

# John 5:31-39

by St. John Chrysostom

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*St. John Chrysostom's sermon on John 5:31-39 emphasizes the validity of Christ's witness through the testimonies of John the Baptist, His works, and the Scriptures, urging believers to embrace faith and good works.*

**Topics:** "Divine Nature", "Scriptural Interpretation"

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## Description

John Chrysostom delves into the intricate meaning behind Jesus' statement 'If I bear witness of Myself, My witness is not true,' highlighting the importance of understanding the context, the audience, and the deeper spiritual truths hidden within Scripture. He emphasizes the need for careful examination and purification of the Word to uncover its treasures and avoid misinterpretation. Chrysostom explains how Jesus' seemingly contradictory statements about His own witness being true or not true were meant to challenge the Jews' misconceptions and lead them to a deeper understanding of His divine nature and mission.

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## Transcript

If I bear witness of Myself, My witness is not true; there is another that bears witness of Me, and I know that the witness which he witnesses of Me is true.

1. If any one unpracticed in the art undertake to work a mine, he will get no gold, but confounding all aimlessly and together, will undergo a labor unprofitable and pernicious: so also they who understand not the method of Holy Scripture, nor search out its peculiarities and laws, but go over all its points carelessly and in one manner, will mix the gold with earth, and never discover the treasure which is laid up in it. I say this now because the passage before us contains much gold, not indeed manifest to view, but covered over with much obscurity, and therefore by digging and purifying we must arrive at the legitimate sense. For who would not at once be troubled at hearing Christ say, If I testify of Myself, My witness is not true; inasmuch as He often appears to have testified of Himself? For instance, conversing with the Samaritan woman He said, I Am that speak unto you: and in like manner to the blind man, It is He that talks with you John 9:37; and rebuking the Jews, You say, you blaspheme, because I said I am the Son of God. John 10:36 And in many other places besides He does this. If now all these assertions be false, what hope of salvation shall we have? And where shall we find truth when Truth Itself declares, My witness is not true? Nor does this appear to be the only contradiction; there is another not less than this. He says farther on, Though I bear witness of Myself, yet My witness is true John 8:14; which then, tell me, am I to receive, and which deem a falsehood? If we take them out thus [from the context] simply as they are said, without

carefully considering the person to whom nor the cause for which they are said, nor any other like circumstances, they will both be falsehoods. For if His witness be not true, then this assertion is not true either, not merely the second, but the first also. What then is the meaning? We need great watchfulness, or rather the grace of God, that we rest not in the mere words; for thus the heretics err, because they enquire not into the object of the speaker nor the disposition of the hearers. If we add not these and other points besides, as times and places and the opinions of the listeners, many absurd consequences will follow.

What then is the meaning? The Jews were about to object to Him, If you bear witness concerning yourself, your witness is not true John 8:13: therefore He spoke these words in anticipation; as though He had said, You will surely say to Me, we believe you not; for no one that witnesses of himself is readily held trustworthy among men. So that the is not true must not be read absolutely, but with reference to their suspicions, as though He had said, to you it is not true; and so He uttered the words not looking to His own dignity, but to their secret thoughts. When He says, My witness is not true, He rebukes their opinion of Him, and the objection about to be urged by them against Him; but when He says, Though I bear witness of Myself, My witness is true John 8:14, He declares the very nature of the thing itself, namely, that as God they ought to deem Him trustworthy even when speaking of Himself. For since He had spoken of the resurrection of the dead, and of the judgment, and that he that believes in Him is not judged, but comes unto life, and that He shall sit to require account of all men, and that He has the same Authority and Power with the Father; and since He was about again otherwise to prove these things, He necessarily put their objection first. I told you, He says, that 'as the Father raises the dead and quickens them, so the Son quickens whom He will'; I told you that 'the Father judges no man, but has committed all judgment unto the Son'; I told you that men must 'honor the Son as they honor the Father'; I told you that 'he that honors not the Son honors not the Father'; I told you that 'he that hears My words and believes them shall not see death, but has passed from death unto life' John 5:24; not exactly quoted; that My voice shall raise the dead, some now, some hereafter; that I shall demand account from all men of their transgressions, that I shall judge righteously, and recompense those who have walked uprightly. Now since all these were assertions, since the things asserted were important, and since no clear proof of them had as yet been afforded to the Jews but one rather indistinct, He puts their objection first when He is about to proceed to establish His assertions, speaking somewhat in this way if not in these very words: Perhaps you will say, you assert all this, but you are not a credible witness, since you testify of yourself. First then checking their disputatious spirit by setting forth what they would say, and showing that He knew the secrets of their hearts, and giving this first proof of His power, after stating the objection He supplies other proofs clear and indisputable, producing three witnesses to what He said, namely, the works wrought by Him, the witness of the Father, and the preaching of John. And He puts first the less important witness of John. For after saying, There is another that bears witness of Me, and I know that his witness is true, He adds,

John 5:33

You sent unto John, and he bore witness unto the truth.

Yet if Your witness be not true, how sayest Thou, I know that the testimony of John is true, and that he has borne witness to the truth? And do you see (O man) how clear it hence is, that the expression, My witness is not true, was addressed to their secret thoughts?

2. What then, says some one, if John bore witness partially. That the Jews might not assert this, see how He removes this suspicion. For He said not, John testified of Me, but, You first sent to John, and you

would not have sent had ye not deemed him trustworthy. Nay, what is more, they had sent not to ask him about Christ, but about himself, and the man whom they deemed trustworthy in what related to himself they would much more deem so in what related to another. For it is, so to speak, the nature of us all not to give so much credit to those who speak of themselves as to those who speak of others; yet him they deemed so trustworthy as not to require even concerning himself any other testimony. For they who were sent said not, What do you say concerning Christ? but, Who are you? What do you say of yourself? So great admiration felt they for the man. Now to all this Christ made allusion by saying, You sent unto John. And on this account the Evangelist has not merely related that they sent, but is exact as to the persons sent that they were Priests and of the Pharisees, not common or abject persons, nor such as might be corrupted or cheated, but men able to understand exactly what he said.

John 5:34

But I receive not testimony from man.

Why then have You brought forward that of John? His testimony was not the testimony of man, for, says he, He that sent me to baptize with water, He said to me. John 1:33 So that John's testimony was the testimony of God; for having learned from Him he said what he did. But that none should ask, Whence is it clear that he learned from God? and stop at this, He abundantly silences them by still addressing Himself to their thoughts. For neither was it likely that many would know these things; they had hitherto given heed unto John as to one who spoke of himself, and therefore Christ says, I receive not testimony from man. And that the Jews might not ask, And if You were not about to receive the testimony of man, and by it to strengthen Yourself, why have You brought forward this man's testimony? see how He corrects this contradiction by what He adds. For after saying, I receive not testimony from man, He has added,

But these things I say, that you may be saved.

What He says is of this kind; I, being God, needed not the witness of John which is man's witness, yet because ye gave more heed to him, believe him more trustworthy than any, ran to him as to a prophet, (for all the city was poured forth to Jordan,) and have not believed on Me, even when working miracles, therefore I remind you of that witness of his.

John 5:35

He was a burning and a shining light, and you were willing for a season to rejoice in his light.

That they may not reply, What if he did speak and we received him not, He shows that they did receive John's sayings: since they sent not common men, but priests and Pharisees and were willing to rejoice; so much did they admire the man, and at the same time had nothing to say against his words. But the for a season, is the expression of one noting their levity, and the fact that they soon started away from him.

John 5:36

But I have greater witness than that of John.

For had ye been willing to admit faith according to the (natural) consequence of the facts, I would have brought you over by My works more than he by his words. But since you will not, I bring you to John, not as needing his testimony, but because I do all 'that you may be saved.' For I have greater witness than that of John, namely, that from My works; yet I do not merely consider how I may be made acceptable to

you by credible evidence, but how by that (of persons) known to and admired by you. Then glancing at them and saying that they rejoiced for a season in his (John's) light, He declared that their zeal was but temporary and uncertain.

He called John a torch, signifying that he had not light of himself, but by the grace of the Spirit; but the circumstance which caused the absolute distinction between Himself and John, namely, that He was the Sun of righteousness, this He put not yet; but merely hinting as yet at this He touched them sharply, by showing that from the same disposition which led them to despise John, neither could they believe in Christ. Since it was but for a season that they admired even the man whom they did admire, and who, had they not acted thus, would soon have led them by the hand to Jesus. Having then proved them altogether unworthy of forgiveness, He went on to say, I have greater witness than that of John. What is that? It is that from His works.

For the works, He says, which the Father has given Me to finish, the same works that I do bear witness of Me that the Father sent Me.

By this He reminded them of the paralytic restored, and of many other things. The words perhaps one of them might have asserted were mere boast, and said by reason of John's friendship towards Him, (though indeed it was not in their power to say even this of John, a man equal to the exact practice of wisdom, and on this account admired by them,) but the works could not even among the maddest of them admit this suspicion; therefore He added this second testimony, saying, The works which the Father has given Me to finish, the same works that I do bear witness of Me that the Father sent Me.

3. In this place He also meets the accusation respecting the violation of the Sabbath. For since those persons argued, How can he be from God, seeing that he keeps not the Sabbath? John 9:16, therefore He says, Which My Father has given unto Me. Yet in truth, He acted with absolute power, but in order most abundantly to show that He does nothing contrary to the Father, therefore He has put the expression of much inferiority. Since why did He not say, The works which the Father has given Me testify that I am equal to the Father? For both of these truths were to be earned from the works, that He did nothing contrary, and that He was equal to Him who begot Him; a point which He is establishing elsewhere, where He says, If you believe not Me, believe the works: that you may know and believe that I am in the Father and the Father in Me. John 10:38 In both respects, therefore, the works bore witness to Him, that He was equal to the Father, and that He did nothing contrary to Him. Why then said He not so, instead of leaving out the greater and putting forward this? Because to establish this was His first object. For although it was a far less thing to have it believed that He came from God, than to have it believed that God was equal with Him, (for that belonged to the Prophets also, but this never,) still He takes much pains as to the lesser point, as knowing that, this admitted, the other would afterwards be easily received. So that making no mention of the more important portion of the testimony, He puts its lesser office, that by this they may receive the other also. Having effected this, He adds,

John 5:37

And the Father Himself, which has sent Me, has borne witness of Me.

Where did He bear witness of Him? In Jordan: This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased Matthew 3:16; hear Him. Yet even this needed proof. The testimony of John then was clear, for they themselves had sent to him, and could not deny it. The testimony from miracles was in like manner clear, for they had seen them wrought, and had heard from him who was healed, and had believed; whence also

they drew their accusation. It therefore remained to give proof to the testimony of the Father. Next in order to effect this, He added,

You have neither heard His voice at any time:

How then says Moses, The Lord spoke, and Moses answered? Exodus 19:19; and David, He had heard a tongue which he knew not Psalm 81:5; and Moses again, Is there any such people which has 'heard the voice of God'? Deuteronomy 4:33

Nor seen His shape.

Yet Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel, are said to have seen Him, and many others. What then is that which Christ says now? He guides them by degrees to a philosophical doctrine, showing that with God is neither voice nor shape, but that He is higher than such forms or sounds like these. For as when He says, You have not heard His voice, He does not mean that God does indeed utter a voice, but one which cannot be heard; so when He says, Nor seen His shape, He does not mean that God has a shape though one invisible, but that neither of these things belongs to God. And in order that they might not say, You are a boaster, God spoke to Moses only; (this at least they did say, We know that God spoke with Moses: as for this fellow, we know not whence He is John 9:29) on this account He spoke as He did, to show that there is neither voice nor shape with God. But why, He says, name I these things? Not only have ye 'neither heard His voice nor seen His shape,' but it is not even in your power to assert that of which you most boast and of which you are all most fully assured, namely, that you have received and keep His commandments. Wherefore He adds,

John 5:38

And you have not His word abiding in you.

That is, the ordinances, the commandments, the Law, and the Prophets. For even if God ordained these, still they are not with you, since you believe not on Me. Because, if the Scriptures everywhere say that it is necessary to give heed to Me, and yet ye believe not, it is quite clear that His word is removed from you. Wherefore again He adds,

For whom He has sent, Him ye believe not.

Then that they may not argue, How, if we have not heard His voice, has He testified unto you? He says,

John 5:39

Search the Scriptures, for they are they which testify of Me.

Since by these the Father gave His testimony. He gave it indeed by Jordan also and in the mount, but Christ brings not forward those voices; perhaps by doing so He would have been disbelieved; for one of them, that in the mount, they did not hear, and the other they heard indeed, but heeded not. For this reason He refers them to the Scriptures, showing that from them comes the Father's testimony, having first removed the old grounds on which they used to boast, either as having seen God or as having heard His voice. For as it was likely that they would disbelieve His voice, and picture to themselves what took place on Sinai, after first correcting their suspicions on these points, and showing that what had been done was a condescension, He then refers them to the testimony of the Scriptures.

4. And from these too let us also, when we war against heretics, arm and fortify ourselves. For all Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness, that the man of God may be perfect, thoroughly furnished unto every good work 2 Timothy 3:16-17; not that he may have some and not others, for such a man is not perfect. For tell me what profit is it, if a man pray continually, but give not liberal alms?

Or if he give liberal alms, but be covetous or violent? Or if he be not covetous nor violent, but (is liberal) to make a show before men, and to gain the praise of the beholders? Or if he give alms with exactness and according to God's pleasure, yet be lifted up by this very thing, and be highminded? Or if he be humble and constant in fasting, but covetous, greedy of gain, and nailed to earth, and one who introduces into his soul the mother of mischief? For the love of money is the root of all evils.

Let us then shudder at the action, let us flee the sin; this has made the world a waste, this has brought all things into confusion, this seduces us from the most blessed service of Christ. It is not possible, He says, to serve God and mammon. For mammon gives commands contradictory to those of Christ. The one says, Give to them that need; the other, Plunder the goods of the needy. Christ says, Forgive them that wrong you; the other, Prepare snares against those who do you no wrong.

Christ says, Be merciful and kind; mammon says, Be savage and cruel, and count the tears of the poor as nothing; to the intent that he may render the Judge stern to us in that day. For then all our actions shall come before our eyes, and those who have been injured and stripped by us, shutting us out from all excuse. Since if Lazarus, who received no wrong from Dives, but only did not enjoy any of his good things, stood forth at that time as a bitter accuser and allowed him not to obtain any pardon, what excuse, tell me, shall they have, who, besides giving no alms of their own substance, seize that of others, and overthrow orphans' houses?

If they who have not fed Christ when He hungered have drawn such fire upon their heads, what consolation shall they enjoy who plunder what belongs not to them at all, who weave ten thousand law-suits, who unjustly grasp the property of all men? Let us then cast out this desire; and we shall cast it out if we think of those before us who did wrongfully, who were covetous and are gone. Do not others enjoy their wealth and labors while they lie in punishment, and vengeance, and intolerable woes?

And how can this be anything but extreme folly, to weary and vex ourselves, that living we may strain ourselves with labor, and on our departure hence undergo intolerable punishments and vengeance, when we might have enjoyed ourselves here, (for nothing so much causes pleasure as the consciousness of almsgiving, ) and departing to that place might have been delivered from all our woes, and obtained ten thousand blessings? For as wickedness is wont to punish those who go after it, even before (they arrive at) the pit, so also virtue, even before the (gift of) the Kingdom, provides delights for those who here practice it, making them to live in company with good hopes and continual pleasure.

Therefore that we may obtain this, both here and in the life to come, let us hold fast to good works, so shall we gain the future crown; to which may we all reach through the grace and lovingkindness of our Lord Jesus Christ, by whom and with whom, to the Father and the Holy Ghost, be glory, now and ever, and world without end. Amen.

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