

# Homily 72 on Matthew

by St. John Chrysostom

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*St. John Chrysostom's homily emphasizes the importance of humility and true obedience to God's commandments while warning against the dangers of vainglory and flawed leadership.*

**Scripture:** Genesis 18:27, Deuteronomy 6:4, Psalm 139:23, Matthew 23:1, Matthew 23:8, 1 Corinthians 3:5, 1 Corinthians 15:9

**Topics:** "Christian Humility", "Servant Leadership"

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## Description

John Chrysostom preaches about Jesus' teachings to the multitudes and His disciples, emphasizing the importance of following God's commandments despite the hypocrisy of the religious leaders. Chrysostom highlights Jesus' respect for the law and Moses, urging his listeners to honor their teachers and priests, even if they are flawed, to avoid falling into the same sins. He condemns the Scribes and Pharisees for their love of glory, vainglory, and harsh treatment of others, pointing out their lack of humility and genuine service. Chrysostom encourages humility, servanthood, and equality among believers, drawing examples from the lives of holy men who practiced modesty and selflessness.

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## Transcript

Matt. XXIII. 1-3.

Then spoke Jesus to the multitudes and to His disciples, saying, The Scribes and the Pharisees sit in Moses' seat: all therefore whatsoever they bid you do, that do; but do not after their works.

Then. When? When He had said these things, when He had stopped their mouths; when He had brought them that they should no more dare to tempt Him; when He had shown their state incurable.

And since He had made mention of the Lord and my Lord, He recurs again to the law. And yet the law said nothing of this kind, but, The Lord your God is one Lord. Deuteronomy 6:4 But Scripture calls the whole Old Testament the law.

But these things He says, showing by all things His full agreement with Him that begot Him. For if He were opposed, He would have said the opposite about the law; but now He commands so great reverence to be shown towards it, that, even when they that teach it are depraved, He charges them to hold to it.

But here He is discoursing about their life and morals, since this was chiefly the cause of their unbelief, their depraved life, and the love of glory. To amend therefore His hearers; that which in the first place most

contributes to salvation, not to despise our teachers, neither to rise up against our priests, this does He command with superabundant earnestness. But He does not only command it, but also Himself does it. For though they were depraved, He does not depose them from their dignity; to them rendering their condemnation heavier, and to His disciples leaving no cloke for disobedience.

I mean, that lest any one should say, that because my teacher is bad, therefore am I become more remiss, He takes away even this pretext. So much at any rate did He establish their authority, although they were wicked men, as even after so heavy an accusation to say, All whatsoever they command you to do, do. For they speak not their own words, but God's, what He appointed for laws by Moses. And mark how much honor He showed towards Moses, again showing His agreement with the Old Testament; since indeed even by this does He make them objects of reverence. For they sit, He says, on Moses' seat. For because He was not able to make them out worthy of credit by their life, He does it from the grounds that were open to Him, from their seat, and their succession from him. But when you hear all, do not understand all the law, as, for instance, the ordinances about meats, those about sacrifices, and the like; for how was He to say so of these things, which He had taken away beforehand? But He meant all things that correct the moral principle, and amend the disposition, and agree with the laws of the New Testament, and suffer them not any more to be under the yoke of the law.

Wherefore then does He give these things divine authority, not from the law of grace, but from Moses? Because it was not yet time, before the crucifixion, for these things to be plainly declared.

But to me He seems, in addition to what has been said, to be providing for another object, in saying these things. For since He was on the point of accusing them, that He might not seem in the sight of the foolish to set His heart on this authority of theirs, or for enmity to be doing these things, first He removed this thought, and having set himself clear from suspicion, then begins His accusation. And for what intent does He convict them, and run out into a long discourse against them? To set the multitude on their guard, so that they might not fall into the same sins. For neither is dissuading like pointing out those that have offended; much as recommending what is right, is not like bringing forward those that have done well. For this cause also He is beforehand in saying, Do not after their works. For, lest they should suppose, because of their listening to them, they ought also to imitate them, He uses this means of correction, and makes what seems to be their dignity a charge against them. For what can be more wretched than a teacher, when the preservation of his disciples is, not to give heed to his life? So that what seems to be their dignity is a most heavy charge against them, when they are shown to live such a life, as they that imitate are ruined.

For this cause He also falls upon His accusations against them, but not for this only, but that He might show, that both their former unbelief wherewith they had not believed, and the crucifixion after this, which they dared to perpetrate, were not a charge against Him who was crucified and disbelieved, but against their perverseness.

But see whence He begins, and whence He aggravates His blame of them. For they say, He says, and do not. For every one is worthy of blame in transgressing the law, but especially he that bears the authority of teaching, for doubly and triply does he deserve to be condemned. For one cause, because he transgresses; for another, that as he ought to amend others, and then halts, he is worthy of a double punishment, because of his dignity; and in the third place, that he even corrupts the more, as committing such transgression in a teacher's place.

And together with these He mentions also another charge against them, that they are harsh to those accountable to them.

For they bind heavy burdens, and grievous to be borne, and lay them on men's shoulders, but they will not move them with their finger. He mentions here a twofold wickedness, their requiring great and extreme strictness of life, without any indulgence, from those over whom they rule, and their allowing to themselves great security; the opposite to which the truly good ruler ought to hold; in what concerns himself, to be an unpardoning and severe judge, but in the matters of those whom he rules, to be gentle and ready to make allowances; the contrary to which was the conduct of these men.

2. For such are all they who practise self restraint in mere words, unpardoning and grievous to bear as having no experience of the difficulty in actions. And this itself too is no small fault, and in no ordinary way increases the former charge.

But do thou mark, I pray you, how He aggravates this accusation also. For He did not say, they cannot, but, they will not. And He did not say, to bear, but, to move with a finger, that is, not even to come near them, nor to touch them.

But wherein are they earnest, and vigorous? In the things forbidden. For, all their works they do, He says, to be seen of men. Matthew 23:5 These things He says, accusing them in respect of vainglory, which kind of thing was their ruin. For the things before were signs of harshness and remissness, but these of the mad desire of glory. This drew them off from God, this caused them to strive before other spectators, and ruined them. For whatever kind of spectators any one may have, since it has become his study to please these, such also are the contests he exhibits. And he that wrestles among the noble, such also are the conflicts he takes in hand, but he among the cold and supine, himself also becomes more remiss. For instance, has any one a beholder that delights in ridicule? He himself too becomes a mover of ridicule, that he may delight the spectator: has another one who is earnest minded, and practises self-government? He endeavors himself to be such as he is, since such is the disposition of him who praises him.

But see again that here too the charge is with aggravation. For neither is it that they do some things in this way, some in another way, but all things absolutely this way.

Then, having blamed them for vainglory, He shows that it is not even about great and necessary things they are vainglorious (for neither had they these, but were destitute of good works), but for things without warmth or worth, and such as were certain proofs of their baseness, the phylacteries, the borders; of their garments. For they make broad their phylacteries, He says, and enlarge the borders of their garments. Matthew 23:5

And what are these phylacteries, and these borders? Since they were continually forgetting God's benefits, He commanded His marvellous works to be inscribed on little tablets, and that these should be suspended from their hands (wherefore also He said, They shall be immoveable in your eyes), which they called phylacteries; as many of our women now wear Gospels hung from their necks. And in order that by another thing again they may be reminded, like as many often do, binding round their finger with a piece of linen or a thread, as being likely to forget, this God enjoined them as children to do, to sew a ribbon of blue on their garments, upon the fringe that hung round their feet, that they might look at it, and remember the commandments; and they were called borders.

In these things then they were diligent, making wide the strips of the tablets, and enlarging the borders of their garments; which was a sign of the most extreme vanity. For wherefore are you vainglorious, and dost make these wide? What, is this your good work? What does it profit you at all, if you gain not the good results from them. For God seeks not the enlarging of these and making them wide, but our remembering His benefits. But if for almsgiving and prayer, although they be attended with labor, and be good deeds on our parts, we must not seek vainglory, how do you, O Jew, pride yourself in these things, which most of all convict your remissness.

But they not in these only, but in other little things, suffered from this disease.

For, they love, He says, the uppermost rooms at feasts, and the chief seats in the synagogues, and greetings in the markets, and to be called of men, Rabbi. For these things, although one may think them small, yet are they a cause of great evils. These things have overthrown both cities and churches.

And it comes upon me now even to weep, when I hear of the first seats, and the greetings, and consider how many ills were hence engendered to the churches of God, which it is not necessary to publish to you now; nay rather as many as are aged men do not even need to learn these things from us.

But mark thou, I pray you, how vainglory prevailed; when they were commanded not to be vainglorious, even in the synagogues, where they had entered to discipline others.

For to have this feeling at feasts, to howsoever great a degree, does not seem to be so dreadful a thing; although even there the teachers ought to be held in reverence, and not in the church only, but everywhere. And like as a man, wherever he may appear, is manifestly distinguished from the brutes; so also ought the teacher, both speaking and holding his peace, and dining, and doing whatever it may be, to be distinguished as well by his gait, as by his look, and by his garb, and by all things generally. But they were on every account objects of ridicule, and in every respect disgraced themselves, making it their study to follow what they ought to flee. For they love them, it is said; but if the loving them be a matter of blame, what a thing must the doing them be; and to hunt and strive after them, how great an evil.

3. The other things then He carried no further than to accuse them, as being small and trifling, and as though His disciples needed not at all to be corrected about these matters; but what was a cause of all the evils, even ambition, and the violent seizing of the teacher's chair, this He brings forward, and corrects with diligence, touching this vehemently and earnestly charging them.

For what says He? But be not ye called Rabbi. Then follows the cause also; For one is your master, and all you are brethren; Matthew 23:8 and one has nothing more than another, in respect of his knowing nothing from himself. Wherefore Paul also says, For who is Paul, and who is Apollos, but ministers? 1 Corinthians 3:5 He said not masters. And again, Call not, father, Matthew 23:9 not that they should not call, but they may know whom they ought to call Father, in the highest sense. For like as the master is not a master principally; so neither is the father. For He is cause of all, both of the masters, and of the fathers.

And again He adds, Neither be ye called guides, for one is your guide, even Christ; and He said not, I. For like as above He said, What think ye of Christ? and He said not, of me, so here too.

But I should be glad to ask here, what they would say, who are repeatedly applying the term one, one, to the Father alone, to the rejection of the Only-begotten. Is the Father guide? All would declare it, and none would gainsay it. And yet one, He says, is your guide, even Christ. For like as Christ, being called the one

guide, casts not out the Father from being guide; even so the Father, being called Master, does not cast out the Son from being Master. For the expression, one, one, is spoken in contradistinction to men, and the rest of the creation.

Having warned them therefore against this grievous pest, and amended them, He instructs also how they may escape it; by humility. Wherefore He adds also, He that is greatest among you shall be your servant. For whosoever shall exalt himself shall be abased, and whosoever shall abase himself shall be exalted.

For nothing is equal to the practice of modesty, wherefore He is continually reminding them of this virtue, both when He brought the children into the midst, and now. And, when on the mount, beginning the beatitudes, He began from hence. And in this place, He plucks it up by the roots hereby, saying, He that abases himself shall be exalted.

Do you see how He draws off the hearer right over to the contrary thing. For not only does He forbid him to set his heart upon the first place, but requires him to follow after the last. For so shall you obtain your desire, He says. Wherefore he that pursues his desire for the first, must follow after the last place. For he that abases himself shall be exalted.

And where shall we find this humility? Will ye that we go again to the city of virtue, the tents of the holy men, the mountains, I mean, and the groves? For there too shall we see this height of humility.

For men, some illustrious from their rank in the world, some from their wealth, in every way put themselves down, by their vesture, by their dwelling, by those to whom they minister; and, as in written characters, they throughout all things inscribe humility.

And the things that are incentives of arrogance, as to dress well, and to build houses splendidly, and to have many servants, things which often drive men even against their will to arrogance; these are all taken away. For they themselves light their fire, they themselves cleave the logs, themselves cook, themselves minister to those that come there.

No one can be heard insulting there, nor seen insulted, nor commanded, nor giving commands; but all are devoted to those that are waited on, and every one washes the strangers' feet, and there is much contention about this. And he does it, not inquiring who it is, neither if he be a slave, nor if he be free; but in the case of every one fulfills this service. No man there is great nor mean. What then? Is there confusion? Far from it, but the highest order. For if any one be mean, he that is great sees not this, but has accounted himself again to be inferior even to him, and so becomes great.

There is one table for all, both for them that are served, and for them that serve; the same food, the same clothes, the same dwellings, the same manner of life. He is great there, who eagerly seizes the mean task. There is not mine and yours, but this expression is exterminated, that is a cause of countless wars.

4. And why do you marvel, if there be one manner of life and table and dress for all, since indeed there is even one soul to all, not in substance only (for this is with all men also), but in love? How then should it ever be lifted up itself against itself? There is no wealth and poverty there, honor and dishonor; how then should haughtiness and arrogance find an entrance? For they are indeed little and great in respect of their virtue; but, as I have said, no one sees this. He that is little, feels not pain, as despised; for neither is there any one to despise him; and should any one spurn him, this above all are they taught, to be despised, to be spurned, to be set at nought, in word and in deed. And with the poor and maimed do they associate,

and their tables are full of these guests; so that for this are they worthy of the heavens. And one tends the wounds of the mutilated, another leads the blind by the hand, a third bears him that is lamed of his leg.

There is no multitude of flatterers or parasites there; or rather they know not even what flattery is; whence then could they be lifted up at any time? For there is great equality among them, wherefore also there is much facility for virtue.

For by these are they of an inferior sort better instructed, than if they were compelled to give up the first place to them.

For like as the impetuous man derives instruction from him that is smitten, and submits to it; so the ambitious from him that claims not glory, but despises it. This they do there abundantly, and as the strife is great with us to obtain the first place, so great is it with them not to obtain it, but utterly to refuse it; and great is their earnest desire who shall have the advantage in honoring, not in being honored.

And besides, even their very employments persuade them to practise moderation, and not to be high-swollen. For who, I pray you, digging in the earth, and watering, and planting, or making baskets, or weaving sackcloth, or practising any other handy works, will ever be proud? Who dwelling in poverty and wrestling with hunger, will ever be sick of this disease? There is not one. Therefore humility is easy to them. And like as here, it is a hard thing to be lowly minded, for the multitude of them who applaud and admire us, so there it is exceedingly easy.

And that man gives heed only to the wilderness, and sees birds flying, and trees waving, and a breeze blowing, and streams rushing through glens. Whence then should he be lifted up who dwells in solitude so great?

Not however that therefore we have from this an excuse, in that we are proud when living in the midst of men. For surely Abraham, when amidst Canaanites, said, I am but dust and ashes; Genesis 18:27 and David, when in the midst of camps, I am a worm, and no man; and the apostle, in the midst of the world, I am not meet to be called an apostle. 1 Corinthians 15:9 What comfort shall we have then; what plea, when even, having such great examples, we do not practise moderation? For even as they are worthy of countless crowns, having been the first that went the way of virtue, even so are we deserving of countless punishments, who not even after those that are departed, and are set before us in books, no nor even after these that are living, and held in admiration through their deeds, are drawn on to the like emulation.

For what could you say, for not being amended? Are you ignorant of letters, and hast not looked into the Scriptures that you might learn the virtues of them of old? To say the truth, this is itself blameworthy, when the church is constantly standing open, not to enter in, and partake of those sacred streams.

However, although thou know not the departed by the Scriptures, these living men you ought to see. But is there no one to lead you? Come to me, and I will show you the places of refuge of these holy men; come and learn thou of them something useful. Shining lamps are these in every part of the earth; as walls are they set about the cities. For this cause have they occupied the deserts, that they may instruct you to despise the tumults in the midst of the world.

For they, as being strong, are able even in the midst of the raging of the waters to enjoy a calm; but thou, who art leaky on every side, hast need of tranquility, and to take breath a little, after the successive waves. Go then there continually, that, having purged away the abiding stain by their prayers and admonitions,

you may both pass in the best manner the present life, and attain unto the good things to come, by the grace and love towards man of our Lord Jesus Christ, by whom and with whom, be unto the Father, together with the Holy Ghost, glory, might, honor, now and ever, and world without end. Amen.

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