

John 2:23-3:4

by St. John Chrysostom

Christ teaches that true faith and humility are necessary to understand spiritual truths and to enter the Kingdom of God.

Scripture: Matthew 5:21, Matthew 13:22, John 2:24 - 3:1, John 3:3, John 12:47, John 20:29, 1 Corinthians 2:14

Topics: "True Discipleship", "Spiritual Renewal"

Description

John Chrysostom preaches about the importance of true discipleship and belief in Jesus, highlighting the distinction between those who follow Him for miracles and those who follow Him for His teachings. He emphasizes the need for a genuine, steadfast faith that goes beyond temporary belief and superficial understanding. Chrysostom also delves into the encounter between Nicodemus and Jesus, illustrating the dangers of approaching spiritual matters with earthly reasoning and the significance of being born again in the Spirit to truly see the Kingdom of God.

Transcript

Now when He was in Jerusalem at the Passover, in the feast, many believed on Him.

1. Of the men of that time some clung to their error, others laid hold on the truth, while of these last, some having retained it for a little while again fell off from it. Alluding to these, Christ compared them to seeds not deeply sown, but having their roots upon the surface of the earth; and He said that they should quickly perish. And these the Evangelist has here pointed out to us, saying,

When He was in Jerusalem, at the Passover, in the feast, many believed on Him, when they saw the miracles which He did.

John 2:24

But Jesus did not commit Himself unto them.

For they were the more perfect among His disciples, who came to Him not only because of His miracles, but through His teaching also. The grosser sort the miracles attracted, but the better reasoners His prophecies and doctrines; and so they who were taken by His teaching were more steadfast than those attracted by His miracles. And Christ also called them blessed, saying, Blessed are they that have not seen, and yet have believed. John 20:29 But that these here mentioned were not real disciples, the following passage shows, for it says, Jesus did not commit Himself unto them. Wherefore? Because He

knew all things,

John 2:25

And needed not that any should testify of man, for He knew what was in man.

The meaning is of this kind. He who dwells in men's hearts, and enters into their thoughts, took no heed of outward words; and knowing well that their warmth was but for a season, He placed not confidence in them as in perfect disciples, nor committed all His doctrines to them as though they had already become firm believers. Now, to know what is in the heart of men belongs to God alone, who has fashioned hearts one by one Psalm 33:15, Septuagint, for, says Solomon, You, even Thou only, know the hearts 1 Kings 8:39; He therefore needed not witnesses to learn the thoughts of His own creatures, and so He felt no confidence in them because of their mere, temporary belief. Men, who know neither the present nor the future, often tell and entrust all without any reserve to persons who approach them deceitfully and who shortly will fall off from them; but Christ did not so, for well He knew all their secret thoughts.

And many such now there are, who have indeed the name of faith, but are unstable, and easily led away; wherefore neither now does Christ commit Himself to them, but conceals from them many things; and just as we do not place confidence in mere acquaintances but in real friends, so also does Christ. Hear what He says to His disciples, Henceforth I call you not servants, you are My friends. c. xv. 14, 15 Whence is this and why? Because all things that I have heard of My Father I have made known unto you. And therefore He gave no signs to the Jews who asked for them, because they asked tempting Him. Indeed the asking for signs is a practice of tempters both then and now; for even now there are some that seek them and say, Why do not miracles take place also at this present time? If you are faithful, as you ought to be, and lovest Christ as you ought to love Him, you have no need of signs, they are given to the unbelievers. How then, asks one, were they not given to the Jews? Given they certainly were; and if there were times when though they asked they did not receive them, it was because they asked them not that they might be delivered from their unbelief, but in order the more to confirm their wickedness.

John 3:1-2

And there was a man of the Pharisees, named Nicodemus. The same came to Jesus by night and said to Him, 'Rabbi, we know that You are a Teacher come from God: for no man can do the miracles that You do, unless God is with him.'

This man appears also in the middle of the Gospel, making defense for Christ; for he says, Our law judges no man before it hear him John 7:51; and the Jews in anger replied to him, Search and look, for out of Galilee arises no prophet. Again after the crucifixion he bestowed great care upon the burial of the Lord's body: There came also, says the Evangelist, Nicodemus, which came to the Lord by night, and brought a mixture of myrrh and aloes, about an hundred pound weight. John 19:39 And even now he was disposed towards Christ, but not as he ought, nor with proper sentiments respecting Him, for he was as yet entangled in Jewish infirmity. Wherefore he came by night, because he feared to do so by day. Yet not for this did the merciful God reject or rebuke him, or deprive him of His instruction, but even with much kindness conversed with him and disclosed to him very exalted doctrines, enigmatically indeed, but nevertheless He disclosed them. For far more deserving of pardon was he than those who acted thus through wickedness. They are entirely without excuse; but he, though he was liable to condemnation, yet was not so to an equal degree. How then does the Evangelist say nothing of the kind concerning him? He has said in another place, that of the rulers also many believed on Him, but because of the Jews they did

not confess (Him), lest they should be put out of the synagogue John 12:42; but here he has implied the whole by mentioning his coming by night. What then says Nicodemus?

Rabbi, we know that You are a Teacher come from God: for no man can do the miracles that You do, except God be with him.

2. Nicodemus yet lingers below, has yet human thoughts concerning Him, and speaks of Him as of a Prophet, imagining nothing great from His miracles. We know, he says, that You are a Teacher come from God. Why then do you come by night and secretly, to Him that speaks the things of God, to Him who comes from God? Why do you not converse with Him openly? But Jesus said nothing like this to him, nor did He rebuke him; for, says the Prophet, A bruised reed shall He not break, and smoking flax shall he not quench; He shall not strive nor cry Isaiah 42:2-3; as quoted Matthew 12:19-20: and again He says Himself, I came not to condemn the world, but to save the world. John 12:47

No man can do these miracles, except God be with him.

Still here Nicodemus speaks like the heretics, in saying, that He has a power working within Him, and has need of the aid of others to do as He did. What then says Christ? Observe His exceeding condescension. He refrained for a while from saying, I need not the help of others, but do all things with power, for I am the Very Son of God, and have the same power as My Father, because this would have been too hard for His hearer; for I say now what I am always saying, that what Christ desired was, not so much for a while to reveal His own Dignity, as to persuade men that He did nothing contrary to His Father. And therefore in many places he appears in words confined by limits, but in His actions He does not so. For when He works a miracle, He does all with power, saying, I will, be thou clean. Matthew 8:3 Talitha, arise. Mark 5:41; not verbally quoted Stretch forth your hand. Mark 3:5 Your sins be forgiven you. Matthew 9:2 Peace, be still. Mark 4:39 Take up your bed, and go unto your house. Matthew 9:6 Thou foul spirit, I say unto you, come out of him. Mark 9:25; not verbally quoted Be it unto you even as you will. Matthew 15:28 If any one say (anything) unto you, you shall say, The Lord has need of him. Mark 11:3 This day shall you be with Me in Paradise. Luke 23:43 You have heard that it was said by them of old time, You shall not kill; but I say unto you, that whosoever is angry with his brother without a cause, shall be in danger of the judgment. Matthew 5:21-22 Come after Me, and I will make you fishers of men. Mark 1:17 And everywhere we observe that His authority is great; for in His actions no one could find fault with what was done. How was it possible? Had His words not come to pass, nor been accomplished as He commanded, any one might have said that they were the commands of a madman; but since they did come to pass, the reality of their accomplishment stopped men's mouths even against their will. But with regard to His discourses, they might often in their insolence charge Him with madness. Wherefore now in the case of Nicodemus, He utters nothing openly, but by dark sayings leads him up from his low thoughts, teaching him, that He has sufficient power in Himself to show forth miracles; for that His Father begot Him Perfect and All-sufficient, and without any imperfection.

But let us see how He effects this. Nicodemus says, Rabbi, we know that You are a Teacher come from God, for no man can do the miracles that You do, except God be with him. He thought he had said something great when he had spoken thus of Christ. What then says Christ? To show that he had not yet set foot even on the threshold of right knowledge, nor stood in the porch, but was yet wandering somewhere without the palace, both he and whoever else should say the like, and that he had not so much as glanced towards true knowledge when he held such an opinion of the Only-Begotten, what says He?

John 3:3

Verily, verily, I say unto you, Unless a man be born again, he cannot see the Kingdom of God.

That is, Unless you are born again and receive the right doctrines, you are wandering somewhere outside, and are far from the Kingdom of heaven. But He does not speak so plainly as this. In order to make the saying less hard to bear, He does not plainly direct it at him, but speaks indefinitely, Unless a man be born again: all but saying, both you and any other, who may have such opinions concerning Me, are somewhere outside the Kingdom. Had He not spoken from a desire to establish this, His answer would have been suitable to what had been said. Now the Jews, if these words had been addressed to them, would have derided Him and departed; but Nicodemus shows here also his desire of instruction. And this is why in many places Christ speaks obscurely, because He wishes to rouse His hearers to ask questions, and to render them more attentive. For that which is said plainly often escapes the hearer, but what is obscure renders him more active and zealous. Now what He says, is something like this: If you are not born again, if you partake not of the Spirit which is by the washing of Regeneration, you can not have a right opinion of Me, for the opinion which you have is not spiritual, but carnal. Titus 3:5 But He did not speak thus, as refusing to confound one who had brought such as he had, and who had spoken to the best of his ability; and He leads him unsuspectedly up to greater knowledge, saying, Unless a man be born again. The word again, in this place, some understand to mean from heaven, others, from the beginning. It is impossible, says Christ, for one not so born to see the Kingdom of God; in this pointing to Himself, and declaring that there is another beside the natural sight, and that we have need of other eyes to behold Christ. Having heard this . . .

John 3:4

Nicodemus says, How can a man be born when he is old?

Do you call Him Master, do you say that He is come from God, and yet do you not receive His words, but use to your Teacher a manner of speaking which expresses much perplexity? For the How, is the doubting question of those who have no strong belief, but who are yet of the earth. Therefore Sarah laughed when she had said, How? And many others having asked this question, have fallen from the faith.

3. And thus heretics continue in their heresy, because they frequently make this enquiry, saying, some of them, How was He begotten? others, How was He made flesh? and subjecting that Infinite Essence to the weakness of their own reasonings. Knowing which, we ought to avoid this unseasonable curiosity, for they who search into these matters shall, without learning the How, fall away from the right faith. On this account Nicodemus, being in doubt, enquires the manner in which this can be, (for he understood that the words spoken referred to himself,) is confused, and dizzy, and in perplexity, having come as to a man, and hearing more than man's words, and such as no one ever yet had heard; and for a while he rouses himself at the sublimity of the sayings, but yet is in darkness, and unstable, borne about in every direction, and continually falling away from the faith. And therefore he perseveres in proving the impossibility, so as to provoke Him to clearer teaching.

Can a man, he says, enter into his mother's womb, and be born?

Do you see how when one commits spiritual things to his own reasonings, he speaks ridiculously, seems to be trifling, or to be drunken, when he pries into what has been said beyond what seems good to God, and admits not the submission of faith? Nicodemus heard of the spiritual Birth, yet perceived it not as

spiritual, but dragged down the words to the lowness of the flesh, and made a doctrine so great and high depend upon physical consequence. And so he invents frivolities, and ridiculous difficulties. Wherefore Paul said, The natural man receives not the things of the Spirit. 1 Corinthians 2:14 Yet even in this he preserved his reverence for Christ, for he did not mock at what had been said, but, deeming it impossible, held his peace. There were two difficulties; a Birth of this kind, and the Kingdom; for neither had the name of the Kingdom ever been heard among the Jews, nor of a Birth like this. But he stops for a while at the first, which most astonished his mind.

Let us then, knowing this, not enquire into things relating to God by reasoning, nor bring heavenly matters under the rule of earthly consequences, nor subject them to the necessity of nature; but let us think of all reverently, believing as the Scriptures have said; for the busy and curious person gains nothing, and besides not finding what he seeks, shall suffer extreme punishment. You have heard, that (the Father) begot (the Son): believe what you have heard; but do ask not, How, and so take away the Generation; to do so would be extreme folly. For if this man, because, on hearing of a Generation, not that ineffable Generation, but this which is by grace, he conceived nothing great concerning it, but human and earthly thoughts, was therefore darkened and in doubt, what punishment must they deserve, who are busy and curious about that most awful Generation, which transcends all reason and intellect? For nothing causes such dizziness as human reasoning, all whose words are of earth, and which cannot endure to be enlightened from above. Earthly reasonings are full of mud, and therefore need we streams from heaven, that when the mud has settled, the clearer portion may rise and mingle with the heavenly lessons; and this comes to pass, when we present an honest soul and an upright life. For certainly it is possible for the intellect to be darkened, not only by unseasonable curiosity, but also by corrupt manners; wherefore Paul has said to the Corinthians, I have fed you with milk, and not with meat; for hitherto you were not able to bear it, neither yet now are you able, for you are yet carnal; for whereas there is among you envying, and strife, and divisions, are you not carnal? 1 Corinthians 3:2 And also in the Epistle to the Hebrews, and in many places, one may see Paul asserting that this is the cause of evil doctrines; for that the soul possessed by passions cannot behold anything great or noble, but as if darkened by a sort of film suffers most grievous dim-sightedness.

Let us then cleanse ourselves, let us kindle the light of knowledge, let us not sow among thorns. What the thorns are, you know, though we tell you not; for often you have heard Christ call the cares of this present life, and the deceitfulness of riches, by this name. Matthew 13:22 And with reason. For as thorns are unfruitful, so are these things; as thorns tear those that handle them, so do these passions; as thorns are readily caught by the fire, and hateful by the husbandman, so too are the things of the world; as in thorns, wild beasts, and snakes, and scorpions hide themselves, so do they in the deceitfulness of riches. But let us kindle the fire of the Spirit, that we may consume the thorns, and drive away the beasts, and make the field clear for the husbandman; and after cleansing it, let us water it with the streams of the Spirit, let us plant the fruitful olive, that most kindly of trees, the evergreen, the light-giving, the nutritious, the wholesome. All these qualities has almsgiving, which is, as it were, a seal on those that possess it. This plant not even death when it comes causes to wither, but ever it stands enlightening the mind, feeding the sinews of the soul, and rendering its strength mightier. And if we constantly possess it, we shall be able with confidence to behold the Bridegroom, and to enter into the bridal chamber; to which may we all attain, through the grace and lovingkindness of our Lord Jesus Christ, with whom to the Father and the Holy Ghost be glory, for ever and ever. Amen.

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