

# Homily 53 on Matthew

by St. John Chrysostom

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*St. John Chrysostom's Homily 53 on Matthew emphasizes Jesus' compassion, the importance of faith, and the dangers of false teachings.*

**Scripture:** Mark 8:17

**Topics:** "Divine Providence", "Spiritual Guidance"

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## Description

John Chrysostom preaches on Jesus' compassion for the multitude, highlighting how He first healed them before providing food, showing His benevolence and providence. Despite the disciples' lack of understanding, Jesus patiently leads them to faith through questioning and miracles, rebuking their hardened hearts and lack of recollection. He emphasizes the importance of discerning the signs of the times and warns against the hypocrisy of seeking signs from Heaven. Through strong reproof and gentle reminders, Jesus guides His disciples away from earthly concerns to focus on spiritual matters and the teachings of the Pharisees and Sadducees.

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## Transcript

MATT. XV. 32. "But Jesus called His disciples unto Him, and said, I have compassion on the multitude, because they continue with me now three days, and have nothing to eat: and I will not send them away fasting, lest they faint in the way."

Both above, when going to do this miracle, He first healed them that were maimed in body, and here He does the self-same thing; from the healing of the blind and the lame, He goes on to this again.

But why might it be, that then His disciples said, Send away the multitude, but now they said not so; and this, though three days had past? Either being themselves improved by this time, or seeing that the people had no great sense of hunger; for they were glorifying God for the things that were done.

But see how in this instance too He does not proceed at once to the miracle, but calls them forth thereunto. For the multitudes indeed who had come out for healing dared not ask for the loaves; but He, the benevolent and provident one, gives even to them that ask not, and says unto His disciples, I have compassion, and will not send them away fasting.

For lest they should say that they came having provisions for the way, He says, They continue with me now three days; so that even if they came having any, it is all spent. For therefore He Himself did not this

on the first and second day, but when all had been consumed by them, in order that having first been in want, they might more eagerly accept His work.

Therefore He says, Lest they faint in the way; implying both their distance to be great, and that they had nothing left.

Then, if you are not willing to send them away fasting, wherefore do you not work the miracle? That by this question and by their answer He might make the disciples more heedful, and that they might show forth their faith, coming unto Him, and saying, Make loaves.

But not even so did they understand the motive of His question; wherefore afterwards He says to them, as Mark relates, Are your hearts so hardened? Having eyes, see ye not? And having ears, hear ye not? Mark 8:17-18

Since, if this were not so, wherefore does He speak to the disciples, and signify the multitude's worthiness to receive a benefit, and add also the pity He Himself feels?

But Matthew says, that after this He also rebuked them, saying, O you of little faith, do ye not yet understand, nor remember the five loaves of the five thousand, and how many baskets ye took up? Nor the seven loaves of the four thousand, and how many baskets ye took up? Matthew 16:8-10 So completely do the evangelists harmonize one with another.

What then say the disciples? Still they creep on the ground, although He had done so very many things in order that that miracle might be kept in memory; as by His question, and by the answer, and by making them minister herein, and by distributing the baskets; but their state of mind was yet rather imperfect.

Wherefore also they say to Him, Whence should we have so many loaves in the wilderness?

Both before this, and now, they make mention of the wilderness; themselves in a weak way of argument so speaking, yet even hereby putting the miracle above suspicion. That is, lest any should affirm (as I have indeed already said), that they obtained it from some neighboring village, the place is acknowledged, that the miracle may be believed. With this view, both the former miracle and this He works in a wilderness, at a great distance from the villages.

The disciples, considering none of all this, said, Whence should we have so many loaves in a wilderness? For they thought verily He had said it as purposing next to enjoin them to feed the people; most foolishly; since with this intent He had said, and that lately, Give ye them to eat, Matthew 14:16 that He might bring them to an urgent need of entreating Him.

But now He says not this, Give ye them to eat, but what? I have compassion on them, and will not send them away fasting; bringing the disciples nearer, and provoking them more, and granting them clearer sight, to ask these things of Him. For in truth they were the words of one signifying that He has power not to send them away fasting; of one manifesting His authority. For the expression, I will not, implies such a purpose in Him.

2. Since however they still spoke of the multitude merely, and the place, and the wilderness (for whence, it is said, should we have in a wilderness so many loaves, as to fill so great a multitude?); and not even so understood what He said, He proceeds to contribute His own part, and says unto them,

How many loaves do you have? And they say, Seven, and a few little fishes. Matthew 15:34

And they no more say, But what are these among so many? John 6:9 as they had said before. So that although they reached not His whole meaning, yet nevertheless they became higher by degrees. For so He too, arousing their mind hereby, puts the question much as He had done before, that by the very form of the inquiry He might remind them of the works already done.

But as you have seen their imperfection hereby, so observe the severity of their spirit, and admire their love of truth, how, writing themselves, they conceal not their own defects, great as they were. For it was no small blame to have presently forgotten this miracle, which had so recently taken place; wherefore they are also rebuked.

And herewith consider also their strictness in another matter, how they were conquerors of their appetite; how disciplined to make little account of their diet. For being in the wilderness and abiding there three days, they had seven loaves.

Now all the rest He does as on the former occasion; thus He both makes them sit down on the ground, and He makes the loaves multiply themselves in the hands of the disciples.

For, He commanded, it is said, the multitude to sit down on the ground. And He took the seven loaves, and the fishes, and gave thanks, and broke, and gave to His disciples, and the disciples to the multitude.

But when we come to the end, there is a difference.

For, they did all eat, so it is said, and were filled, and they took up of the broken meat that was left, seven baskets full. And they that did eat were four thousand men, besides women and children. Matthew 15:37-38

But why at the former time, when there were five thousand, did twelve baskets full remain over and above, whereas here, when there were four thousand, it was seven baskets full? For what purpose, I say, and by what cause, were the remnants less, the guests not being so many?

Either then one may say this, that the baskets on this last occasion were greater than those used before, or if this were not so, lest the equality of the miracle should again cast them into forgetfulness, He rouses their recollection by the difference, that by the variation they might be reminded of both one and the other. Accordingly, in that case, He makes the baskets full of fragments equal in number to His disciples, in this, the other baskets equal to the loaves; indicating even hereby His unspeakable power, and the ease wherewith He exercised His authority, in that it was possible for Him to work such miracles, both in this way and in the other. For neither was it of small power, to maintain the exact number, both then and now; then when there were five thousand, now when there were four thousand; and not suffer the remnants to be more than the baskets used on the one occasion or on the other, although the number of the guests was different.

And the end again was like the former. For as then He left the multitude and withdrew in a ship, so also now; and John also says this. John 6:17 For since no sign did so work upon them to follow Him, as the miracle of the loaves; and they were minded not only to follow Him, but also to make Him a king; John 6:15 avoiding all suspicion of usurping royalty, He hastens away after this work of wonder: and He does not even go away afoot, lest they should follow Him, but by entering into a ship.

And He sent away the multitudes, so it says, and went on board the ship, and came into the coasts of Magdala.

3. And the Pharisees and Sadducees came and desired Him to show them a sign from Heaven. But He says, When it is evening, you say, Fair weather, for the sky is red; and in the morning, Foul weather today, for the sky is red and lowering. You can discern the face of the sky, but can you not the signs of the times? A wicked and adulterous generation seeks after a sign, and there shall no sign be given unto it, but the sign of the prophet Jonas. And He left them, and departed.

But Mark says, that when they had come unto Him, and were questioning with Him, He sighed deeply in His spirit, and says, Why does this generation seek after a sign? Mark 8:12

And yet surely their inquiry was deserving of anger and great displeasure; yet nevertheless the benevolent and provident One is not angry, but pities and bewails them as incurably diseased, and after so full a demonstration of His power, tempting Him.

For not in order to believe did they seek, but to lay hold of Him. Since had they come unto Him as ready to believe, He would have given it. For He who said to the woman, It is not meet, Matthew 15:26 and afterwards gave, much more would He have shown His bounty to these.

But since they did not seek to believe, therefore He also calls them hypocrites, because in another place they said one thing, and meant another. Yea, had they believed, they would not even have asked. And from another thing too it is evident that they believed not; that when reproved and exposed, they abode not with Him, nor said, We are ignorant and seek to learn.

But for what sign from Heaven were they asking? Either that He should say the sun, or curb the moon, or bring down thunderbolts, or work a change in the air, or some other such thing.

What then says He to all this? You can discern the face of the sky, but can you not discern the signs of the times? See His meekness and moderation. For not even as before did He refuse merely, and say, There shall none be given them, but He states also the cause why He gives it not, even though they were not asking for information.

What then was the cause? Much as in the sky, says He, one thing is a sign of a storm, another of fair weather, and no one when he saw the sign of foul weather would seek for a calm, neither in calm and fair weather for a storm; so should you reckon with regard to me also. For this present time of my coming, is different from that which is to come. Now there is need of these signs which are on the earth, but those in Heaven are stored up against that time. Now as a physician am I come, then I shall be here as a judge; now to seek that which is gone astray, then to demand an account. Therefore in a hidden manner am I come, but then with much publicity, folding up the heaven, hiding the sun, not suffering the moon to give her light. Then 'the very powers of the heavens shall be shaken,' Matthew 24:29 and the manifestation of my coming shall imitate lightning that appears at once to all. Matthew 24:27 But not now is the time for these signs; for I have come to die, and to suffer all extremities.

Heard ye not the prophet, saying, He shall not strive nor cry, neither shall His voice be heard without? Isaiah 42:2 and another again, He shall come down as rain upon a fleece of wool?

And if men speak of the signs in Pharaoh's time, there was an enemy then from whom deliverance was needed, and it all took place in due course. But to Him that came among friends there was no need of

those signs.

And besides, how shall I give the great signs, when the little are not believed? Little, I mean, as regards display, since in power these latter were much greater than the former. For what could be equal to remitting sins, and raising the dead, and driving away devils, and creating a body, and ordering all other things aright?

But see their hardened heart, how on being told, that no sign should be given them but the sign of the prophet Jonas, they do not ask. And yet, knowing both the prophet, and all that befell him, and having been told this a second time, they ought to have inquired and learned what the saying could mean; but, as I said, there is no desire of information in these their doings. For this cause He also left them, and departed.

4. And when His disciples, so it is said, had come to the other side, they forgot to take bread. Then Jesus said to them, Take heed and beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and of the Sadducees. Matthew 16:5-6

And why said He not plainly, Beware of their teaching? His will is to remind them of what had been done, for He knew they had forgotten. But for accusing them at once there seemed to be no reasonable ground, but to take the occasion from themselves, and so to reprove them, would make the charge admissible. And why did He not then reprove them, when they said, 'Whence should we have so many loaves in the wilderness?' for it seemed a good time then to say what He says here. That He might not seem to rush hastily on the miracle. And besides, He would not blame them before the multitude, nor seek honor in their presence. And now too the accusation had greater reason, for that after repetition of the miracle they were so minded.

Wherefore also He works another miracle, and then and not till then He reproves; I mean, He brings forward what they were reasoning in their hearts. But what were their reasonings? Because, so it is said, we have taken no bread. For as yet they were full of trepidation about the purifications of the Jews, and the observances of meats.

Wherefore on all accounts He attacks them even with severity, saying, Why reason ye in yourselves, O you of little faith, because you have brought no bread? Perceive ye not yet, neither understand? Have ye your heart hardened? Having eyes, see ye not? Having ears, hear ye not? Mark 8:17-18 Do ye not remember the five loaves of the five thousand, and how many baskets ye took up? Neither the seven loaves of the four thousand, and how many baskets ye took up? Matthew 16:9-10

Do you see intense displeasure? For nowhere else does He appear to have so rebuked them. Wherefore then does He so? In order again to cast out their prejudice about the meats. I mean that with this view, whereas then He had only said, Perceive ye not, neither understand? in this place, and with a strong rebuke, He says, O you of little faith.

For not everywhere is lenity a good thing. And as He used to allow them freedom of speech, so does He also reprove, by this variety providing for their salvation. And mark at once His reproof, how strong, and His mildness. For all but excusing Himself to them for His severe reproofs to them, He says, Do ye not yet consider the five loaves, and how many baskets ye took up; and the seven loaves, and how many baskets ye took up? And to this end He sets down also the numbers, as well of the persons fed as of the fragments, at once both bringing them to recollection of the past, and making them more attentive to the

future.

And to teach you how great the power of His reproof, and how it roused up their slumbering mind, hear what says the evangelist. For Jesus having said no more, but having reproved them, and added this only, How is it that you do not understand, that I spoke it not to you concerning bread that you should beware, but of the leaven of the Pharisees and Sadducees; He subjoined, saying, Then understood they that He bade them not beware of the leaven of bread, but of the doctrine of the Pharisees and Sadducees, Matthew 14:12 although He had not uttered that interpretation.

See how much good His reproof wrought. For it both led them away from the Jewish observances, and when they were remiss, made them more heedful, and delivered them from want of faith;

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