

# Homily 57 on Matthew

by St. John Chrysostom

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*Christ explains the Scriptures to the disciples, clarifying the two advents of Christ and the role of John the Baptist as the forerunner of the first advent.*

**Scripture:** Mark 9:23

**Topics:** "Christ's Advents", "Faith And Healing"

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## Description

John Chrysostom preaches on the disciples' confusion regarding the prophecy of Elias, explaining the two advents of Christ as mentioned in the Scriptures and the role of John the Baptist as the forerunner. He emphasizes the importance of understanding the prophetic language and the accuracy of Christ's statements regarding Elias. Chrysostom also delves into the disciples' lack of faith in healing the possessed boy, highlighting the power of belief and the need for strong faith. He addresses the issue of drunkenness, urging moderation and self-control, drawing parallels between human behavior and that of animals in recognizing limits.

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## Transcript

Matt. XVII. 10.

And His disciples asked Him, saying, Why then say the Scribes that Elias must first come?

Not then from the Scriptures did they know this, but the Scribes used to explain themselves, and this saying was reported abroad among the ignorant people; as about Christ also.

Wherefore the Samaritan woman also said, Messiah comes; when He has come, He will tell us all things: John 4:25 and they themselves asked John, Are you Elias, or the Prophet? John 1:21 For the saying, as I said, prevailed, both that concerning the Christ and that concerning Elias, not however rightly interpreted by them.

For the Scriptures speak of two advents of Christ, both this that is past, and that which is to come; and declaring these Paul said, The grace of God, that brings salvation, has appeared, teaching us, that, denying ungodliness and worldly lusts, we should live soberly, and righteously, and godly. Behold the one, hear how he declares the other also; for having said these things, he added, Looking for the blessed hope and appearing of our great God and Saviour Jesus Christ. Titus 2:13 And the prophets too mention both; of the one, however, that is, of the second, they say Elias will be the forerunner. For of the first, John was

forerunner; whom Christ called also Elias, not because he was Elias, but because he was fulfilling the ministry of that prophet. For as the one shall be forerunner of the second advent, so was the other too of the first. But the Scribes, confusing these things and perverting the people, made mention of that other only to the people, the second advent, and said, If this man is the Christ, Elias ought to have come beforehand. Therefore the disciples too speak as follows, How then say the Scribes, Elias must first come?

Therefore also the Pharisees sent unto John, and asked him, Are you Elias? John 1:21 making no mention anywhere of the former advent.

What then is the solution, which Christ alleged? Elias indeed comes then, before my second advent; and now too is Elias come; so calling John.

In this sense Elias has come: but if you would seek the Tishbite, he is coming. Wherefore also He said, Elias truly comes, and shall restore all things. All what things? Such as the Prophet Malachi spoke of; for I will send you, says He, Elias the Tishbite, who shall restore the heart of father to son, lest I come and utterly smite the earth.

Do you see the accuracy of prophetic language? How, because Christ called John, Elias, by reasoning of their community of office, lest you should suppose this to be the meaning of the prophet too in this place, He added His country also, saying, the Tishbite; whereas John was not a Tishbite. And herewith He sets down another sign also, saying, Lest I come and utterly smite the earth, signifying His second and dreadful advent. For in the first He came not to smite the earth. For, I came not, says He, to judge the world, but to save the world. John 12:47

To show therefore that the Tishbite comes before that other advent, which has the judgment, He said this. And the reason too of his coming He teaches withal. And what is this reason? That when He has come, he may persuade the Jews to believe in Christ, and that they may not all utterly perish at His coming. Wherefore He too, guiding them on to that remembrance, says, And he shall restore all things; that is, shall correct the unbelief of the Jews that are then in being.

Hence the extreme accuracy of his expression; in that he said not, He will restore the heart of the son to the father, but of the father to the son. For the Jews being fathers of the apostles, his meaning is, that he will restore to the doctrines of their sons, that is, of the apostles, the hearts of the fathers, that is, the Jewish people's mind.

But I say unto you, that Elias has come already, and they knew him not, but have done unto him whatsoever they listed. Likewise shall also the Son of Man suffer of them. Then they understood that He spoke to them of John. Matthew 17:12-13

And yet neither the Scribes said this, nor the Scriptures; but because now they were sharper and more attentive to His sayings, they quickly caught His meaning.

And whence did the disciples know this? He had already told them, He is Elias, which was for to come; Matthew 11:14 but here, that he has come; and again, that Elias comes and will restore all things. But be not thou troubled, nor imagine that His statement wavers, though at one time He said, he will come, at another, he has come. For all these things are true. Since when He says, Elias indeed comes, and will restore all things, He means Elias himself, and the conversion of the Jews which is then to take place; but

when He says, Which was for to come, He calls John, Elias, with regard to the manner of his administration. Yea, and so the prophets used to call every one of their approved kings, David; and the Jews, rulers of Sodom, Isaiah 1:10 and sons of Ethiopians; Amos 9:7 because of their ways. For as the other shall be forerunner of the second advent, so was this of the first.

2. And not for this only does He call him Elias everywhere, but to signify His perfect agreement with the Old Testament, and that this advent too is according to prophecy.

Wherefore also He adds again, He came, and they knew him not, but have done unto him all things whatsoever they listed. Matthew 17:12 What means, all things whatsoever they listed? They cast him into prison, they used him despitefully, they slew him, they brought his head in a charger.

Likewise shall also the Son of Man suffer of them. Do you see how again He in due season reminds them of His passion, laying up for them great store of comfort from the passion of John. And not in this way only, but also by presently working great miracles. Yea, and whenever He speaks of His passion, presently He works miracles, both after those sayings and before them; and in many places one may find Him to have kept this rule.

Then, for instance, it says, He began to signify how that He must go unto Jerusalem, and be killed, and suffer many things. Matthew 16:21 Then: when? When He was confessed to be Christ, and the Son of God.

Again on the mountain, when He had shown them the marvellous vision, and the prophets had been discoursing of His glory, He reminded them of His passion. For having spoken of the history concerning John, He added, Likewise shall also the Son of Man suffer of them.

And after a little while again, when He had cast out the devil, which His disciples were not able to cast out; for then too, As they abode in Galilee, so it says, Jesus said to them, The Son of Man shall be betrayed into the hands of sinful men, and they shall kill Him, and the third day He shall rise again. Matthew 17:23

Now in doing this, He by the greatness of the miracles was abating the excess of their sorrow, and in every way consoling them; even as here also, by the mention of John's death, He afforded them much consolation.

But should any one say, Wherefore did He not even now raise up Elias and send him, witnessing as He does so great good of his coming? we should reply, that even as it was, while thinking Christ to be Elias, they did not believe Him. For some say, such are the words, that You are Elias, and others, Jeremias. Matthew 16:14 And indeed between John and Elias, there was no difference but the time only. Then how will they believe at that time? it may be said. Why, he will restore all things, not simply by being recognized, but also because the glory of Christ will have been growing more intense up to that day, and will be among all clearer than the sun. When therefore, preceded by such an opinion and expectation, he comes making the same proclamation as John, and himself also announcing Jesus, they will more easily receive his sayings. But in saying, They knew him not, He is excusing also what was done in His own case. Luke 23:24

And not in this way only does He console them, but also by pointing out that John's sufferings at their hands, whatever they are, are undeserved; and by His throwing into the shade what would annoy them, by means of two signs, the one on the mountain, the other just about to take place.

But when they heard these things, they do not ask Him when Elias comes; being straitened either by grief at His passion, or by fear. For on many occasions, upon seeing Him unwilling to speak a thing clearly, they are silent, and so an end. For instance, when during their abode in Galilee He said, The Son of Man shall be betrayed, and they shall kill Him; Matthew 17:22-23 it is added by Mark, That they understood not the saying, and were afraid to ask Him; Mark 9:32 by Luke, That it was hid from them, that they might not perceive it, and they feared to ask Him of that saying. Luke 9:45

3. And when they had come to the multitude, there came to Him a man, kneeling down to Him, and saying, Lord, have mercy on my son, for he is lunatic, and sore vexed; for oftentimes he falls into the fire, and oft into the water. And I brought him unto Your disciples, and they could not cure him. Matthew 17:14-16

This man the Scripture signifies to be exceedingly weak in faith; and this is many ways evident; from Christ's saying, All things are possible to him that believes; Mark 9:23 from the saying of the man himself that approached, Help my unbelief: Mark 9:24 from Christ's commanding the devil to enter no more into him; Mark 9:25 and from the man's saying again to Christ, If You can. Mark 9:22 Yet if his unbelief was the cause, it may be said, that the devil went not out, why does He blame the disciples? Signifying, that even without persons to bring the sick in faith, they might in many instances work a cure. For as the faith of the person presenting oftentimes availed for receiving the cure, even from inferior ministers; so the power of the doers oftentimes sufficed, even without belief in those who came to work the miracle.

And both these things are signified in the Scripture. For both they of the company of Cornelius by their faith drew unto themselves the grace of the Spirit; and in the case of Eliseus 2 Kings 13:21 again, when none had believed, a dead man rose again. For as to those that cast him down, not for faith but for cowardice did they cast him, unintentionally and by chance, for fear of the band of robbers, and so they fled: while the person himself that was cast in was dead, yet by the mere virtue of the holy body the dead man arose.

Whence it is clear in this case, that even the disciples were weak; but not all; for the pillars Galatians 2:9 were not present there. And see this man's want of consideration, from another circumstance again, how before the multitude he pleads to Jesus against His disciples, saying, I brought him to Your disciples, and they could not cure him.

But He, acquitting them of the charges before the people, imputes the greater part to him. For, O faithless and perverse generation, these are His words, how long shall I be with you? Matthew 17:17 not aiming at his person only, lest He should confound the man, but also at all the Jews. For indeed many of those present might probably be offended, and have undue thoughts of them.

But when He said, How long shall I be with you, He indicates again death to be welcome to Him, and the thing an object of desire, and His departure longed for, and that not crucifixion, but being with them, is grievous.

He stopped not however at the accusations; but what says He? Bring him hither to me. Mark 9:21 And Himself moreover asks him, how long time he is thus; both making a plea for His disciples, and leading the other to a good hope, and that he might believe in his attaining deliverance from the evil.

And He suffers him to be torn, not for display (accordingly, when a crowd began to gather, He proceeded to rebuke him), but for the father's own sake, that when he should see the evil spirit disturbed at Christ's mere call, so at least, if in no other way, he might be led to believe the coming miracle.

And because he had said, Of a child, and, If you can help me, Christ says, To him that believes, all things are possible, Mark 9:23 again giving the complaint a turn against him. And whereas when the leper said, If You will, You can make me clean, Matthew 8:2 bearing witness to His authority Christ commending him, and confirming His words, said, I will, be thou clean; in this man's case, upon his uttering a speech in no way worthy of His power --If You can, help me,-- see how He corrects it, as not rightly spoken. For what says He? If you can believe, all things are possible to him that believes. What He says is like this: Such abundance of power is with me, that I can even make others work these miracles. So that if you believe as one ought, even you yourself art able, says He, to heal both this one, and many others. And having thus said, He set free the possessed of the devil.

But do thou not only from this observe His providence and His beneficence, but also from that other time, during which He allowed the devil to be in him. Since surely, unless the man had been favored with much providential care even then, he would have perished long ago; for it cast him both into the fire, so it is said, and into the water. And he that dared this would assuredly have destroyed the man too, unless even in so great madness God had put on him His strong curb: as indeed was the case with those naked men that were running in the deserts and cutting themselves with stones.

And if he call him a lunatic, trouble not yourself at all, for it is the father of the possessed who speaks the word. How then says the evangelist also, He healed many that were lunatic? Denominating them according to the impression of the multitude. For the evil spirit, to bring a reproach upon nature, by wine? For the weaker the vessel, the more entire the shipwreck, whether she be free or a slave. For the free woman behaves herself unseemly in the midst of her slaves as spectators, and the slave again in like manner in the midst of the slaves, and they cause the gifts of God to be blasphemously spoken of by foolish men.

For instance, I hear many say, when these excesses happen, Would there were no wine. O folly! O madness! When other men sin, do you find fault with God's gifts? And what great madness is this? What? Did the wine, O man, produce this evil? Not the wine, but the intemperance of such as take an evil delight in it. Say then, Would there were no drunkenness, no luxury; but if you say, Would there were no wine, you will say, going on by degrees, Would there were no steel, because of the murderers; no night, because of the thieves; no light, because of the informers; no women, because of adulteries; and, in a word, you will destroy all.

But do not so; for this is of a satanical mind; do not find fault with the wine, but with the drunkenness; and when you have found this self-same man sober, sketch out all his unseemliness, and say unto him, Wine was given, that we might be cheerful, not that we might behave ourselves unseemly; that we might laugh, not that we might be a laughingstock; that we might be healthful, not that we might be diseased; that we might correct the weakness of our body, not cast down the might of our soul.

God honored you with the gift, why disgrace yourself with the excess thereof? Hear what Paul says, Use a little wine for your stomach's sake, and your frequent infirmities. 1 Timothy 5:23 But if that saint, even when oppressed with disease, and enduring successive sicknesses, partook not of wine, until his Teacher suffered him; what excuse shall we have, who are drunken in health? To him indeed He said, Use a little wine for your stomach's sake; but to each of you who are drunken, He will say, Use little wine, for your fornications, your frequent filthy talking, for the other wicked desires to which drunkenness is wont to give birth. But if you are not willing, for these reasons, to abstain; at least on account of the despondencies which come of it, and the vexations, do ye abstain. For wine was given for gladness, Yea, wine, so it is

said, makes glad the heart of man: but you mar even this excellence in it. For what kind of gladness is it to be beside one's self, and to have innumerable vexations, and to see all things whirling round, and to be oppressed with giddiness, and like those that have a fever, to require some who may drench their heads with oil?

6. These things are not said by me to all: or rather they are said to all, not because all are drunken, God forbid; but because they who do not drink take no thought of the drunken. Therefore even against you do I rather inveigh, that are in health; since the physician too leaves the sick, and addresses his discourse to them that are sitting by them. To you therefore do I direct my speech, entreating you neither to be at any time over-taken by this passion, and to draw up as by cords those who have been so overtaken, that they be not found worse than the brutes. For they indeed seek nothing more than what is needful, but these have become even more brutish than they, overpassing the boundaries of moderation. For how much better is the ass than these men? How much better the dog! For indeed each of these animals, and of all others, whether it need to eat, or to drink, acknowledges sufficiency for a limit, and goes not on beyond what it needs; and though there are innumerable persons to constrain, it will not endure to go on to excess.

In this respect then we are worse even than the brutes, by the judgment not of them that are in health only, but even by our own. For that you have judged yourselves to be baser than both dogs and asses, revealed to Peter, He does hereby again confirm. And neither at this did He stop, but by His very condescension declares this self-same truth; an instance of exceeding wisdom.

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