

Homily 81 on Matthew

by St. John Chrysostom

Jesus' instructions to the disciples and the betrayal of Judas serve as a reminder of the nature of covetousness and the importance of virtue and repentance.

Scripture: Matthew 21:3, Matthew 25:30, Matthew 25:41-42, Matthew 25:46, Matthew 26:17, Matthew 26:22, Matthew 26:25, Luke 22:7, John 13:1

Topics: "Covetousness", "Eternal Punishment"

Description

John Chrysostom preaches on the events leading up to Jesus' betrayal, highlighting the significance of the Last Supper and the revelation of Judas as the betrayer. He emphasizes the meekness and compassion of Jesus towards Judas, despite his impending betrayal, and the severity of Judas' actions driven by covetousness. Chrysostom warns against the dangers of covetousness, comparing the actions of the covetous to those possessed by demons, and the consequences of such behavior in this life and the next. He urges his audience to resist the temptations of wealth and to cultivate virtues to avoid spiritual shipwrecks and eternal punishment.

Transcript

Matthew 26:17-18.

Now the first day of the feast of unleavened bread the disciples came to Jesus, saying, Where will You that we prepare for You to eat the Passover? And He said, Go into the city to such a man, and say unto him, The Master says, My time is at hand; I will keep the Passover at your house with My disciples.

By the first day of the feast of unleavened bread, he means the day before that feast; for they are accustomed always to reckon the day from the evening, and he makes mention of this in which in the evening the passover must be killed; John 13:1 for on the fifth day of the week they came unto Him. And this one calls the day before the feast of unleavened bread, Luke 22:7 speaking of the time when they came to Him, and another says on this wise, Then came the day of unleavened bread, when the passover must be killed; by the word came, meaning this, it was near, it was at the doors, making mention plainly of that evening. For they began with the evening, wherefore also each adds, when the passover was killed.

And they say, Where will You that we prepare for You to eat the passover? So even from this it is manifest, that He had no house, no place of sojourning; and I suppose neither had they. For surely they would have entreated him to come there. But neither had they any, having now parted with all things.

But wherefore did He keep the passover? To indicate by all things unto the last day, that He is not opposed to the law.

And for what possible reason does He send them to an unknown person? To show by this also that He might have avoided suffering. For He who prevailed over this man's mind, so that he received them, and that by words; what would He not have done with them that crucified Him, if it had been His will not to suffer? And what He did about the ass, this He did here also. For there too He says, If any man say anything unto you, you shall say, that the Lord has need of them; Matthew 21:3 and so likewise here, The Master says, I will keep the passover at your house. But I marvel not at this only, that he received Him, being unknown, but that expecting to bring upon himself such enmity and implacable hostility, he despised the enmity of the multitude.

After this, because they knew him not, He gave them a sign, like as the prophet touching Saul, saying, You shall find one going up and carrying a bottle; 1 Samuel 10:3 and here, carrying a pitcher. And see again the display of his power. For He did not only say, I will keep the passover, but He adds another thing also, My time is at hand. And this He did, at once continually reminding His disciples of the passion, so that exercised by the frequency of the prediction, they should be prepared for what was to take place; and at the same time to show to themselves, and to him that was receiving Him, and to all the Jews, which I have often mentioned, that not involuntarily does He come to His passion. And He adds, with my disciples, in order that both the preparation should be sufficient, and that the man should not suppose that He was concealing Himself.

Now when the evening had come, He sat down with the twelve disciples. Oh the shamelessness of Judas! For he too was present there, and came to partake both of the mysteries, and of the meal, and is convicted at the very table, when although he had been a wild beast, he would have become tame.

For this cause the evangelist also signifies, that while they are eating, Christ speaks of His betrayal, that both by the time and by the table he might show the wickedness of the traitor.

For when the disciples had done, as Jesus had appointed them, when the evening had come, He sat down with the twelve. And as they did eat, He said, we are told, Verily, I say unto you, that one of you shall betray me. And before the supper, He had even washed his feet. And see how He spares the traitor. For He said not, such a one shall betray me; but, one of you, so as again to give him power of repentance by concealment. And He chooses to alarm all, for the sake of saving this man. Of you, the twelve, says He, that are everywhere present with me, whose feet I washed, to whom I promised so many things.

Intolerable sorrow thereupon seized that holy company. And John indeed says, they were in doubt, and looked one upon another, and each of them asked in fear concerning himself, although conscious to themselves of no such thing. But this evangelist says, that being exceeding sorrowful, they began every one of them to say unto Him, Is it I, Lord? Matthew 26:22 And He answered and said, He it is, to whom I shall give a sop, when I have dipped it.

Mark at what time He discovered him. It was when it was His will to deliver the rest from this trouble, for they were even dead with the fear, wherefore also they were instant with their questions. But not only as desiring to deliver them from their distress He did this, but also as willing to amend the traitor. For since after having often heard it generally, he continued incorrigible, being past feeling, He being minded to make him feel more, takes off his mask.

For when being sorrowful they began to say, Is it I, Lord? He answered and said, He that dips with me in the dish, the same shall betray me. The Son of Man goes, as it is written of Him, but woe to the man by whom the Son of Man is betrayed. It had been good for that man if he had not been born.

Now some say that he was so bold as not to honor his Master, but to dip with Him: but to me Christ seems to have done this too, to shame him the more, and bring him over to a better disposition. For this act again has something more in it.

2. But these things we ought not to pass by at random, but they should be instilled in our minds, and wrath would find no place at any time.

For who, bearing in mind that supper, and the traitor sitting at meat with the Saviour of all, and Him who was to be betrayed thus meekly reasoning, would not put away all venom of wrath and anger? See at any rate how meekly He conducts Himself towards him, The Son of Man goes, as it is written of Him.

And these things again He said, both to restore the disciples, that they might not think the thing was a sign of weakness, and to amend the traitor.

But woe unto that man by whom the Son of Man is betrayed! It had been good for that man if he had not been born. See again in His rebukes His unspeakable meekness. For not even here with invective, but more in the way of compassion, does He apply what He says, but in a disguised way again; and yet not his former senselessness only, but his subsequent shamelessness was deserving of the utmost indignation. For after this conviction he says, Is it I, Lord? Oh insensibility! He inquires, when conscious to himself of such things. For the evangelist too, marvelling at his boldness, says this. What then says the most mild and gentle Jesus? You say. And yet He might have said, O thou unholy, thou all unholy one; accursed, and profane; so long a time in travail with mischief, who hast gone your way, and made satanical compacts, and hast agreed to receive money, and hast been convicted by me too, do you yet dare to ask? But none of these things did He say; but how? You say? fixing for us bounds and rules of long suffering.

But some one will say, Yet if it was written that He was to suffer these things, wherefore is Judas blamed, for he did the things that were written? But not with this intent, but from wickedness. For if you inquire not concerning the motive, you will deliver even the devil from the charges against him. But these things are not, they are not so. For both the one and the other are deserving of countless punishments, although the world was saved. For neither did the treason of Judas work out salvation for us, but the wisdom of Christ, and the good contrivance of His fair skill, using the wickednesses of others for our advantage.

What then, one may say, though Judas had not betrayed Him, would not another have betrayed Him? And what has this to do with the question? Because if Christ must needs be crucified, it must be by the means of some one, and if by some one, surely by such a person as this. But if all had been good, the dispensation in our behalf had been impeded. Not so. For the Allwise knows how He shall bring about our benefits, even had this happened. For His wisdom is rich in contrivance, and incomprehensible. So for this reason, that no one might suppose that Judas had become a minister of the dispensation, He declares the wretchedness of the man. But some one will say again, And if it had been good if he had never been born, wherefore did He suffer both this man, and all the wicked, to come into the world? When you ought to blame the wicked, for that having the power not to become such as they are, they have become wicked, you leave this, and busiest yourself, and art curious about the things of God; although knowing that it is not by necessity that any one is wicked.

But the good only should be born, he would say, and there were no need of hell, nor punishment, nor vengeance, nor trace of vice, but the wicked should either not be born at all, or being born should straightway depart.

First then, it were well to repeat to you the saying of the apostle, Nay but, O man, who are you that repliest against God? Shall the thing formed say to Him that formed it, Why have You made me thus?

But if you still demandest reasons, we would say this, that the good are more admired for being among the bad; because their long-suffering and great self-command is then most shown. But you take away the occasion of their wrestlings, and conflicts, by saying these things. What then, in order that these may appear good, are others punished? says he. God forbid, but for their own wickedness. For neither because they were brought into the world did they become wicked, but on account of their own wickedness; wherefore also they are punished. For how should they fail to be deserving of punishment, seeing they have so many teachers of virtue, and gain nothing therefrom. For like as the noble and good are worthy of double honor, because they both became good, and took no hurt from the wicked; so also the worthless deserve twofold punishment, both because they became wicked, when they might have become good (they show it who have become such), and because they gained nothing from the good.

But let us see what says this wretched man, when convicted by his Master. What then says he? Is it I, Rabbi? Matthew 26:25 And why did he not ask this from the beginning? He thought to escape knowledge by its being said, one of you; but when He had made him manifest, he ventured again to ask, confiding in the clemency of his Master, that He would not convict him.

3. O blindness! Whereunto has it led him? Such is covetousness, it renders men fools and senseless, yea reckless, and dogs instead of men, or rather even more fierce than dogs, and devils after being dogs. This man at least received unto him the devil even when plotting against him, but Jesus, even when doing him good, he betrayed, having already become a devil in will. For such does the insatiable desire of gain make men, out of their mind, frenzy-smitten, altogether given up to gain, as was the case even with Judas.

But how do Matthew and the other evangelists say, that, when he made the agreement touching the treason, then the devil seized him; but John, that after the sop Satan entered into him. John 13:27 And John himself knew this, for further back he says, The devil having now put into the heart of Judas, that he should betray Him. How then does he say, After the sop Satan entered into him? Because he enters not in suddenly, nor at once, but makes much trial first, which accordingly was done here also. For after having tried him in the beginning, and assailed him quietly, after that he saw him prepared to receive him, he thenceforth wholly breathed himself into him, and completely got the better of him.

But how, if they were eating the passover, did they eat it contrary to the law? For they should not have eaten it, sitting down to their meat. Exodus 12:11 What then can be said? That after eating it, they then sat down to the banquet.

But another evangelist says, that on that evening He not only ate the passover, but also said, With desire I have desired to eat this passover with you, Luke 22:15 that is, on that year. For what reason? Because then the salvation of the world was to be brought about, and the mysteries to be delivered, and the subjects of sorrow to be done away with by His death; so welcome was the cross to Him. But nothing softened the savage monster, nor moved, nor shamed him. He pronounced him wretched, saying, Woe to that man. He alarmed him again, saying, It were good for him if he had not been born. He put him to shame, saying, To whom I shall give a sop, when I have dipped it. And none of these things checked him,

but he was seized by covetousness, as by some madness, or rather by a more grievous disease. For indeed this is the more grievous madness.

For what would the madman do like this? He poured not forth foam out of his mouth but he poured forth the murder of his Lord. He distorted not his hands, but stretched them out for the price of precious blood. Wherefore his madness was greater, because he was mad being in health.

But he does not utter do you say, sounds without meaning. And what is more without meaning than this language. What will you give me, and I will deliver Him unto you? Matthew 26:15 I will deliver, the devil spoke by that mouth. But he did not smite the ground with his feet struggling? Nay, how much better so to struggle, than thus to stand upright. But do you say, he did not cut himself with stones? Yet how much better, than to do such things as these!

Will ye, that we bring forward the possessed and the covetous, and make a comparison between the two. But let no one account what is done a reproach to himself. For we do not reproach the nature, but we lament the act. The possessed was never clad with garments, cutting himself with stones, and running, he rushes over rough paths, driven headlong of the devil. Do not these things seem to be dreadful? What then, if I shall show the covetous doing more grievous things than these to their own soul, and to such a degree more grievous, that these are considered child's play compared with those. Will you indeed shun the pest? Come then, let us see if they are in any respect in a more tolerable state than they. In none, but even in a more grievous condition; for indeed they are more objects of shame than ten thousand naked persons. For it were far better to be naked as to clothing, than being clad with the fruits of covetousness, to go about like them that celebrate the orgies for Bacchus. For like as they have on madmen's masks and clothes, so have these also. And much as the nakedness of the possessed is caused by madness, so does madness produce this clothing, and the clothing is more miserable than the nakedness.

And this I will hereby endeavor to prove. For whom should we say was more mad, among madmen themselves; one who should cut himself, or one who together with himself should hurt those who met him? It is quite clear that it is this last. The madmen then strip themselves of their clothing, but these all that meet them. But these tear their clothes to pieces. And how readily would every one of those that are injured consent that his garment should be torn, rather than be stripped of all his substance?

But those do not aim blows at the face. In the first place, the covetous do even this, and if not all, yet do all inflict by famine and penury more grievous pains on the belly.

But those bite not with the teeth. Would that it were with teeth, and not with the darts of covetousness fiercer than teeth. For their teeth are weapons and darts. For who will feel most pained, he that was bitten once, and straightway healed, or he that is for ever eaten up by the teeth of penury? For penury when involuntary is more grievous than furnace or wild beast.

But those rush not into the deserts like the possessed of devils. Would it were the deserts, and not the cities, that they overran, and so all in the cities enjoyed security. For now in this respect again, they are more intolerable than all the insane, because they do in the cities these things which the others do in the deserts, making the cities deserts, and like as in a desert, where there is none to hinder, so plundering the goods of all men.

But they do not pelt with stones them that meet them. And what is this? Of stones it were easy to beware; but of the wounds which by paper and ink they work to the wretched poor (framing writings full of blows

without number), who, out of those that fall in with them, can ever easily beware?

4. And let us see also what they do to themselves. They walk naked up and down the city, for they have no garment of virtue. But if this does not seem to them to be a disgrace, this again is of their exceeding madness, for that they have no feeling of the unseemliness, but while they are ashamed of having their body naked, they bear about the soul naked, and glory in it. And if you wish, I will tell you also the cause of their insensibility. What then is the cause? They are naked among many that are thus naked, wherefore neither are they ashamed, like as neither are we in the baths. So that if indeed there were many clothed with virtue, then would their shame appear more. But now this above all is a worthy subject for many tears, that because the bad are many, bad things are not even esteemed as a disgrace. For besides the rest, the devil has brought about this too, not to allow them to obtain even a sense of their evil deeds, but by the multitude of them that practise wickedness, to throw a shade over their disgrace; since if it came to pass that he was in the midst of a multitude of persons practising self-restraint, such a one would see his nakedness more.

That they are more naked than the possessed is evident from these things; and that they go into the deserts, neither this again could any one gainsay. For the wide and broad way is more desert than any desert. For though it have many that journey on it, yet none from among men, but serpents, scorpions, wolves, adders, and asps. Such are they that practise wickedness. And this way is not only desert, but much more rugged than that of the mad. And this is hereby evident. For stones and ravines and crags do not so wound those that mount them, as robbery and covetousness the souls that practise them.

And that they live by the tombs, like the possessed, or rather that they themselves are tombs, is plain by this. What is a tomb? A stone having a dead body lying in it. Wherein then do these men's bodies differ from those stones? Or rather, they are more miserable even than they. For it is not a stone containing a dead body, but a body more insensible than stones, bearing about a dead soul. Wherefore one would not be wrong in calling them tombs. For so did our Lord too call the Jews, for this reason most especially; He went on at least to say, Their inward parts are full of ravening and covetousness.

Would ye that I show next, how they also cut their heads with stones? Whence then first, I pray you, will you learn this? From the things here, or from the things to come? But of the things to come they have not much regard; we must speak then of the things here. For are not anxieties more grievous than many stones, not wounding heads, but consuming a soul. For they are afraid, lest those things should justly go forth out of their house, which have come unto them unjustly; they tremble in fear of the utmost ills, are angry, are provoked, against those of their own house, against strangers; and now despondency, now fear, now wrath, comes upon them in succession, and they are as if they were crossing precipice after precipice, and they are earnestly looking day by day for what they have not yet acquired. Wherefore neither do they feel pleasure in the things they have, both by reason of not feeling confidence about the security of them, and because with their whole mind they are intent upon what they have not yet seized. And like as one continually thirsting, though he should drink up ten thousand fountains, feels not the pleasure, because he is not satisfied; so also these, so far from feeling pleasure, are even tormented, the more they heap around themselves; from their not feeling any limit to such desire.

And things here are like this; but let us speak also of the day to come. For though they give not heed, yet it is necessary for us to speak. In the day to come then, one will see everywhere such men as these undergoing punishment. For when He says, I was an hungered, and you gave me no meat; I was thirsty, and you gave me no drink; Matthew 25:42 He is punishing these; and when He says, Depart into the

eternal fire prepared for the devil, He is sending there them that make a bad use of riches. And the wicked servant, who gives not to his fellow-servants the goods of his Lord, is of the number of these men, and he that buried his talent, and the five virgins.

And wherever you shall go, you will see the covetous punished. And now they will hear, There is a void between us and you; now, Depart from me into the fire that is prepared. Matthew 25:41 And now being cut asunder, they will go away, where there is gnashing of teeth, and from every place one may see them driven, and finding a place nowhere, but gathered in hell alone.

5. What then is the use of the right faith to us for salvation, when we hear these things? There, gnashing of teeth, and outer darkness, and the fire prepared for the devil, and to be cut asunder, and to be driven away; here, enmities, evil speakings, slanders, perils, cares, plots, to be hated of all, to be abhorred of all, even of the very persons that seem to flatter us. For as good men are admired not by the good only but even by the wicked; so bad men, not the good only, but also the worthless, hate. And in proof that this is true, I would gladly ask of the covetous, whether they do not feel painfully one toward another; and account such more their enemies than those that have done them the greatest wrong; whether they do not also accuse themselves, whether they do not account the thing an affront, if any one brings this reproach upon them. For indeed this is an extreme reproach, and a sure proof of much wickedness; for if you dost not endure to despise wealth, of what will you ever get the better? Of lust, or of the mad desire of glory, or anger, or of wrath? And how would any be persuaded of it? For as to lust, and anger, and wrath, many impute it even to the temperament of the flesh, and to this do students of medicine refer the excesses thereof; and him that is of a more hot and languid temperament, they affirm to be more lustful; but him that runs out into a drier kind of ill temperament, eager, and irritable, and wrathful. But with respect to covetousness, no one ever heard of their having said any such thing. So entirely is the pest the effect of mere remissness, and of a soul past feeling.

Therefore, I beseech you, let us give diligence to amend all such things, and to give an opposite direction to the passions that come upon us in every age. But if in every part of our life we sail past the labors of virtue, everywhere undergoing shipwrecks; when we have arrived at the harbor destitute of spiritual freight, we shall undergo extreme punishment. For our present life is an outstretched ocean. And as in the sea here, there are different bays exposed to different tempests, and the Ætgean is difficult because of the winds, the Tyrrhenian strait because of the confined space, the Charybdis that is by Africa because of the shallows, the Propontis, which is without the Euxine sea, on account of its violence and currents, the parts without Cadiz because of the desolation, and tracklessness, and unexplored places therein, and other portions for other causes; so also is it in our life.

And the first sea to view is that of our childish days, having much tempestuousness, because of its folly, its facility, because it is not steadfast. Therefore also we set over it guides and teachers, by our diligence adding what is wanting to nature, even as there by the pilot's skill.

After this age succeeds the sea of the youth, where the winds are violent as in the Ætgean, lust increasing upon us. And this age especially is destitute of correction; not only because he is beset more fiercely, but also because his faults are not reprov'd, for both teacher and guide after that withdraw. When therefore the winds blow more fiercely, and the pilot is more feeble, and there is no helper, consider the greatness of the tempest.

After this there is again another period of life, that of men, in which the cares of the household press upon us, when there is a wife, and marriage, and begetting of children, and ruling of a house, and thick falling showers of cares. Then especially both covetousness flourishes and envy.

When then we pass each part of our life with shipwrecks, how shall we suffice for the present life? How shall we escape future punishment. For when first in the earliest age we learn nothing healthful, and then in youth we do not practise sobriety, and when grown to manhood do not get the better of covetousness, coming to old age as to a hold full of bilgewater, and as having made the barque of the soul weak by all these shocks, the planks being separated, we shall arrive at that harbor, bearing much filth instead of spiritual merchandise, and to the devil we shall furnish laughter, but lamentation to ourselves, and bring upon ourselves the intolerable punishments.

That these things may not be, let us brace ourselves up on every side, and, withstanding all our passions, let us cast out the lust of wealth, that we may also attain unto the good things to come, by the grace and love towards man of our Lord Jesus Christ, to whom be glory forever and ever. Amen.

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