

John 3:17-20

by St. John Chrysostom

God's lovingkindness is shown in His mercy and correction, and Christ's first coming was to remit sins, not to punish.

Topics: "Gods Mercy", "Repentance"

Description

John Chrysostom preaches about the lovingkindness of God, emphasizing that God sent His Son not to condemn the world but to save it. He addresses the misconception that God's mercy allows for sin without consequences, highlighting the importance of repentance and the severity of punishment for those who reject grace. Chrysostom explains the two Advents of Christ, one for salvation and the other for judgment, stressing the need for belief in Jesus to avoid condemnation. He also discusses the significance of light coming into the world and the condemnation of those who choose darkness over light due to their evil deeds.

Transcript

For God sent not His Son to condemn the world, but to save the world.

1. Many of the more careless sort of persons, using the lovingkindness of God to increase the magnitude of their sins and the excess of their disregard, speak in this way, There is no hell, there is no future punishment, God forgives us all sins. To stop whose mouths a wise man says, Say not, His mercy is great, He will be pacified for the multitude of my sins; for mercy and wrath come from Him, and His indignation rests upon sinners Sirach 5:6: and again, As His mercy is great, so is His correction also. Sirach 16:12 Where then, says one, is His lovingkindness, if we shall receive for our sins according to our deserts? That we shall indeed receive according to our deserts, hear both the Prophet and Paul declare; one says, You shall render to every man according to his work Psalm 62:12, Septuagint; the other, Who will render to every man according to his work. Romans 2:6 And yet we may see that even so the lovingkindness of God is great; in dividing our existence into two periods, the present life and that which is to come, and making the first to be an appointment of trial, the second a place of crowning, even in this He has shown great lovingkindness.

How and in what way? Because when we had committed many and grievous sins, and had not ceased from youth to extreme old age to defile our souls with ten thousand evil deeds, for none of these sins did He demand from us a reckoning, but granted us remission of them by the washing of Regeneration, and freely gave us Righteousness and Sanctification. What then, says one, if a man who from his earliest age

has been deemed worthy of the mysteries, after this commits ten thousand sins? Such an one deserves a severer punishment. For we do not pay the same penalties for the same sins, if we do wrong after Initiation. And this Paul declares, saying, He that despised Moses' law died without mercy under two or three witnesses; of how much sorer punishment, do you suppose, shall he be thought worthy, who has trodden under foot the Son of God, and has counted the blood of the Covenant an unholy thing, and has done despite unto the Spirit of grace? Hebrews 10:28-29 Such an one then is worthy of severer punishment. Yet even for him God has opened doors of repentance, and has granted him many means for the washing away his transgressions, if he will. Think then what proofs of lovingkindness these are; by Grace to remit sins, and not to punish him who after grace has sinned and deserves punishment, but to give him a season and appointed space for his clearing. For all these reasons Christ said to Nicodemus, God sent not His Son to condemn the world, but to save the world.

For there are two Advents of Christ, that which has been, and that which is to be; and the two are not for the same purpose; the first came to pass not that He might search into our actions, but that He might remit; the object of the second will be not to remit, but to enquire. Therefore of the first He says, I came not to condemn the world, but to save the world John 3:17; but of the second, When the Son shall have come in the glory of His Father, He shall set the sheep on His right hand, and the goats on His left. Matthew 25:31, 46 And they shall go, these into life; and these into eternal punishment. Yet His former coming was for judgment, according to the rule of justice. Why? Because before His coming there was a law of nature, and the prophets, and moreover a written Law, and doctrine, and ten thousand promises, and manifestations of signs, and chastisements, and vengeance, and many other things which might have set men right, and it followed that for all these things He would demand account; but, because He is merciful, He for a while pardons instead of making enquiry. For had He done so, all would at once have been hurried to perdition. For all, it says, have sinned, and come short of the glory of God. Romans 3:23 Do you see the unspeakable excess of His lovingkindness?

John 3:18

He that believes in the Son, is not judged; but he that believes not, is judged already.

Yet if He came not to judge the world, how is he that believes not judged already, if the time of judgment has not yet arrived? He either means this, that the very fact of disbelieving without repentance is a punishment, (for to be without the light, contains in itself a very severe punishment,) or he announces beforehand what shall be. For as the murderer, though he be not as yet condemned by the decision of the judge, is still condemned by the nature of the thing, so is it with the unbeliever. Since Adam also died on the day that he ate of the tree; for so ran the decree, In the day that you eat of the tree, you shall die Genesis 2:17, Septuagint; yet he lived. How then died he? By the decree; by the very nature of the thing; for he who has rendered himself liable to punishment, is under its penalty, and if for a while not actually so, yet he is by the sentence.

Lest any one on hearing, I came not to judge the world, should imagine that he might sin unpunished, and should so become more careless, Christ stops such disregard by saying, is judged already; and because the judgment was future and not yet at hand, He brings near the dread of vengeance, and describes the punishment as already come. And this is itself a mark of great lovingkindness, that He not only gives His Son, but even delays the time of judgment, that they who have sinned, and they who believe not, may have power to wash away their transgressions.

He that believes in the Son, is not judged. He that believes, not he that is over-curious: he that believes, not the busybody. But what if his life be unclean, and his deeds evil? It is of such as these especially that Paul declares, that they are not true believers at all: They profess that they know God, but in works they deny Him. Titus 1:16 But here Christ says, that such an one is not judged in this one particular; for his works indeed he shall suffer a severer punishment, but having believed once, he is not chastised for unbelief.

2. Do you see how having commenced His discourse with fearful things, He has concluded it again with the very same? For at first He says, Unless a man be born of water and of the Spirit, he cannot enter into the Kingdom of God: and here again, He that believes not on the Son, is judged already. Think not, He says, that the delay advantages at all the guilty, except he repent, for he that has not believed, shall be in no better state than those who are already condemned and under punishment.

John 3:19

And this is the condemnation, that light has come into the world, and men loved darkness rather than light.

What He says, is of this kind: they are punished, because they would not leave the darkness, and hasten to the light. And hence He goes on to deprive them of all excuse for the future: Had I come, says He, to punish and to exact account of their deeds, they might have been able to say, 'this is why we started away from you,' but now I have come to free them from darkness, and to bring them to the light; who then could pity one who will not come from darkness unto light? When they have no charge to bring against us, but have received ten thousand benefits, they start away from us. And this charge He has brought in another place, where He says, They hated Me without a cause John 15:25: and again, If I had not come and spoken unto them, they had not had sin. John 15:22 For he who in the absence of light sits in darkness, may perchance receive pardon; but one who after it has come abides by the darkness, produces against himself a certain proof of a perverse and contentious disposition. Next, because His assertion would seem incredible to most, (for none would prefer darkness to light,) He adds the cause of such a feeling in them. What is that?

John 3:19-20

Because their deeds were evil. For every one that does evil, hates the light, neither comes to the light, lest his deeds should be reproved.

Yet he came not to judge or to enquire, but to pardon and remit transgressions, and to grant salvation through faith. How then fled they? Had He come and sat in His Judgment seat, what He said might have seemed reasonable; for he that is conscious to himself of evil deeds, is wont to fly his judge. But, on the contrary, they who have transgressed even run to one who is pardoning. If therefore He came to pardon, those would naturally most hasten to Him who were conscious to themselves of many transgressions; and indeed this was the case with many, for even publicans and sinners sat at meat with Jesus. What then is this which He says? He says this of those who choose always to remain in wickedness. He indeed came, that He might forgive men's former sins, and secure them against those to come; but since there are some so relaxed, so powerless for the toils of virtue, that they desire to abide by wickedness till their latest breath, and never cease from it, He speaks in this place reflecting upon these. For since, He says, the profession of Christianity requires besides right doctrine a sound conversation also, they fear to come over to us, because they like not to show forth a righteous life. Him that lives in heathenism none would blame, because with gods such as he has, and with rites as foul and ridiculous as his gods, he shows forth

actions that suit his doctrines; but those who belong to the True God, if they live a careless life, have all men to call them to account, and to accuse them. So greatly do even its enemies admire the truth. Observe, then, how exactly He lays down what He says. His expression is, not He that has done evil comes not to the light, but he that does it always, he that desires always to roll himself in the mire of sin, he will not subject himself to My laws, but chooses to stay without, and to commit fornication without fear, and to do all other forbidden things. For if he comes to Me, he becomes manifest as a thief in the light, and therefore he avoids My dominion. For instance, even now one may hear many heathen say, that they cannot come to our faith, because they cannot leave off drunkenness and fornication, and the like disorders.

Well, says some one, but are there no Christians that do evil, and heathens that live discreetly? That there are Christians who do evil, I know; but whether there are heathens who live a righteous life, I do not yet know assuredly. For do not speak to me of those who by nature are good and orderly, (this is not virtue,) but tell me of the man who can endure the exceeding violence of his passions and (yet) be temperate. You cannot. For if the promise of a Kingdom, and the threat of hell, and so much other provision, can scarcely keep men in virtue, they will hardly go after virtue who believe in none of these things. Or, if any pretend to do so, they do it for show; and he who does so for show, will not, when he may escape observation, refrain from indulging his evil desires. However, that we may not seem to any to be contentious, let us grant that there are right livers among the heathen; for neither does this go against my argument, since I spoke of that which occurs in general, not of what happens rarely.

And observe how in another way He deprives them of all excuse, when He says that, the light came into the world. Did they seek it themselves, He says, did they toil, did they labor to find it? The light itself came to them, and not even so would they hasten to it. And if there be some Christians who live wickedly, I would argue that He does not say this of those who have been Christians from the beginning, and who have inherited true religion from their forefathers, (although even these for the most part have been shaken from right doctrine by their evil life,) yet still I think that He does not now speak concerning these, but concerning the heathen and the Jews who ought to have come to the right faith. For He shows that no man living in error would choose to come to the truth unless he before had planned for himself a righteous life, and that none would remain in unbelief unless he had previously chosen always to be wicked.

Do not tell me that a man is temperate, and does not rob; these things by themselves are not virtue. For what advantages it, if a man has these things, and yet is the slave of vainglory, and remains in his error, from fear of the company of his friends? This is not right living. The slave of a reputation is no less a sinner than the fornicator; nay, he works more and more grievous deeds than he. But tell me of any one that is free from all passions and from all iniquity, and who remains among the heathen. You can not do so; for even those among them who have boasted great things, and who have, as they say, sayest. "}"--> mastered avarice or gluttony, have been, most of all men, the slaves of reputation, and this is the cause of all evils. Thus it is that the Jews also have continued Jews; for which cause Christ rebuked them and said, How can you believe, which receive honor from men? John 5:44

And why, pray, did He not speak on these matters with Nathanael, to whom He testified of the truth, nor extend His discourse to any length? Because even he came not with such zeal as did Nicodemus. For Nicodemus made this his work, and the season which others used for rest he made a season for hearing; but Nathanael came at the instance of another. Yet not even him did Jesus entirely pass by, for to him He says, Hereafter you shall see heaven open, and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man. John 1:51 But to Nicodemus He spoke not so, but conversed with him on the Dispensation

and on eternal life, addressing each differently and suitably to the condition of his will. It was sufficient for Nathanael, because he knew the writings of the prophets, and was not so timid either, to hear only thus far; but because Nicodemus was as yet possessed by fear, Christ did not indeed clearly reveal to him the whole, but shook his mind so as to cast out fear by fear, declaring that he who did not believe was being judged, and that unbelief proceeded from an evil conscience. For since he made great account of honor from men, more than he did of the punishment; (Many, says the Evangelist, of the rulers believed on Him, but because of the Jews they did not confess John 12:42) on this point Christ touches him, saying, It cannot be that he who believes not on Me disbelieves for any other cause save that he lives an unclean life. Farther on He says, I am the Light John 8:12, but here, the Light came into the world; for at the beginning He spoke somewhat darkly, but afterwards more clearly. Yet even so the man was kept back by regard for the opinion of the many, and therefore could not endure to speak boldly as he ought.

Fly we then vainglory, for this is a passion more tyrannical than any. Hence spring covetousness and love of wealth, hence hatred and wars and strifes; for he that desires more than he has, will never be able to stop, and he desires from no other cause, but only from his love of vainglory. For tell me, why do so many encircle themselves with multitudes of eunuchs, and herds of slaves, and much show? Not because they need it, but that they may make those who meet them witnesses of this unseasonable display. If then we cut this off, we shall slay together with the head the other members also of wickedness, and there will be nothing to hinder us from dwelling on earth as though it were heaven. Nor does this vice merely thrust its captives into wickedness, but is even co-existent with their virtues, and when it is unable entirely to cast us out of these, it still causes us much damage in the very exercise of them, forcing us to undergo the toil, and depriving us of the fruit. For he that with an eye to this, fasts, and prays, and shows mercy, has his reward. What can be more pitiable than a loss like this, that it should befall man to bewail himself uselessly and in vain, and to become an object of ridicule, and to lose the glory from above? Since he that aims at both cannot obtain both. It is indeed possible to obtain both, when we desire not both, but one only, that from heaven; but he cannot obtain both, who longs for both. Wherefore if we wish to attain to glory, let us flee from human glory, and desire that only which comes from God; so shall we obtain both the one and the other; which may we all enjoy, through the grace and loving kindness 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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