

Homily 64 on Matthew

by St. John Chrysostom

The sermon teaches that it is possible for people to come to God at different times and still receive the same reward, and that humility and gratitude are essential for a life of virtue and holiness.

Scripture: Matthew 5:22, Matthew 8:11, Matthew 8:20, Matthew 20:1, Matthew 20:16, Matthew 20:27, John 13:15, 1 Corinthians 11:31, Galatians 1:15, Hebrews 12:14

Topics: "Christian Humility", "God's Mercy"

Description

John Chrysostom preaches on the importance of humility, diligence, and self-reflection in the Christian life. He emphasizes the need to focus on one's own virtues and good works rather than judging others, urging believers to emulate the examples of faithful individuals like Noah, Abraham, and Job. Chrysostom warns against envy, jealousy, and pride, highlighting the significance of almsgiving, righteousness, and obedience to God's commandments. He uses the parable of the laborers in the vineyard to illustrate God's mercy and the reward of those who turn to Him, regardless of when they come to faith.

Transcript

Matt. XIX. 27.

Then answered Peter and said to Him, Behold, we have forsaken all, and followed You; what shall we have therefore?

All which? O blessed Peter; the rod? The net? The boat? The craft? These things do you tell me of, as all? Yea, says he, but not for display do I say these things, but in order that by this question I may bring in the multitude of the poor. For since the Lord had said, If you will be perfect, sell that you have, and give to the poor, and you shall have treasure in Heaven; Matthew 19:21 lest any one of the poor should say, What then? If I have no possessions, can I not be perfect? Peter asks, that you, the poor man, may learn, that you are made in no respect inferior by this: Peter asks, that you may not learn from Peter and doubt (for indeed he was imperfect as yet, and void of the Spirit), but that, having received the declaration from Peter's Master, you may be confident.

For like as we do (we make things our own often when speaking of the concerns of others), so did the apostle, when he put to Him this question in behalf of all the world. Since that at least he knew with certainty his own portion, is manifest from what had been said before; for he that had already received the keys of the Heavens, much more might feel confidence about the things hereafter.

But mark also how exactly his reply is according to Christ's demand. For He had required of the rich man these two things, to give that he had to the poor, and to follow Him. Wherefore he also expresses these two things, to forsake, and to follow. For behold we have forsaken all, says he, and have followed You. For the forsaking was done for the sake of following, and the following was rendered easier by the forsaking, and made them feel confidence and joy touching the forsaking.

What then says He? Verily, I say unto you, that you which have followed me, in the regeneration when the Son of Man shall sit on the throne of His glory, you also shall sit upon twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel. Matthew 19:28 What then, one may say, shall Judas sit there? By no means. How, then, does He say, You shall sit on twelve thrones? how shall the terms of the promise be fulfilled?

Hear how, and on what principle. There is a law ordained of God, recited by Jeremiah, the prophet to the Jews, and in these words: At what instant I shall speak a sentence concerning a nation and kingdom, to pluck up and destroy; if that nation turn from their evil deeds, I also will repent of the evils, which I thought to do unto them. And at what instant I shall speak concerning a nation and kingdom to build and to plant it; and if they do evil in my sight, that they obey not my voice, I also will repent of the good, which I said I would do unto them. Jeremiah 18:7-10

For the same custom do I observe with respect to the good things as well, says He. For though I spoke of building up, should they show themselves unworthy of the promise, I will no longer do it. Which sort of thing was done with respect to man upon his creation, For the dread of you, it is said, and the fear of you shall be on the wild beasts, Genesis 9:2 and it came not to pass, for he proved himself unworthy of the sovereignty, even as did Judas also.

For in order that neither at the denunciations of punishment any men should despair and become more hardened, nor by the promises of good things be rendered causelessly more remiss, He remedies both these evils, by that which I have before mentioned, saying in this way: Though I should threaten, do not despair; for you are able to repent, and to reverse the denunciation, like the Ninevites. Though I should promise any good thing, grow not remiss because of the promise. For should you appear unworthy, the fact of my having promised will not advantage you, but will rather bring punishment. For I promise you being worthy.

Therefore even then in His discourse with His disciples He did not promise to them simply, for neither did He say, you, only, but added, which have followed me, that He might both cast out Judas, and draw towards Him those that should come afterwards. For neither to them only was it said, nor to Judas any more, when he had become unworthy.

Now to the disciples He promised things to come, saying, You shall sit on twelve thrones, for they were now of a higher stamp, and sought after none of the things of the present world, but to the rest He promises also what are here.

For every one, He says, that has forsaken brethren, or sisters, or father, or mother, or wife, or children, or lands, or house, for my name's sake, shall receive an hundredfold in this world, and shall inherit eternal life.

For lest any after having heard the word ye, should suppose this a thing peculiar to the disciples (I mean now the enjoying the greatest and first honors in the things to come), He extended the word, and spread the promise over the whole earth, and from the things present establishes the things to come also. And to

the disciples also at the beginning, when they were in a more imperfect state, He reasoned from the things present. For when He drew them from the sea, and took them from their trade, and commanded them to forsake the ships, He made mention not of Heaven, not of thrones, but of the things here, saying, I will make you fishers of men; but when He had wrought them to be of higher views, then after that He discourses of the things to come also.

2. But what is, Judging the twelve tribes of Israel? This is, condemning them. For they are not surely to sit as judges, but like as He said the Queen of the South should condemn that generation, and the Ninevites shall condemn them; so now these also. Therefore He said not, the nations, and the world, but the tribes of Israel. For since both the Jews alike and the apostles had been brought up under the same laws, and customs, and polity; when the Jews said, that for this cause they could not believe in Christ, because the law forbade to receive His commandments, by bringing forward these men, who had received the same law, and yet had believed, He condemns all those; like as even already He had said, therefore they shall be your judges. Matthew 12:27

And what great thing does He promise them, it may be said, if what the Ninevites have and the Queen of the South, this these are to have also? In the first place He had promised them many other things before this, and after this does promise them, and this alone is not their reward.

And besides even in this He intimated by the way something more than these things. For of those He simply said, The men of Nineveh shall rise up and condemn this generation, Matthew 12:41 and, The Queen of the South shall condemn it; but concerning these, not merely thus, but how? When the Son of Man shall sit upon the throne of His glory, then shall you also sit upon twelve thrones, says He, declaring, that they also shall reign with Him, and partake of that glory. For if we suffer, it is said, we shall also reign with Him. 2 Timothy 2:12 For neither do the thrones signify a sitting (in judgment), for He alone is the one that shall sit and judge, but honor and glory unspeakable did He intimate by the thrones.

To these then He spoke of these things, but to all the rest of eternal life and an hundredfold here. But if to the rest, much more to these too, both these things, and the things in this life.

And this surely came to pass; for when they had left a fishing rod and a net, they possessed with authority the substances of all, the prices of the houses and the lands, and the very bodies of the believers. For often did they choose even to be slain for their sake, as Paul also bears witness to many, when he says, If it had been possible ye would have plucked out your eyes, and given them to me. Galatians 4:51 But when He says, Every one who has forsaken wife, He says not this, for marriages to be broken asunder for nought, but as He says concerning one's life, He that loses his life for my sake shall find it, Matthew 10:39 not that we should destroy ourselves, neither that while yet here we should part it from the body, but that we should prefer godliness to all things; this too He says also with respect to wife and brethren.

But He seems to me here to intimate also the persecutions. For since there were many instances both of fathers urging their sons to ungodliness, and wives their husbands; when they command these things, says He, let them be neither wives nor parents, even as Paul likewise said, But if the unbelieving depart, let him depart. 1 Corinthians 7:15

When He had then raised the spirit of all, and had persuaded them to feel confidence both with respect to themselves and to all the world, He added, that Many that were first shall be last, and last first. But this although it be spoken also without distinction concerning many others likewise, it is spoken also concerning these men and concerning the Pharisees, who did not believe, even as before also He had

said, Many shall come from east and west and shall sit down with Abraham, and Isaac, and Jacob; but the children of the kingdom shall be cast out. Matthew 8:11-12

Then He adds also a parable, as training those who had fallen short to a great forwardness.

For the kingdom of Heaven, He said, is like to a man that is an householder, which went out early in the morning to hire laborers into his vineyard. And when he had agreed with them for a penny a day, he sent them into his vineyard.

And at the third hour he saw others standing idle, and to them too he said, Go also into the vineyard, and whatsoever is right I will give you. And about the sixth and ninth hours he did likewise. And about the eleventh hour, he saw others standing idle, and says unto them, Why stand ye here all the day idle? But they say unto him, No man has hired us. He says unto them, Go also into my vineyard, and whatsoever is right, you shall receive.

So when even had come, the lord of the vineyard says unto his steward, Call the laborers, and give them their hire, beginning from the last unto the first. And when they came that were hired about the eleventh hour, they received every man a penny. And the first supposed that they should receive more, and they received likewise every man a penny. And when they had received it, they murmured against the good man of the house, saying, These last have wrought but one hour, and you have made them equal unto us that have borne the burden and heat of the day. But he answered one of them, and said, Friend, I do you no wrong; did you not agree with me for a penny? Take what is yours, and go your way; I will give unto this last also, even as unto you. Is it not lawful for me to do what I will with my own? Is your eye evil, because I am good? Thus the last shall be first, and the first last: for many are called, but few chosen.

3. What is to us the intent of this parable? For the beginning does not harmonize with what is said at the end, but intimates altogether the contrary. For in the first part He shows all enjoying the same, and not some cast out, and some brought in; yet He Himself both before the parable and after the parable said the opposite thing. That the first shall be last, and the last first, that is, before the very first, those not continuing first, but having become last. For in proof that this is His meaning, He added, Many are called, but few chosen, so as doubly both to sting the one, and to soothe and urge on the other.

But the parable says not this, but that they shall be equal to them that are approved, and have labored much. For you have made them equal unto us, it is said, that have borne the burden and heat of the day.

What then is the meaning of the parable? For it is necessary to make this first clear, and then we shall clear up that other point. By a vineyard He means the injunctions of God and His commandments: by the time of laboring, the present life: by laborers, them that in different ways are called to the fulfillment of the injunctions: by early in the morning, and about the third and ninth and eleventh hours, them who at different ages have drawn near to God, and approved themselves.

But the question is this, whether the first having gloriously approved themselves, and having pleased God, and having throughout the whole day shone by their labors, are possessed by the basest feeling of vice, jealousy and envy. For when they had seen them enjoying the same rewards, they say, These last have wrought but one hour, and you have made them equal unto us, that have borne the burden and heat of the day. And in these words, when they are to receive no hurt, neither to suffer diminution as to their own hire, they were indignant, and much displeased at the good of others, which was proof of envy and jealousy. And what is yet more, the good man of the house in justifying himself with respect to them, and in making

his defense to him that had said these things, convicts him of wickedness and the basest jealousy, saying, Did you not agree with me for a penny? Take what is yours, and go your way; I will give unto the last even as unto you. Is your eye evil, because I am good?

What then is it which is to be established by these things? For in other parables also this self-same thing may be seen. For the son who was approved is brought in, as having felt this self-same thing, when he saw his prodigal brother enjoying much honor, even more than himself. For like as these enjoyed more by receiving first, so he in a greater degree was honored by the abundance of the things given him; and to these things he that was approved bears witness.

What then may we say? There is no one who is thus justifying himself, or blaming others in the kingdom of Heaven; away with the thought! For that place is pure from envy and jealousy. For if when they are here the saints give their very lives for sinners, much more when they see them there in the enjoyment of these things, do they rejoice and account these to be blessings of their own. Wherefore then did He so frame His discourse? The saying is a parable, wherefore neither is it right to inquire curiously into all things in parables word by word, but when we have learned the object for which it was composed, to reap this, and not to busy one's self about anything further.

Wherefore then was this parable thus composed? What is its object to effect? To render more earnest them that are converted and become better men in extreme old age, and not to allow them to suppose they have a less portion. So it is for this cause He introduces also others displeased at their blessings, not to represent those men as pining or vexed, away with the thought! But to teach us that these have enjoyed such honor, as could even have begotten envy in others. Which we also often do, saying, Such a one blamed me, because I counted you worthy of much honor, neither having been blamed, nor wishing to slander that other, but hereby to show the greatness of the gift which this one enjoyed.

But wherefore can it have been that He did not hire all at once? As far as concerned Him, He did hire all; but if all did not hearken at once, the difference was made by the disposition of them that were called. For this cause, some are called early in the morning, some at the third hour, some at the sixth, some at the ninth, some at the eleventh, when they would obey.

This Paul also declared when he said, When it pleased Him, who separated me from my mother's womb. Galatians 1:15 When did it please Him? When he was ready to obey. For He willed it even from the beginning, but because he would not have yielded, then it pleased Him, when Paul also was ready to obey. Thus also did He call the thief, although He was able to have called him even before, but he would not have obeyed. For if Paul at the beginning would not have obeyed, much more the thief.

And if they say, No man has hired us, in the first place as I said we must not be curious about all the points in the parables; but here neither is the good man of the house represented to say this, but they; but he does not convict them, that he might drive them to perplexity, but might win them over. For that He called all, as far as lay in Him, from the first even the parable shows, saying, that He went out early in the morning to hire.

4. From everything then it is manifest to us, that the parable is spoken with reference to them who from earliest youth, and those who in old age and more tardily, lay hold on virtue; to the former, that they may not be proud, neither reproach those called at the eleventh hour; to the latter, that they may learn that it is possible even in a short time to recover all.

For since He had been speaking about earnestness, and the casting away of riches, and contempt of all one's possessions, but this needed much vigor of mind and youthful ardor; in order to kindle in them a fire of love, and to give vigor to their will, He shows that it is possible even for men coming later to receive the hire of the whole day.

But He does not say it thus, lest again He should make them proud, but he shows that the whole is of His love to man, and because of this they shall not fail, but shall themselves enjoy the unspeakable blessings.

And this chiefly is what it is His will to establish by this parable. And if He adds, that, So the last shall be first and the first last; for many are called, but few chosen, marvel not. For not as inferring it from the parable does He say this, but His meaning is this, that like as this came to pass, so shall that come to pass. For here indeed the first did not become last, but all received the same contrary to hope and expectation. But as this result took place contrary to hope and contrary to expectation, and they that came before were equalled by them that followed, so shall that also come to pass which is more than this, and more strange, I mean, that the last should come to be even before the first, and that the first should be after these. So that that is one thing, and this another.

But He seems to me to say these things, darkly hinting at the Jews, and among the believers at those who at first shone forth, but afterwards neglected virtue, and fell back; and those others again that have risen from vice, and have shot beyond many. For we see such changes taking place both with respect to faith and practice.

Wherefore I entreat you let us use much diligence both to stand in the right faith, and to show forth an excellent life. For unless we add also a life suitable to our faith, we shall suffer the extremest punishment.

And this the blessed Paul showed even from times of old, when he said, that They did all eat the same spiritual meat, and did all drink the same spiritual drink: and added, that they were not saved; for they were overthrown in the wilderness. And Christ declared it even in the evangelists, when He brought in some that had cast out devils and prophesied, and are led away to punishment. And all His parables also, as that of the virgins, that of the net, that of the thorns, that of the tree not bringing forth fruit, demand virtue in our works. For concerning doctrines He discourses seldom, for neither does the subject need labor, but of life often or rather everywhere, for the war about this is continual, wherefore also so is the labor.

And why do I speak of the whole code. For even a part of it overlooked brings upon one great evils; as, for instance, almsgiving overlooked casts into hell them that have come short in it; and yet this is not the whole of virtue, but a part thereof. But nevertheless both the virgins were punished for not having this, and the rich man was for this cause tormented, and they that have not fed the hungry, are for this condemned with the devil. Again, not to revile is a very small part of it, nevertheless this too casts out them that have not attained to it. For he that says to his brother, You fool, shall be in danger of hell fire. Matthew 5:22 Again, even continence itself is a part, but nevertheless, without this no one shall see the Lord. For, Follow peace, it is said, and holiness, without which no man shall see the Lord. Hebrews 12:14 And humility too in like manner is a part of virtue; but nevertheless though any one should fulfill other good works, but have not attained to this, he is unclean with God. And this is manifest from the Pharisee, who though abounding with numberless good works, by this lost all.

But I have also something more than these things to say again. I mean, that not only one of them overlooked shuts Heaven against us, but though it be done, yet not in due perfection and abundance, it

produces the selfsame effect again. For unless your righteousness shall exceed the righteousness of the Scribes and Pharisees, you shall not enter into the kingdom of Heaven. Matthew 8:20 So that though thou give alms, but not more than they, you shall not enter in.

And how much did they bestow in alms? One may ask. For this very thing, I am minded to say now, that they who do not give may be roused to give, and they that give may not pride themselves, but may make increase of their gifts. What then did they give? A tenth of all their possessions, and again another tenth, and after this a third, so that they almost gave away the third part, for three-tenths put together make up this. And together with these, first fruits, and first born, and other things besides, as, for instance, the offerings for sins, those for purification, those at feasts, those in the jubilee, those by the cancelling of debts, and the dismissals of servants, and the lendings that were clear of usury. But if he who gave the third part of his goods, or rather the half (for those being put together with these are the half), if then he who is giving the half, achieves no great thing, he who does not bestow so much as the tenth, of what shall he be worthy? With reason He said, There are few that be saved.

5. Let us not, then, despise the care of our life. For if one portion of it despised brings so great a destruction, when on every hand we are subject to the sentence of condemnation, how shall we escape the punishment? And what manner of penalty shall we not suffer? And what manner of hope of salvation have we, one may ask, if each of the things we have numbered threatens us with hell? I too say this; nevertheless, if we give heed we may be saved, preparing the medicines of almsgiving, and attending to our wounds.

For oil does not so strengthen a body, as benevolence at once strengthens a soul, and makes it invincible to all and impregnable to the devil. For wheresoever he may seize us, his hold then slips, this oil not suffering his grasp to fix on our back.

With this oil therefore let us anoint ourselves continually. For it is the cause of health, and a supply of light, and a source of cheerfulness. But such a one, you will say, has talents of gold so many and so many, and gives away nothing. And what is that to you? For thus shall you appear more worthy of admiration, when in poverty you are more munificent than he. It was on this ground Paul marvelled at the Macedonians, not because they gave, but because even though they were in poverty they gave.

Look not then at these, but at the common Teacher of all, who had not where to lay His head. Matthew 8:20 And why, you say, does not this and that person do so? Do not judge another, but deliver yourself from the charge against you. Since the punishment is greater when thou at the same time blamest others, and yourself doest not, when judging other men, you are again yourself also subject to the same judgment. For if even them who do right He permits not to judge others, much more will He not permit offenders. Let us not therefore judge others, neither let us look to others who are taking their ease, but unto Jesus, and from thence let us draw our examples.

Why! Have I been your benefactor? Why! Did I redeem you, that you look to me? It is another who has bestowed these things on you. Why do you let go your Master, and look unto your fellow-servant? Heardest thou not Him saying, Learn of me, for I am meek and lowly in heart? Matthew 11:29 And again, He that would be first among you, let him be servant of all: and again, Even as the Son of Man came not to be ministered unto, but to minister. Matthew 20:27-28 And after these things again, lest taking offense at them who are remiss among your fellow-servants, thou continue in contemptuousness; to draw you off from that, He says, I have made myself an example to you, that as I have done, you should do also. John

13:15 But have you no teacher of virtue among those persons that are with you, neither such a one as to lead you on to these things? More abundant then will be the praise, the commendation greater, when not even being supplied with teachers you have become one to be marvelled at.

For this is possible, nay very easy, if we be willing: and this they show, who first duly performed these things, as for instance, Noah, Abraham, Melchizedeck, Job, and all the men like them. To them it is needful to look every day, and not unto these, whom you never cease emulating, and passing about their names in your assemblies. For nothing else do I hear you saying everywhere, but such words as these; Such a one has bought so many acres of land; such a one is rich, he is building. Why do you stare, O man, at what is without? Why do you look to others? If you are minded to look to others, look to them that do their duty, to them that approve themselves, to them that carefully fulfill the law, not to those that have become offenders, and are in dishonor. For if you look to these, you will gather hence many evil things, falling into remissness, into pride, into condemnation of others; but if you reckon over them that do right, you will lead yourself on unto humility, unto diligence, unto compunction, unto the blessings that are beyond number.

Hear what the Pharisee suffered, because he let pass them that do right, and looked to him that had offended; hear and fear.

See how David became one to be marvelled at, because he looked to his ancestors that were noted for virtue. For I am a stranger, says he, and a sojourner, as all my fathers were. For this man, and all that are like him, let pass them that had sinned, and thought of those who had approved themselves.

This do thou also. For you are not set to judge of the negligences of which others have been guilty, nor to inquire into the sins which others are committing; you are required to do judgment on yourself, not on others. For if we judged ourselves, it is said, we should not be judged, but when we are judged, we are chastened of the Lord. 1 Corinthians 11:31-32 But you have reversed the order, of yourself requiring no account of offenses great or small, but being strict and curious about the offenses of others.

Let us no more do this, but leaving off this disorderly way, let us set up a tribunal in ourselves for the sins committed by ourselves, becoming ourselves accusers, and judges, and executioners for our offenses.

But if it be your will to be busy about the things of other men also, busy yourself about their good works, not their sins, that both by the memory of our negligences and by our emulation for the good works they have done, and by setting before ourselves the judgment-seat from which no prayers can deliver, wounded each day by our conscience as by a kind of goad, we may lead ourselves on to humility, and a greater diligence, and attain unto the good things to come, by the grace and love towards man of our Lord Jesus Christ; with whom be to the Father, together with the Holy Ghost, glory, might, honor, now and always, and world without end. Amen.

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