

# Homily 86 on Matthew

by St. John Chrysostom

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*Jesus stands trial before the governor, Pilate, who ultimately yields to the crowd's demands and has Jesus crucified.*

**Scripture:** Matthew 22:17, Matthew 27:11, Matthew 27:25, John 18:36, Acts 17:7

**Topics:** "Sin And Virtue", "Eternal Judgment"

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## Description

John Chrysostom preaches on the trial of Jesus before Pilate, highlighting the false accusations brought forward by the chief priests and elders, the governor's attempts to release Jesus, and the crowd's choice of Barabbas over Jesus. Chrysostom emphasizes the gradual progression from small sins to great sins, warning against the dangers of allowing wicked passions to take hold and the importance of resisting the beginnings of sin. He also cautions against despair and the deception of sins disguised as devotion, urging listeners to guard against the sources of sins and strive for virtue to avoid punishment and attain eternal blessings.

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## Transcript

Matthew 27:11-12.

And Jesus stood before the governor; and the governor asked Him, saying, Are you the king of the Jews? And Jesus said to him, You say. And when He was accused of the chief priests and elders, He answered nothing.

Do you see what He is first asked? Which thing most of all they were continually bringing forward in every way? For since they saw Pilate making no account of the matters of the law, they direct their accusation to the state charges. So likewise did they in the case of the apostles, ever bringing forward these things, and saying that they were going about proclaiming king one Jesus, Acts 17:7 speaking as of a mere man, and investing them with a suspicion of usurpation.

Whence it is manifest, that both the rending the garment and the amazement were a pretense. But all things they got up, and plied, in order to bring Him to death.

This at any rate Pilate then asked. What then said Christ? You say. He confessed that He was a king, but a heavenly king, which elsewhere also He spoke more clearly, replying to Pilate, My kingdom is not of this world; John 18:36 that neither they nor this man should have an excuse for accusing Him of such things.

And He gives a reason that cannot be gainsaid, saying, If I were of this world, my servants would fight, that I should not be delivered. For this purpose I say, in order to refute this suspicion, He both paid tribute, Matthew 22:17 and commanded others to pay it, and when they would make Him a king, He fled. John 6:15

Wherefore then did he not bring forward these things, it may be said, at that time, when accused of usurpation? Because having the proofs from His acts, of His power, His meekness, His gentleness, beyond number, they were willfully blind, and dealt unfairly, and the tribunal was corrupt. For these reasons then He replies to nothing, but holds His peace, yet answering briefly (so as not to get the reputation of arrogance from continual silence) when the high priest adjured Him, when the governor asked, but in reply to their accusations He no longer says anything; for He was not now likely to persuade them. Even as the prophet declaring this self-same thing from of old, said, In His humiliation His judgment was taken away.

At these things the governor marvelled, and indeed it was worthy of admiration to see Him showing such great forbearance, and holding His peace, Him that had countless things to say. For neither did they accuse Him from knowing of any evil thing in Him, but from jealousy and envy only. At least when they had set false witness, wherefore, having nothing to say, did they still urge their point? And when they saw Judas was dead, and that Pilate had washed his hands of it, why were they not pricked with remorse. For indeed He did many things even at the very time, that they might recover themselves, but by none were they amended.

What then says Pilate? Do you not hear how many things these witness against you? He wished that He should defend Himself and be acquitted, wherefore also he said these things; but since He answered nothing, he devises another thing again.

Of what nature was this? It was a custom for them to release one of the condemned, and by this means he attempted to deliver Him. For if you are not willing to release Him as innocent, yet as guilty pardon Him for the feast's sake.

Do you see order reversed? For the petition in behalf of the condemned it was customary to be with the people, and the granting it with the rulers; but now the contrary has come to pass, and the ruler petitions the people; and not even so do they become gentle, but grow more savage and bloodthirsty, driven to frenzy by the passion of envy. For neither had they whereof they should accuse Him, and this though He was silent, but they were refuted even then by reason of the abundance of His righteous deeds, and being silent He overcame them that say ten thousand things, and are maddened.

And when he was set down on the judgment seat, his wife sent unto him, saying, have thou nothing to do with this just man, for I have suffered many things this day in a dream because of Him. See what a thing takes place again, sufficient to recall them all. For together with the proof from the things done, the dream too was no small thing. And wherefore does he not see it himself? Either because she was more worthy, or because he, if he had seen it, would not have been equally believed; or would not so much as have told it. Therefore it was ordered that the wife should see it, so that it might be manifest to all. And she does not merely see it, but also suffers many things, that from his feeling towards his wife, the man may be made more reluctant to the murder. And the time too contributed not a little, for on the very night she saw it.

But it was not safe, it may be said, for him to let Him go, because they said He made Himself a king. He ought then to have sought for proofs, and a conviction, and for all the things that are infallible signs of an

usurpation, as, for instance, whether He levied forces, whether He collected money, whether He forged arms, whether He attempted any other such thing. But he is led away at random, therefore neither does Christ acquit him of the blame, in saying, He that betrays me unto you has greater sin. So that it was from weakness that he yielded and scourged Him, and delivered Him up.

He then was unmanly and weak; but the chief priests wicked and criminal. For since he had found out a device, namely, the law of the feast requiring him to release a condemned person, what do they contrive in opposition to that? They persuaded the multitude, it is said, that they should ask Barabbas.

2. See how much care he takes for them to relieve them from blame, and how much diligence they employed, so as not to leave to themselves so much as a shadow of an excuse. For which was right? To let go the acknowledged criminal, or Him about whose guilt there was a question? For, if in the case of acknowledged offenders it was fit there should be a liberation, much more in those of whom there was a doubt. For surely this man did not seem to them worse than acknowledged murderers. For on this account, it is not merely said they had a robber; but one noted, that is, who was infamous in wickedness, who had perpetrated countless murders. But nevertheless even him did they prefer to the Saviour of the world, and neither did they reverence the season because it was holy, nor the laws of humanity, nor any other thing of the kind, but envy had once for all blinded them. And besides their own wickedness, they corrupt the people also, that for deceiving them too they might suffer the most extreme punishment.

Since therefore they ask for the other, he says, What shall I do then with the Christ, in this way desiring to put them to the blush, by giving them the power to choose, that at least out of shame they might ask for Him, and the whole should be of their bountifulness. For though to say, He had not done wrong, made them more contentious, yet to require that He should be saved out of humanity, carries with it persuasion and entreaty that cannot be gainsaid.

But even then they said, Crucify Him. But he said, why, what evil has He done? But they cried out exceedingly, let Him be crucified. But he, when he saw that he profited nothing, washed his hands, saying, I am innocent. Why then did you deliver Him up? Why did you not rescue Him, as the centurion did Paul. Acts xxi For that man too was aware that he would please the Jews; and a sedition had taken place on his account, and a tumult, nevertheless he stood firm against all. But not so this man, but he was extremely unmanly and weak, and all were corrupt together. For neither did this man stand firm against the multitude, nor the multitude against the Jews, and in every way their excuse was taken away. For they cried out exceedingly, that is, cried out the more, Let Him be crucified. For they desired not only to put Him to death, but also that it should be on a charge of wickedness, and though the judge was contradicting them, they continued to cry out the same thing.

Do you see how many things Christ did in order to recover them? For like as He often times checked Judas, so likewise did He restrain these men too, both throughout all His Gospel, and at the very time of His condemnation. For surely when they saw the ruler and the judge washing his hands of it, and saying, I am innocent of this blood, they should have been moved to compunction both by what was said, and by what was done, as well when they saw Judas had hanged himself, as when they saw Pilate himself entreating them to take another in the place of Him. For when the accuser and traitor condemns himself, and he who gives sentence puts off from himself the guilt, and such a vision appears the very night, and even as condemned he begs Him off, what kind of plea will they have? For if they were not willing that He should be innocent, yet they should not have preferred to him even a robber, one that was acknowledged to be such, and very notorious.

What then did they? When they saw the judge washing his hands, and saying, I am innocent, they cried out His blood be on us, and on our children. Matthew 27:25 Then at length when they had given sentence against themselves, he yielded that all should be done.

See here too their great madness. For passion and wicked desire are like this. They suffer not men to see anything of what is right. For be it that you curse yourselves; why do you draw down the curse upon your children also?

Nevertheless, the lover of man, though they acted with so much madness, both against themselves, and against their children, so far from confirming their sentence upon their children, confirmed it not even on them, but from the one and from the other received those that repented, and counts them worthy of good things beyond number. For indeed even Paul was of them, and the thousands that believed in Jerusalem; for, you see it is said, brother, how many thousands of Jews there are which believe. And if some continued in their sin, to themselves let them impute their punishment.

Then released he Barabbas unto them, but Jesus, when he had scourged Him, he delivered to be crucified.

And wherefore did he scourge Him. Either as one condemned, or willing to invest the judgment with due form, or to please them. And yet he ought to have resisted them. For indeed even before this he had said, Take ye Him, and judge Him according to your law. John 18:31 And there were many things that might have held back him and those men, the signs and the miracles, and the great patience of Him, who was suffering these things, and above all His untold silence. For since both by His defense of Himself, and by His prayers, He had shown His humanity, again He shows His exaltedness and the greatness of His nature, both by His silence, and by His contemning what is said; by all leading them on to marvel at Himself. But to none of these things did they give way.

3. For when once the reasoning powers are overwhelmed as it were by intoxication or some wild insanity, it would be hard for the sinking soul to rise again, if it be not very noble.

For it is fearful, it is fearful to give place to these wicked passions, wherefore it were fit in every way to ward off and repel their entering in. For when they have laid hold of the soul, and got the dominion over it, like as fire lighting upon a wood, so do they kindle the flame to a blaze.

Wherefore I entreat you to do all things so as to fence off their entrance; and not by comforting yourselves with this heartless reasoning to bring in upon yourselves all wickedness, saying, what of this? What of that? For countless ills have their birth from hence. For the devil, being depraved, makes use of much craft, and exertion, and self-abasement for the ruin of men, and begins his attack on them with things of a more trifling nature.

And mark it, he desired to bring Saul into superstition of witchcraft. But if he had counselled this at the beginning, the other would not have given heed; for how should he, who was even driving them out? Therefore gently and little by little he leads him on to it. For when he had disobeyed Samuel, and had caused the burnt-offering to be offered, when he was not present, being blamed for it, he says, The compulsion from the enemy was too great, and when he ought to have bewailed, he felt as though he had done nothing.

Again God gave him the commands about the Amalekites, but he transgressed these too. Thence he proceeded to his crimes about David, and thus slipping easily and little by little he stayed not, until he came unto the very pit of destruction, and cast himself in. So likewise in the case of Cain, he did not at once urge him to slay his brother, since he would not have persuaded him, but first wrought upon him to offer things more or less vile, saying, This is no sin: in the second place he kindled envy and jealousy, saying, neither is there anything in this; thirdly, he persuaded him to slay and to deny his murder; and did not leave him before he had put on him the crowning act of evil.

Wherefore it is necessary for us to resist the beginning. For at any rate, even if the first sins stopped at themselves, not even so were it right to despise the first sins; but now they go on also to what is greater, when the mind is careless. Wherefore we ought to do all things to remove the beginnings of them.

For look not now at the nature of the sin, that it is little, but that it becomes a root of great sin when neglected. For if one may say something marvellous, great sins need not so much earnestness, as such as are little, and of small account. For the former the very nature of the sin causes us to abhor, but the little sins by this very thing cast us into remissness; and allow us not to rouse ourselves heartily for their removal. Wherefore also they quickly become great, while we sleep. This one may see happening in bodies also.

So likewise in the instance of Judas, that great wickedness had its birth. For if it had not seemed to him a little thing to steal the money of the poor, he would not have been led on to this treachery. Unless it had seemed to the Jews a little thing to be taken captive by vainglory, they would not have run on the rock of becoming Christ's murderers. And indeed all evils we may see arise from this.

For no one quickly and at once rushes out into vices. For the soul has, yea it has a shame implanted in us, and a reverence for right things; and it would not at once become so shameless as in one act to cast away everything, but slowly, and little by little does it perish, when it is careless. Thus also did idolatry enter in, men being honored beyond measure, both the living and the departed; thus also were idols worshipped; thus too did whoredom prevail, and the other evils.

And see. One man laughed unseasonably; another blamed him; a third took away the fear, by saying, nothing comes of this. For what is laughing? What can come of it? Of this is bred foolish jesting; from that filthy talking; then filthy doings.

Again, another being blamed for slandering his neighbors, and reviling, and calumniating, despised it, saying, evil-speaking is nothing. By this he begets hatred unspeakable, revilings without end; by the revilings blows, and by the blows oftentimes murder.

4. From these little things then that wicked spirit thus brings in the great sins; and from the great despair; having invented this other while not less mischievous than the former. For to sin destroys not so much as to despair. For he that has offended, if he be vigilant, speedily by repentance amends what has been done; but he that has learned to despond, and does not repent, by reason thereof fails of this amendment by not applying the remedies from repentance.

And he has a third grievous snare; as when he invests the sin with a show of devotion. And where has the devil so far prevailed as to deceive to this degree? Hear, and beware of his devices. Christ by Paul commanded that a woman depart not from her husband, 1 Corinthians 7:10 and not to defraud one another, except by consent; 1 Corinthians 7:5 but some from a love of continence forsooth, having

withdrawn from their own husbands, as though they were doing something devout, have driven them to adultery. Consider now what an evil it is that they, undergoing so much toil, should be blamed as having committed the greatest injustice, and should suffer extreme punishment, and drive their husbands into the pit of destruction.

Others again, abstaining from meats by a rule of fasting, have by degrees gone so far as to abhor them; which even of itself brings a very great punishment.

But this comes to pass, when any hold fast their own prejudices contrary to what is approved by the Scriptures. Those also among the Corinthians thought it was a part of perfection to eat of all things without distinction, even of things forbidden, but nevertheless this was not of perfection, but of the utmost lawlessness. Wherefore also Paul earnestly reproveth them, and pronounces them to be worthy of extreme punishment. Others again think it a sign of piety to wear long hair. And yet this is among the things forbidden, and carries with it much disgrace.

Again, others follow after excessive sorrow for their sins as a profitable thing; yet it also comes of the devil's wiles, and Judas showed it; at least in consequence thereof he even hanged himself. Therefore Paul again was in fear about him that had committed fornication, lest any such thing should befall him, and persuaded the Corinthians speedily to deliver him, lest perhaps such a one should be swallowed up with overmuch sorrow. 2 Corinthians 2:7 Then, indicating that such a result comes of the snares of that wicked one, he says, Lest Satan should get an advantage over us, for we are not ignorant of his devices, 2 Corinthians 2:10-11 meaning that he assails us with much craft. Since if he fought against us plainly and openly, the victory would be ready and easy; or rather even now, if we be vigilant, victory will be ready. For indeed against each one of those ways God has armed us.

For to persuade us not to despise even these little things, hear what warning He gives us, saying, He that says to his brother, thou fool, shall be in danger of hell; Matthew 5:22 and he that has looked with unchaste eyes is a complete adulterer. Matthew 5:28 And on them that laugh he pronounces a woe, and everywhere He removes the beginning and the seeds of evil, and says we have to give an account of an idle word. Matthew 12:36 Therefore also Job applied a remedy even for the thoughts of his children. Job 1:5

But about not despairing, it is said, Does he fall, and not arise? Does he turn away, and not return? Jeremiah 8:4 and, I do not will the death of the sinner, so much as that he should turn and live: and, Today if you will hear His voice: and many other such things, both sayings and examples are set in the Scripture. And in order not to be ruined under the guise of godly fear, hear Paul saying, Lest perhaps such a one be swallowed up by overmuch sorrow.

Knowing therefore these things, let us set for a barrier in all the ways that pervert the unwary the wisdom which is drawn from the Scriptures. Neither say, why, what is it, if I gaze curiously at a beautiful woman? For if you should commit the adultery in the heart, soon you will venture on that in flesh. Say not, why, what is it if I should pass by this poor man? For if you pass this man by, you will also the next; if him, then the third.

Neither again say, why, what is it, if I should desire my neighbor's goods. For this, this caused Ahab's ruin; although he would have paid a price, yet he took it from one unwilling. For a man ought not to buy by force, but on persuasion. But if he, who would have paid the fair price, was so punished, because he took from one unwilling, he who does not so much as this, and takes by violence from the unwilling, and that

when living under grace, of what punishment will he not be worthy?

In order therefore that we be not punished, keeping ourselves quite pure from all violence and rapine, and guarding against the sources of sins together with the sins themselves, let us with much diligence give heed to virtue; for thus shall we also enjoy the good things eternal by the grace and love towards man of our Lord Jesus Christ, to whom be glory world without end. Amen.

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