

John 5:39-47

by St. John Chrysostom

St. John Chrysostom's sermon emphasizes the necessity of diligently searching the Scriptures to understand Christ and the consequences of failing to do so.

Scripture: Psalm 38:3, Proverbs 1:7, Proverbs 21:8, John 5:39-46, 1 Corinthians 6:7

Topics: "Scripture Study", "Godly Wisdom"

Description

John Chrysostom emphasizes the importance of diligently searching the Scriptures to find eternal life in Christ, rather than merely reading them superficially. He points out that the Jews' lack of belief in Jesus stems from their love for human honor over God's honor, as evidenced by their rejection of Christ's teachings and miracles. Chrysostom highlights the hypocrisy of the Jews claiming to trust in Moses while disbelieving in the One whom Moses wrote about. He warns about the folly of wickedness and the wisdom found in virtue, urging listeners to cast out deceit and embrace true wisdom found in fearing God.

Transcript

Search the Scriptures; for in them ye think you have eternal life; and they are they which testify of Me. And ye will not come to Me that you might have [eternal] life.

1. Beloved, let us make great account of spiritual things, and not think that it is sufficient for us to salvation to pursue them anyhow. For if in things of this life a man can gain no great profit if he conduct them in an indifferent and chance way, much more will this be the case in spiritual things, since these require yet greater attention. Wherefore Christ when He referred the Jews to the Scriptures, sent them not to a mere reading, but a careful and considerate search; for He said not, Read the Scriptures, but, Search the Scriptures. Since the sayings relating to Him required great attention, (for they had been concealed from the beginning for the advantage of the men of that time,) He bids them now dig down with care that they might be able to discover what lay in the depth below. These sayings were not on the surface, nor were they cast forth to open view, but lay like some treasure hidden very deep. Now he that searches for hidden things, except he seek them with care and toil, will never find the object of his search. For which cause He said, Search the Scriptures, because in them ye think you have eternal life. He said not, You have, but ye think, showing that they gained from them nothing great or high, expecting as they did to be saved by the mere reading, without the addition of faith. What He says therefore is of this kind: Do ye not admire the Scriptures, do ye not think that they are the causes of all life? By these I confirm My claims now, for they are they which testify of Me, yet ye will not come to Me that you may have eternal life. It was thus with

good reason that He said, ye think, because they would not obey, but merely prided themselves on the bare reading. Then lest owing to His very tender care He should incur among them the suspicion of vainglory, and because He desired to be believed by them, should be deemed to be seeking His own; (for He reminded them of the words of John, and of the witness of God, and of His own works, and said all He could to draw them to Him, and promised them life;) since, I say, it was likely that many would suspect that He spoke these things from a desire of glory, hear what He says:

John 5:41

I receive not honor from men.

That is, I need it not: My nature, He says, is not of such a kind as to need the honor which is from men, for if the sun can receive no addition from the light of a candle, much farther am I from needing the honor which is from men. Why then, asks some one, do you say these things, if you need it not? That ye may be saved. This He positively asserted above, and the same He implied here also, by saying, that you might have life. Moreover, He puts another reason:

John 5:42

But I know you that you have not the love of God in you.

For when under pretense of loving God they persecuted Him because He made Himself equal with God, and He knew that they would not believe Him, lest any one should ask, why do you speak these words? I speak them, He says, to convict you of this, that it is not for the love of God that you persecute Me, if it be so that He testifies to Me both by works and by the Scriptures. For as before this when you deemed Me an enemy of God ye drove Me away, so now, since I have declared these things, you ought to have hastened to Me, if you had really loved. God. But ye love Him not. And therefore have I spoken these words, to show that you are possessed with excessive pride, that you are vainly boasting and shading over your own enviousness. And the same He proves not by these things only, but by those that should come to pass.

John 5:43

I have come in My Father's name, and you receive Me not; if another shall come in his own name, him will you receive.

2. Do you see that He everywhere declares that He has been sent, that judgment has been committed to Him by the Father, that He can do nothing of Himself, in order that He may cut off all excuse for their unfairness? But who is it that He here says shall come in his own name? He alludes here to Antichrist, and puts an incontrovertible proof of their unfairness. For if as loving God ye persecute Me, much more ought this to have taken place in the case of Antichrist. For he will neither say that he is sent by the Father, nor that he comes according to his will, but in everything contrariwise, seizing like a tyrant what belongs not to him, and asserting that he is the very God over all, as Paul says, 'Exalting himself above all that is called God, or that is worshipped, showing himself that he is God.' 2 Thessalonians 2:4 This is to 'come in his own name.' I do not so, but have come in the Name of My Father. That they received not One who said that He was sent of God, was a sufficient proof that they loved not God; but now from the contrary of this fact, from their being about to receive Antichrist, He shows their shamelessness. For when they received not One who asserts that He was sent by God, and are about to worship one who knows Him not, and

who says that he is God over all, it is clear that their persecution proceeded from malice and from hating God. On this account He puts two reasons for His words; and first the kinder one, That ye may be saved; and, That ye may have life: and when they would have mocked at Him, He puts the other which was more striking, showing that even although His hearers should not believe, yet that God was wont always to do His own works. Now Paul speaking concerning Antichrist said prophetically, that God shall send them strong delusion -- that they all might be judged who believed not the truth, but had pleasure in unrighteousness. 2 Thessalonians 2:11-12 Christ said not, He shall come; but, if He come, from tenderness for His hearers; and because all their obstinacy was not yet complete. He was silent as to the reason of His coming; but Paul, for those who can understand, has particularly alluded to it. For it is he who takes away all excuse from them.

Christ then puts also the cause of their unbelief, saying . . .

John 5:44

How can you believe, which receive honor one of another, and seek not the honor that comes from God only?

Hence again He shows that they looked not to the things of God, but that under this pretense they desired to gratify private feeling, and were so far from doing this on account of His glory, that they preferred honor from men to that which comes from Him. How then were they likely to entertain such hostility towards Him for a kind of honor which they so despised, as to prefer to it the honor which comes from men?

Having told them that they had not the love of God, and having proved it by what was doing in His case, and by what should be in the case of Antichrist, and having demonstrated that they were deprived of all excuse, He next brings Moses to be their accuser, going on to say,

John 5:45-47

Do not think that I will accuse you to the Father; there is one that accuses you, even Moses, in whom you trust. For had ye believed Moses, you would have believed Me; for he wrote of Me. But if you believe not his writings, how shall you believe My words?

What He says is of this kind: It is Moses who has been insulted more than I by your conduct towards Me, for you have disbelieved him rather than Me. See how in every way He has cast them out from all excuse. You said that you loved God when you persecuted Me; I have shown that you did so from hatred of Him: ye say that I break the Sabbath and annul the Law; I have rid Me of this slander also: ye maintain that you believe in Moses by what ye dare to do against Me; I on the contrary show that this is most to disbelieve in Moses; for so far am I from opposing the Law, that he who shall accuse you is none other than the man who gave you the Law. As then He said of the Scriptures, in which ye think you have eternal life, so of Moses also He says, in whom you trust; everywhere conquering them by their own weapons.

And whence, says some one, is it clear that Moses will accuse us, and that you are not a boaster? What have you to do with Moses? You have broken the Sabbath which he ordained that we should keep; how then should he accuse us? And how does it appear that we shall believe in another who comes in his own name? All these assertions you make without evidence. Now in truth all these points are proved above. For (Christ would reply) since it is acknowledged that I came from God, both by the works, by the voice of John, and by the testimony of the Father, it is evident that Moses will accuse the Jews. For what says he?

If a man come doing miracles and leading you to God, and truly foretelling things future, you must hearken unto him with all readiness. Now Christ had done all this. He wrought miracles in very truth, He drew all men to God, and (so that He) caused accomplishment to follow His predictions.

But whence does it appear that they will believe another? From their hating Christ, since they who turn aside from Him who comes according to the will of God will, it is quite plain, receive the enemy of God. And marvel not if He now puts forward Moses, although He said, I receive not witness from man, for He refers them not to Moses, but to the Scriptures of God. However, since the Scriptures terrified them less, He brings round His discourse to the very person (of Moses), setting over against them their Lawgiver as their accuser, thus rendering the terror more impressive; and each of their assertions He refutes. Observe: they said that they persecuted Him through love for God, He shows that they did so through hating God; they said that they held fast to Moses, He shows that they acted thus because they believed not Moses. For had they been zealous for the law, they ought to have received Him who fulfilled it; if they loved God they ought to have believed One who drew them to Him, if they believed Moses they ought to have done homage to One of whom Moses prophesied. But (says Christ) if Moses is disbelieved before My coming, it is nothing unlikely that I, who am heralded by him, should be driven away by you. As then He had shown from their conduct towards Himself that they who admired John (really) despised him, so now He shows that they who thought that they believed Moses, believed him not, and turns back on their own head all that they thought to put forward in their own behalf. So far, He says, am I from drawing you away from the Law, that I call your Lawgiver himself to be your accuser.

That the Scriptures testified of Him He declared, but where they testify He added not; desiring to inspire them with greater awe, and to prompt them to search, and to reduce them to the necessity of questioning. For had He told them readily and without their questioning, they would have rejected the testimony; but now, if they gave any heed to His words, they needed first of all to ask, and learn from Him what that testimony was. On this account He deals the more largely in assertions and threats, not in proofs only, that even so He may bring them over by fear of what He says; but they even so were silent. Such a thing is wickedness; whatsoever a man say or do it is not stirred to move, but remains keeping its peculiar venom.

Wherefore we must cast out all wickedness from our souls, and never more contrive any deceit; for, says one, To the perverse God sends crooked paths Proverbs 21:8, Septuagint; and, The holy spirit of discipline will flee deceit, and remove from thoughts that are without understanding. Wisdom 1:5 For nothing makes men so foolish as wickedness; since when a man is treacherous, unfair, ungrateful, (these are different forms of wickedness,) when without having been wronged he grieves another, when he weaves deceits, how shall he not exhibit an example of excessive folly?

Again, nothing makes men so wise as virtue; it renders them thankful and fair-minded, merciful, mild, gentle, and candid; it is wont to be the mother of all other blessings. And what is more understanding than one so disposed? For virtue is the very spring and root of prudence, just as all wickedness has its beginning in folly. For, the insolent man and the angry become the prey of their respective passions from lack of wisdom; on which account the prophet said, There is no soundness in my flesh: my wounds stink and are corrupt because of my foolishness Psalm 38:3-4: showing that all sin has its beginning in folly: and so the virtuous man who has the fear of God is more understanding than any; wherefore a wise man has said, The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom.

Proverbs 1:7 If then to fear God is to have wisdom, and the wicked man has not that fear, he is deprived of that which is wisdom indeed -- and deprived of that which is wisdom indeed, he is more foolish than any.

And yet many admire the wicked as being able to do injustice and harm, not knowing that they ought to deem them wretched above all men, who thinking to injure others thrust the sword against themselves -- an act of extremest folly, that a man should strike himself and not even know that he does so, but should think that he is injuring another while he is killing himself.

Wherefore Paul, knowing that we slay ourselves when we smite others, says, Why do ye not rather take wrong? Why do ye not rather suffer yourselves to be defrauded? 1 Corinthians 6:7 For the not suffering wrong consists in doing none, as also the not being ill-used in not using others ill; though this assertion may seem a riddle to the many, and to those who will not learn true wisdom. Knowing this, let us not call wretched or lament for those who suffer injury or insult, but for such who inflict these things; these are they who have been most injured, who have made God to be at war with them, and have opened the mouths of ten thousand accusers, who are getting an evil reputation in the present life, and drawing down on themselves severe punishment in the life to come.

While those who have been wronged by them, and have nobly borne it all, have God favorable to them, and all to condone with, and praise, and entertain them. Such as these in the present life, shall enjoy an exceeding good report, as affording the strongest example of true wisdom, and in the life to come shall share the good things everlasting; to which may we all attain through the grace and lovingkindness of our Lord Jesus Christ, with whom to the Father and the Holy Ghost be glory, now and ever, and world without end. Amen.

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