blind. Whereas, had He spoken it of the law, He would have said, It is a blind leader of the blind. But not so did He speak, but, They are blind leaders of the blind: freeing it from the blame, and bringing it all round upon them.

Then to sever the people also from them, as being on the point of falling into a pit by their means, He says, If the blind lead the blind, both shall fall into the ditch.

It is a great evil merely to be blind, but to be in such a case and have none to lead him, nay, to occupy the place of a guide, is a double and triple ground of censure. For if it be a dangerous thing for the blind man not to have a guide, much more so that he should even desire to be guide to another.

What then says Peter? He says not, What can this be which You have said? but as though it were full of obscurity, he puts his question. And he says not, Why have you spoken contrary to the law? for he was

afraid, lest he should be thought to have taken offense, but asserts it to be obscure. However, that it was not obscure, but that he was offended, is manifest, for it had nothing of obscurity.

Wherefore also He rebukes him, saying, Are ye also yet without understanding? Matthew 15:16 For as to the multitude, they did not perhaps so much as understand the saying; but themselves were the persons offended. Wherefore, whereas at first, as though asking in behalf of the Pharisees, they were desirous to be told; when they heard Him denouncing a great threat, and saying, Every plant, which my heavenly Father has not planted, shall be rooted up, and, They are blind leaders of the blind, they were silenced. But he, always ardent, not even so endures to hold his peace, but says, Declare unto us this parable. Matthew 15:15

What then says Christ? With a sharp rebuke He answers, Are ye also yet without understanding? Do ye not yet understand?

But these things He said, and reproveth them, in order to cast out their prejudice; He stopped not however at this, but adds other things also, saying, That whatsoever enters in at the mouth goes into the belly, and is cast out into the draught; but those things which proceed out of the mouth come forth from the heart, and they defile the man. For out of the heart proceed evil thoughts, murders, adulteries, fornications, thefts, blasphemies, false-witnessings: and these are the things that defile the man: but to eat with unwashen hands defiles not the man. Matthew 15:17-20

Do you see how sharply He deals with them, and in the way of rebuke?

Then He establishes His saying by our common nature, and with a view to their cure. For when He says, It goes into the belly, and is cast out into the draught, he is still answering according to the low views of the Jews. For He says, it abides not, but goes out: and what if it abode? It would not make one unclean. But not yet were they able to hear this.

And one may remark, that because of this the lawgiver allows just so much time, as it may be remaining within one, but when it is gone forth, no longer. For instance, at evening He bids you wash yourself, and so be clean; measuring the time of the digestion, and of the excretion. Leviticus 11:24-25 But the things of the heart, He says, abide within, and when they are gone forth they defile, and not when abiding only. And first He puts our evil thoughts, a kind of thing which belonged to the Jews; and not as yet does He make His refutation from the nature of the things, but from the manner of production from the belly and the heart respectively, and from the fact that the one sort remains, the other not; the one entering in from without, and departing again outwards, while the others are bred within, and having gone forth they defile, and then more so, when they are gone forth. Because they were not yet able, as I said, to be taught these things with all due strictness.

But Mark says, that cleansing the meats, He spoke this. He did not however express it, nor at all say, but to eat such and such meats defiles not the man, for neither could they endure to be told it by Him thus distinctly. And accordingly His conclusion was, But to eat with unwashen hands defiles not the man. Matthew 15:20

5. Let us learn then what are the things that defile the man; let us learn, and let us flee them. For even in the church we see such a custom prevailing among the generality, and men giving diligence to come in clean garments, and to have their hands washed; but how to present a clean soul to God, they make no account.

And this I say, not forbidding them to wash hands or mouth; but willing men so to wash as is meet, not with water only, but instead of water, with all virtues. For the filth of the mouth is evil speaking, blasphemy, reviling, angry words, filthy talking, laughter, jesting: if then you are conscious to yourself of uttering none of them, neither of being defiled with this filth, draw near with confidence; but if you have times out of number received these stains, why do you labor in vain, washing your tongue indeed with water, but bearing about on it such deadly and hurtful filth? For tell me, had you dung on your hands, and mire, would you indeed venture to pray? By no means. And yet this were no hurt; but that is ruin. How then are you reverential in the different things, but in the forbidden remiss?

What then? Should not we pray? Says one. We should indeed, but not while defiled, and having upon us mire of that sort.

What then, if I have been overtaken? says one. Cleanse yourself. How, and in what way? Weep, groan, give alms, apologize to him that is affronted, reconcile him to yourself hereby, wipe clean your tongue, lest you provoke God more grievously. For so if one had filled his hands with dung, and then should lay hold of your feet, entreating you, far from hearing him, you would rather spurn him with your foot; how then dared thou in such sort draw near to God? Since in truth the tongue is the hand of them that pray, and by it we lay hold on the knees of God. Defile it not therefore, lest to you also He say, Though you make many prayers, I will not hearken. Isaiah 1:15 Yea, and in the power of the tongue are death and life; Proverbs 18:21 and, By your words you shall be justified, and by your words you shall be condemned. Matthew 12:37

I bid you then watch your tongue more than the apple of your eye. The tongue is a royal steed. If then thou put a bridle on it, and teach it to pace orderly, the King will rest and take His seat thereon; but if you suffer it to rush about unbridled and leap wantonly, it becomes a beast for the devil and bad spirits to ride on. And while thou, fresh from the company of your own wife, darest not pray, although this is no blame at all; do you lift up your hands, fresh from reviling and insult, which brings after it no less than hell, before you have well cleansed yourself? And how do you not shudder? Tell me. Have you not heard Paul, saying, Marriage is honorable, and the bed undefiled? Hebrews 13:4 But if on rising from the undefiled bed, you dare not draw near in prayer, how do you coming from the bed of the devil call on that awful and terrible name? For it is truly the devil's bed, to wallow in insults and reviling. And like some wicked adulterer, wrath dallies with us in great delight, casting into us deadly seed, and making us give birth to diabolical enmity, and doing all things in a way opposite to marriage. For whereas marriage causes the two to become one flesh, wrath severs into many parts them that were united, and cleaves and cuts in pieces the very soul.

That you may therefore with confidence draw near to God, receive not wrath, when it comes in upon you, and desires to be with you, but drive it away like a mad dog.

For so Paul too commanded: his phrase being, lifting up holy hands without wrath and disputing. 1 Timothy 2:8 Dishonor not then your tongue, for how will it entreat for you, when it has lost its proper confidence? But adorn it with gentleness, with humility, make it worthy of the God who is entreated, fill it with blessing, with much almsdoing. For it is possible even with words to do alms. For a word is a better thing than a gift, Sirach 18:16 and answer the poor man peaceably with meekness. Sirach 4:8 And all the rest of your time too adorn it with the rehearsing of the laws of God; Yea, let all your communication be in the law of the Most High. Sirach 9:15

Having thus adorned ourselves, let us come to our King, and fall at His knees, not with the body only, but also with the mind. Let us consider whom we are approaching, and on whose behalf, and what we would accomplish. We are drawing near unto God, whom the seraphim behold and turn away their faces, not bearing His brightness; at sight of whom the earth trembles. We draw near unto God, who dwells in the light, which no man can approach unto. 1 Timothy 6:16 And we draw near unto Him for deliverance from hell, for remission of sins, for escape from those intolerable punishments, for attaining to the Heavens, and to the good things that are there. Let us, I say, fall down before Him both in body and in mind, that He may raise us up when we are down; let us converse with all gentleness and meekness.

And who is so wretched and miserable, one may say, as not to become gentle in prayer? He that prays with an imprecation, and fills himself with wrath, and cries out against his enemies.

6. Nay, if you will accuse, accuse yourself. If you will whet and sharpen your tongue, let it be against your own sins. And tell not what evil another has done to you, but what you have done to yourself; for this is most truly an evil; since no other will really be able to injure you, unless thou injure yourself. Wherefore, if you desire to be against them that wrong you, approach as against yourself first; there is no one to hinder; since by coming into court against another, you have but the greater injury to go away with.

And what injury at all have you really to mention? That such an one insulted and spoiled you by violence, and encompassed you with dangers? Nay, this is receiving not injury, but if we be sober, the very greatest benefit; the injured being he that did such things, not he that suffered them. And this is more than any one thing the cause of all our evils, that we do not so much as know at all who is the injured, and who the injurious person. Since if we knew this well, we should not ever injure ourselves, we should not pray against another, having learned that it is impossible to suffer ill of another. For not to be spoiled, but to spoil, is an evil. Wherefore, if you have spoiled, accuse yourself; but if you have been spoiled, rather pray for him that spoiled you, because he has done you the greatest good. For although the intent of the doer was not such, yet you have received the greatest benefit, if you have endured it nobly. For him, both men, and the laws of God declare to be wretched, but you, the injured party, they crown, and proclaim your praise.

For so if any one sick of a fever had violently taken from any other a vessel containing water, and had had his fill of his pernicious desire, we should not say that the despoiled had been injured, but the spoiler; for he has aggravated his fever, and made his disease more grievous. Now in this way I bid you reason concerning him also that loves wealth and money. For he too, having a far worse fever than the other, has by this rapine fanned the flame in himself.

Again, were some madman to snatch a sword from any one, and destroy himself, which again is the injured? He that has been robbed, or the robber? It is quite clear, he that did the robbery.

Well then, in the case of seizing property also, let us give the same suffrage. For what a sword is to a madman, much the same is wealth to a covetous man; nay, it is even a worse thing. For the madman, when he has taken the sword, and thrust it through himself, is both delivered from his madness, and has no second blow to receive; but the lover of money receives daily ten thousand wounds more grievous than his, without delivering himself from his madness, but aggravating it more exceedingly: and the more wounds he receives, the more does he give occasion for other more grievous blows.

Reflecting then on these things, let us flee this sword; let us flee the madness; though late, let us become temperate. For this virtue too ought to be called temperance, not less than that which is used to be so

called among all men. For whereas there the dominion of one lust is to be struggled against, here we have to master many lusts, and those of all kinds.

Yea, nothing, nothing is more foolish than the slave of wealth. He thinks he overcomes when he is overcome. He thinks he is master, when he is a slave, and putting bonds on himself, he rejoices; making the wild beast fiercer, he is pleased; and becoming a captive, he prides himself, and leaps for joy; and seeing a dog rabid and flying at his soul, when he ought to bind him and weaken him by hunger, he actually supplies him with abundance of food, that he may leap upon him more fiercely, and be more formidable.

Reflecting then on all these things, let us loose the bonds, let us slay the monster, let us drive away the disease, let us cast out this madness; that we may enjoy a calm and pure health, and having with much pleasure sailed into the serene haven, may attain unto the eternal blessings; unto which may we all attain, by the grace and love towards man of our Lord Jesus Christ, to whom be glory and might, now and always, and world without end. Amen.

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