

John 1:15

by St. John Chrysostom

St. John Chrysostom's sermon on John 1:15 emphasizes the importance of John's testimony about Christ and the call for believers to live out their faith through good works and mercy.

Scripture: 1 Corinthians 3:8

Topics: "Faithful Service", "Good Works"

Description

John Chrysostom emphasizes the importance of laboring faithfully in God's work, assuring that even if the results are not visible, the Lord will reward according to our efforts. He highlights the role of John the Baptist in preparing the way for Jesus, gradually revealing His greatness to the people. Chrysostom urges believers to live out their faith through good works, sacrificial giving, and genuine mercy, as these offerings are more pleasing to God than mere rituals or sacrifices.

Transcript

John bears witness of Him, and cries, saying, This is He of whom I spoke, saying, He that comes after me is preferred before me, for He was before me. 1. Do we then run and labor in vain? Are we sowing upon the rocks? Does the seed fall upon the rocks? Does the seed fall without our knowing it by the wayside, and among thorns? I am greatly troubled and fear, lest our husbandry be unprofitable; not as though I shall be a loser as well as you, touching the reward of this labor.

For it is not with those who teach as it is with husbandmen. Oftentimes the husbandman after his year's toil, his hard work and sweat, if the earth produce no suitable return for his pains, will be able to find comfort for his labors from none else, but returns ashamed and downcast from his barn to his dwelling, his wife and children, unable to require of any man a reward for his lengthened toil. But in our case there is nothing like this. For even though the soil which we cultivate bring forth no fruit, if we have shown all industry, the Lord of it and of us will not suffer us to depart with disappointed hopes, but will give us a recompense; for, says St.

Paul, Every man shall receive his own reward according to his own labor 1 Corinthians 3:8, not according to the event of things. And that it is so, hearken: And You, he says, Son of man, testify unto this people, if they will hear, and if they will understand. Ezekiel 2:5, not from Septuagint And Ezekiel says, If the watchman give warning what it behooves to flee from, and what to choose, he has delivered his own soul, although there be none that will take heed. Ezekiel 3:18, and 33:9; not quoted from Septuagint Yet although we have this strong consolation, and are confident of the recompense that shall be made us, still

when we see that the work in you does not go forward, our state is not better than the state of those husbandmen who lament and mourn, who hide their faces and are ashamed.

This is the sympathy of a teacher, this is the natural care of a father. For Moses too, when it was in his power to have been delivered from the ingratitude of the Jews, and to have laid the more glorious foundation of another and far greater people, (Let Me alone, said God, that I may consume them, and make of you a nation mightier than this Exodus 32:10) because he was a holy man, the servant of God, and a friend very true and generous, he did not endure even to hearken to this word, but chose rather to perish with those who had been once allotted to him, than without them to be saved and be in greater honor.

Such ought he to be who has the charge of souls. For it is a strange thing that any one who has weak children, will not be called the father of any others than those who are sprung from him, but that he who has had disciples placed in his hands should be continually changing one flock for another, that we should be catching at the charge now of these, then of those, then again of others, having no real affection for any one. May we never have cause to suspect this of you. We trust that you abound more in faith in our Lord Jesus Christ, and in love to one another and towards all men.

And this we say as desiring that your zeal may be increased, and the excellence of your conversation farther advanced. For it is thus that you will be able to bring your understandings down to the very depth of the words set before us, if no film of wickedness darken the eyes of your intellect, and disturb its clear-sightedness and acuteness.

What then is it which is set before us today? John bore witness of Him, and cried, saying, This was He of whom I spoke, He that comes after me is preferred before me, for He was before me. The Evangelist is very full in making frequent mention of John, and often bearing about his testimony. And this he does not without a reason, but very wisely; for all the Jews held the man in great admiration, (even Josephus imputes the war to his death; and shows, that, on his account, what once was the mother city, is now no city at all, and continues the words of his encomium to great length,) and therefore desiring by his means to make the Jews ashamed, he continually reminds them of the testimony of the forerunner. The other Evangelists make mention of the older prophets, and at each successive thing that took place respecting Him refer the hearer to them. Thus when the Child is born, they say, Now all this was done, that it might be fulfilled which was spoken by Esias the prophet, saying, Behold, a virgin shall be with Child, and shall bring forth a Son Matthew 1:22; Isaiah 7:14; and when He is plotted against and sought for everywhere so diligently, that even tender infancy is slaughtered by Herod, they bring in Jeremy, saying, In Ramah was there a voice heard, lamentation, and weeping, and great mourning, Rachel weeping for her children Matthew 2:18; Jeremiah 31:15; and again, when He comes up out of Egypt, they mention Hosea, saying, Out of Egypt have I called My Son Matthew 2:15; Hosea 11:1; and this they do everywhere. But John providing testimony more clear and fresh, and uttering a voice more glorious than the other, brings continually forward not those only who had departed and were dead, but one also who was alive and present, who pointed Him out and baptized Him, him he continually introduces, not desiring to gain credit for the master through the servant, but condescending to the infirmity of his hearers. For as unless He had taken the form of a servant, He would not have been easily received, so had He not by the voice of a servant prepared the ears of his fellow-servants, the many (at any rate) of the Jews would not have received the Word.

2. But besides this, there was another great and wonderful provision. For because to speak any great words concerning himself, makes a man's witness to be suspected, and is often an obstacle to many hearers, another comes to testify of Him. And besides this the many are in a manner wont to run more readily to a voice which is more familiar and natural to them, as recognizing it more than other voices; and therefore the voice from heaven was uttered once or twice, but that of John oftentimes and continually. For those of the people who had surmounted the infirmity of their nature, and had been released from all the things of sense, could hear the Voice from heaven, and had no great need of that of man, but in all things obeyed that other, and were led by it; but they who yet moved below, and were wrapt in many veils, needed that meaner (voice). In the same way John, because he had snipped himself in every way of the things of sense, needed no other instructors, but was taught from heaven. He that sent me, says he, to baptize with water, the Same said to me, Upon whom you shall see the Spirit of God descending, the same is He. John 1:33 But the Jews who still were children, and could not as yet reach to that height, had a man for their teacher, a man who did not speak to them words of his own, but brought them a message from above.

What then says he? He bears witness concerning Him, and cries, saying What means that word cries? Boldly, he means, and freely, without any reserve, he proclaims. What does he proclaim? To what does he bear witness, and cry? This is He of whom I said, He that comes after me is preferred before me; for He was before me. The testimony is dark, and contains besides much that is lowly. For he does not say, This is the Son of God, the Only-begotten, the true Son ; but what? He that comes after me, is preferred before me; for He was before me.

As the mother birds do not teach their young all at once how to fly, nor finish their teaching in a single day, but at first lead them forth so as to be just outside the nest, then after first allowing them to rest, set them again to flying, and on the next day continue a flight much farther, and so gently, little by little, bring them to the proper height; just so the blessed John did not immediately bring the Jews to high things, but taught them for a while to fly up a little above the earth saying, that Christ was greater than he.

And yet this, even this was for the time no small thing, to have been able to persuade the hearers that one who had not yet appeared nor worked any wonders was greater than a man, (John, I mean,) so marvelous, so famous, to whom all ran, and whom they thought to be an angel. For a while therefore he labored to establish this in the minds of his hearers, that He to whom testimony was borne was greater than he who bore it; He that came after, than he that came before, He who had not yet appeared, than he that was manifest and famous.

And observe how prudently he introduces his testimony; for he does not only point Him out when He has appeared, but even before He appears, proclaims Him. For the expression, This is He of whom I spoke, is the expression of one declaring this. As also Matthew says, that when all came to him, he said, I indeed baptize you with water, but He that comes after me is mightier than I, the latchet of whose shoes I am not worthy to unloose. Wherefore then even before His appearance did he this?

In order that when He appeared, the testimony might readily be received, the minds of the hearers being already prepossessed by what was said concerning Him, and the mean external appearance not vitiating it. For if without having heard anything at all concerning Him they had seen the Lord, and as they beheld Him had at the same time received the testimony of John's words, so wonderful and great, the meanness of His appearance would have straightway been an objection to the grandeur of the expressions.

For Christ took on Him an appearance so mean and ordinary, that even Samaritan women, and harlots, and publicans, had confidence boldly to approach and converse with Him. As therefore, I said, if they had at once heard these words and seen Himself, they might perhaps have mocked at the testimony of John; but now because even before Christ appeared, they had often heard and had been accustomed to what was said concerning Him, they were affected in the opposite way, not rejecting the instruction of the words by reason of the appearance of Him who was witnessed of, but from their belief of what had been already told them, esteeming Him even more glorious.

The phrase, that comes after, means, that preaches after me, not that was born after me. And this Matthew glances at when he says, after me comes a man, not speaking of His birth from Mary, but of His coming to preach (the Gospel), for had he been speaking of the birth, he would not have said, comes, but has come; since He was born when John spoke this. What then means is before me? Is more glorious, more honorable. Do not, he says, because I came preaching first from this, suppose that I am greater than He; I am much inferior, so much inferior that I am not worthy to be counted in the rank of a servant. This is the sense of is before me, which Matthew showing in a different manner, says, The latchet of whose shoes I am not worthy to unloose. Luke 3:16 Again, that the phrase, is before me, does not refer to His coming into Being, is plain from the sequel; for had he meant to say this, what follows, for He was before me, would be superfluous. For who so dull and foolish as not to know that He who was born before him was before him? Or if the words refer to His subsistence before the ages, what is said is nothing else than that He who comes after me came into being before me. Besides, such a thing as this is unintelligible, and the cause is thrown in needlessly; for he ought to have said the contrary, if he had wished to declare this, that He who comes after me was before me, since also He was born before me. For one might with reason assign this, (the being born before) as the cause of being before, but not the being before, as the cause of being born. While what we assert is very reasonable. Since you all at least know this, that they are always things uncertain not things evident, that require their causes to be assigned. Now if the argument related to the production of substance, it could not have been uncertain that he who was born first must needs be first; but because he is speaking concerning honor, he with reason explains what seems to be a difficulty. For many might well enquire, whence and on what pretext He who came after, became before, that is, appeared with great honor; in reply to this question therefore, he immediately assigns the reason; and the reason is, His Being first. He does not say, that by some kind of advancement he cast me who has been first behind him, and so became before me, but that he was before me, even though he arrives after me.

But how, says one, if the Evangelist refers to His manifestation to men, and to the glory which was to attend Him from them, does he speak of what was not yet accomplished, as having already taken place? For he does not say, shall be, but was. Because this is a custom among the prophets of old, to speak of the future as of the past. Thus Isaiah speaking of His slaughter does not say, He shall be led (which would have denoted futurity) as a sheep to the slaughter; but He was led as a sheep to the slaughter Isaiah 53:7; yet He was not yet Incarnate, but the Prophet speaks of what should be as if it had come to pass. So David, pointing to the Crucifixion, said not, They shall pierce My hands and My feet, but They pierced My hands and My feet, and parted My garments among them, and cast lots upon My vesture Psalm 22:16-18; and discoursing of the traitor as yet unborn, he says, He which did eat of My bread, has lifted up his heel against Me Psalm 41:9; and of the circumstances of the Crucifixion, They gave Me gall for meat, and in My thirst they gave Me vinegar to drink. Psalm 69:21

4. Do you desire that we adduce more examples, or do these suffice? For my part, I think they do; for if we have not dug over the ground in all its extent, we have at least dug down to its bottom; and this last kind of

work is not less laborious than the former; and we fear lest by straining your attention immoderately we cause you to fall back.

Let us then give to our discourse a becoming conclusion. And what conclusion is becoming? A suitable giving of glory to God; and that is suitable which is given, not by words only, but much more by actions. For He says, Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father which is in Heaven. Matthew 5:16 Now nothing is more full of light than a most excellent conversation. As one of the wise men has said, The paths of the just shine like the light Proverbs 4:18, Septuagint; and they shine not for them alone who kindle the flame by their works, and are guides in the way of righteousness, but also for those who are their neighbors.

Let us then pour oil into these lamps, that the flame become higher, that rich light appear. For not only has this oil great strength now, but even when sacrifices were at their height, it was far more acceptable than they could be. I will have mercy, He says, and not sacrifice. Matthew 12:7; Hosea 6:6 And with good reason; for that is a lifeless altar, this a living; and all that is laid on that altar becomes the food of fire, and ends in dust, and it is poured forth as ashes, and the smoke of it is dissolved into the substance of the air; but here there is nothing like this, the fruits which it bears are different.

As the words of Paul declare; for in describing the treasures of kindness to the poor laid up by the Corinthians, he writes, For the administration of this service not only supplies the want of the saints, but is abundant also by many thanksgivings unto God. 2 Corinthians 9:12 And again; Whiles they glorify God for your professed subjection unto the Gospel of Christ, and for your liberal distribution unto them, and unto all men; and by their prayer for you, which long after you.

Do you behold it resolving itself into thanksgiving and praise of God, and continual prayers of those who have been benefited, and more fervent charity? Let us then sacrifice, beloved, let us sacrifice every day upon these altars. For this sacrifice is greater than prayer and fasting, and many things beside, if only it come from honest gain, and honest toils, and be pure from all covetousness, and rapine, and violence. For God accepts such offerings as these, but the others He turns away from and hates; He will not be honored out of other men's calamities, such sacrifice is unclean and profane, and would rather anger God than appease Him.

So that we must use all carefulness, that we do not, in the place of service, insult Him whom we would honor. For if Cain for making a second-rate offering, having done no other wrong, suffered extreme punishment, how shall not we when we offer anything gained by rapine and covetousness, suffer yet more severely. It is for this that God has shown to us the pattern of this commandment, that we might have mercy, not be severe to our fellow-servants; but he who takes what belongs to one and gives it to another, has not shown mercy, but inflicted hurt, and done an extreme injustice.

As then a stone cannot yield oil, so neither can cruelty produce humanity; for alms when it has such a root as this is alms no longer. Therefore I exhort that we look not to this only, that we give to those that need, but also that we give not from other men's plunder. When one prays, and another curses, whose voice will the Lord hear? Sirach 34:24 If we guide ourselves thus strictly, we shall be able by the grace of God to obtain much lovingkindness and mercy and pardon for what we have done amiss during all this long time, and to escape the river of fire; from which may it come to pass that we be all delivered, and ascend to the Kingdom of Heaven, through the grace and lovingkindness of our Lord Jesus Christ, to whom, with the Father and the Holy Ghost, be glory for ever and ever. Amen.

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