

Homily 55 on Matthew

by St. John Chrysostom

The sermon emphasizes the importance of following Christ and renouncing oneself, and warns of the consequences of not doing so.

Scripture: Deuteronomy 6:11, Proverbs 23:13, Matthew 16:24-26, Romans 1:25, 2 Corinthians 9:8, Galatians 5:22, Colossians 3:17

Topics: "Self Denial", "Following Christ"

Description

John Chrysostom preaches on the importance of self-denial, taking up one's cross, and following Jesus. He emphasizes the need to renounce oneself, bear the cross of suffering, and follow Christ wholeheartedly, even unto death. Chrysostom highlights the eternal consequences of losing or saving one's soul, urging believers to prioritize spiritual matters over worldly concerns. He encourages a life of self-discipline, prayer, and thanksgiving, drawing inspiration from the dedication of monks and the early Christians who lived out their faith in various circumstances.

Transcript

Matt. XVI. 24.

Then said Jesus unto His disciples, If any man will come after me, let him renounce himself, and take up his cross and follow me.

Then; when? When Peter said, Be it far from You, this shall not be unto You; and was told, Get behind me, Satan. Matthew 16:22-23 For He was by no means satisfied with the mere rebuke, but, willing also more abundantly to show both the extravagance of what Peter had said, and the benefit of His passion, He says, Your word to me is, Be it far from You, this shall not be unto You: but my word to you is, Not only is it hurtful to you, and destructive, to hinder me and to be displeased at my Passion, but it will be impossible for you even to be saved, unless you yourself too be continually prepared for death.

Thus, lest they should think His suffering unworthy of Him, not by the former things only, but also by the events that were coming on, He teaches them the gain thereof. Thus in John first, He says, Except the grain of wheat fall into the ground and die, it abides alone; but if it die, it brings forth much fruit; John 12:24 but here more abundantly working it out, not concerning Himself only does He bring forward the statement that it is meet to die, but concerning them also. For so great is the profit thereof, that in your case also unwillingness to die is grievous, but to be ready for it, good.

This however He makes clear by what follows, but for the present He works it out on one side only. And see how He also makes His discourse unexceptionable: not saying at all, whether you will, or no, you must suffer this, but how? If any man will come after me. I force not, I compel not, but each one I make lord of his own choice; wherefore also I say, 'If any man will.' For to good things do I call you, not to things evil, or burdensome; not to punishment and vengeance, that I should have to compel. Nay, the nature of the thing is alone sufficient to attract you.

Now, thus saying, He drew them unto Him the more. For he indeed that uses compulsion oftens turns men away, but he that leaves the hearer to choose attracts him more. For soothing is a mightier thing than force. Wherefore even He Himself said, If any man will. For great, says He, are the good things which I give you, and such as for men even to run to them of their own accord. For neither if one were giving gold, and offering a treasure, would he invite with force. And if that invitation be without compulsion, much more this, to the good things in the Heavens. Since if the nature of the thing persuade you not to run, you are not worthy to receive it at all, nor if you should receive it, will you well know what you have received.

Wherefore Christ compels not, but urges, sparing us. For since they seemed to be murmuring much, being secretly disturbed at the saying, He says, No need of disturbance or of trouble. If you do not account what I have mentioned to be a cause of innumerable blessings, even when befalling yourselves, I use no force, nor do I compel, but if any be willing to follow, him I call.

For do not by any means imagine that this is your following of me; I mean, what ye now do attending upon me. You have need of many toils, many dangers, if you are to come after me. For you ought not, O Peter, because you have confessed me Son of God, therefore only to expect crowns, and to suppose this enough for your salvation, and for the future to enjoy security, as having done all. For although it be in my power, as Son of God, to hinder you from having any trial at all of those hardships; yet such is not my will, for your sake, that you may yourself too contribute something, and be more approved.

For so, if one were a judge at the games, and had a friend in the lists, he would not wish to crown him by favor only, but also for his own toils; and for this reason especially, because he loves him. Even so Christ also; whom He most loves, those He most of all will have to approve themselves by their own means also, and not from His help alone.

But see how at the same time He makes His saying not a grievous one. For He does by no means compass them only with His terror, but He also puts forth the doctrine generally to the world, saying, If any one will, be it woman or man, ruler or subject, let him come this way.

2. And though he seem to have spoken but one single thing, yet His sayings are three, Let him renounce himself, and Let him bear his cross, and Let him follow me; and two of them are joined together, but the one is put by itself.

But let us see first what it can be to deny one's self. Let us learn first what it is to deny another, and then we shall know what it may be to deny one's self. What then is it to deny another? He that is denying another -- for example, either brother, or servant, or whom you will, -- should he see him either beaten, or bound, or led to execution, or whatever he may suffer, stands not by him, does not help him, is not moved, feels nothing for him, as being once for all alienated from him. Thus then He will have us disregard our own body, so that whether men scourge, or banish, or burn, or whatever they do, we may not spare it. For this is to spare it. Since fathers too then spare their offspring, when committing them to teachers, they command not to spare them.

So also Christ; He said not, Let him not spare himself, but very strictly, Let him renounce himself; that is, let him have nothing to do with himself, but give himself up to all dangers and conflicts; and let him so feel, as though another were suffering it all.

And He said not, Let him deny, but Let him renounce; even by this small addition intimating again, how very far it goes. For this latter is more than the former.

And let him take up his cross. This arises out of the other. For to hinder your supposing that words, and insults, and reproaches are to be the limits of our self-renunciation, He says also how far one ought to renounce one's self; that is, unto death, and that a reproachful death. Therefore He said not, Let him renounce himself unto death, but, Let him take up his cross; setting forth the reproachful death; and that not once, nor twice, but throughout all life one ought so to do. Yea, says He, bear about this death continually, and day by day be ready for slaughter. For since many have indeed contemned riches, and pleasure, and glory, but death they despised not, but feared dangers; I, says He, will that my champion should wrestle even unto blood, and that the limits of his course should reach unto slaughter; so that although one must undergo death, death with reproach, the accursed death, and that upon evil surmise, we are to bear all things nobly, and rather to rejoice in being suspected.

And let him follow me. That is, it being possible for one to suffer, yet not to follow Him, when one does not suffer for Him (for so robbers often suffer grievously, and violaters of tombs, and sorcerers); to hinder your supposing that the mere nature of your calamities is sufficient, He adds the occasion of these calamities.

And what is it? In order that, so doing and suffering, you may follow Him; that for Him you may undergo all things; that you may possess the other virtues also. For this too is expressed by Let him follow me; so as to show forth not fortitude only, such as is exercised in our calamities, but temperance also, and moderation, and all self-restraint. This being properly to follow, the giving heed also to the other virtues, and for His sake suffering all.

For there are who follow the devil even to the endurance of all this, and for his sake give up their own lives; but we for Christ, or rather for our own sakes: they indeed to harm themselves both here and there; but we, that we may gain both lives.

How then is it not extreme dullness, not to show forth even the same fortitude with them that perish; and this, when we are to reap from it so many crowns? Yet with us surely Christ Himself is present to be our help, but with them no one.

Now He had indeed already spoken this very injunction, when He sent them, saying, Go not into the way of the Gentiles (for, says He, I send you as sheep in the midst of wolves, and, you shall be brought before kings and governors) but now with more intensity and severity. For then He spoke of death only, but here He has mentioned a cross also, and a continual cross. For let him take up, says He, his cross; that is, let him carry it continually and bear it. And this He is wont to do in everything; not in the first instance, nor from the beginning, but quietly and gradually, bringing in the greater commandments, that the hearers may not count it strange.

3. Then, because the saying seemed to be vehement, see how He softens it by what follows, and sets down rewards surpassing our toils; and not rewards only, but also the penalties of vice: nay, on these last He dwells more than on those, since not so much His bestowing blessings, as His threat of severities, is wont to bring ordinary men to their senses. See at least how He both begins here from this, and ends in

this.

For whosoever will save his life shall lose it, says He, but whosoever shall lose his life for my sake, shall find it. For what is a man profited, if he should gain the whole world, and lose his own soul? Or what shall a man give in exchange for his soul?

Now what He says is like this: not as unsparing towards you, but rather as exceedingly sparing you, I enjoin these things. For he who spares his child, ruins it; but he who spares it not, preserves. To which effect also a certain wise man said, If you beat your son with a rod, he shall not die, but you shall deliver his soul from death. Proverbs 23:13-14 And again, He that refreshes his son, shall bind up his wounds. Sirach 30:7

This takes place in the camp also. For if the general, sparing the soldiers, commands them to remain within the place always, he will destroy with them the inhabitants too.

In order then that this may not happen in your case also, says He, ye must be arrayed against continual death. For now too a grievous war is about to be kindled. Sit not therefore within, but go forth and fight; and should you fall in your post, then have you obtained life. For if in the visible wars he that in his post meets slaughter, is both more distinguished than the rest, and more invincible, and more formidable to the enemy; although we know that after death the king, in behalf of whom he takes his station, is not able to raise him up again: much more in these wars, when there are such hopes of resurrection besides, will he who exposes his own life unto death, find it; in one sense, because he will not be quickly taken; in a second, because even though he fall, God will lead his life on to a higher life.

4. Then, because he had said, He who will save shall lose it, but whosoever shall lose shall save it, and on that side had set salvation and destruction, and on this salvation and destruction; to prevent any one's imagining the one destruction and salvation to be all the same with the other, and to teach you plainly that the difference between this salvation and that is as great as between destruction and salvation; from the contraries also He makes an inference once for all to establish these points. For what is a man profited, says He, if he gain the whole world, and lose his own soul?

Do you see how the wrongful preservation of it is destruction, and worse than all destruction, as being even past remedy, from the want of anything more to redeem it? For tell me not this, says He, that he that has escaped such dangers has saved his life; but together with his life put also the whole world, yet what profit has he thereby, if the soul perish?

For tell me, should you see your servants in luxury, and yourself in extreme calamity, will you indeed profit anything by being master? By no means. Make this reckoning then with regard to your soul also, when the flesh is in luxury and wealth, and she awaiting the destruction to come.

What shall a man give in exchange for his soul?

Again, He dwells upon the same point. What? Have you another soul to give for this soul? Says He. Why, should you lose money, you will be able to give money; or be it house, or slaves, or any other kind of possession, but for your soul, if you lose it, you will have no other soul to give: yea, though you had the world, though you were king of the whole earth, you would not be able, by paying down all earthly goods, with the earth itself, to redeem but one soul.

And what marvel, if it be so with the soul? Since even in the body one may see that so it turns out. Though thou wear ten thousand diadems, but have a body sickly by nature, and incurable, you will not be able, not by giving all your kingdom, to recover this body, not though thou add innumerable persons, and cities, and goods.

Now thus I bid you reason with regard to your soul also; or rather even much more with regard to the soul; and do thou, forsaking all besides, spend all your care upon it. Do not then while taking thought about the things of others, neglect yourself and your own things; which now all men do, resembling them that work in the mines. For neither do these receive any profit from this labor, nor from the wealth; but rather great harm, both because they incur fruitless peril, and incur it for other men, reaping no benefit from such their toils and deaths. These even now are objects of imitation to many, who are digging up wealth for others; or rather we are more wretched even than this, inasmuch as hell itself awaits us after these our labors. For they indeed are staid from those toils by death, but to us death proves a beginning of innumerable evils.

But if you say, you have in your wealth the fruit of your toils: show me your soul gladdened, and then I am persuaded. For of all things in us the soul is chief. And if the body be fattened, while she is pining away, this prosperity is nothing to you (even as when the handmaiden is glad, the happiness of the maidservant is nothing to her mistress perishing, nor is the fair robe anything compared with the weak flesh); but Christ will say unto you again, What shall a man give in exchange for his soul? on every hand commanding you to be busied about that, and to take account of it only.

5. Having alarmed them therefore hereby, He comforts them also by His good things.

For the Son of Man shall come, says He, in the glory of His Father with His holy angels, and then He shall reward every man according to his works.

Do you see how the glory of the Father and of the Son is all one? But if the glory be one, it is quite evident that the substance also is one. For if in one substance there be a difference of glory (for there is one glory of the sun, and another glory of the moon, and another glory of the stars; for one star differs from another star in glory; 1 Corinthians 15:41 although the substance be one), how may the substance of those differ, whereof the glory is one? For He said not at all, In glory such as the Father's, whereby you might suppose again some variation; but implying entire perfection, In that same glory, says He, will He come; for it to be deemed one and the same.

Now, why fear, O Peter (so He speaks), on being told of death? Why, then shall you see me in the glory of the Father. And if I am in glory, so are you; your interests are no wise limited to the present life, but another sort of portion will take you up, a better one. Nevertheless, when He had spoken of the good things, He stayed not at this, but mingled the fearful things also, bringing forward that judgment-seat, and the inexorable account, and the inflexible sentence, and the judgment that cannot be deceived.

He suffered not however His discourse to appear only dismal, but tempered it also with good hopes. For neither did He say, then shall He punish them that sinned, but, He shall reward every man according to his doings. And this He said, reminding not only the sinners of punishment, but also them that have done well of prizes and crowns.

6. And He indeed spoke it, in part to refresh the good, but I ever shudder at hearing it, for I am not of them that are crowned, and I suppose that others also share with us in our fear and anxiety. For whom is this saying not enough to startle, when he has entered into his own conscience; and to make him shudder, and

convince him that we have need of sackcloth, and of prolonged fasting, more than the people of the Ninevites? For not for an overthrow of a city, and the common end, are we concerned, but for eternal punishment, and the fire that is never quenched.

Wherefore also I praise and admire the monks that have occupied the desert places, as for the rest, so for this saying. For they after having made their dinners, or rather after supper (for dinner they know not at any time, because they know that the present time is one of mourning and fasting); after supper then, in saying certain hymns of thanksgiving unto God, they make mention of this expression also. And if you would hear the very hymns themselves, that you too may say them continually, I will rehearse to you the whole of that sacred song. The words of it then stand as follows: Blessed God, who feedest me from my youth up, who givest food to all flesh; fill our hearts with joy and gladness, that always having all sufficiency we may abound unto every good work in Christ Jesus our Lord; with whom be unto You glory, honor and might, with the Holy Spirit, forever. Amen. Glory to You, O Lord, glory to You, O Holy One, glory to You, O King, that You have given us meat to make us glad. Fill us with the Holy Ghost, that we may be found well-pleasing before You, not being ashamed, when You render to every man according to his works.

Now this hymn is in all parts worthy of admiration, but especially the above ending of it. That is, because meals and food are wont to dissipate and weigh down, they put this saying as a kind of bridle upon the soul, at the time of indulgence reminding it of the time of judgment. For they have learned what befell Israel through a costly table. For my beloved, says He, ate, and waxed fat, and kicked. Wherefore also Moses said, When you shall have eaten and drunk and art full, remember the Lord your God. Deuteronomy 6:11-12

For after that feast, then they ventured on those acts of lawless daring.

Do thou therefore also look to it, lest something like it befall you. For though thou sacrifice not to stone nor to gold, either sheep or bullocks, see lest to wrath thou sacrifice your own soul, lest to whoredom or other like passions, thou sacrifice your own salvation. Yea -- on this account, you see, they being afraid of these downfalls, when they have enjoyed their meal, or rather fasting (for their meal is in fact fasting), remind themselves of the terrible judgment-seat, and of that day. And if they who correct themselves both with fasting, and with nights spent on the ground, with watchings, and with sackcloth, and with ten thousand means, do yet require also this reminding, when will it be possible for us to live virtuously; who set forth tables loaded with innumerable wrecks, and do not so much as pray at all, neither in the beginning nor the end?

7. Wherefore to put an end to these shipwrecks, let us bring before us that hymn and unfold it all, that seeing the profit thereof, we too may chant it constantly over our table, and quell the rude motions of the belly, introducing both the manners and laws of those angels into our houses. For you ought indeed to go there and reap these fruits; but since you are not willing, at least through our words, hear this spiritual melody, and let every one after his meal say these words, beginning thus.

Blessed God. For the apostolic law they straightway fulfill, that commands, Whatsoever we do in word or in deed, that we do it in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, giving thanks to God and the Father by Him. Colossians 3:17

Next, the thanksgiving takes place not for that one day only, but for all their life. For, Who feedest me, it is said, from my youth up. And a lesson of self-command is drawn thence, that when God feeds, we must

not take thought. For if upon a king's promising you to furnish your daily food out of his own stores, you would be of good hope for the future; much more, when God gives, and all things pour upon you as out of fountains, should you be freed from all anxiety. Yea, and to this very intent they so speak, that they may persuade both themselves, and those that are made disciples by them, to put off all worldly care.

Then, not to have you suppose that for themselves only they offer up this thanksgiving, they further say, Who givest food to all flesh, giving thanks in behalf of all the world; and as fathers of the whole earth, so do they offer up their praises for all, and train themselves to a sincere brotherly love. For it is not even possible they should hate them, in behalf of whom they thank God, that they are fed.

Do you see both charity introduced by their thanksgiving, and worldly care cast out, both by the preceding words, and by these? For if He feed all flesh, much more them that are devoted to him; if them that are entangled in worldly cares, much more them that are freed from the same.

To establish this, Christ Himself said, How many sparrows do ye exceed in value? And He said it, teaching them not to put their confidence in wealth and land and seeds; for it is not these that feed us, but the word of God.

Hereby they stop the mouths, both of the Manichæans, and of them of Valentinus, and of all that are diseased in their way. For sure this Being is not evil, who sets his own stores before all, even before them that blaspheme Him.

Then comes the petition: Fill our hearts with joy and gladness. With what manner of joy then, does it mean? The joy of this world? God forbid: for had they meant this, they would not have occupied summits of mountains, and deserts, nor wrapt themselves in sackcloth; but that joy they mean, which has nothing in common with this present life, the joy of angels, the joy above.

And they do not simply ask for it, but in great excess; for they say not, give, but, fill, and they say not us, but our hearts. For this is especially a heart's joy; For the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace. Galatians 5:22

Thus, because sin brought in sorrow, they request that through joy righteousness may be implanted in them, for no otherwise might joy be engendered.

That, always having all sufficiency, we may abound unto every good work. 2 Corinthians 9:8 See how they fulfill that word of the gospel which says, Give us this day our daily bread, and how they seek even this for spiritual ends. For their phrase is, That we may abound unto every good work. They said not, That we may do our duty only, but even more than what is enjoined, for, that we may abound, means this. And while of God they seek sufficiency in things needful, themselves are willing to obey not in sufficiency only, but with much abundance, and in all things. This is the part of well-disposed servants, this of men strict in goodness, to abound always, and in all things.

Then again reminding themselves of their own weakness, and that without the influence from above nothing noble can be done; having said, that we may abound unto every good work, they add, in Christ Jesus our Lord, with whom unto You be glory, honor, and might forever. Amen; framing this end like their commencement by a thread of thanksgiving.

8. After this again, they seem to begin afresh, but they are keeping to the same argument. As Paul also in the beginning of an epistle, having closed with a doxology, where he says, According to the will of our God

and Father, to whom be glory forever. Amen; Galatians 1:4-5 begins the subject again on which he was writing. And again in another place when he had said, They worshipped and served the creature more than the Creator, who is blessed forever: Amen; Romans 1:25 he completed not his discourse, but begins again.

Therefore neither let us blame these our angels, as acting disorderly, for that having closed with a doxology they begin again the sacred hymns. For they follow apostolic laws, beginning from a doxology, and ending therein, and after that end making a commencement again.

Wherefore they say, Glory be to You, O Lord; glory be to You, O Holy One; glory be to You, O King; that You have given us food to make us glad.

Since not for the greater things only, but also for the lesser, we ought to give thanks. And they do give thanks for these also, putting to shame the heresy of the Manichæans, and of as many as affirm our present life to be evil. For lest for their high self-command, and contempt of the belly, you should suspect them as abhorring the meat, like the heretics aforesaid, who choke themselves to death; they by their prayer teach you, that not from abhorrence of God's creatures they abstain from most of them, but as exercising self-restraint.

And see how after thanksgiving for His past gifts, they are importunate also for the greater things, and dwell not upon the matters of this life, but mount above the heavens, and say, Fill us with the Holy Ghost. For it is not even possible to approve one's self as one ought, not being filled with that grace; as there is no doing anything noble or great, without the benefit of Christ's influences.

As therefore when they had said, That we may abound unto every good work, they added, In Christ Jesus; so here also they say, Fill us with the Holy Ghost, that we may be found to have been well-pleasing before You.

Do you see how for the things of this life they pray not, but give thanks only; but for the things of the Spirit, they both give thanks and pray. For, seek ye, says He, the kingdom of heaven, and all these things shall be added unto you.

And mark too another kind of severe goodness in them; their saying, namely, That we may be found to have been well-pleasing in Your sight, not being ashamed. For we care not, say they, for the shame that proceeds from the many, but whatever men may say of us, laughing, upbraiding, we do not so much as regard it; but our whole endeavor is not to be put to shame then. But in these expressions, they bring in also the river of fire, and the prizes, and the rewards.

They said not, that we be not punished, but, that we be not ashamed. For this is to us far more fearful than hell, to seem to have offended our Lord.

But since the more part and the grosser sort are not in fear of this, they add, When You render to every man according to his works. Do you see how greatly these strangers and pilgrims have benefitted us, these citizens of the wilderness, or rather citizens of the Heavens? For whereas we are strangers to the Heavens, but citizens of the earth, these are just the contrary.

And after this hymn, being filled with much compunction, and with many and fervent tears, so they proceed to sleep, snatching just so much of it as a little to refresh themselves. And again, the nights they make days, spending them in thanksgivings and in the singing of psalms.

But not men only, but women also practise this self-denial, overcoming the weakness of their nature by the abundance of their zeal.

Let us be abashed then at their earnestness, we who are men, let us cease to be fastened to the things present, to shadow, to dreams, to smoke. For the more part of our life is passed in insensibility.

For both the first period of our life is full of much folly, and that again which travels on to old age, makes all the feeling that is in us wither away, and small is the space between, that is able feelingly to enjoy pleasure; or rather, not even that has a pure participation thereof, by reason of innumerable cares and toils, that harass it.

Wherefore, I pray, let us seek the unmovable and eternal goods, and the life that never has old age.

For even one dwelling in a city may imitate the self-denial of the monks; yea, one who has a wife, and is busied in a household, may pray, and fast, and learn compunction. Since they also, who at the first were instructed by the apostles, though they dwelt in cities, yet showed forth the piety of the occupiers of the deserts: and others again who had to rule over workshops, as Priscilla and Aquila.

And the prophets too, all had both wives and households, as Isaiah, as Ezekiel, as the great Moses, and received no hurt therefrom in regard of virtue.

These then let us also imitate, and continually offer thanksgiving to God, continually sing hymns to Him; let us give heed to temperance, and to all other virtues, and the self-denial that is practised in the deserts, let us bring into our cities; that we may appear both well-pleasing before God, and approved before men, and attain unto the good things to come, by the grace and love towards man of our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom and with whom be unto the Father, glory, honor, and might, together with the holy and life-giving Spirit, now and always and world without end. Amen.

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