

John 1:21-27

by St. John Chrysostom

John the Baptist answers the Jews' questions, pointing them to Christ and his superior baptism.

Scripture: Deuteronomy 18:15, Isaiah 40:3, Matthew 3:11, Matthew 11:11, Matthew 11:19, Luke 1:66, Luke 16:15, John 1:20, 1 Corinthians 6:7, Hebrews 11:38

Topics: "Humility", "Envy"

Description

John Chrysostom preaches about the dangers of envy, highlighting how it harms the envious first before causing any harm to others, emphasizing the importance of enduring wrong rather than inflicting it. He discusses the encounter between John the Baptist and the Jews, showcasing John's humility and gentleness in responding to their questions about his identity. John Chrysostom delves into the significance of John the Baptist's testimony about Jesus, pointing out the humility and wisdom in John's acknowledgment of Jesus' superiority and his unworthiness to even untie His sandals.

Transcript

And this is the record of John, when the Jews sent priests and Levites from Jerusalem to ask him, Who are you?

1. A dreadful thing is envy, beloved, a dreadful thing and a pernicious, to the envious, not to the envied. For it harms and wastes them first, like some mortal venom deeply seated in their souls; and if by chance it injure its objects, the harm it does is small and trifling, and such as brings greater gain than loss. Indeed not in the case of envy only, but in every other, it is not he that has suffered, but he that has done the wrong, who receives injury. For had not this been so, Paul would not have enjoined the disciples rather to endure wrong than to inflict it, when he says, Why do you not rather take wrong? Why do you not rather suffer yourselves to be defrauded? 1 Corinthians 6:7 Well he knew, that destruction ever follows, not the injured party, but the injuring. All this I have said, by reason of the envy of the Jews. Because those who had flocked from the cities to John, and had condemned their own sins, and caused themselves to be baptized, repenting as it were after Baptism, send to ask him, Who are you? Of a truth they were the offspring of vipers, serpents, and even worse if possible than this. O evil and adulterous and perverse generation, after having been baptized, do you then become vainly curious, and question about the Baptist? What folly can be greater than this of yours? How was it that you came forth? That you confessed your sins, that you ran to the Baptist? How was it that you asked him what you must do? When in all this you were acting unreasonably, since you knew not the principle and purpose of his coming. Yet of this the

blessed John said nothing, nor does he charge or reproach them with it, but answers them with all gentleness.

It is worth while to learn why he did thus. It was, that their wickedness might be manifest and plain to all men. Often did John testify of Christ to the Jews, and when he baptized them he continually made mention of Him to his company, and said, I indeed baptize you with water, but there comes One after me who is mightier than I; He shall baptize you with the Holy Ghost and with fire. Matthew 3:11 With regard to him they were affected by a human feeling; for, tremblingly attentive to the opinion of the world, and looking to the outward appearance 2 Corinthians 10:7, they deemed it an unworthy thing that he should be subject to Christ.

Since there were many things that pointed out John for an illustrious person. In the first place, his distinguished and noble descent; for he was the son of a chief priest. Then his conversation, his austere mode of life, his contempt of all human things; for despising dress and table, and house and food itself, he had passed his former time in the desert. In the case of Christ all was the contrary of this. His family was mean, (as they often objected to Him, saying, Is not this the carpenter's son?

Is not his mother called Mary? And his brethren James and Joses?) Matthew 13:55; and that which was supposed to be His country was held in such evil repute, that even Nathanael said, Can there any good thing come out of Nazareth? John 1:46 His mode of living was ordinary, and His garments not better than those of the many. For He was not girt with a leathern girdle, nor was His raiment of hair, nor did He eat honey and locusts. But He fared like all others, and was present at the feasts of wicked men and publicans, that He might draw them to Him.

Which thing the Jews not understanding reproached Him with, as He also says Himself, The Son of Man came eating and drinking, and they say, Behold a gluttonous man and a winebibber, a friend of publicans and sinners. Matthew 11:19 When then John continually sent them from himself to Jesus, who seemed to them a meaner person, being ashamed and vexed at this, and wishing rather to have him for their teacher, they did not dare to say so plainly, but send to him, thinking by their flattery to induce him to confess that he was the Christ.

They do not therefore send to him mean men, as in the case of Christ, for when they wished to lay hold on Him, they sent servants, and then Herodians, and the like, but in this instance, priests and Levites, and not merely priests, but those from Jerusalem, that is, the more honorable; for the Evangelist did not notice this without a cause. And they send to ask, Who are you? Yet the manner of his birth was well known to all, so that all said, What manner of child shall this be?

Luke 1:66; and the report had gone forth into all the hill country. And afterwards when he came to Jordan, all the cities were set on the wing, and came to him from Jerusalem, and from all Judæa, to be baptized. Why then do they now ask? Not because they did not know him, (how could that be, when he had been made manifest in so many ways?) but because they wished to bring him to do that which I have mentioned.

2. Hear then how this blessed person answered to the intention with which they asked the question, not to the question itself. When they said, Who are you? he did not at once give them what would have been the direct answer, I am the voice of one crying in the wilderness. But what did he? He removed the suspicion they had formed; for, says the Evangelist, being asked, Who are you?

John 1:20

He confessed, and denied not; but confessed, I am not the Christ.

Observe the wisdom of the Evangelist. He mentions this for the third time, to set forth the excellency of the Baptist, and their wickedness and folly. And Luke also says, that when the multitudes supposed him to be the Christ, he again removes their suspicion. This is the part of an honest servant, not only not to take to himself his master's honor, but also to reject it when given to him by the many. But the multitudes arrived at this supposition from simplicity and ignorance; these questioned him from an ill intention, which I have mentioned, expecting, as I said, to draw him over to their purpose by their flattery. Had they not expected this, they would not have proceeded immediately to another question, but would have been angry with him for having given them an answer foreign to their enquiry, and would have said, Why, did we suppose that? Did we come to ask you that? But now as taken and detected in the fact, they proceed to another question, and say,

John 1:21

What then? Are you Elias? And he says, I am not.

For they expected that Elias also would come, as Christ declares; for when His disciples enquired, How then do the scribes say that Elias must first come? Matthew 17:10 He replied, Elias truly shall first come, and restore all things. Then they ask, Are you that prophet? And he answered, No. Matthew 17:10 Yet surely he was a prophet. Wherefore then does he deny it? Because again he looks to the intention of his questioners. For they expected that some special prophet should come, because Moses said, The Lord your God will raise up unto you a Prophet of your brethren like me, unto Him shall you harken. Deuteronomy 18:15 Now this was Christ. Wherefore they do not say, Are you a prophet? meaning thereby one of the ordinary prophets; but the expression, Are you the prophet? with the addition of the article, means, Are you that Prophet who was foretold by Moses? and therefore he denied not that he was a prophet, but that he was that Prophet.

John 1:22

Then said they unto him, Who are you? That we may give an answer to them that sent us. What do you say of yourself?

Observe them pressing him more vehemently, urging him, repeating their questions, and not desisting; while he first kindly removes false opinions concerning himself, and then sets before them one which is true. For, says he,

John 1:23

I am the voice of one crying in the wilderness, Make straight the way of the Lord, as said the prophet Esaias.

When he had spoken some high and lofty words concerning Christ, as if (replying) to their opinion, he immediately betook himself to the Prophet to draw from thence confirmation of his assertion.

John 1:24-25

And [says the Evangelist] they who were sent were of the Pharisees. And they asked him, and said to him, Why do you baptize then, if you be not that Christ, neither Elias, neither that Prophet?

Do you see not without reason I said that they wished to bring him to this? And the reason why they did not at first say so was, lest they should be detected by all men. And then when he said, I am not the Christ, they, being desirous to conceal what they were plotting within, go on to Elias, and that Prophet. But when he said that he was not one of these either, after that, in their perplexity, they cast aside the mask, and without any disguise show clearly their treacherous intention, saying, Why do you baptize then, if you be not that Christ? And then again, wishing to throw some obscurity over the thing, "seest thou how, disguising what they had, they add."--> they add the others also, Elias, and that Prophet. For when they were not able to trip him by their flattery, they thought that by an accusation they could compel him to say the thing that was not.

What folly, what insolence, what ill-timed officiousness! You were sent to learn who and whence he might be, not to lay down laws for him also. This too was the conduct of men who would compel him to confess himself to be the Christ. Still not even now is he angry, nor does he, as might have been expected, say to them anything of this sort, Do you give orders and make laws for me? but again shows great gentleness towards them.

John 1:26-27

I baptize with water: but there stands one among you, whom you know not; He it is, who coming after me is preferred before me, whose shoe's latchet I am not worthy to unloose. 3. What could the Jews have left to say to this? For even from this the accusation against them cannot be evaded, the decision against them admits not of pardon, they have given sentence against themselves. How? In what way? They deemed John worthy of credit, and so truthful, that they might believe him not only when he testified of others, but also when he spoke concerning himself.

For had they not been so disposed, they would not have sent to learn from him what related to himself. Because you know that the only persons whom we believe, especially when speaking of themselves, are those whom we suppose to be more veracious than any others. And it is not this alone which closes their mouths, but also the disposition with which they had approached him; for they came forth to him at first with great eagerness, even though afterwards they altered. Both which things Christ declared, when He said, He was a burning (and a shining) light, and you were willing for a season to rejoice in his light.

Moreover, his answer made him yet more worthy of credit. For (Christ) says, He that seeks not his own glory, the same is true, and no unrighteousness is in him. Now this man sought it not, but refers the Jews to another. And those who were sent were of the most trustworthy among them, and of the highest rank, so that they could have in no way any refuge or excuse, for the unbelief which they exhibited towards Christ. Wherefore did you not receive the things spoken concerning Him by John?

You sent men who held the first rank among you, you enquired by them, you heard what the Baptist answered, they manifested all possible officiousness, sought into every point, named all the persons you suspected him to be; and yet most publicly and plainly he confessed that he was neither Christ, nor Elias nor that Prophet. Nor did he stop even there, but also informed them who he was, and spoke of the nature of his own baptism, that it was but a slight and mean thing, nothing more than some water, and told of the superiority of the Baptism given by Christ; he also cited Esaias the prophet, testifying of old very long ago, and calling Christ Lord Isaiah 40:3, but giving him the names of minister and servant.

What after this ought they to have done? Ought they not to have believed on Him who was witnessed of, to have worshipped Him, to have confessed Him to be God? For the character and heavenly wisdom of the witness showed that his testimony proceeded, not from flattery, but from truth; which is plain also from this, that no man prefers his neighbor to himself, nor, when he may lawfully give honor to himself, will yield it up to another, especially when it is so great as that of which we speak.

So that John would not have renounced this testimony (as belonging) to Christ, had He not been God. For though he might have rejected it for himself as being too great for his own nature, yet he would not have assigned it to another nature that was beneath it.

But there stands One among you, whom you know not. Reasonable it was that Christ should mingle among the people as one of the many, because everywhere He taught men not to be puffed up and boastful. And in this place by knowledge the Baptist means a perfect acquaintance with Him, who and whence He was. And immediately next to this he puts, Who comes after me; all but saying, Think not that all is contained in my baptism, for had that been perfect, Another would not have arisen after me to offer you a different One, but this of mine is a preparation and a clearing the way for that other. Mine is but a shadow and image, but One must come who shall add to this the reality. So that His very coming 'after me' especially declares His dignity: for had the first been perfect, no place would have been required for a second. Is before me, is more honorable, brighter. And then, lest they should imagine that His superiority was found by comparison, desiring to establish His incomparableness, he says, Whose shoe's latchet I am not worthy to unloose; that is, who is not simply before me, but before me in such a way, that I am not worthy to be numbered among the meanest of His servants. For to loose the shoe is the office of humblest service.

Now if John was not worthy to unloose the latchet Matthew 11:11, John, than whom among them that are born of women there has not risen a greater, where shall we rank ourselves? If he who was equal to, or rather greater than, all the world, (for says Paul, the world was not worthy of them Hebrews 11:38 declares himself not worthy to be reckoned even among the meanest of those who should minister unto Him, what shall we say, who are full of ten thousand sins, and are as far from the excellence of John, as earth from heaven.

4. He then says that he himself is not worthy so much as to unloose the latchet of His shoe; while the enemies of the truth are mad with such a madness, as to assert that they are worthy to know Him even as He knows Himself. What is worse than such insanity, what more frenzied than such arrogance? Well has a wise man said, The beginning of pride is not to know the Lord.

The devil would not have been brought down and become a devil, not being a devil before, had he not been sick of this disease. This it was that cast him out from that confidence, this sent him to the pit of fire, this was the cause of all his woes. For it is enough of itself to destroy every excellence of the soul, whether it find almsgiving, or prayer, or fasting, or anything. For, says the Evangelist, That which is highly esteemed among men is impure before the Lord. Luke 16:15 -- not quoted exactly Therefore it is not only fornication or adultery that are wont to defile those who practice them, but pride also, and that far more than those vices. Why? Because fornication though it is an unpardonable sin, yet a man may plead the desire; but pride cannot possibly find any cause or pretext of any sort whatever by which to obtain so much as a shadow of excuse; it is nothing but a distortion and most grievous disease of the soul, produced from no other source but folly. For there is nothing more foolish than a proud man, though he be surrounded with wealth, though he possess much of the wisdom of this world, though he be set in royal

place, though he bear about with all things that among men appear desirable.

For if the man who is proud of things really good is wretched and miserable, and loses the reward of all those things, must not he who is exalted by things that are nought, and puffs himself up because of a shadow or the flower of the grass, (for such is this world's glory,) be more ridiculous than any, when he does just as some poor needy man might do, pining all his time with hunger, yet if ever he should chance one night to see a dream of good fortune, filled with conceit because of it?

O wretched and miserable! When your soul is perishing by a most grievous disease, when you are poor with utter poverty, are you high-minded because you have such and such a number of talents of gold? Because you have a multitude of slaves and cattle? Yet these are not yours; and if you dost not believe my words, learn from the experience of those who have gone before you. And if you are so drunken, that you can not be instructed even from what has befallen others, wait a little, and you shall know by what befalls yourself that these things avail you nothing, when gasping for life, and master not of a single hour, not even of a little moment, you shall unwillingly leave them to those who are about you, and these perhaps those whom you would not. For many have not been permitted even to give directions concerning them, but have departed suddenly, desiring to enjoy them, but not permitted, dragged from them, and forced to yield them up to others, giving place by compulsion to those to whom they would not. That this be not our case, let us, while we are yet in strength and health, send forward our riches hence to our own city, for thus only and in no other way shall we be able to enjoy them; so shall we lay them up in a place inviolate and safe. For there is nothing, there is nothing there that can take them from us; no death, no attested wills, no successors to inheritances, no false informations, no plottings against us, but he who has departed hence bearing away great wealth with him may enjoy it there forever. Who then is so wretched as not to desire to revel in riches which are his own throughout? Let us then transfer our wealth, and remove it there. We shall not need for such a removal asses, or camels, or carriages, or ships, (God has relieved even us from this difficulty,) but we only want the poor, the lame, the crippled, the infirm. These are entrusted with this transfer, these convey our riches to heaven, these introduce the masters of such wealth as this to the inheritance of goods everlasting. Which may it be that we all attain through the grace and lovingkindness of our Lord Jesus Christ, by whom and with whom, to the Father and the Holy Ghost, be glory, now and ever, and world without end. Amen.

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