

# Homily 58 on Matthew

by St. John Chrysostom

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*Jesus teaches the disciples about the importance of humility and becoming like little children to enter the kingdom of heaven, while also warning against offending those who are humble and lowly.*

**Scripture:** Matthew 17:22, Matthew 18:2, Matthew 18:6, 1 Corinthians 12:26, 1 Thessalonians 2:19

**Topics:** "Humility", "Worldly Ambition"

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## Description

John Chrysostom preaches about the dangers of arrogance and the pursuit of worldly honors, highlighting the folly of seeking glory, wealth, and power as they lead to enslavement to passions and vices. He emphasizes the importance of humility, simplicity, and freedom of the soul, using the example of a little child as a model for true greatness in the kingdom of heaven. Chrysostom warns against offending the humble ones, stating that severe punishment awaits those who harm them, and encourages a focus on virtue and genuine love for others over the pursuit of worldly success.

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## Transcript

MATT. XVII. 22, 23. "And while they abode in Galilee, Jesus said to them, The Son of Man shall be betrayed into the hands of men, and they shall kill Him, and the third day He shall be raised again. And they were exceeding sorry."

THAT is, to hinder their saying, "wherefore do we abide here continually," He speaks to them again of the passion; on hearing which they had no wish so much as to see Jerusalem. And it is remarkable how, when both Peter had been rebuked, and Moses and Elias had discoursed concerning it, and had called the thing glory, and the Father had uttered a voice from above, and so many miracles had been done, and the resurrection was at the doors (for He said, He should by no means abide any long time in death, but should be raised the third day); not even so did they endure it, but were sorry; and not merely sorry, but exceeding sorry.

Now this arose from their being ignorant as yet of the force of His sayings. This Mark and Luke indirectly expressing said, the one, "They understood not the saying, and were afraid to ask Him:"the other, "It was hid from them, that they perceived it not, and they feared to ask Him of that saying."

And yet if they were ignorant, how were they sorry? Because they were not altogether ignorant; that He was to die they knew, continually hearing it, but what this death might be, and that there would be a speedy release from it, and that it would work innumerable blessings, as yet they knew not clearly; nor

what this resurrection might be: but they understood it not, wherefore they grieved; for indeed they clung very earnestly to their Master.

"And when they had come to Capernaum, they that received the didrachma came to Peter, and said, Does not your Master pay the didrachma?"

And what is this "didrachma?" When God had slain the firstborn of the Egyptians, then He took the tribe of Levi in their stead. Afterwards, because the number of the tribe was less than of the firstborn among the Jews, for them that are wanting to make up the number, He commanded a shekel to be contributed: and moreover a custom came thereby in force, that the firstborn should pay this tribute.

Because then Christ was a firstborn child, and Peter seemed to be first of the disciples, to him they come: their way being, as I suppose, to exact it in every city; wherefore also in His native place they approached Him; for Capernaum was accounted His native place.

And Him indeed they dared not approach, but Peter; nor him either with much violence, but rather gently. For not as blaming, but as inquiring, they said, "Does not your Master pay the didrachma?" For the right opinion of Him they had not as yet, but as concerning a man, so did they feel; yet they rendered Him some reverence and honor, because of the signs that went before.

2. What then says Peter? "He says, Yea:" and to these indeed he said, that He pays, but to Him he said it not, blushing perhaps to speak to Him of these things. Wherefore that gentle one, well knowing as He did all things, prevented him, saying, "What do you think, Simon? Of whom do the kings of the earth take custom or tribute? Of their own sons, or of strangers;" and when he said "of strangers," He replied, "Then are the sons free."

For lest Peter should suppose Him to say so, being told it by the others, He prevents him, partly indicating what has been said, partly giving him leave to speak freely, backward as he was to speak first of these things.

And what He says is like this, "I am indeed free from paying tribute. For if the kings of the earth take it not of their sons, but of their subjects; much more ought I to be freed from this demand, I who am Son, not of an earthly king, but of the King of Heaven, and myself a King." Do you see how He has distinguished the sons from them that are not sons? And if He were not a Son, to no purpose has He brought in the example also of the kings. "Yea," one may say, "He is a Son, but not truly begotten." Then is He not a Son; and if not a Son, nor truly begotten, neither does He belong to God, but to some other. But if He belong to another, then neither has the comparison its proper force. For He is discoursing not of the sons generally, but of the genuine sons, men's very own; of them that share the kingdom with their parents.

Wherefore also in contradistinction He has mentioned the "strangers;" meaning by "strangers," such as are not born of them, but by "their own," those whom they have begotten of themselves.

And I would have you mark this also; how the high doctrine, 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.

For after thus speaking, He says, But lest we should offend them, go thou and cast an hook into the sea, and take up the fish that first comes up, and you shall find therein a piece of money; that take, and give unto them for me and you.

See how He neither declines the tribute, nor simply commands to pay it, but having first proved Himself not liable to it, then He gives it: the one to save the people, the other, those around Him, from offense. For He gives it not at all as a debt, but as doing the best for their weakness. Elsewhere, however, He despises the offense, when He was discoursing of meats, Matthew 15:11 teaching us to know at what seasons we ought to consider them that are offended, and at what to disregard them.

And indeed by the very mode of giving He discloses Himself again. For wherefore does He not command him to give of what they have laid up? That, as I have said, herein also He might signify Himself to be God of all, and the sea also to be under His rule. For He had indeed signified this even already, by His rebuke, and by His commanding this same Peter to walk on the waves; but He now again signifies the self-same thing, though in another way, yet so as to cause herein great amazement. For neither was it a small thing, to foretell that the first, who out of those depths should come in his way, would be the fish that would pay the tribute; and having cast forth His commandment like a net into that abyss, to bring up the one that bore the piece of money; but it was of a divine and unutterable power, thus to make even the sea bear gifts, and that its subjection to Him should be shown on all hands, as well when in its madness it was silent, Matthew 8:26 and when, though fierce, it received its fellow servant; Matthew 14:29 as now again, when it makes payment in His behalf to them that are demanding it.

And give unto them, He says, for me and you. Do you see the exceeding greatness of the honor? See also the self-command of Peter's mind. For this point Mark, the follower of this apostle, does not appear to have set down, because it indicated the great honor paid to him; but while of the denial he wrote as well as the rest, the things that make him illustrious he has passed over in silence, his master perhaps entreating him not to mention the great things about himself. And He used the phrase, for me and you, because Peter too was a firstborn child.

Now as you are amazed at Christ's power, so I bid you admire also the disciple's faith, that to a thing beyond possibility he so gave ear. For indeed it was very far beyond possibility by nature. Wherefore also in requital for his faith, He joined him to Himself in the payment of the tribute.

3. In that hour came the disciples unto Jesus, saying, Who then is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?

The disciples experienced some feeling of human weakness; wherefore the evangelist also adds this note, saying, In that hour; when He had preferred him to all. For of James too, and John, one was a firstborn son, but no such thing as this had He done for them.

Then, being ashamed to avow their feeling, they say not indeed openly, Wherefore have you preferred Peter to us? or, Is he greater than we are? for they were ashamed; but indefinitely they ask, Who then is greater? For when they saw the three preferred, they felt nothing of the kind; but now that the honor had come round to one, they were vexed. And not for this only, but there were many other things which they put together to kindle that feeling. For to him He had said, I will give you the keys; Matthew 16:19 to him, Blessed are you, Simon Barjona; to him here, Give unto them for me and you; and seeing too in general how freely he was allowed to speak, it somewhat fretted them.

And if Mark says, Mark 9:34 that they did not ask, but reasoned in themselves, that is nothing contrary to this. For it is likely that they did both the one and the other, and whereas before, on another occasion, they had had this feeling, both once and twice, that now they did both declare it, and reason among themselves.

But to you I say, Look not to the charge against them only, but consider this too; first, that they seek none of the things of this world; next, that even this passion they afterwards laid aside, and give up the first place one to another. But we are not able to attain so much as unto their faults, neither do we seek, who is greatest in the kingdom of heaven; but, who is greatest in the earthly kingdom, who is wealthiest, who most powerful.

What then says Christ? He unveils their conscience, and replies to their feeling, not merely to their words. For He called a little child unto Him, says the Scripture, and said, Unless you are converted, and become as this little child, you shall not enter into the kingdom of heaven. Matthew 18:2-3 Why, you, He says, inquire who is greatest, and are contentious for first honors; but I pronounce him, that is not become lowest of all, unworthy so much as to enter in there.

And full well does He both allege that pattern, and not allege it only, but also set the child in the midst, by the very sight abashing them, and persuading them to be in like manner lowly and artless. Since both from envy the little child is pure, and from vainglory, and from longing for the first place; and he is possessed of the greatest of virtues, simplicity, and whatever is artless and lowly.

Not courage then only is wanted, nor wisdom, but this virtue also, humility I mean, and simplicity. Yea, and the things that belong to our salvation halt even in the chiefest point, if these be not with us.

The little child, whether it be insulted and beaten, or honored and glorified, neither by the one is it moved to impatience or envy, nor by the other lifted up.

Do you see how again He calls us on to all natural excellencies, indicating that of free choice it is possible to attain them, and so silences the wicked frenzy of the Manichæans? For if nature be an evil thing, wherefore does He draw from hence His patterns of severe goodness?

And the child which He set in the midst I suppose to have been a very young child indeed, free from all these passions. For such a little child is free from pride and the mad desire of glory, and envy, and contentiousness, and all such passions, and having many virtues, simplicity, humility, unworldliness, prides itself upon none of them; which is a twofold severity of goodness; to have these things, and not to be puffed up about them.

Wherefore He brought it in, and set it in the midst; and not at this merely did He conclude His discourse, but carries further this admonition, saying, And whoever shall receive such a little child in my name, receives me.

For know, says He, that not only, if you yourselves become like this, shall you receive a great reward; but also if for my sake ye honor others who are such, even for your honor to them do I appoint unto you a kingdom as your recompence. Or rather, He sets down what is far greater, saying, he receives me. So exceedingly dear to me is all that is lowly and artless. For by a little child, here, He means the men that are thus simple and lowly, and abject and contemptible in the judgment of the common sort.

4. After this, to obtain yet more acceptance for His saying, He establishes it not by the honor only, but also by the punishment, going on to say, And whoever shall offend one of these little ones, it were better for him that a millstone were hanged about his neck, and that he were drowned in the depth of the sea.

For as they, says He, who honor these for my sake, have heaven, or rather an honor greater than the very kingdom; even so they likewise who dishonor them (for this is to offend them), shall suffer the extremity of

punishment. And marvel thou not at His calling the affront an offense; for many feeble-minded persons have suffered no ordinary offense from being treated with slight and insult. To heighten therefore and aggravate the blame, He states the mischief arising therefrom.

And He does not go on to express the punishment in the same way, but from the things familiar to us, He indicates how intolerable it is. For when He would touch the grosser sort most sharply, He brings sensible images. Wherefore here also, meaning to indicate the greatness of the punishment they shall undergo, and to strike into the arrogance of those that despise them, He brought forward a kind of sensible punishment, that of the millstone, and of the drowning. Yet surely it were suitable to what had gone before to have said, He that receives not one of these little ones, receives not me; a thing bitterer than any punishment; but since the very unfeeling, and exceeding gross, were not so much penetrated by this, terrible as it is, He puts a millstone, and a drowning. And He said not, A millstone shall be hanged about his neck, but, It would be better for him to undergo this; implying that another evil, more grievous than this, awaits him; and if this be unbearable, much more that.

Do you see how in both respects He made His threat terrible, first by the comparison with the known image rendering it more distinct, then by the excess on its side presenting it to the fancy as far greater than that visible one. Do you see how He plucks up by the root the spirit of arrogance; how He heals the ulcer of vainglory; how He instructs us in nothing to set our heart on the first honors; how He persuades such as covet them in everything to follow after the lowest place?

5. For nothing is worse than arrogance. This even takes men out of their natural senses, and brings upon them the character of fools; or rather, it really makes them to be utterly like idiots.

For like as, if any one, being three cubits in stature, were to strive to be higher than the mountains, or actually to think it, and draw himself up, as overpassing their summits, we should seek no other proof of his being out of his senses; so also when you see a man arrogant, and thinking himself superior to all, and accounting it a degradation to live with other people, seek not thou after that to see any other proof of that man's madness. Why, he is much more ridiculous than any natural fool, inasmuch as he absolutely creates this his disease on purpose. And not in this only is he wretched, but because he does without feeling it fall into the very gulf of wickedness.

For when will such an one come to due knowledge of any sin? When will he perceive that he is offending? Nay, rather he is as a vile and captive slave, whom the devil having caught goes off with, and makes him altogether a prey, buffetting him on every side, and encompassing him with ten thousand insults.

For unto such great folly does he lead them in the end, as to get them to be haughty towards their children, and wives, and towards their own forefathers. And others, on the contrary, He causes to be puffed up by the distinction of their ancestors. Now, what can be more foolish than this? When from opposite causes people are alike puffed up, the one sort because they had mean persons for fathers, grandfathers, and ancestors; and the other because theirs were glorious and distinguished? How then may one abate in each case the swelling sore? By saying to these last, Go farther back than your grandfather, and immediate ancestors, and you will find perchance many cooks, and drivers of asses, and shopkeepers: but to the former, that are puffed up by the meanness of their forefathers, the contrary again; And thou again, if you proceed farther up among your forefathers, will find many far more illustrious than you are.

For that nature has this course, come let me prove it to you even from the Scriptures. Solomon was son of a king, and of an illustrious king, but that king's father was one of the vile and ignoble. And his grandfather on his mother's side in like manner; for else he would not have given his daughter to a mere soldier. And if you were to go up again higher from these mean persons, you will see the race more illustrious and royal. So in Saul's case too, so in many others also, one shall come to this result. Let us not then pride ourselves herein. For what is birth? Tell me. Nothing, but a name only without a substance; and this you will know in that day. But because that day is not yet come, let us now even from the things present persuade you, that hence arises no superiority. For should war overtake us, should famine, should anything else, all these inflated conceits of noble birth are put to the proof: should disease, should pestilence come upon us, it knows not how to distinguish between the rich and the poor, the glorious and inglorious, the high born and him that is not such; neither does death, nor the other reverses of fortune, but they all rise up alike against all; and if I may say something that is even marvellous, against the rich more of the two. For by how much they are less exercised in these things, so much the more do they perish, when overtaken by them. And the fear too is greater with the rich. For none so tremble at princes as they; and at multitudes, not less than at princes, yea rather much more; many such houses in fact have been subverted alike by the wrath of multitudes and the threatening of princes. But the poor man is exempt from both these kinds of troubled waters.

6. Wherefore let alone this nobility, and if you would show me that you are noble, show the freedom of your soul, such as that blessed man had (and he a poor man), who said to Herod, It is not lawful for you to have your brother Philip's wife; Mark 6:18 such as he was possessed of, who before him was like him, and after him shall be so again; who said to Ahab, I do not trouble Israel, but thou, and your father's house; 1 Kings 18:18 such as the prophets had, such as all the apostles.

But not like this are the souls of them that are slaves to wealth, but as they that are under ten thousand tutors, and taskmasters, so these dare not so much as lift up their eye, and speak boldly in behalf of virtue. For the love of riches, and that of glory, and that of other things, looking terribly on them, make them slavish flatterers; there being nothing which so takes away liberty, as entanglement in worldly affairs, and the wearing what are accounted marks of distinction. For such an one has not one master, nor two, nor three, but ten thousand.

And if you would fain even number them, let us bring in some one of those that are in honor in kings' courts, and let him have both very much wealth, and great power, and a birthplace excelling others, and distinction of ancestry, and let him be looked up to by all men. Now then let us see, if this be not the very person to be more in slavery than all; and let us set in comparison with him, not a slave merely, but a slave's slave, for many though servants have slaves. This slave's slave then for his part has but one master. And what though that one be not a freeman? Yet he is but one, and the other looks only to his pleasure. For albeit his master's master seem to have power over him, yet for the present he obeys one only; and if matters between them two are well, he will abide in security all his life. But our man has not one or two only, but many, and more grievous masters. And first he is in care about the sovereign himself. And it is not the same to have a mean person for a master, as to have a king, whose ears are buzzed into by many, and who becomes a property now to this set and now to that.

Our man, though conscious of nothing, suspects all; both his comrades and his subordinates; both his friends and his enemies.

But the other man too, you may say, fears his master. But how is it the same thing, to have one or many, to make one timorous? Or rather, if a man inquire carefully, he will not find so much as one. How, and in what sense? Whereas that slave has no one that desires to put him out of that service of his, and to introduce himself (whence neither has he any one to plot against him therein); these have not even any other pursuit, but to unsettle him that is more approved and more beloved by their ruler. Wherefore also he must needs flatter all, his superiors, his equals, his friends. For where envy is, and love of glory, there even sincere friendship has no strength. For as those of the same craft cannot love one another with a perfect and genuine love, so is it with rivals in honor also, and with them that long for the same among worldly objects. Whence also great is the war within.

Do you see what a swarm of masters, and of hard masters? Will you that I show you yet another, more grievous than this? They that are behind him, all of them strive to get before him: all that are before him, to hinder him from coming nearer them, and passing them by.

7. But O marvel! I undertook indeed to show you masters, but our discourse, we find, coming on and waxing eager, has performed more than my undertaking, pointing out foes instead of masters; or rather the same persons both as foes and as masters. For while they are courted like masters, they are terrible as foes, and they plot against us as enemies. When then any one has the same persons both as masters, and as enemies, what can be worse than this calamity? The slave indeed, though he be subject to command, yet nevertheless has the advantage of care and good-will on the part of them who give him orders; but these, while they receive commands, are made enemies, and are set one against another; and that so much more grievously than those in battles, in that they both wound secretly, and in the mask of friends they treat men as their enemies would do, and oftentimes make themselves credit of the calamity of others.

But not such are our circumstances; rather should another fare ill, there are many to grieve with him: should he obtain distinction, many to find pleasure with him. Not so again the apostle: For whether, says he, one member suffer, all the members suffer with it; or one member be honored, all the members rejoice with it. 1 Corinthians 12:26 And the words of him who gives these admonitions, are at one time, What is my hope or joy? Are not even ye? 1 Thessalonians 2:19 at another, Now we live, if you stand fast in the Lord; 1 Thessalonians 3:8 at another, Out of much affliction and anguish of heart I wrote to you; 2 Corinthians 2:4 and, Who is weak, and I am not weak? Who is offended, and I burn not? 2 Corinthians 11:29

Wherefore then do we still endure the tempest and the billows of the world without, and not run to this calm haven, and leaving the names of good things, go on to the very things themselves? For glory, and dignity, and wealth, and credit, and all such things, are names with them, but with us realities; just as the grievous things, death and dishonor and poverty, and whatever else is like them, are names indeed with us, but realities with them.

And, if you will, let us first bring forward glory, so lovely and desirable with all of them. And I speak not of its being short-lived, and soon put out, but when it is in its bloom, then show it me. Take not away the daubings and colored lines of the harlot, but bring her forward decked out, and exhibit her to us, for me thereupon to expose her deformity. Well then, of course you will tell of her array, and her many lictors, and the heralds' voice, and the listening of all classes, and the silence kept by the populace, and the blows given to all that come in one's way, and the universal gazing. Are not these her splendors? Come then, let us examine whether these things be not vain, and a mere unprofitable imagination. For wherein is the

person we speak of the better for these things, either in body, or in soul? For this constitutes the man. Will he then be taller hereby, or stronger, or healthier, or swifter, or will he have his senses keener, and more piercing? Nay, no one could say this. Let us go then to the soul, if haply we may find there any advantage occurring herefrom. What then? Will such a one be more temperate, more gentle, more prudent, through that kind of attendance? By no means, but rather quite the contrary. For not as in the body, so also is the result here. For there the body indeed gains nothing in respect of its proper excellence; but here the mischief is not only the soul's reaping no good fruit, but also its actually receiving much evil therefrom: hurried as it is by such means into haughtiness, and vainglory, and folly, and wrath, and ten thousand faults like them.

But he rejoices, you will say, and exults in these things, and they brighten him up. The crowning point of his evils lies in that word of yours, and the incurable part of the disease. For he that rejoices in these things, would be unwilling however easily to be released from that which is the ground of his evils; yea, he has blocked up against himself the way of healing by this delight. So that here most of all is the mischief, that he is not even pained, but rather rejoices, when the diseases are growing upon him.

For neither is rejoicing always a good thing; since even thieves rejoice in stealing, and an adulterer in defiling his neighbor's marriage bed, and the covetous in spoiling by violence, and the manslayer in murdering. Let us not then look whether he rejoice, but whether it be for something profitable, lest perchance we find his joy to be such as that of the adulterer and the thief.

For wherefore, tell me, does he rejoice? For his credit with the multitude, because he can puff himself up, and be gazed upon? Nay, what can be worse than this desire, and this ill-placed fondness? Or if it be no bad thing, you must leave off deriding the vainglorious and aspersing them with continual mockeries: ye must leave off uttering imprecations on the haughty and contemptuous. But ye would not endure it. Well then, they too deserve plenty of censure, though they have plenty of lictors. And all this I have said of the more tolerable sort of rulers; since the greater part of them we shall find transgressing more grievously than either robbers, or murderers, or adulterers, or spoilers of tombs, from not making a good use of their power. For indeed both their thefts are more shameless, and their butcheries more hardened, and their impurities far more enormous than the others; and they dig through, not one wall, but estates and houses without end, their prerogative making it very easy to them.

And they serve a most grievous servitude, both stooping basely under their passions, and trembling at all their accomplices. For he only is free, and he only a ruler, and more kingly than all kings, who is delivered from his passions.

Knowing then these things, let us follow after the true freedom, and deliver ourselves from the evil slavery, and let us account neither pomp of power nor dominion of wealth, nor any other such thing, to be blessed; but virtue only. For thus shall we both enjoy security here, and attain unto the good things to come, by the grace and love towards man of our Lord Jesus Christ, to whom be glory and might, with the Father and the Holy Spirit, world without end. Amen.

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