

John 3:22-30

by St. John Chrysostom

Jesus' disciples baptized to lead people to Christ, while Jesus did not baptize because he was not yet giving the Spirit, and John continued to baptize to prevent his disciples from becoming more contentious and to show that he was not trying to compete with Jesus.

Scripture: Matthew 9:14, John 3:27, John 3:29-30, Acts 5:39, Romans 10:17

Topics: "Humility", "Divine Approval"

Description

John Chrysostom preaches about the importance of humility and avoiding the destructive desire for glory, which can lead to jealousy and division. He emphasizes the need to focus on heavenly glory rather than earthly recognition, using the example of John the Baptist humbly acknowledging the superiority of Jesus and joyfully stepping back as Jesus' ministry grows. Chrysostom highlights the dangers of seeking human praise and the importance of seeking divine approval, urging believers to prioritize eternal treasures over temporary accolades.

Transcript

And He came and His disciples into the land of Judaea, and there He tarried with them (and baptized).

1. Nothing can be clearer or mightier than the truth, just as nothing is weaker than falsehood, though it be shaded by ten thousand veils. For even so it is easily detected, it easily melts away. But truth stands forth unveiled for all that will behold her beauty; she seeks no concealment, dreads no danger, trembles at no plots, desires not glory from the many, is accountable to no mortal thing, but stands above them all, is the object of ten thousand secret plots, yet remains unconquerable, and guards as in a sure fortress these who fly to her by her own exceeding might, who avoids secret lurking places, and sets what is hers before all men. And this Christ conversing with Pilate declared, when He said, I ever taught openly, and in secret have I said nothing. John 18:20 As He spoke then, so He acted now, for, After this, says the Evangelist, He went forth and His disciples into the land of Judaea, and there He tarried with them and baptized. At the feasts He went up to the City to set forth in the midst of them His doctrines, and the help of His miracles; but after the feasts were over, He often went to Jordan, because many ran together there. For He ever chose the most crowded places, not from any love of show or vainglory, but because He desired to afford His help to the greatest number.

Yet the Evangelist farther on says, that Jesus baptized not, but His disciples; whence it is clear that this is his meaning here also. And why did Jesus not baptize? The Baptist had said before, He shall baptize you

with the Holy Spirit and with fire. Now he had not yet given the Spirit, and it was therefore with good cause that he did not baptize. But His disciples did so, because they desired to bring many to the saving doctrine.

And why, when the disciples of Jesus were baptizing, did not John cease to do so? Why did he continue to baptize, and that even until he was led to prison?

Ver. 23 . 'John also was baptizing in Æþnon'; and to add,

Ver. 24 . 'John was not yet cast into prison,'

For to say these things was to declare that until that time he did not cease to baptize. But wherefore did he baptize until then? For he would have made the disciples of Jesus seem more reverend had he desisted when they began. Why then did he baptize? It was that he might not excite his disciples to even stronger rivalry, and make them more contentious still. For if, although he ten thousand times proclaimed Christ, yielded to Him the chief place, and made himself so much inferior, he still could not persuade them to run to Him; he would, had he added this also, have made them yet more hostile. On this account it was that Christ began to preach more constantly when John was removed. And moreover, I think that the death of John was allowed, and that it happened very quickly, in order that the whole attention of the multitude might be shifted to Christ, and that they might no longer be divided in their opinions concerning the two.

Besides, even while he was baptizing, he did not cease continually to exhort them, and to show them the high and awful nature of Jesus. For He baptized them, and told them no other thing than that they must believe in Him that came after him. Now how would a man who acted thus by desisting have made the disciples of Christ seem worthy of reverence? On the contrary, he would have been thought to do so through envy and passion. But to continue preaching gave a stronger proof; for he desired not glory for himself, but sent on his hearers to Christ, and wrought with Him not less, but rather much more than Christ's own disciples, because his testimony was unsuspected and he was by all men far more highly esteemed than they. And this the Evangelist implies, when he says, all Judæa and the country around about Jordan went out to him and were baptized. Matthew 3:5 Even when the disciples were baptizing, yet many did not cease to run to him.

If any one should enquire, And in what was the baptism of the disciples better than that of John? we will reply, in nothing; both were alike without the gift of the Spirit, both parties alike had one reason for baptizing, and that was, to lead the baptized to Christ. For in order that they might not be always running about to bring together those that should believe, as in Simon's case his brother did, and Philip to Nathanael, they instituted baptism, in order by it to bring all men to them easily, and to prepare a way for the faith which was to be. But that the baptisms had no superiority one over the other, is shown by what follows. What is that?

John 3:25

There arose a question (between some) of John's disciples and the Jews about purifying.

For the disciples of John being ever jealously disposed towards Christ's disciples and Christ Himself, when they saw them baptizing, began to reason with those who were baptized, as though their baptism was in a manner superior to that of Christ's disciples; and taking one of the baptized, they tried to persuade him of this; but persuaded him not. Hear how the Evangelist has given us to understand that it

was they who attacked him, not he who set on foot the question. He does not say, that a certain Jew questioned with them, but that, there arose a questioning from the disciples of John with a certain Jew, concerning purification.

2. And observe, I pray you, the Evangelist's inoffensiveness. He does not speak in the way of invective, but as far as he is able softens the charge, merely saying, that a question arose; whereas the sequel (which he has also set down in an inoffensive manner) makes it plain that what was said was said from jealousy.

John 3:26

They came unto John, and said to him, Rabbi, He that was with you beyond Jordan, to whom you bore witness, behold the same baptizes, and all men come to Him.

That is, He whom you baptized; for this they imply when they say, to whom you bore witness, as though they had said, He whom you pointed out as illustrious, and make remarkable, dares to do the same as thou. Yet they do not say, He whom you baptized baptizes; (for then they would have been obliged to make mention of the Voice that came down from heaven, and of the descent of the Spirit;) but what say they? He that was with you beyond Jordan, to whom you bore witness; that is, He who held the rank of a disciple, who was nothing more than we, this man has separated himself, and baptizes. For they thought to make him jealous, not only by this, but by asserting that their own reputation was now diminishing. All, say they, come to Him. Whence it is evident, that they did not get the better of the Jew with whom they disputed; but they spoke these words because they were imperfect in disposition, and were not yet clear from a feeling of rivalry. What then does John? He did not rebuke them severely, fearing lest they should separate themselves again from him, and work some other mischief. What are his words?

John 3:27

A man can receive nothing, except it be given him from above.

Marvel not, if he speak of Christ in a lowly strain; it was impossible to teach all at once, and from the very beginning, men so pre-occupied by passion. But he desires to strike them for a while with awe and terror, and to show them that they warred against none other than God Himself, when they warred against Christ. And here he secretly establishes that truth, which Gamaliel asserted, You cannot overthrow it, lest haply ye be found even to fight against God. Acts 5:39 For to say, None can receive anything, except it be given him from heaven, was nothing else than declaring that they were attempting impossibilities, and so would be found to fight against God. Well, but did not Theudas and his followers 'receive' from themselves? They did, but they straightway were scattered and destroyed, not so what belonged to Christ.

By this also he gently consoles them, showing them that it was not a man, but God, who surpassed them in honor; and that therefore they must not wonder if what belonged to Him was glorious, and if all men came unto Him: for that this was the nature of divine things, and that it was God who brought them to pass, because no man ever yet had power to do such deeds. All human things are easily seen through, and rotten, and quickly melt away and perish; these were not such, therefore not human. Observe too how when they said, to whom you bore witness, he turned against themselves that which they thought they had put forward to lower Christ, and silences them after showing that Jesus' glory came not from his testimony; A man cannot, he says, receive anything of himself, except it be given him from heaven. If you hold at all to my testimony, and believe it to be true, know that by that testimony you ought to prefer not me to Him,

but Him to me. For what was it that I testified? I call you yourselves to witness.

John 3:28

You yourselves bear me witness that I said, I am not the Christ, but that I am sent before Him.

If then you hold to my testimony, (and you even now produce it when you say, 'to whom you bore witness,') He is not only not diminished by receiving my witness, but rather is increased by it; besides, the testimony was not mine, but God's. So that if I seem to you to be trustworthy, I said this among other things, that 'I am sent before Him.' Do you see how he shows little by little that this Voice was divine? For what he says is of this kind: I am a servant, and say the words of Him that sent me, not flattering Christ through human favor, but serving His Father who sent me. I gave not the testimony as a gift, but what I was sent to speak, I spoke. Do not then because of this suppose that I am great, for it shows that He is great. He is Lord of all things. This he goes on to declare, and says,

John 3:29

He that has the bride is the bridegroom; but the friend of the bridegroom which stands and hears him, rejoices greatly because of the bridegroom's voice.

But how does he who said, 'whose shoe's latchet I am not worthy to unloose,' now call himself His 'friend'? It is not to exalt himself, nor boastingly, that he says this, but from desire to show that he too most forwards this, (i.e. the exaltation of Christ,) and that these things come to pass not against his will or to his grief, but that he desires and is eager for them, and that it was with a special view to them that all his actions had been performed; and this he has very wisely shown by the term friend. For on occasions like marriages, the servants of the bridegroom are not so glad and joyful as his friends. It was not from any desire to prove equality of honor, (away with the thought,) but only excess of pleasure, and moreover from condescension to their weakness that he calls himself friend. For his service he before declared by saying, I am sent before Him. On this account, and because they thought that he was vexed at what had taken place, he called himself the friend of the Bridegroom, to show that he was not only not vexed, but that he even greatly rejoiced. For, says he, I came to effect this, and am so far from grieving at what has been done, that had it not come to pass, I should then have been greatly grieved. Had the bride not come to the Bridegroom, then I should have been grieved, but not now, since my task has been accomplished. When His servants are advancing, we are they who gain the honor; for that which we desired has come to pass, and the bride knows the Bridegroom, and you are witnesses of it when you say, 'All men come unto Him.' This I earnestly desired, I did all to this end; and now when I see that it has come to pass, I am glad, and rejoice, and leap for joy.

3. But what means, He which stands and hears Him rejoices greatly, because of the Bridegroom's voice? He transfers the expression from the parable to the subject in hand; for after mentioning the bridegroom and the bride, he shows how the bride is brought home, that is, by a Voice and teaching. For thus the Church is wedded to God; and therefore Paul says, Faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the word of God. Romans 10:17 At this 'Voice,' says he, I rejoice. And not without a cause does he put who stands, but to show that his office had ceased, that he had given over to Him the Bride, and must for the future stand and hear Him; that he was a servant and minister; that his good hope and his joy was now accomplished. Therefore he says,

This my joy therefore is fulfilled.

That is to say, The work is finished which was to be done by me, for the future I can do nothing more. Then, to prevent increase of jealous feeling, not then only, but for the future, he tells them also of what should come to pass, confirming this too by what he had already said and done. Therefore he continues,

John 3:30

He must increase, but I must decrease.

That is to say, What is mine has now come to a stand, and has henceforth ceased, but what is His increases; for that which you fear shall not be now only, but much more as it advances. And it is this especially which shows what is mine the brighter; for this end I came, and I rejoice that what is His has made so great progress, and that those things have come to pass on account of which all that I did was done. Do you see how gently and very wisely he softened down their passion, quenched their envy, showed them that they were undertaking impossibilities, a method by which wickedness is best checked? For this purpose it was ordained, that these things should take place while John was yet alive and baptizing, in order that his disciples might have him as a witness of the superiority of Christ, and that if they should not believe, they might be without excuse. For John came not to say these words of his own accord, nor in answer to other enquirers, but they asked the question themselves, and heard the answer. For if he had spoken of himself, their belief would not have been equal to the self-condemning judgment which they received when they heard him answer to their question; just as the Jews also, in that they sent to him from their homes, heard what they did, and yet would not believe, by this especially deprived themselves of excuse.

What then are we taught by this? That a mad desire of glory is the cause of all evils; this led them to jealousy, and when they had ceased for a little, this roused them to it again. Wherefore they come to Jesus, and say, Why do your disciples fast not? Matthew 9:14 Let us then, beloved, avoid this passion; for if we avoid this we shall escape hell. For this vice specially kindles the fire of hell, and everywhere extends its role, and tyrannically occupies every age and every rank. This has turned churches upside down, this is mischievous in state matters, has subverted houses, and cities, and peoples, and nations. Why do you marvel? It has even gone forth into the desert, and manifested even there its great power. For men who have bidden an entire farewell to riches and all the show of the world, who converse with no one, who have gained the mastery over the more imperious desires after the flesh, these very men, made captives by vainglory, have often lost all. By reason of this passion, one who had labored much went away worse off than one who had not labored at all, but on the contrary had committed ten thousand sins; the Pharisee than the Publican. However, to condemn the passion is easy enough, (all agree in doing that,) but the question is, how to get the better of it. How can we do this? By setting honor against honor. For as we despise the riches of earth when we look to the other riches, as we contemn this life when we think of that far better than this, so we shall be enabled to spit on this world's glory, when we know of another far more august than it, which is glory indeed. One is a thing vain and empty, has the name without the reality; but that other, which is from heaven, is true, and has to give its praise Angels, and Archangels, and the Lord of Archangels, or rather I should say that it has men as well. Now if you look to that theater, learnest what crowns are there, transportest yourself into the applauses which come thence, never will earthly things be able to hold you, nor when they come will you deem them great, nor when they are away seek after them. For even in earthly palaces none of the guards who stand around the king, neglecting to please him that wears the diadem and sits upon the throne, troubles himself about the voices of daws, or the noise of flies and gnats flying and buzzing about him; and good report from men is no better than these. Knowing then the worthlessness of human things, let us collect our all into treasuries that cannot be spoiled, let us seek

that glory which is abiding and immovable; which may we all attain, through the grace and loving-kindness of our Lord Jesus Christ, by whom, and with whom to the Father and the Holy Spirit be glory, now and ever, and world without end. Amen.

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