

# Homily 73 on Matthew

by St. John Chrysostom

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*The sermon warns against the dangers of hypocrisy, corruption, and vainglory, and emphasizes the importance of seeking a good disposition and gentleness in a spouse.*

**Topics:** "Inner Purity", "Repentance"

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## Description

John Chrysostom delivers a powerful sermon condemning the hypocrisy and wickedness of the Scribes and Pharisees, highlighting their greed, gluttony, and neglect of justice and mercy. He emphasizes the importance of inner purity over external rituals, calling out their vainglory and lack of true repentance. Chrysostom warns against the dangers of seeking worldly wealth and pleasures over virtues like self-denial, gentleness, and piety, urging the congregation to prioritize the purification of the soul and adherence to God's commandments.

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## Transcript

Matt. XXIII. 14.

Woe unto you, Scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you devour widows' houses, and for a pretense make long prayers: therefore you shall receive greater damnation.

After this, next He derides them for gluttony: and the grievous thing was, that not from rich men's goods, but from the poor they indulged their own belly, and aggravated their poverty, which they should have relieved. For neither did they merely eat, but devoured.

Moreover also the manner of their overreaching was yet more grievous, for a pretense making long prayers.

For every one is worthy of vengeance who does any evil thing; but he that is deriving even the reason for so doing from godliness, and is using this cloke for his wickedness, is justly liable to a far more grievous punishment. And wherefore did He not depose them? Because the time suffered it not as yet. So therefore He lets them alone for a time, but by His sayings, He secures that the people be not deceived, lest, through the dignity of those men, they be drawn on to the same emulation.

For as He had said, Whatsoever they bid you do, that do; He shows how many things they do amiss, lest from thence He should be supposed among the unwise to commit all to them.

Woe unto you, for you shut up the kingdom against men; for you neither go in yourselves, neither suffer ye them that are entering to go in. But if to profit no one be a charge against a man, even to hurt and hinder, what plea has that? But what means, them that are entering in? Them that are fit for it. For when they were to lay injunctions on others, they used to make the burdens intolerable, but when they themselves were to do any of the things required, on the contrary, so far from doing anything, they went much beyond this in wickedness, they even used to corrupt others. These are they that are called pests, who make their employment the ruin of others, standing right contrary to teachers. For if it be the part of a teacher to save that which is perishing, to destroy that which is on the point of being saved is that of a destroyer.

After this, again another charge: You compass sea and land to make one proselyte, and when he is made, you make him twofold more the child of hell than yourselves; that is, not even the fact that hardly you have taken him, and with endless toils, induces you to be sparing towards him, although of the things we have hardly acquired, we are more sparing, but you not even this renders more gentle.

Here He lays to their charge two things; one, that they are unprofitable for the salvation of the many, and need much toil in order to win over even one; another, that they were remiss in the preservation of him whom they had gained, or rather that they were not only careless, but even traitors, by their wickedness in their life corrupting him, and making him worse. For when the disciple sees his teachers to be such as these, he becomes worse than they. For he stops not at his teacher's wickedness; but as when his teacher is virtuous, he imitates him, so when he is bad, he even goes beyond him, by reason of our proneness to what is evil.

And He calls him a child of hell, that is, a very hell. And He said twofold more than you, that He might both alarm those, and make these feel the more severely, because they are teachers of wickedness. And not this only, but because they labor to instill into their disciples a greater wickedness, hardening them to a much greater depravity than they have, and this is above all a mark of a depraved soul.

Then He derides them for folly also, because they bade them disregard the greater commandments. And yet before He had said the opposite, that they bind heavy burdens, and grievous to be borne. But these things too they did again and were doing everything for the corruption of those who were subject to them, in little things requiring strictness, and despising the great.

For you pay tithe, He says, of mint and anise, and have omitted the weightier matters of the law, judgment, and mercy, and faith. These ought ye to have done, and not to leave the others undone.

Here then He naturally says it, where it is tithe and almsgiving, for what does it hurt to give alms? But not to keep the law; for neither does it say thus. Therefore here indeed He says, These ought ye to have done; but where He is speaking about clean and unclean, He no longer adds this, but makes a distinction, and shows that the inward purity is necessarily followed by the outward, but the converse is no longer so.

For where there is a plea of love to man, He passes it over lightly, for this very reason, and because it was not yet time expressly and plainly to revoke the things of the law. But where it is an observance of bodily purification, He overthrows it more plainly.

So, therefore, while with respect to alms He says, These ought ye to have done, and not to leave the others undone, touching purifications He speaks not on this wise, but what? You make clean, He says, the outside of the cup and the platter, but within they are full of extortion, and injustice. Cleanse that which is within the cup, that the outside may be clean also. And He took it from a thing confessed and manifest,

from a cup and platter.

2. Then, to show that there is no harm arising from despising bodily cleansings, but very great vengeance from not regarding the purifications of the soul, which is virtue, He called these a gnat, for they are small and nothing, but those other a camel, for they were beyond what men could bear. Wherefore also He says, Straining at the gnat, and swallowing the camel. For indeed the one were enacted for the sake of the other, I mean of mercy and judgment; so that not even then did they profit being done alone. For whereas the little things were mentioned for the sake of the great, and after that these last were neglected, and labor was spent on those alone, nothing was gained even then by this. For the greater followed not the lesser, but the lesser were sure to follow these greater.

But these things He says to show, that even before grace had come, these were not among the principal things, or among those upon which men should spend their labor, but the matters required were different. But if before the grace they were so, much more when high commandments had come, were these things unprofitable, and it was not meet to practise them at all.

In every case then is vice a grievous thing, but especially when it does not so much as think it needs amendment; and it is yet more grievous, when it thinks itself sufficient even to amend others; to express which Christ calls them blind guides. For if for a blind man not to think he needs a guide be extreme misery and wretchedness; when he wishes himself to guide others, see to what a gulf it leads.

But these things He said, by all intimating their mad desire of glory, and their exceeding frenzy concerning this pest. For this became a cause to them of all their evils, namely, that they did all things for display. This both led them away from the faith, and caused them to neglect what really is virtue, and induced them to busy themselves about bodily purifyings only, neglecting the purifications of the soul. So therefore to lead them into what really is virtue, and to the purifyings of the soul, He makes mention of mercy, and judgment, and faith. For these are the things that comprise our life, these are what purify the soul, justice, love to man, truth; the one inclining us to pardon and not suffering us to be excessively severe and unforgiving to them that sin (for then shall we gain doubly, both becoming kind to man, and hence meeting also ourselves with much kindness from the God of all), and causing us both to sympathize with them that are despitefully entreated, and to assist them; the other not suffering them to be deceitful, and crafty.

But neither when He says, These ought ye to have done, and not to leave the others undone, does He say it as introducing a legal observance; away with the thought; neither with regard to the platter and the cup, when He said, Cleanse that which is within the cup and platter, that the outside of them may be clean also, does He bring us unto the old regard for little things, but on the contrary indeed, He does all things to show it to be superfluous. For He said not, Cleanse the outside of them also, but that which is within, and the outside is sure to follow.

And besides, neither is it concerning a cup and platter he is speaking, but of soul and body, by the outside meaning the body, by the inside the soul. But if with regard to the platter there be need of that which is within much more with regard to you.

But ye do the contrary, says He, observing things trifling and external, you neglect what are great and inward: whence very great mischief arises, for that thinking you have duly performed all, you despise the other things; and despising them, you do not so much as strive or attempt to perform them.

After this, He again derides them for vainglory, calling them whited sepulchers, Matthew 23:27 and unto all adding, ye hypocrites; which thing is the cause of all their evils, and the origin of their ruin. And He did not merely call them whited sepulchers, but said, that they were full of uncleanness and hypocrisy. And these things He spoke, indicating the cause wherefore they did not believe, because they were full of hypocrisy and iniquity.

But these things not Christ only, but the prophets also constantly lay to their charge, that they spoil, that their rulers judge not according to the rule of justice, and every where you may find the sacrifices indeed refused, but these things required. So that there is nothing strange, nothing new, neither in the lawgiving, nor in the accusation, nay not even in the comparison of the sepulchre. For the prophet makes mention thereof, neither did he call them merely a sepulchre, but their throat an open sepulchre.

Such are many men now also, decking themselves indeed outwardly, but full of iniquity within. For now too there is many a mode, and many a care for outward purifications, but of those in the soul not so much as one. But if indeed any one should tear open each man's conscience, many worms and much corruption would he find, and an ill savor beyond utterance; unreasonable and wicked lusts I mean, which are more unclean than worms.

3. But that they should be such persons is not so dreadful a thing (although it be dreadful), but that you, that have been counted worthy to become temples of God, should of a sudden have become sepulchers, having as much ill savor, this is extreme wretchedness. He in whom Christ dwells, and the Holy Spirit has worked, and such great mysteries, that this man should be a sepulchre, what wretchedness is this? What mournings and lamentations does this call for, when the members of Christ have become a tomb of uncleanness? Consider how you were born, of what things you have been counted worthy, what manner of garment you have received, how you were built a temple without a breach! How fair! not adorned with gold, neither with pearls, but with the spirit that is more precious than these.

Consider that no sepulchre is made in a city, so then neither shall you be able to appear in the city above. For if here this is forbidden, much more there. Or rather even here you are an object of scorn to all, bearing about a dead soul, and not to be scorned only, but also to be shunned. For tell me, if any one were to go round, bearing about a dead body, would not all have rushed away? Would not all have fled? Think this now likewise. For you go about, bearing a spectacle far more grievous than this, a soul deadened by sins, a soul paralyzed.

Who now will pity such a one? For when thou dost not pity your own soul, how shall another pity him that is so cruel, such an enemy to himself? If any one, where you slept and eat, had buried a dead body, what would you not have done? But you are burying a dead soul, not where you dine, nor where you sleep, but in the members of Christ: and are you not afraid lest a thousand lightnings and thunderbolts be hurled from above upon your head?

And how do you even dare to set foot in the churches of God, and in holy temples, having within you the savor of so much abomination? For if one bearing a dead body into the king's courts and burying it would have suffered the utmost punishment, thou setting your foot in the sacred courts, and filling the house with so much ill savor, consider what a punishment you will undergo.

Imitate that harlot who anointed with ointment the feet of Christ, and filled the whole house with the odor, the opposite to which you do to His house! For what though thou be not sensible of the ill savor? For this most of all is the grievous part of the disease; wherefore also you are incurably diseased, and more

grievously than they that are maimed in their bodies, and become fetid. For that disease indeed is both felt by the sick and is without any blame, nay even is deserving of pity; but this of hatred and punishment.

Since then both in this respect it is more grievous, and from the sick not being sensible of it as he ought to be; come, give yourself to my words, that I may teach you plainly the mischief of it.

But first listen to what you say in the Psalm, Let my prayer be set forth in Your sight as incense. When then not incense, but a stinking smoke arises from you, and from your deeds, what punishment do you not deserve to undergo?

What then is the stinking smoke? Many come in gazing about at the beauty of women; others curious about the blooming youth of boys. After this, do you not marvel, how bolts are not launched, and all things are not plucked up from their foundations? For worthy both of thunderbolts and hell are the things that are done; but God, who is long-suffering, and of great mercy, forbears awhile His wrath, calling you to repentance and amendment.

What doest thou, O man? Are you curiously looking after women's beauty, and do you not shudder at thus doing despite unto the temple of God? Does the church seem to you a brothel, and less honorable than the market-place. For in a market-place indeed you are afraid and ashamed to appear to be looking after any woman, but in God's temple, when God Himself is discoursing unto you, and threatening about these things, you are committing whoredom and adultery at the very time in which you are being told not to do this. And do you not shudder, nor stand amazed?

These things do the spectacles of wantonness teach you, the pest that is so hard to put down, the deleterious sorceries, the grievous snares of the thoughtless, the pleasurable destruction of the unchaste.

Therefore the prophet also blaming you, said, Your eyes are not good, neither is your heart.

It would be better for such men to be blind; it would better to be diseased, than to abuse your eyes for these purposes.

It were meet indeed that you had within you the wall to part you from the women; but since you are not so minded, our fathers thought it necessary by these boards to wall you off; since I hear from the elder ones, that of old there were not so much as these partitions; For in Christ Jesus there is neither male nor female. And in the apostle's time also both men and women were together. Because the men were men, and the women women, but now altogether the contrary; the women have urged themselves into the manners of courtezans, but the men are in no better state than frantic horses.

Heard ye not, that the men and women were gathered together in the upper room, and that congregation was worthy of the heavens? And very reasonably. For even women then practised much self-denial, and the men gravity and chastity. Hear, for instance, the seller of purple saying, If you have judged me to be faithful to the Lord, come in, and abide with me. Hear the women, who went about with the apostles, having taken unto themselves manly courage, Priscilla, Persis, and the rest; from whom our present women are as far removed as our men from their men.

4. For then indeed even travelling into far countries women brought not on themselves evil report; but now even though brought up in a chamber, they hardly escape this suspicion. But these things arise from their decking of themselves, and their luxury. Then the business of those women was to spread the word; but now to appear beauteous, and fair, and comely in countenance. This is glory to them, this salvation; but of

lofty and great works they do not even dream.

What woman exerts herself to make her husband better? What man has taken to himself this care to amend his wife? There is not one: but the woman's whole study is upon the care of ornaments of gold, and raiment, and the other adornments of the person, and how to increase their substance; but the man's both this, and others more than this, all however worldly.

Who, when about to marry, inquires about the disposition and nurture of the damsel? No one; but straightway about money, and possessions, and measures of property of various and different kinds; like as if he were about to buy something, or to settle some common contract.

Therefore they do even so call marriage. For I have heard many say, such a man has contracted with such a woman, that is, has married. And they offer insult to the gifts of God, and as though buying and selling, so do they marry, and are given in marriage.

And writings there are, requiring greater security than those about buying and selling. Learn how those of old married, and imitate them. How then did they marry? They inquired about ways of life, and morals, and virtue of the soul. Therefore they had no need of writings, nor of security by parchment and ink; for the bride's disposition sufficed them in the place of all.

I therefore entreat you likewise not to seek after wealth and affluence, but a good disposition, and gentleness. Seek for a pious and self-denying damsel, and these will be to you better than countless treasures. If you seek the things of God, these others will come also; but if you pass by those, and hasten unto these, neither will these follow.

But such a man, one will say, became rich by his wife! Are you not ashamed of bringing forward such examples? I had ten thousand times sooner become a poor man, as I have heard many say, than gain wealth from a wife. For what can be more displeasing than that wealth? What more painful than the abundance? What more shameful than to be notorious from thence, and for it to be said by all, such a man became rich by a wife? For the domestic discomforts I pass by, all that must needs result from hence, the wife's pride, the servility, the strifes, the reproaches of the servants. The beggar, the ragged one, the base one, and sprung of base. Why, what had he when he came in? Do not all things belong to our mistress? But thou dost not care at all about these sayings, for neither are you a freeman. Since the parasites likewise hear worse things than these, and are not pained wherefore neither are these, but rather pride themselves in their disgrace; and when we tell them of these things, Let me have, says one of them, something pleasant and sweet, and let it choke me. Alas! The devil, what proverbs has he brought into the world, of power to overturn the whole life of such persons. See at least this self-same devilish and pernicious saying; of how much ruin it is full. For it means nothing else than these words, Have thou no regard to what is honorable; have thou no regard to what is just; let all those things be cast aside, seek one thing alone, pleasure. Though the thing stifle you, let it be your choice; though all that meet you spurn you, though they smear your face with mire, though they drive you away as a dog, bear all. And what else would swine say, if they had a voice? What else would filthy dogs? But perhaps not even they would have said such things, as the devil has persuaded men to rave.

Wherefore I entreat you, being conscious of the senselessness of such words as these, to flee such proverbs, and to choose out those in the Scriptures that are contrary to them.

But what are these? Go not, it is said, after your lusts, and refrain yourself from your appetites. Sirach 18:30 And, touching an harlot again, it is said in opposition to this proverb, Give not heed to a bad woman: for honey drops from the lips of a woman that is an harlot, which, for a season, is luscious unto your throat; but afterwards you shall find it more bitter than gall, and sharper than a two-edged sword. Unto these last then let us listen, not unto those. For hence indeed spring our mean, hence our slavish thoughts, hence men become brutes, because in everything they will follow after pleasure according to this proverb, which, even without arguments of ours, is of itself ridiculous. For after one is choked, what is the gain of sweetness?

Cease, therefore, to set up such great absurdity, and to kindle hell and unquenchable fire; and let us look steadfastly (at length though late) as we ought, unto the things to come, having put away the film on our eyes, that we may both pass the present life honestly, and with much reverence and godly fear, and attain unto the good things to come, by the grace and love towards man of our Lord Jesus Christ, to whom be glory world without end. Amen.

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