

Homily 65 on Matthew

by St. John Chrysostom

Jesus teaches the disciples that true greatness comes from serving others and being humble, rather than seeking power and glory for oneself.

Scripture: Genesis 18:27, Exodus 5:2, Psalm 138:6, Proverbs 22:4, Isaiah 66:2, Matthew 20:28, Luke 14:11, 1 Timothy 3:6, James 4:6, James 4:10

Topics: "Humility", "Pride"

Description

John Chrysostom preaches on the importance of humility and lowliness of heart, contrasting it with the dangers of arrogance and pride. He emphasizes how true greatness comes from serving others and being meek, drawing examples from Scripture and the lives of saints. Chrysostom highlights how God resists the proud but gives grace to the humble, showing that humility leads to exaltation while arrogance leads to downfall. He encourages the listeners to embrace humility, as it not only pleases God but also brings honor and blessings in this life and the life to come.

Transcript

Matt. XX. 17-19.

And Jesus going up to Jerusalem took the twelve disciples apart in the way, and said to them, Behold, we go up to Jerusalem; and the Son of Man shall be betrayed unto the chief priests and unto the Scribes, and they shall condemn Him to death, and shall deliver Him to the Gentiles to mock, and to scourge, and to crucify Him; and the third day He shall be raised.

He goes not up at once to Jerusalem when He has come out of Galilee, but having first wrought miracles, and having stopped the mouths of Pharisees, and having discoursed with His disciples of renouncing possessions: for, if you will be perfect, says He, sell that you have: Matthew 19:21 and of virginity, He that is able to receive, let him receive it: Matthew 19:12 and of humility, For except ye be converted, and become as little children, you shall not enter into the kingdom of Heaven: Matthew 18:3 and of a recompense of the things here, For whoever has forsaken houses, or brethren, or sisters, shall receive an hundredfold in this world: Matthew 19:29 and of rewards there, For he shall also inherit, it is said, eternal life: then He assails the city next, and being on the point of going up, discoursed again of His passion. For since it was likely that they, because they were not willing this should come to pass, would forget it, He is continually putting them in remembrance, exercising their mind by the frequency with which He reminded them, and diminishing their pain.

But He speaks with them apart, necessarily; for it was not meet that His discourse about these things should be published to the many; neither that it should be spoken plainly, for no advantage arose from this. For if the disciples were confounded at hearing these things, much more the multitude of the people.

What then? Was it not told to the people? You may say. It was indeed told to the people also, but not so plainly. For, Destroy, says He, this Temple, and in three days I will raise it up; John 2:19 and, This generation seeks after a sign, and there shall no sign be given it, but the sign of Jonas; Matthew 12:39 and again, Yet a little while am I with you, and you shall seek me, and shall not find me. John 7:33-34

But to the disciples not so, but as the other things He spoke unto them more plainly, so also spoke He this too. And for what purpose, if the multitude understood not the force of His sayings, were they spoken at all? That they might learn after these things, that fore-knowing it, He came to His passion, and willing it; not in ignorance, nor by constraint. But to the disciples not for this cause only did He foretell it; but, as I have said, in order that having been exercised by the expectation, they might more easily endure the passion, and that it might not confound them by coming upon them without preparation. So for this cause, while at the beginning He spoke of His death only, when they were practised and trained to hear of it, He adds the other circumstances also; as, for instance, that they should deliver Him to the Gentiles, that they should mock and scourge Him; as well on this account, as in order that when they saw the mournful events come to pass, they might expect from this the resurrection also. For He who had not cloaked from them what would give pain, and what seemed to be matter of reproach, would reasonably be believed about good things too.

But mark, I pray you, how with regard to the time also He orders the thing wisely. For neither at the beginning did He tell them, lest He should disquiet them, neither at the time itself, lest by this again He should confound them; but when they had received sufficient proof of His power, when He had given them promises that were very great concerning life everlasting, then He introduces also what He had to say concerning these things, once and twice and often interweaving it with His miracles and His instructions.

But another evangelist says, that He brought in the prophets also as witnesses; Luke 18:31 and another again says, that even they themselves understood not His words, but the saying was hid from them, and that they were amazed as they followed Him.

Surely then, one may say, the benefit of the prediction is taken away. For if they knew not what they were hearing, neither could they look for the event, and not looking for it, neither could they be exercised by their expectations.

But I say another thing also more perplexing than this: If they did not know, how were they sorry. For another says, they were sorry. If therefore they knew it not, how were they sorry? How did Peter say, Be it far from You. This shall not be unto You? Matthew 16:22

What then may we say? That He should die indeed they knew, albeit they knew not clearly the mystery of the Incarnation. Neither did they know clearly about the resurrection, neither what He was to achieve; and this was hid from them.

For this cause also they felt pain. For some they had known to have been raised again by other persons, but for any one to have raised up himself again, and in such wise to have raised himself as not to die any more, they had never known.

This then they understood not, though often said; nay nor of this self-same death did they clearly know what it was, and how it should come on Him. Wherefore also they were amazed as they followed Him, but not for this cause only; but to me at least He seems even to amaze them by discoursing of His passion.

2. Yet none of these things made them take courage, and this when they were continually hearing about His resurrection. For together with His death this also especially troubled them, to hear that men should mock and scourge Him, and the like. For when they considered His miracles, the possessed persons whom He had delivered, the dead whom He had raised, all the other marvellous works which He was doing, and then heard these things, they were amazed, if He who does these works is thus to suffer. Therefore they fell even into perplexity, and now believed, now disbelieved, and could not understand His sayings. So far at least were they from understanding clearly what He said, that the sons of Zebedee at the same time came to Him, and spoke to Him of precedence. We desire, it is said, that one should sit on Your right hand, and one on Your left. How then does this evangelist say, that their mother came to Him? It is probable both things were done. I mean, that they took their mother with them, with the purpose of making their entreaty stronger, and in this way to prevail with Christ.

For in proof that this is true, as I say, and the request was rather theirs, and that being ashamed they put forward their mother, mark how Christ directs His words to them.

But rather let us learn, first, what do they ask, and with what disposition, and whence they were moved to this? Whence then were they moved to this? They saw themselves honored above the rest, and expected from that they should obtain this request also. But what can it be they ask? Hear another evangelist plainly declaring this. For, Because He was near, it is said, to Jerusalem, and because they thought the kingdom of God should immediately appear, Luke 19:11 they asked these things. For they supposed that this was at the doors, and visible, and that having obtained what they asked, they would undergo none of the painful things. For neither for its own sake only did they seek it, but as though they would also escape the hardships.

Wherefore also Christ in the first place leads them off from these thoughts, commanding them to await slaughter and dangers, and the utmost terrors. For, Are you able, says He, to drink of the cup that I drink of? Matthew 20:22

But let no man be troubled at the apostles being in such an imperfect state. For not yet was the cross accomplished, not yet the grace of the Spirit given. But if you would learn their virtue, notice them after these things, and you will see them superior to every passion. For with this object He reveals their deficiencies, that after these things you might know what manner of men they became by grace.

That then they were asking, in fact, for nothing spiritual, neither had a thought of the kingdom above, is manifest from hence. But let us see also, how they come unto Him, and what they say. We would, it is said, that whatsoever we shall desire of You, You should do it for us. Mark 10:35

And Christ says to them, What would ye? Mark 10:36 not being ignorant, but that He may compel them to answer, and lay open the wound, and so apply the medicine. But they out of shame and confusion of face, because under the influence of a human passion they had come to do this, took Him privately apart from the disciples, and asked Him. For they went before, it is said, so that it might not be observable to them, and so said what they wished. For it was their desire, as I suppose, because they heard, You shall sit on twelve thrones, to have the first place of these seats. And that they had an advantage over the others, they knew, but they were afraid of Peter, and say, Command, that one sit on Your right hand, one on Your

left; and they urge Him, saying, Command.

What then says He? Showing, that they asked nothing spiritual, neither, if they had known again what they were asking, would they have ventured to ask for so much, He says, You know not what ye ask, how great, how marvellous, how surpassing even the powers above. After that He adds, Are you able to drink of the cup that I shall drink of, and to be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with? Do you see, how He straightway drew them off from their suspicion, by framing His discourse from the contrary topics? For you, He says, talk to me of honor and crowns, but I to you of conflicts and labors. For this is not the season for rewards, neither shall that glory of mine appear now, but the present time is one of slaughter, and wars, and dangers.

And see how by the form of His question, He both urges and attracts them. For He said not, Are you able to be slain? Are you able to pour forth your blood? but how? Are you able to drink of the cup? Then to attract them to it, He says, Which I shall drink of, that by their fellowship with Him in it they might be made more ready.

And a baptism again calls He it; showing that great was the cleansing the world was to have from the things that were being done.

They say unto Him, We are able. Matthew 20:22 Out of their forwardness they straightway undertook it, not knowing even this which they were saying, but looking to hear what they had asked.

What then says He? You shall drink indeed of my cup, and be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with. Great blessings did He foretell to them. His meaning is, you shall be counted worthy of martyrdom, and shall suffer these things which I suffer; you shall close your life by a violent death, and in these things you shall be partakers with me; But to sit on my right hand and on my left is not mine to give, but it shall be given to them for whom it is prepared of my Father.

3. Having first elevated their souls, and made them of a higher character, and having rendered them such as sorrow could not subdue, then He reproves their request.

But what can be this present saying? For indeed there are two points that are subjects of inquiry to many: one, if it be prepared for any to sit on His right hand; and then, if the Lord of all has not power to bestow it on them for whom it is prepared.

What then is the saying? If we solve the former point, then the second also will be clear to the inquirers. What then is this? No one shall sit on His right hand nor on His left. For that throne is inaccessible to all, I do not say to men only, and saints, and apostles, but even to angels, and archangels, and to all the powers that are on high.

At least Paul puts it as a peculiar privilege of the Only-Begotten, saying, To which of the angels said He at any time, Sit on my right hand? Hebrews 1:13 And of the angels He says, who makes His angels spirits; but unto the Son, 'Your throne, O God.' Hebrews 1:7-8

How then says He, To sit on my right hand and on my left is not mine to give, as though there are some that should sit there? Not as though there are; far from it; but He makes answer to the thoughts of them who ask the favor, condescending to their understanding. For neither did they know that lofty throne, and His sitting at the right hand of the Father; how should they, when even the things that were much lower than these, and were daily instilled into them, they understood not? But they sought one thing only, to

enjoy the first honors, and to stand before the rest, and that no one should stand before them with Him; even as I have already said before, that, since they heard of twelve thrones, in ignorance what the saying could mean, they asked for the first place.

What therefore Christ says is this: You shall die indeed for me, and shall be slain for the sake of the gospel, and shall be partakers with me, as far as regards the passion: but this is not sufficient to secure you the enjoyment of the first seat, and to cause that you should occupy the first place. For if any one else should come, together with the martyrdom, possessed of all the other parts of virtue far more fully than you, not because I love you now, and prefer you to the rest, therefore shall I set aside him that is distinguished by his good works, and give the first honors to you.

But thus indeed He did not say it, so as not to pain them, but darkly He intimates the self-same thing, saying, You shall drink indeed of my cup, and you shall be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with; but to sit on my right hand and on my left, this is not mine to give, but it shall be given to those for whom it is prepared.

But for whom is it prepared? For them who could become distinguished by their works. Therefore He said not, It is not mine to give, but my Father's, lest any should say that He was too weak, or wanting in vigor for their recompense; but how? It is not mine, but of those for whom it is prepared.

And in order that what I say may be more plain, let us work it on an illustration, and let us suppose there was some master of the games, then that many excellent combatants went down to the contest, and that some two of the combatants that were most nearly connected with the master of the games were to come to him and say, Cause us to be crowned and proclaimed, confiding in their good-will and friendship with him; and that he were to say to them, This is not mine to give, but it shall be given to them for whom it is prepared, by their labors, and their toils; should we indeed condemn him as powerless? By no means, but we should approve him for his justice, and for having no respect of persons. Like then as we should not say that he did not give the crown from want of vigor, but as not wishing to corrupt the law of the games, nor to disturb the order of justice; in like manner now should I say Christ said this, from every motive to compel them, after the grace of God, to set their hopes of salvation and approval on the proof of their own good works.

Therefore He says, For whom it is prepared. For what, says He, if others should appear better than you? What, if they should do greater things? For shall you, because you have become my disciples, therefore enjoy the first honors, if you yourselves should not appear worthy of the choice?

For that He Himself has power over the whole, is manifest from His having the entire judgment. For to Peter too He speaks thus, I will give you the keys of the Heavens. And Paul also makes this clear where he says, Henceforth is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, will give me in that day; and not to me only, but unto all them also which have loved His appearing. 2 Timothy 4:8 But the appearing was of Christ. But that no one will stand before Paul, is surely clear to every one.

And if He has expressed these things somewhat obscurely, marvel not. For to lead them on by hidden instruction, not to be rudely pressing Him without object or cause for the first honors (for from a human passion they felt this), and not wishing to give them pain, by the obscurity He effects both these objects.

Then were the ten moved with indignation with respect to the two. Then. When.? When He had reproved them. So long as the judgment was Christ's, they were not moved with indignation; but seeing them

preferred, they were contented, and held their peace, out of reverence and honor to their Master.

And if they were vexed in mind, yet they dared not utter this. And when they had some feeling of human weakness towards Peter, at the time that He gave the didrachmas, they did not give way to anger, but asked only, Who then is greatest? But since here the request was the disciples', they are moved with indignation. And not even here are they straightway moved with indignation, when they asked, but when Christ had reproved them, and had said they should not enjoy the first honors, unless they showed themselves worthy of these.

4. Do you see how they were all in an imperfect state, when both these were lifting themselves up above the ten, and those envying the two? But, as I said, show me them after these things, and you will see them delivered from all these passions. Hear at least how this same John, he who now came to Him for these things, everywhere gives up the first place to Peter, both in addressing the people, and in working miracles, in the Acts of the Apostles.

And he conceals not Peter's good deeds, but relates both the confession, which he openly made when all were silent, John 6:68-69 and his entering into the tomb, John 20:6 and puts the apostle before himself. For, because both continued with Him at His crucifixion, taking away the ground of his own commendation, he says, That disciple was known unto the high priest. John 18:15

But James survived not a long time, but from the beginning he was so greatly filled with warmth, and so forsook all the things of men, and mounted up to an height unutterable, as straightway to be slain. Thus, in all respects, they after these things became excellent.

But then, they were moved with indignation. What then says Christ? He called them unto Him, and said, The princes of the Gentiles exercise dominion over them. For, as they were disturbed and troubled, He soothes them by His call before His word, and by drawing them near Him. For the two having separated themselves from the company of the ten, had stood nearer Him, pleading their own interests. Therefore He brings near Him these also, by this very act, and by exposing and revealing it before the rest, soothing the passion both of the one and of the other.

And not as before, so now also does He check them. For whereas before He brings little children into the midst, and commands to imitate their simplicity and lowliness; here He reproveth them in a sharper way from the contrary side, saying, The princes of the Gentiles exercise dominion over them, and their great ones exercise authority upon them, but it shall not be so among you; but he that will be great among you, let this man be minister to all; and he that will be first, let him be last of all; showing that such a feeling as this is that of heathens, I mean, to love the first place. For the passion is tyrannical, and is continually hindering even great men; therefore also it needs a severer stripe. Whence He too strikes deeper into them, by comparison with the Gentiles shaming their inflamed soul, and removes the envy of the one and the arrogance of the other, all but saying, Be not moved with indignation, as insulted. For they harm and disgrace themselves most, who on this wise seek the first places, for they are among the last. For matters with us are not like matters without. 'For the princes of the Gentiles exercise dominion over them,' but with me the last, even he is first.

And in proof that I say not these things without cause, by the things which I do and suffer, receive the proof of my sayings. For I have myself done something even more. For being King of the powers above, I was willing to become man, and I submitted to be despised, and despitefully entreated. And not even with these things was I satisfied, but even unto death did I come. Therefore, He says,

Even as the Son of Man came not to be ministered unto, but to minister, and to give His life a ransom for many. Matthew 20:28 For not even at this did I stop, says He, but even my life did I give a ransom; and for whom? For enemies. But thou if you are abused, it is for yourself, but I for you.

Be not then afraid, as though your honor were plucked down. For however much you humble yourself, you cannot descend so much as your Lord. And yet His descent has become the ascent of all, and has made His own glory shine forth. For before He was made man, He was known among angels only; but after He was made man and was crucified, so far from lessening that glory, He acquired other besides, even that from the knowledge of the world.

Fear not then, as though your honor were put down, if you should abase yourself, for in this way is your glory more exalted, in this way it becomes greater. This is the door of the kingdom. Let us not then go the opposite way, neither let us war against ourselves. For if we desire to appear great, we shall not be great, but even the most dishonored of all.

Do you see how everywhere He urges them by the opposite things, giving them what they desire? For in the preceding parts also we have shown this in many instances, and in the cases of the covetous, and of the vain-glorious, He did thus. For wherefore, He says, do you give alms before men? That you may enjoy glory? You must then not do so, and you shall surely enjoy it. Wherefore do you lay up treasures? That you may be rich? You must then not lay up treasures, and you shall be rich. Even so here too, wherefore do you set your heart on the first places? That you may be before others? Choose then the last place, and then you will enjoy the first. So that if it be your will to become great, seek not to become great, and then you will be great. For the other is to be little.

5. Do you see how He drew them off from the disease, by showing them both from thence failing of their object, and from hence gaining, that they might flee the one, and follow after the other.

And of the Gentiles, too, He for this cause reminded them, that in this way again He might show the thing to be disgraceful and to be abhorred.

For the arrogant is of necessity base, and, on the contrary, the lowly-minded is high. For this is the height that is true and genuine, and exists not in name only, nor in manner of address. And that which is from without is of necessity and fear, but this is like to God's. Such a one, though he be admired by no one, continues high; even as again the other, though he be courted by all, is of all men the basest. And the one is an honor rendered of necessity, whence also it easily passes away; but the other is of principle, whence also it continues steadfast. Since for this we admire the saints also, that being greater than all, they humbled themselves more than all. Wherefore even to this day they continue to be high, and not even death has brought down that height.

And if you be minded, let us by reasonings also inquire into this very thing. Any one is said to be high, either when he is so by greatness of stature, or when he has chanced to be set on a high place, and low in like manner, from the opposite things.

Let us see then who is like this, the boaster, or he that keeps within measure, that you may perceive that nothing is higher than lowliness of mind, and nothing lower than boastfulness.

The boaster then desires to be greater than all, and affirms no one to be equal in worth with him; and how much soever honor he may obtain, he sets his heart on more and claims it, and accounts himself to have

obtained none, and treats men with utter contempt, and yet seeks after the honor that comes from them; than which what can be more unreasonable? For this surely is like an enigma. By those, whom he holds in no esteem, he desires to be glorified.

Do you see how he who desires to be exalted falls down and is set on the ground? For that he accounts all men to be nothing compared with himself, he himself declares, for this is boasting. Why then dost cast yourself upon him who is nothing? Why do you seek honor of him? Why do you lead about with you such great multitudes?

Do you see one low, and set on a low place. Come then, let us inquire about the high man. This one knows what man is, and that man is a great thing, and that he himself is last of all, and therefore whatever honor he may enjoy, he reckons this great, so that this one is consistent with himself and is high, and shifts not his judgment; for whom he accounts great, the honors that come from them he esteems great also, though they should chance to be small, because he accounts those who bestow them to be great. But the boastful man accounts them that give the honors to be nothing, yet the honors bestowed by them he reckons to be great.

Again, the lowly man is seized by no passion, no anger can much trouble this man, no love of glory, no envy, no jealousy: and what can be higher than the soul that is delivered from these things? But the boastful man is held in subjection by all these things, like any worm crawling in the mire, for jealousy and envy and anger are forever troubling his soul.

Which then is high? He that is superior to his passions, or he that is their slave? He that trembles at them and is afraid of them, or he that is unsubdued, and never taken by them? Which kind of bird should we say flies higher? That which is higher than the hands and the arrows of the hunter, or that which does not even suffer the hunters to need an arrow, from his flying along the ground, and from not being able ever to elevate himself? Is not then the arrogant man like this? For indeed every net readily catches him as crawling on the ground.

6. But if you will, even from that wicked demon prove thou this. For what can be baser than the devil, because he had exalted himself; what higher than the man who is willing to abase himself? For the former crawls on the ground under our heel (For, ye tread, He says, upon serpents and scorpions), but the latter is set with the angels on high.

But if you desire to learn this from the example of haughty men also, consider that barbarian king, that led so great an army, who knew not so much as the things that are manifest to all; as, for instance, that stone was stone, and the images, images; wherefore he was inferior even to these. But the godly and faithful are raised even above the sun; than whom what can be higher, who rise above even the vaults of heaven, and passing beyond angels, stand by the very throne of the king.

And that you may learn in another way their vileness; who will be abased? He who has God for his ally, or he with whom God is at war? It is quite plain that it is he with whom He is at war. Hear then touching either of these what says the Scripture. God resists the proud, but gives grace unto the humble. James 4:6

Again, I will ask you another thing also. Which is higher? He who acts as a priest to God and offers sacrifice? Or he who is somewhere far removed from confidence towards Him? And what manner of sacrifice does the lowly man offer? One may say. Hear David saying, The sacrifice of God is a contrite spirit; a contrite and humbled heart God will not despise.

Do you see the purity of this man? Behold also the uncleanness of the other; for every one that is proud in heart is unclean before God. Besides, the one has God resting upon him, (For unto whom will I look, says He, but to him that is meek and quiet, and trembles at my words), Isaiah 66:2 but the other crawls with the devil, for he that is lifted up with pride shall suffer the devil's punishment. Wherefore Paul also said, Lest, being lifted up with pride, he should fall into the condemnation of the devil. 1 Timothy 3:6

And the thing opposite to what he wishes, befalls him. For his wish is to be arrogant, that he may be honored; but the most contemned of all is this character. For these most of all are laughing stocks, foes and enemies to all men, the most easy to be subdued by their enemies, the men that easily fall into anger, the unclean before God.

What then can be worse than this, for this is the extremity of evils? And what is sweeter than the lowly, what more blessed, since they are longed after, and beloved of God? And the glory too that comes of men, these do most of all enjoy, and all honor them as fathers, embrace them as brothers, receive them as their own members.

Let us then become lowly, that we may be high. For most utterly does arrogance abase. This abased Pharaoh. For, I know not, he says, the Lord, Exodus 5:2 and he became inferior to flies and frogs, and the locusts, and after that with his very arms and horses was he drowned in the sea. In direct opposition to him, Abraham says, I am dust and ashes, Genesis 18:27 and prevailed over countless barbarians, and having fallen into the midst of Egyptians, returned, bearing a trophy more glorious than the former, and, cleaving to this virtue, grew ever more high. Therefore he is celebrated everywhere, therefore he is crowned and proclaimed; but Pharaoh is both earth and ashes, and if there is anything else more vile than these. For nothing does God so abhor as arrogance. For this object has He done all things from the beginning, in order that He might root out this passion. Because of this are we become mortal, and are in sorrows, and wailings. Because of this are we in toil, and sweat, and in labor continual, and mingled with affliction. For indeed out of arrogance did the first man sin, looking for an equality with God. Therefore, not even what things he had, did he continue to possess, but lost even these.

For arrogance is like this, so far from adding to us any improvement of our life, it subtracts even what we have; as, on the contrary, humility, so far from subtracting from what we have, adds to us also what we have not.

This virtue then let us emulate, this let us pursue, that we may both enjoy present honor, and attain unto the glory to come, by the grace and love towards man of our Lord Jesus Christ, with whom be unto the Father glory and might, together with the Holy Ghost, now and always, and world without end. Amen.

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