

John 3:31-34

by St. John Chrysostom

John Chrysostom's sermon emphasizes the importance of spiritual zeal and the need to carefully consider the object of the speaker and the infirmity of the hearers when interpreting Scripture.

Scripture: John 1:11, John 3:31, John 3:33-34, John 5:30, John 5:39, John 10:15, John 15:15, Romans 15:4, 1 Corinthians 3:1, 1 Corinthians 10:11

Topics: "Christ's Supremacy", "Holy Spirit"

Description

John Chrysostom emphasizes the dangers of seeking glory and the importance of recognizing Christ's superiority as the One who comes from above, contrasting with earthly limitations. He explains that Christ's testimony is true and should be believed, as He speaks what He has heard and seen from the Father. Chrysostom highlights the significance of receiving Christ's testimony as a seal of God's truth, showing disbelief in Christ is disbelief in God. He also delves into the concept of God giving the Spirit without measure, indicating Christ's unmeasured operation of the Spirit compared to others, urging listeners to carefully understand and apply the Scriptures for spiritual growth.

Transcript

He that comes from above is above all; he that is of the earth is earthly, and speaks of the earth.

1. A dreadful thing is the love of glory, dreadful and full of many evils; it is a thorn hard to be extracted, a wild beast untamable and many headed, arming itself against those that feed it; for as the worm eats through the wood from which it is born, as rust wastes the iron whence it comes forth, and moths the fleeces, so vainglory destroys the soul which nourishes it; and therefore we need great diligence to remove the passion. Observe here how long a charm John uses over the disciples affected by it, and can scarcely pacify them. For he softens them with other words besides those already mentioned. And what are these others? He that comes from above, he says, is above all; he that is of the earth, is earthly, and speaks of the earth. Since you make much ado with my testimony, and in this way say that I am more worthy of credit than He, you needs must know this, that it is impossible for One who comes from heaven to have His credit strengthened by one that inhabites earth.

And what means above all, what is the expression intended to show to us? That Christ has need of nothing, but is Himself sufficient for Himself, and incomparably greater than all; of himself John speaks as being of the earth, and speaking of the earth. Not that he spoke of his own mind, but as Christ said, If I have told you of earthly things and you believe not, so calling Baptism, not because it was an earthly thing,

but because He compared it when He spoke with His own Ineffable Generation, so here John said that he spoke of earth, comparing his own with Christ's teaching. For the speaking of earth means nothing else than this, My things are little and low and poor compared with His, and such as it was probable that an earthly nature would receive. In Him 'are hid all the treasures of wisdom.' Colossians 2:5 That he speaks not of human reasonings is plain from this. He that is of the earth, says he, is earthly. Yet not all in him was earthly, but the higher parts were heavenly, for he had a soul, and was partaker of a Spirit which was not of earth. How then says he that he is earthly? Do you see not that he means only, I am small and of no esteem, going on the ground and born in the earth; but Christ came to us from above. Having by all these means quenched their passion, he afterwards speaks more openly of Christ; for before this it was useless to utter words which could never have gained a place in the understanding of his hearers: but when he has pulled up the thorns, he then boldly casts in the seed, saying,

John 3:31-32

He that comes from above is above all. And what He has heard He speaks, and what He has seen He testifies; and no man receives His testimony.

Having uttered something great and sublime concerning Him, he again brings down his discourse to a humbler strain. For the expression, what He has heard and seen, is suited rather to a mere man. What He knew He knew not from having learned it by sight, or from having heard it, but He included the whole in His Nature, having come forth perfect from the Bosom of His Father, and needing none to teach Him. For, As the Father, He says, knows Me, even so know I the Father. John 10:15 What then means, He speaks that He has heard, and testifies that He has seen? Since by these senses we gain correct knowledge of everything, and are deemed worthy of credit when we teach on matters which our eyes have embraced and our ears have taken in, as not in such cases inventing or speaking falsehoods, John desiring here to establish this point, said, What He has heard and seen: that is, nothing that comes from Him is false, but all is true. Thus we when we are making curious enquiry into anything, often ask, Did you hear it? Did you see it? And if this be proved, the testimony is indubitable, and so when Christ Himself says, As I hear, I judge John 5:30; and, What I have heard from My Father, that I speak John 15:15; and, We speak that We have seen John 3:11; and whatsoever other sayings He utters of the kind, are uttered not that we might imagine that He says what He does being taught of any, (it were extreme folly to think this,) but in order that nothing of what is said may be suspected by the shameless Jews. For because they had not yet a right opinion concerning Him, He continually betakes Himself to His Father, and hence makes His sayings credible.

2. And why do you wonder if He betake Himself to the Father, when He often resorts to the Prophets and the Scriptures? As when He says, They are they that testify of Me. John 5:39 Shall we then say that He is inferior to the Prophets, because He draws testimonies from them? Away with the thought. It is because of the infirmity of His hearers that He so orders His discourse, and says that He spoke what He spoke having heard it from the Father, not because He needed a teacher, but that they might believe that nothing that He said was false. John's meaning is of this kind: I desire to hear what He says, for He comes from above, bringing thence those tidings which none but life knows rightly; for 'what He has seen and heard,' is the expression of one who declares this.

And no man receives His testimony. Yet He had disciples, and many besides gave heed to His words. How then says John, No man? He says no man, instead of few men, for had he meant no man at all, how could he have added,

John 3:33

He that has received His testimony, has set to his seal that God is true.

Here he touches his own disciples, as not being likely for a time to be firm believers. And that they did not even after this believe in Him, is clear from what is said afterwards; for John even when dwelling in prison sent them thence to Christ, that he might the more bind them to Him. Yet even then they scarcely believed, to which Christ alluded when He said, And blessed is he whosoever shall not be offended in Me. Matthew 11:6 And therefore now he said, And no man receives His testimony, to make sure his own disciples; all but saying, Do not, because for a time few shall believe in Him, therefore deem that His words are false; for, 'He speaks that He has seen.' Moreover he says this to touch also the insensibility of the Jews. A charge which the Evangelist at commencing brought against them, saying, He came unto His own, and His own received Him not. For this is no reproach against Him, but an accusation of those who received Him not. John 1:11

He that has received His testimony has set to his seal that God is true. Here he terrifies them also by showing that he who believes not on Him, disbelieves not Him alone, but the Father also; wherefore he adds:

John 3:34

He whom God has sent speaks the words of God.

Since then He speaks His words, he that believes and he that believes not, believes or believes not God. Hath set to His seal, that is, has declared. Then, to increase their dread, he says, that God is true; thus showing, that no man could disbelieve Christ without making God who sent Him guilty of a falsehood. Because, since He says nothing save what is from the Father, but all that He says is His, he that hears not Him, hears not Him that sent Him. See how by these words again he strikes them with fear. As yet they thought it no great thing not to hearken to Christ; and therefore he held so great a danger above the heads of the unbelievers, that they might learn that they hearken not to God Himself, who hearken not to Christ. Then he proceeds with the discourse, descending to the measure of their infirmity, and saying,

For God gives not the Spirit by measure.

Again, as I said, he brings down his discourse to lower ground, varying it and making it suitable to be received by those who heard it then; otherwise he could not have raised them and increased their fear. For had he spoken anything great and sublime concerning Jesus Himself, they would not have believed, but might even have despised Him. Therefore he leads up all to the Father, speaking for a while of Christ as of a man. But what is it that he says, God gives not the Spirit by measure? He would show that we all have received the operation of the Spirit, by measure, (for in this place he means by Spirit the operation of the Spirit, for this it is that is divided,) but that Christ has all Its operation unmeasured and entire. Now if His operations be unmeasured, much more His Essence. Do you see too that the Spirit is Infinite? How then can He who has received all the operation of the Spirit, who knows the things of God, who says, We speak that We have heard, and testify that We have seen John 3:11, be rightly suspected? He says nothing which is not of God, or which is not of the Spirit. And for a while he utters nothing concerning God the Word, but makes all his doctrine credible by (reference to) the Father and the Spirit. For that there is a God they knew, and that there is a Spirit they knew, (even though they held not a right opinion concerning Him,) but that there is a Son, they knew not. It is for this reason that he ever has recourse to the Father

and the Spirit, thence confirming his words. For if any one should take no account of this reason, and examine his language by itself, it would fall very far short of the Dignity of Christ. Christ was not therefore worthy of their faith, because He had the operation of the Spirit, (for He needs not aid from thence,) but is Himself Self-sufficient; only for a while the Baptist speaks to the understanding of the simpler sort, desiring to raise them up by degrees from their low notions.

And this I say, that we may not carelessly pass by what is contained in the Scriptures, but may fully consider the object of the speaker, and the infirmity of the hearers, and many other points in them. For teachers do not say all as they themselves would wish, but generally as the state of their weak (hearers) requires. Wherefore Paul says, I could not speak unto you as unto spiritual, but as unto carnal; I have fed you with milk, and not with meat. 1 Corinthians 3:1-2 He means, I desired indeed to speak unto you as unto spiritual, but could not; not because he was unable, but because they were not able so to hear. So too John desired to teach some great things to the disciples, but they could not yet bear to receive them, and therefore he dwells for the most part on that which is lowlier.

It behooves us therefore to explore all carefully. For the words of the Scriptures are our spiritual weapons; but if we know not how to fit those weapons and to arm our scholars rightly, they keep indeed their proper power, but cannot help those who receive them. For let us suppose there to be a strong corselet, and helm, and shield, and spear; and let one take this armor and put the corselet upon his feet, the helmet over his eyes instead of on his head, let him not put the shield before his breast, but perversely tie it to his legs: will he be able to gain any advantage from the armor? will he not rather be harmed?

It is plain to any one that he will. Yet not on account of the weakness of the weapons, but on account of the unskillfulness of the man who knows not how to use them well. So with the Scriptures, if we confound their order; they will even so retain their proper force, yet will do us no good. Although I am always telling you this both in private and in public, I effect nothing, but see you all your time nailed to the things of this life, and not so much as dreaming of spiritual matters.

Therefore our lives are careless, and we who strive for truth have but little power, and have become a laughing stock to Greeks and Jews and Heretics. Had you been careless in other matters, and exhibited in this place the same indifference as elsewhere, not even so could your doings have been defended; but now in matters of this life, every one of you, artisan and politician alike, is keener than a sword, while in necessary and spiritual things we are duller than any; making by-work business, and not deeming that which we ought to have esteemed more pressing than any business, to be by-work even.

Do you not know that the Scriptures were written not for the first of mankind alone, but for our sakes also? Do you not hear Paul say, that they are written for our admonition, upon whom the ends of the world have come; that we through patience and comfort of the Scriptures might have hope? 1 Corinthians 10:11; Romans 15:4 I know that I speak in vain, yet will I not cease to speak, for thus I shall clear myself before God, though there be none to hear me. He that speaks to them that give heed has this at least to cheer his speech, the persuasion of his hearers; but he that speaks continually and is not listened to, and yet ceases not to speak, may be worthy of greater honor than the other, because he fulfills the will of God, even though none give heed unto him, to the best of his power.

Still, though our reward will be greater owing to your disobedience, we rather desire that it be diminished, and that your salvation be advanced, thinking that your being well approved of is a great reward. And we now say this not to make our discourse painful and burdensome to you, but to show to you the grief which

we feel by reason of your indifference. God grant that we may be all of us delivered from this, that we may cling to spiritual zeal and obtain the blessings of heaven, 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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