

Homily 67 on Matthew

by St. John Chrysostom

Jesus cleanses the temple to emphasize His authority and teaches us the importance of faith, prayer, and repentance.

Scripture: Exodus 19:8, Jeremiah 3:7, Jeremiah 8:4, Matthew 21:12-31, John 2:18, John 4:35, John 5:14, 1 Corinthians 10:12, Ephesians 5:14

Topics: "Temple Purity", "Repentance Needed"

Description

John Chrysostom preaches about Jesus cleansing the temple, highlighting the importance of maintaining a pure and reverent worship space, and the consequences of turning a sacred place into a den of thieves. He emphasizes the Jews' refusal to recognize Jesus' authority despite His miracles and teachings, and how their lack of repentance contrasts with the belief of publicans and harlots. Chrysostom encourages listeners not to despair but to have faith in God's transformative power, using examples of individuals who turned from sin to righteousness, illustrating the possibility of redemption and the need for repentance and virtuous living.

Transcript

Matthew 21:12-13.

And Jesus went into the temple, and cast out all them that sold and bought in the temple, and overthrew the tables of the money-changers and the seats of them that sold doves, and says unto them, It is written, my house shall be called a house of prayer; but you have made it a den of thieves.

This John likewise says, but he in the beginning of his Gospel, this at the end. Whence it is probable this was done twice, and at different seasons.

And it is evident both from the times, and from their reply. For there He came at the very passover, but here much before. And there the Jews say, What sign do you show us? John 2:18 but here they hold their peace, although reprov'd, because He was now marvelled at among all men.

And this is a heavier charge against the Jews, that when He had done this not once only, but a second time, they continued in their trafficking, and said that He was an adversary of God, when they ought even from hence to have learned His honor for His Father and His own might. For indeed He also wrought miracles, and they saw His words agreeing with His works.

But not even so were they persuaded, but were sore displeased, and this while they heard the prophet crying aloud, and the children in a manner beyond their age proclaiming Him. Wherefore also He Himself sets up Isaiah against them as an accuser, saying, My house shall be called a house of prayer. Isaiah 56:7

But not in this way only does He show His authority, but also by His healing various infirmities. For the blind and the lame came unto Him, and He healed them, Matthew 21:14 and His power and authority He indicates.

But they not even so would be persuaded, but together with the rest of the miracles hearing even the children proclaiming, were ready to choke, and say, Do you not hear what these say? And yet it was Christ's part to have said this to them, Hear ye not what these say? for the children were singing to Him as to God.

What then says He? Since they were speaking against things manifest, He applies His correction more in the way of reproof, saying, Have ye never read, Out of the mouths of babes and sucklings You have perfected praise? And well did He say, Out of the mouth. For what was said was not of their understanding, but of His power giving articulation to their tongue yet immature.

And this was also a type of the Gentiles lisping, and sounding forth at once great things with understanding and faith.

And for the apostles also there was from hence no small consolation. For that they might not be perplexed, how being unlearned they should be able to publish the gospel, the children anticipate them, and remove all their anxiety, teaching them, that He would grant them utterance, who made even these to sing praises.

And not so only, but the miracle showed that He is Creator even of nature. The children then, although of age immature, uttered things that had a clear meaning, and were in accordance with those above, but the men things teeming with frenzy and madness. For such is the nature of wickedness.

Forasmuch then as there were many things to provoke them, from the multitude, from the casting out of the sellers, from the miracles, from the children, He again leaves them, giving room to the swelling passion, and not willing to begin His teaching, lest boiling with envy they should be the more displeased at His sayings.

Now in the morning as He returned into the city, He was an hungered. Matthew 21:18 How is He an hungered in the morning? When He permits the flesh, then it shows its feeling. And when He saw a fig tree in the way, He came to it, and found nothing thereon, but leaves only. Matthew 21:19 Another evangelist says, The time of figs was not yet; but if it was not time, how does the other evangelist say, He came, if haply He might find fruit thereon. Whence it is manifest that this belongs to the suspicion of His disciples, who were yet in a somewhat imperfect state. For indeed the evangelists in many places record the suspicions of the disciples.

Like as this then was their suspicion, so also was it too to suppose it was cursed for this cause, because of having no fruit. Wherefore then was it cursed? For the disciples' sakes, that they might have confidence. For because everywhere He conferred benefits, but punished no man; and it was needful that He should afford them a demonstrative proof of His power to take vengeance also, that both the disciples might

learn, and the Jews, that being able to blast them that crucify Him, of His own will He submits, and does not blast them; and it was not His will to show forth this upon men; upon the plant did He furnish the proof of His might in taking vengeance. But when unto places, or unto plants, or unto brutes, any such thing as this is done, be not curious, neither say, how was the fig-tree justly dried up, if it was not the time of figs; for this it is the utmost trifling to say; but behold the miracle, and admire and glorify the worker thereof.

Since in the case also of the swine that were drowned, many have said this, working out the argument of justice; but neither there should one give heed, for these again are brutes, even as that was a plant without life.

Wherefore then was the act invested with such an appearance, and with this plea for a curse? As I said, this was the disciple's suspicion.

But if it was not yet time, vainly do some say the law is here meant. For the fruit of this was faith, and then was the time of this fruit, and it had indeed borne it; For already John 4:35 are the fields white to harvest, says He; and, I sent you to reap that whereon ye bestowed no labor. John 4:38

2. Not any therefore of these things does He here intimate, but it is what I said, He displays His power to punish, and this is shown by saying, The time was not yet, making it clear that of this special purpose He went, and not for hunger, but for His disciples' sake, who indeed marvelled exceedingly, although many miracles had been done greater; but, as I said, this was strange, for now first He showed forth His power to take vengeance. Wherefore not in any other, but in the moistest of all planted things did He work the miracle, so that hence also the miracle appeared greater.

And that you might learn, that for their sakes this was done, that He might train them to feel confidence, hear what He says afterwards. But what says He? You also shall do greater things, if you are willing to believe and to be confident in prayer. Do you see that all is done for their sake, so that they might not be afraid and tremble at plots against them? Wherefore He says this a second time also, to make them cleave to prayer and faith. For not this only shall you do, but also shall remove mountains; and many more things shall you do, being confident in faith and prayer.

But the boastful and arrogant Jews, wishing to interrupt His teaching, came unto Him, and asked, By what authority doest thou these things? Matthew 21:23 For since they could not object against the miracles, they bring forward against Him the correction of the traffickers in the temple. And this in John also they appear to ask, although not in these words, but with the same intent. For there too they say, What sign do you show unto us? Seeing that you do these things. But there He answers them, saying, Destroy this temple, and I in three days will raise it up, whereas here He drives them into a difficulty. Whence it is manifest, that then indeed was the beginning and prelude of the miracles, but here the end.

But what they say is this: Have you received the teacher's chair? Have you been ordained a priest, that you displayed such authority? It is said. And yet He had done nothing implying arrogance, but had been careful for the good order of the temple, yet nevertheless having nothing to say, they object against this. And indeed when He cast them out, they did not dare to say anything, because of the miracles, but when He showed Himself, then they find fault with Him.

What then says He? He does not answer them directly, to show that, if they had been willing to see His authority, they could; but He asks them again, saying, The baptism of John, whence is it? From heaven, or of men?

And what sort of inference is this? The greatest surely. For if they had said, from heaven, He would have said to them, why then did ye not believe him? For if they had believed, they would not have asked these things. For of Him John had said, I am not worthy to loose the latchet of His shoe; and, Behold the Lamb of God, which takes away the sins of the world; and, This is the Son of God; and, He that comes from above is above all; John 4:31 and, His fan is in His hand, and He will thoroughly purge His floor. Matthew 3:12 So that if they had believed him, there was nothing to hinder them from knowing by what authority Christ does these things.

After this, because they, dealing craftily, said, We know not, He said not, neither know I, but what? Neither tell I you. Matthew 21:27 For if indeed they had been ignorant it would have been requisite for them to be instructed; but since they were dealing craftily with good reason He answers them nothing.

And how was it they did not say that the baptism was of men? They feared the people Matthew 21:26 it is said. Do you see a perverse heart? In every case they despise God and do all things for the sake of men. For this man too they feared for their sakes not reverencing the saint but on account of men, and they were not willing to believe in Christ, because of men, and all their evils were engendered to them from hence.

After this, He says, What do you think? A man had two sons; and he says to the first, go, work today in the vineyard. But he answered and said, I will not: but afterward he repented, and went. And he came to the second, and said likewise. And he answered and said, I go sir: and went not. Whether then of them two did the will of his father? They say, the first.

Again He convicts them by a parable, intimating both their unreasonable obstinacy, and the submissiveness of those who were utterly condemned by them. For these two children declare what came to pass with respect to both the Gentiles and the Jews. For the former not having undertaken to obey, neither having become hearers of the law, showed forth their obedience in their works; and the latter having said, All that the Lord shall speak, we will do, and will hearken, Exodus 19:8 in their works were disobedient. And for this reason, let me add, that they might not think the law would benefit them, He shows that this self-same thing condemns them, like as Paul also says, Not the hearers of the law are just before God, but the doers of the law shall be justified. For this intent, that He might make them even self-condemned, He causes the judgment to be delivered by themselves, like as He does also in the ensuing parable of the vineyard.

3. And that this might be done, He makes trial of the accusation in the person of an other. For since they were not willing to confess directly, He by a parable drives them on to what He desired.

But when, not understanding His sayings, they had delivered the judgment, He unfolds His concealed meaning after this, and says, Publicans and harlots go into the kingdom of Heaven before you. For John came unto you in the way of righteousness, and you believed him not; but the publicans believed him; and you, when you had seen it, repented not afterwards, that you might believe him. Matthew 21:31-32

For if He had said simply, harlots go before you, the word would have seemed to them to be offensive; but now, being uttered after their own judgment it appears to be not too hard.

Therefore He adds also the accusation. What then is this? John came, He says, unto you, not unto them, and not this only, but; also in the way of righteousness. For neither with this can you find fault, that he was some careless one, and of no profit; but both his life was irreprehensible, and his care for you great, and

you gave no heed to him.

And with this there is another charge also, that publicans gave heed; and with this, again another, that not even after them did ye. For you should have done so even before them, but not to do it even after them was to be deprived of all excuse; and unspeakable was both the praise of the one, and the charge against the other. To you he came, and you accepted him not; he came not to them, and they receive him, and not even them did ye take for instructors.

See by how many things is shown the commendation of those, and the charge against these. To you he came, not to them. You believed not, this offended not them. They believed, this profited not you.

But the word, go before you, is not as though these were following, but as having a hope, if they were willing. For nothing, so much as jealousy, rouses the grosser sort. Therefore He is ever saying, The first shall be last, and the last first. Therefore He brought in both harlots and publicans, that they might provoke them to jealousy.

For these two indeed are chief sins, engendered of violent lust, the one of sexual desire, the other of the desire of money. And He indicates that this especially was hearing the law of God, to believe John. For it was not of grace only, that harlots entered in, but also of righteousness. For not, as continuing harlots, did they enter in, but having obeyed and believed, and having been purified and converted, so did they enter in.

Do you see how He rendered His discourse less offensive, and more penetrating, by the parable, by His bringing in the harlots? For neither did He say at once, wherefore believed ye not John? But what was much more pricking, when, He had put forward the publicans and the harlots, then He added this, by the order of their actions convicting their unpardonable conduct, and showing that for fear of men they do all things, and for vainglory. For they did not confess Christ for fear, lest they should be put out of the synagogue; and again, of John they dared not speak evil, and not even this from reverence, but for fear. All which things He convicted by His sayings, and with more severity afterwards did He go on to inflict the blow, saying, But you, when you knew it, repented not afterwards, that you might believe him.

For an evil thing it is not at the first to choose the good, but it is a heavier charge not even to be brought round. For this above all makes many wicked, which I see to be the case with some now from extreme insensibility.

But let no one be like this; but though he be sunk down to the extremity of wickedness, let him not despair of the change for the better. For it is an easy thing to rise up out of the very abysses of wickedness.

Heard ye not how that harlot, that went beyond all in lasciviousness, outshone all in godly reverence. Not the harlot in the gospels do I mean, but the one in our generation, who came from Phœnice, that most lawless city. For she was once a harlot among us, having the first honors on the stage, and great was her name everywhere, not in our city only, but even as far as the Cilicians and Cappadocians. And many estates did she ruin, and many orphans did she overthrow; and many accused her of sorcery also, as weaving such toils not by her beauty of person only, but also by her drugs. This harlot once won even the brother of the empress, for mighty indeed was her tyranny.

But all at once, I know not how, or rather I do know well, for it was being so minded, and converting, and bringing down upon herself God's grace, she despised all those things, and having cast away the arts of

the devils, mounted up to heaven.

And indeed nothing was more vile than she was, when she was on the stage; nevertheless, afterwards she outwent many in exceeding continence, and having clad herself with sackcloth, all her time she thus disciplined herself. On the account of this woman both the governor was stirred up, and soldiers armed, yet they had not strength to carry her off to the stage, nor to lead her away from the virgins that had received her.

This woman having been counted worthy of the unutterable mysteries, and having exhibited a diligence proportionate to the grace (given her) so ended her life, having washed off all through grace, and after her baptism having shown forth much self-restraint. For not even a mere sight of herself did she allow to those who were once her lovers, when they had come for this, having shut herself up, and having passed many years, as it were, in a prison. Thus shall the last be first, and the first last; thus do we in every case need a fervent soul, and there is nothing to hinder one from becoming great and admirable:

4. Let no man then of them that live in vice despair; let no man who lives in virtue slumber. Let neither this last be confident, for often the harlot will pass him by; nor let the other despair, for it is possible for him to pass by even the first.

Hear what God says unto Jerusalem, I said, after she had committed all these whoredoms, Turn thou unto me, and she returned not. Jeremiah 3:7 When we have come back unto the earnest love of God, He remembers not the former things. God is not as man, for He reproaches us not with the past, neither does He say, Why were you absent so long a time? When we repent; only let us approach Him as we ought. Let us cleave to Him earnestly, and rivet our hearts to His fear.

Such things have been done not under the new covenant only, but even under the old. For what was worse than Manasseh? But he was able to appease God. What more blessed than Solomon? But when he slumbered, he fell. Or rather I can show even both things to have taken place in one, in the father of this man, for he the same person became at different times both good and bad. What more blessed than Judas? But he became a traitor. What more wretched than Matthew? But he became an evangelist. What worse than Paul? But he became an apostle. What more to be envied than Simon? But he became even himself the most wretched of all.

How many other such changes would you see, both to have taken place of old, and now taking place every day? For this reason then I say, Neither let him on the stage despair, nor let him in the church be confident. For to this last it is said, Let him that thinks he stands, take heed lest he fall; 1 Corinthians 10:12 and to the other, Shall not he that falls arise? Jeremiah 8:4 and, Lift up the hands which hang down, and the feeble knees. Again, to these He says, Watch; but to those, Awake, you that sleep and arise from the dead. Ephesians 5:14 For these need to preserve what they have, and those to become what they are not; these to preserve their health, those to be delivered from their infirmity, for they are sick; but many even of the sick become healthy, and of the healthy many by remissness grow infirm.

To the one then He says, Behold, you are made whole, sin no more, lest a worse thing come unto you; John 5:14 but to these, Will you be made whole? Arise, take up your bed, and go unto your house. For a dreadful, dreadful palsy is sin, or rather it is not palsy only, but also somewhat else more grievous. For such a one is not only in inactivity as to good works, but also in the active doing of evil works. But nevertheless, though thou be so disposed, and be willing to rouse yourself a little, all the terrors are at an end.

Though you have been so thirty and eight years, and art earnest to become whole, there is no one to hinder you. Christ is present now also, and says, Take up your bed, only be willing to rouse yourself, despair not. Have you no man? But you have God. Have you no one to put you into the pool? But you have Him who suffers you not to need the pool. Have you had no one to cast you in there? But you have Him that commands you to take up your bed.

You may not say, While I am coming, another steps down before me. John 5:7 For if it be your will to go down into the fountain, there is none to hinder you. Grace is not consumed, is not spent, it is a kind of fountain springing up constantly; by His fullness are we all healed both soul and body. Let us come unto it then even now. For Rahab also was a harlot, yet was she saved; and the thief was a murderer, yet he became a citizen of paradise; and while Judas being with his Master perished, the thief being on a cross became a disciple. Such are the wonderful works of God. Thus the magi approved themselves, thus the publican became an evangelist, thus the blasphemer an apostle.

5. Look at these things, and never despair, but be ever confident, and rouse yourself. Lay hold only on the way that leads there, and you will advance quickly. Shut not up the doors, close not up the entrance. Short is the present life, small the labor. But though it were great, not even so ought one to decline it. For if you toil not at this most glorious toil that is spent upon repentance and virtue, in the world you will assuredly toil and weary yourself in other ways. But if both in the one and the other there be labor, why do we not choose that which has its fruit abundant, and its recompense greater.

Yet neither is this labor and that the same. For in worldly pursuits are continual perils, and losses one upon another, and the hope uncertain; great is the servility, and the expenditure alike of wealth, and of bodies, and of souls; and then the return of the fruits is far below our expectation, if perchance it should grow up.

For neither does toil upon worldly matters everywhere bear fruit; nay but even, when it has not failed, but has brought forth its produce even abundantly, short is the time wherein it continues.

For when you are grown old, and hast no longer after that the feeling of enjoyment in perfection, then and not till then does the labor bear you its recompense. And whereas the labor was with the body in its vigor, the fruit and the enjoyment is with one grown old and languid, when time has dulled even the feeling, although if it had not dulled it, the expectation of the end suffers us not to find pleasure.

But in the other case not so, but the labor is in corruption and a dying body, but the crown in one incorruptible, and immortal, and having no end. And the labor is both first and short-lived; but the reward both subsequent and endless, that with security you may take your rest after that, looking for nothing unpleasant.

For neither may thou fear change any more or loss as here. What sort of good things, then, are these, which are both insecure, and short-lived, and earthly, and vanishing before they have appeared, and acquired with many toils? And what good things are equal to those, that are immovable, that grow not old, that have no toil, that even at the time of the conflicts bring you crowns?

For he that despises money even here already receives his reward, being freed from anxiety, from rivalry, from false accusation, from plotting from envy. He that is temperate, and lives orderly, even before his departure, is crowned and lives in pleasure, being delivered from unseemliness, ridicule, dangers of accusation, and the other things that are to be feared. All the remaining parts of virtue likewise make us a

return here already.

In order therefore that we may attain unto both the present and the future blessings, let us flee from vice and choose virtue. For thus shall we both enjoy delight, and obtain the crowns to come, unto which God grant we may all attain, by the grace and love towards man of our Lord Jesus Christ, to whom be glory and might forever and ever. Amen.

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