

John 3:12-16

by St. John Chrysostom

Jesus' teachings are designed to lead His hearers to faith and demonstrate the relationship between the type and the reality, and God's love for the world is infinite and unconditional.

Scripture: Isaiah 58:7, John 3:14-16, Romans 5:7, Colossians 2:16, 1 Peter 2:22

Topics: "Divine Revelation", "Eternal Salvation"

Description

John Chrysostom emphasizes the importance of understanding earthly teachings before grasping heavenly truths, highlighting Jesus' method of gradually revealing profound doctrines to accommodate the limitations of His audience. Chrysostom explains the significance of Jesus referring to Baptism as an 'earthly thing' compared to the heavenly Generation, stressing the need for faith in comprehending divine mysteries. He delves into the symbolism of Jesus being lifted up like the serpent in the wilderness, connecting the Crucifixion to salvation and eternal life for believers. Chrysostom challenges listeners to reflect on God's immense love demonstrated through the sacrifice of His Son, contrasting human reluctance to give generously with Christ's selfless act of redemption.

Transcript

If I have told you earthly things, and you believe not, how shall you believe, if I tell you of heavenly things? And no man has ascended up to heaven, but He that came down from heaven, even the Son of Man which is in heaven.

1. What I have often said I shall now repeat, and shall not cease to say. What is that? It is that Jesus, when about to touch on sublime doctrines, often contains Himself by reason of the infirmity of His hearers, and dwells not for a continuance on subjects worthy of His greatness, but rather on those which partake of condescension. For the sublime and great, being but once uttered, is sufficient to establish that character, as far as we are able to hear it; but unless more lowly sayings, and such as are near to the comprehension of the hearers, were continually uttered, the more sublime would not readily take hold on a groveling listener. And therefore of the sayings of Christ more are lowly than sublime. But yet that this again may not work another mischief, by detaining the disciple here below, He does not merely set before men His inferior sayings without first telling them why He utters them; as, in fact, He has done in this place. For when He had said what He did concerning Baptism, and the Generation by grace which takes place on earth, being desirous to admit them to that His own mysterious and incomprehensible Generation, He holds it in suspense for a while, and admits them not, and then tells them His reason for not admitting

them. What is that? It is, the dullness and infirmity of His hearers. And referring to this He added the words, If I have told you earthly things, and you believe not, how shall you believe if I tell you of heavenly things? so that wherever He says anything ordinary and humble, we must attribute this to the infirmity of His audience.

The expression earthly things, some say is here used of the wind; that is, If I have given you an example from earthly things, and you did not even so believe, how shall you be able to learn sublimer things? And wonder not if He here call Baptism an earthly thing, for He calls it so, either from its being performed on earth, or so naming it in comparison with that His own most awful Generation. For though this Generation of ours is heavenly, yet compared with that true Generation which is from the Substance of the Father, it is earthly.

He does not say, You have not understood, but, You have not believed; for when a man is ill disposed towards those things which it is possible to apprehend by the intellect, and will not readily receive them, he may justly be charged with want of understanding; but when he receives not things which cannot be apprehended by reasoning, but only by faith, the charge against him is no longer want of understanding, but unbelief. Leading him therefore away from enquiring by reasonings into what had been said, He touches him more severely by charging him with want of faith. If now we must receive our own Generation by faith, what do they deserve who are busy with their reasonings about that of the Only-Begotten?

But perhaps some may ask, And if the hearers were not to believe these sayings, wherefore were they uttered? Because though they believed not, those who came after would believe and profit by them. Touching him therefore very severely, Christ goes on to show that He knows not these things only, but others also, far more and greater than these. And this He declared by what follows, when He said, And no man has ascended up to heaven, but He that came down from heaven, even the Son of Man which is in heaven.

And what manner of sequel is this? asks one. The very closest, and entirely in unison with what has gone before. For since Nicodemus had said, We know that You are a teacher come from God, on this very point He sets him right, all but saying, Think Me not a teacher in such manner as were the many of the prophets who were of earth, for I have come from heaven (but) now. None of the prophets has ascended up there, but I dwell there. Do you see how even that which appears very exalted is utterly unworthy of his greatness? For not in heaven only is He, but everywhere, and He fills all things; but yet He speaks according to the infirmity of His hearer, desiring to lead him up little by little. And in this place He called not the flesh Son of Man, but He now named, so to speak, His entire Self from the inferior substance; indeed this is His wont, to call His whole Person often from His Divinity, and often from His humanity.

John 3:14

And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up.

This again seems to depend upon what has gone before, and this too has a very close connection with it. For after having spoken of the very great benefaction that had come to man by Baptism, He proceeds to mention another benefaction, which was the cause of this, and not inferior to it; namely, that by the Cross. As also Paul arguing with the Corinthians sets down these benefits together, when he says, Was Paul crucified for you? Or were you baptized into the name of Paul? for these two things most of all declare His unspeakable love, that He both suffered for His enemies, and that having died for His enemies, He freely gave to them by Baptism entire remission of their sins.

2. But wherefore did He not say plainly, I am about to be crucified, instead of referring His hearers to the ancient type? First, that you may learn that old things are akin to new, and that the one are not alien to the other; next, that you may know that He came not unwillingly to His Passion; and again, besides these reasons, that you may learn that no harm arises to Him from the Fact, and that to many there springs from it salvation. For, that none may say, And how is it possible that they who believe in one crucified should be saved, when he himself is holden of death? He leads us to the ancient story. Now if the Jews, by looking to the brazen image of a serpent, escaped death, much rather will they who believe in the Crucified, with good reason enjoy a far greater benefit. For this takes place, not through the weakness of the Crucified, or because the Jews are stronger than He, but because God loved the world, therefore is His living Temple fastened to the Cross.

John 3:15

That whosoever believes in Him should not perish, but have eternal life.

Do you see the cause of the Crucifixion, and the salvation which is by it? Do you see the relationship of the type to the reality? There the Jews escaped death, but the temporal, here believers the eternal; there the hanging serpent healed the bites of serpents, here the Crucified Jesus cured the wounds inflicted by the spiritual dragon; there he who looked with his bodily eyes was healed, here he who beholds with the eyes of his understanding put off all his sins; there that which hung was brass fashioned into the likeness of a serpent, here it was the Lord's Body, built by the Spirit; there a serpent bit and a serpent healed, here death destroyed and a Death saved. But the snake which destroyed had venom, that which saved was free from venom; and so again was it here, for the death which slew us had sin with it, as the serpent had venom; but the Lord's Death was free from all sin, as the brazen serpent from venom. For, says Peter, He did no sin, neither was guile found in His mouth. 1 Peter 2:22 And this is what Paul also declares, And having spoiled principalities and powers, He made a show of them openly, triumphing over them in it. Colossians 2:16 For as some noble champion by lifting on high and dashing down his antagonist, renders his victory more glorious, so Christ, in the sight of all the world, cast down the adverse powers, and having healed those who were smitten in the wilderness, delivered them from all venomous beasts that vexed them, by being hung upon the Cross. Yet He did not say, must hang, but, must be lifted up Acts 28:4; for He used this which seemed the milder term, on account of His hearer, and because it was proper to the type.

John 3:16

God so loved the world that He gave His Only-begotten Son, that whosoever believes in Him should not perish, but have everlasting life.

What He says, is of this kind: Marvel not that I am to be lifted up that you may be saved, for this seems good to the Father, and He has so loved you as to give His Son for slaves, and ungrateful slaves. Yet a man would not do this even for a friend, nor readily even for a righteous man; as Paul has declared when he said, Scarcely for a righteous man will one die. Romans 5:7 Now he spoke at greater length, as speaking to believers, but here Christ speaks concisely, because His discourse was directed to Nicodemus, but still in a more significant manner, for each word had much significance. For by the expression, so loved, and that other, God the world, He shows the great strength of His love. Large and infinite was the interval between the two. He, the immortal, who is without beginning, the Infinite Majesty, they but dust and ashes, full of ten thousand sins, who, ungrateful, have at all times offended Him; and

these He loved. Again, the words which He added after these are alike significant, when He says, that He gave His Only-begotten Son, not a servant, not an Angel, not an Archangel. And yet no one would show such anxiety for his own child, as God did for His ungrateful servants.

His Passion then He sets before him not very openly, but rather darkly; but the advantage of the Passion He adds in a clearer manner, saying, That every one that believes in Him, should not perish, but have everlasting life. For when He had said, must be lifted up, and alluded to death, lest the hearer should be made downcast by these words, forming some mere human opinions concerning Him, and supposing that His death was a ceasing to be, observe how He sets this right, by saying, that He that was given was The Son of God, and the cause of life, of everlasting life. He who procured life for others by death, would not Himself be continually in death; for if they who believed on the Crucified perish not, much less does He perish who is crucified. He who takes away the destitution of others much more is He free from it; He who gives life to others, much more to Himself does He well forth life. Do you see that everywhere there is need of faith? For He calls the Cross the fountain of life; which reason cannot easily allow, as the heathens now by their mocking testify. But faith which goes beyond the weakness of reasoning, may easily receive and retain it. And whence did God so love the world? From no other source but only from his goodness.

3. Let us now be abashed at His love, let us be ashamed at the excess of His lovingkindness, since He for our sakes spared not His Only-begotten Son, yet we spare our wealth to our own injury; He for us gave His Own Son, but we for Him do not so much as despise money, nor even for ourselves. And how can these things deserve pardon? If we see a man submitting to sufferings and death for us, we set him before all others, count him among our chief friends, place in his hands all that is ours, and deem it rather his than ours, and even so do not think that we give him the return that he deserves. But towards Christ we do not preserve even this degree of right feeling. He laid down His life for us, and poured forth His precious Blood for our sakes, who were neither well-disposed nor good, while we do not pour out even our money for our own sakes, and neglect Him who died for us, when He is naked and a stranger; and who shall deliver us from the punishment that is to come? For suppose that it were not God that punishes, but that we punished ourselves; should we not give our vote against ourselves? Should we not sentence ourselves to the very fire of hell, for allowing Him who laid down His life for us, to pine with hunger? But why speak I of money? Had we ten thousand lives, ought we not to lay them all down for Him? And yet not even so could we do what His benefits deserve. For he who confers a benefit in the first instance, gives evident proof of his kindness, but he who has received one, whatever return he makes, he repays as a debt, and does not bestow as a favor; especially when he who did the first good turn was benefiting his enemies. And he who repays both bestows his gifts on a benefactor, and himself reaps their fruit besides. But not even this induces us; more foolish are we than any, putting golden necklaces about our servants and mules and horses, and neglecting our Lord who goes about naked, and passes from door to door, and ever stands at our outlets, and stretches forth His hands to us, but often regarding Him with un pitying eye; yet these very things He undergoes for our sake. Gladly does He hunger that you may be fed; naked does He go that He may provide for you the materials for a garment of incorruption, yet not even so do you give up any of your own. Some of your garments are moth-eaten, others are a load to your coffers, and a needless trouble to their possessors, while He who gave you these and all else that you possess goes naked.

But perhaps you do not lay them by in your coffers, but wear them and make yourself fine with them. And what gain you by this? Is it that the street people may see you? What then? They will not admire you who wearest such apparel, but the man who supplies garments to the needy; so if you desire to be admired, by

clothing others, you will the rather get infinite applause. Then too God as well as man shall praise you; now none can praise, but all will grudge at you, seeing you with a body well arrayed, but having a neglected soul. So harlots have adornment, and their clothes are often more than usually expensive and splendid; but the adornment of the soul is with those only who live in virtue.

These things I say continually, and I will not cease to say them, not so much because I care for the poor, as because I care for your souls. For they will have some comfort, if not from you, yet from some other quarter; or even if they be not comforted, but perish by hunger, the harm to them will be no great matter. What did poverty and wasting by hunger injure Lazarus! But none can rescue you from hell, if you obtain not the help of the poor; we shall say to you what was said to the rich man, who was continually broiling, yet gained no comfort. God grant that none ever hear those words, but that all may go into the bosom of Abraham; by the grace and lovingkindness of our Lord Jesus Christ, by whom and with whom, to the Father and the Holy Ghost, be glory for ever and ever. Amen.

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