

On the Priesthood - Part 5

by St. John Chrysostom

The dangers of ambition and the importance of humility, self-awareness, and proper preparation in the priesthood are emphasized, as well as the responsibility of the ordainer and the consequences of negligence and irresponsibility.

Scripture: Matthew 5:19, Acts 20:31, Colossians 3:16, 1 Thessalonians 5:11, 1 Timothy 4:13, 1 Timothy 5:17, 2 Timothy 2:24, 2 Timothy 3:14, 1 Peter 3:15

Topics: "Church Leadership", "Scriptural Knowledge"

Description

John Chrysostom emphasizes the importance of being skilled and knowledgeable in the ministry, highlighting the dangers of unskilled leadership in the Church. He uses the example of St. Paul's mastery in both speech and doctrine, showing how his teachings and epistles have had a profound impact on the Church. Chrysostom stresses the need for priests and laity to be well-versed in Scripture, capable of defending the faith and refuting false teachings. He warns against the perils of unskilled leadership leading to the spiritual ruin of many souls.

Transcript

Basil heard this, and after a little pause thus replied:

If you were yourself ambitious of obtaining this office, your fear would have been reasonable; for in being ambitious of undertaking it, a man confesses himself to be qualified for its administration, and if he fail therein, after it has been entrusted to him, he cannot take refuge in the plea of inexperience, for he has deprived himself of this excuse beforehand, by having hurriedly seized upon the ministry, and whoever willingly and deliberately enters upon it, can no longer say, I have sinned in this matter against my will -- and against my will I have ruined such and such a soul; for He who will one day judge him, will say to him, Since then thou were conscious of such inexperience, and had not ability for undertaking this matter without incurring reproach, why were thou so eager and presumptuous as to take in hand what was so far beyond your power? Who compelled you to do so? Did you shrink or fly, and did any one drag you on by force? But you will hear nothing like this, for you can have nothing of this kind to condemn yourself for; and it is evident to all that thou were in no degree ambitious of this dignity, for the accomplishment of the matter was due to the action of others. Hence, circumstances which leave those who are ambitious of this office no chance of pardon when they err therein, afford you ample ground for excuse.

Chrysostom: At this I shook my head and smiled a little, admiring the simple-mindedness of the man, and thus addressed him: I could wish indeed that matters were as you say, most excellent of men, but not in order that I might be able to accept that office from which I lately fled. For if, indeed, no chastisement were to await me for undertaking the care of the flock of Christ without consideration and experience, yet to me it would be worse than all punishment, after being entrusted with so great a charge, to have seemed so base towards Him who entrusted me with it. For what reason, then, did I wish that thou were not mistaken in this opinion of yours? truly for the sake of those wretched and unhappy beings (for so must I call them, who have not found out how to discharge the duties of this office well, though thou were to say ten thousand times over that they had been driven to undertake it, and that, therefore, their errors therein are sins of ignorance)-- for the sake, I say, of such that they might succeed in escaping that unquenchable fire, and the outer darkness Matthew 25:30 and the worm that dies not Mark 9:44 and the punishment of being cut asunder, and perishing together with the hypocrites.

But what am I to do for you? It is not as you say, no, by no means. And if you will, I will give you a proof of what I maintain, from the case of a kingdom, which is not of such account with God as the priesthood. Saul, that son of Kish, was not himself at all ambitious of becoming a king, but was going in quest of his asses, and came to ask the prophet about them. The prophet, however, proceeded to speak to him of the kingdom, but not even then did he run greedily after it, though he heard about it from a prophet, but drew back and deprecated it, saying, Who am I, and what is my father's house. 1 Samuel 9:21 What then? When he made a bad use of the honor which had been given him by God, were those words of his able to rescue him from the wrath of Him who had made him king? And was he able to say to Samuel, when rebuked by him: Did I greedily run and rush after the kingdom and sovereign power? I wished to lead the undisturbed and peaceful life of ordinary men, but thou dragged me to this post of honor. Had I remained in my low estate I should easily have escaped all these stumbling blocks, for were I one of the obscure multitude, I should never have been sent forth on this expedition, nor would God have committed to my hands the war against the Amalekites, and if I had not had it committed to me, I should not have sinned this sin. But all such arguments are weak as excuses, and not only weak, but perilous, inasmuch as they rather kindle the wrath of God. For he who has been promoted to great honor by God, must not advance the greatness of his honor as an excuse for his errors, but should make God's special favor towards him the motive for further improvement; whereas he who thinks himself at liberty to sin because he has obtained some uncommon dignity, what does he but study to show that the lovingkindness of God is the cause of his personal transgression, which is always the argument of those who lead godless and careless lives. But we ought to be on no account thus minded, nor to fall away into the insane folly of such people, but be ambitious at all times to make the most of such powers as we have, and to be reverent both in speech and thought.

For (to leave the kingdom and to come to the priesthood, which is the more immediate subject of our discourse) neither was Eli ambitious of obtaining his high office, yet what advantage was this to him when he sinned therein? But why do I say obtain it? Not even had he wished could he have avoided it, because he was under a legal necessity to accept it. For he was of the tribe of Levi, and was bound to undertake that high office which descended to him from his forefathers, notwithstanding which even he paid no small penalty for the lawlessness of his sons.

And the very first High Priest of the Jews, concerning whom God spoke so many words to Moses, when he was unable to withstand alone the frenzy of so great a multitude, was he not very nearly being destroyed, but for the intercession of his brother, which averted the wrath of God? Exodus 32:10-11 And

since we have mentioned Moses, it will be well to show the truth of what we are saying from what happened to him. For this same saintly Moses was so far from grasping at the leadership of the Jews as to deprecate the offer, Exodus 4:13 and to decline it when God commanded him to take it, and so to provoke the wrath of Him who appointed him; and not only then, but afterwards when he entered upon his rule, he would gladly have died to have been set free from it: Kill me, says he, if you are going to deal thus with me.

But what then? When he sinned at the waters of strife, Numbers 20:12 could these repeated refusals be pleaded in excuse for him? Could they prevail with God to grant him pardon? And wherefore was he deprived of the promised land? For no other reason, as we all know, than for this sin of his, for which that wondrous man was debarred from enjoying the same blessings which those over whom he ruled obtained; but after many labors and sufferings, after that unspeakable wandering, after so many battles fought and victories won, he died outside the land to reach which he had undergone so much toil and trial; and though he had weathered the storms of the deep, he failed to enjoy the blessings of the haven after all.

From hence then you see that not only they who grasp at this office are left without excuse for the sins they commit in the discharge thereof, but they too who come to it through the ambitious desire of others; for truly if those persons who have been chosen for this high office by God himself, though they have never so often refused it, have paid such heavy penalties, and if nothing has availed to deliver any of them from this danger, neither Aaron nor Eli, nor that holy man the Saint, the prophet, the wonder worker, the meek above all the men which were upon the face of the earth, Numbers 12:3 who spoke with God, as a man speaks unto his friend, Exodus 33:11 hardly shall we who fall so infinitely short of the excellence of that great man, be able to plead as a sufficient excuse the consciousness that we have never been ambitious of the dignity, more especially when many of the ordinations now-a-days do not proceed from the grace of God, but are due to human ambition.

God chose Judas, and counted him one of the sacred band, and committed to him, as to the rest, the dignity of the apostolic office; yea he gave him somewhat beyond the others, the stewardship of the money. John 12:6 But what of that? When he afterwards abused both these trusts, betraying Him whom he was commissioned to preach, and misapplying the money which he should have laid out well; did he escape punishment? nay for this very reason he even brought upon himself greater punishment, and very reasonably too.

For we must not use the high honors given to us by God so as to offend Him, but so as to please Him better. But he who claims exemption from punishment where it is due, because he has been exalted to higher honor than others, acts very much like one of those unbelieving Jews, who after hearing Christ say, If I had not come and spoken unto them, they had not had sin, If I had not done among them the works which none other did, they had not had sin, John 15:22-24 should reproach the Saviour and benefactor of mankind by replying, Why, then, did you come and speak?

Why did you work miracles? Was it that you might punish us the more? But these are the words of madness and of utter senselessness. For the Great Physician came not to give you over, but to heal you -- not to pass you by when thou were sick, but to rid you entirely of disease. But you have of your own accord withdrawn yourself from his hands; receive therefore the sorer punishment. For as you would have been freed from your former maladies if you had yielded to his treatment, so if, when you saw him coming to your aid you fled from him, you will no longer be able to cleanse yourself of these infirmities, and as you are unable, you will both suffer punishment for them, and also because for your part you made God's

solicitude for your good of none effect.

Therefore we who act like this are not subjected to the same torment after as before we received honor at God's hands, but far severer torment after than before. For he who has not become good even by being well treated, deserves all the bitterer punishment. Since, then, this excuse of yours has been shown to be weak, and not only fails to save those who take refuge in it, but exposes them so much the more, we must provide ourselves with some other means of safety.

Basil: Tell me of what nature is that? Since, as for me, I am at present scarce master of myself, you have reduced me to such a state of fear and trembling by what you have said.

Chrysostom: Do not, I beseech and implore you, do not be so downcast. For while there is safety for us who are weak, namely, in not undertaking this office at all, there is safety for you too who are strong, and this consists in making your hopes of salvation depend, next to the grace of God, on avoiding every act unworthy of this gift, and of God who gave it. For they certainly would be deserving of the greatest punishment who, after obtaining this dignity through their own ambition, should then either on account of sloth, or wickedness, or even inexperience, abuse the office. Not that we are to gather from this that there is pardon in store for those who have not been thus ambitious. Yea, even they too are deprived of all excuse. For in my judgment, if ten thousand were to entreat and urge, a man should pay them no attention, but should first of all search his own heart, and examine the whole matter carefully before yielding to their importunities. Now no one would venture to undertake the building of a house were he not an architect, nor will any one attempt the cure of sick bodies who is not a skilled physician; but even though many urge him, will beg off, and will not be ashamed to own his ignorance; and shall he who is going to have the care of so many souls entrusted to him, not examine himself beforehand? will he accept this ministry even though he be the most inexperienced of men, because this one commands him, or that man constrains him, or for fear of offending a third? And if so, how will he escape casting himself together with them into manifest misery. Had he continued as he was, it were possible for him to be saved, but now he involves others in his own destruction. For whence can he hope for salvation? Whence to obtain pardon? Who will then successfully intercede for us? They who are now perhaps urging us and forcibly dragging us on? But who will save these same at such a moment? For even they too will stand in need in their turn of intercession, that they may escape the fire. Now, that I say not these things to frighten you, but as representing the matter as in truth it is, hear what the holy Apostle Paul says to Timothy his disciple, his own and beloved son, Lay hands suddenly on no man, neither be partaker of other men's sins. 1 Timothy 5:22 Do you not see from what great blame, yea and vengeance, we, so far as in us lies, have delivered those who were ready to put us forward for this office.

2. For as it is not enough for those who are chosen to say in excuse for themselves, I did not summon myself to this office, nor could I avoid what I did not see beforehand; so neither will it be a sufficient plea for those who ordain them to say that they did not know him who was ordained. The charge against them becomes greater on account of their ignorance of him whom they brought forward, and what seems to excuse them only serves to accuse them the more. For how absurd a thing, is it not? That they who want to buy a slave, show him to the physician, and require sureties for the sale, and information about him from their neighbours, and after all this do not yet venture on his purchase without asking for some time for a trial of him; while they who are going to admit any one to so great an office as this, give their testimonial and their sanction loosely and carelessly, without further investigation, just because some one wishes it, or to court the favor, or to avoid the displeasure of some one else. Who shall then successfully intercede for us in that day, when they who ought to defend us stand themselves in need of defenders? He who is

going to ordain, therefore, ought to make diligent inquiry, and much more he who is to be ordained. For though they who ordain him share his punishment, for any sins which he may commit in his office, yet so far from escaping vengeance he will even pay a greater penalty than they -- save only if they who chose him acted from some worldly motive contrary to what seemed justifiable to themselves. For if they should be detected so doing, and knowing a man to be unworthy have brought him forward on some pretext or other, the amount of their punishment shall be equivalent to his, nay perhaps the punishment shall be even greater for them who appointed the unfit man. For he who gives authority to any one who is minded to destroy the Church, would be certainly to blame for the outrages which that person commits. But if he is guilty of no such thing, and says that he has been misled by the opinions of others, even then he shall not altogether remain unpunished, but his punishment shall be a little lighter than his who has been ordained. What then? It is possible that they who elect may come to the election deceived by a false report. But he who is elected could not say, I am ignorant of myself, as others were of him. As one who will receive therefore a sorer punishment than they who put him forward, so should he make his scrutiny of himself more careful than that which they make of him; and if they in ignorance drag him on, he ought to come forward and instruct them carefully about any matters whereby he may stop their being misled; and so having shown himself unworthy of trial may escape the burden of so high an office.

For what is the reason why, in the arts of war, and merchandize, and husbandry, and other departments of this life, when some plan is proposed, the husbandman will not undertake to navigate the ship, nor the soldier to till the ground, nor the pilot to lead an army, under pain of ten thousand deaths? Is it not plainly this? That each foresees the danger which would attend his incompetence? Well, where the loss is concerned with trifles shall we use so much forethought, and refuse to yield to the pressure of compulsion, but where the punishment is eternal, as it is for those who know not how to handle the Priesthood, shall we want only and inconsiderately run into so great danger, and then advance, as our excuse, the pressing entreaties of others?

But He who one day will judge us will entertain no such plea as this. For we ought to show far more caution in spiritual matters than in carnal. But now we are not found exhibiting as much caution. For tell me: if supposing a man to be an artificer, when he is not so, we invited him to do a piece of work, and he were to respond to the call, and then having set his hand to the material prepared for the building, were to spoil the wood and spoil the stone, and so to build the house that it straightway fell to pieces, would it be sufficient excuse for him to allege that he had been urged by others and did not come of his own accord?

In no wise; and very reasonably and justly so. For he ought to have refused even at the call of others. So for the man who only spoils wood and stone, there will be no escape from paying the penalty, and is he who destroys souls, and builds the temple of God carelessly, to think that the compulsion of others is his warrant for escaping punishment? Is not this very absurd? For I omit the fact as yet that no one is able to compel the man who is unwilling. But be it that he was subjected to excessive pressure and various artful devices, and then fell into a snare; will this therefore rescue him from punishment?

I beseech you, let us not deceive ourselves, and pretend that we know not what is obvious to a mere child. For surely this pretence of ignorance will not be able to profit in the day of reckoning. You were not ambitious, you say, of receiving this high office, conscious of your own weakness. Well and good. Then you ought, with the same mind, to have declined the solicitation of others; or, when no one called you, were you weak and incapable, but when those were found ready to offer you this dignity, did you suddenly become competent?

What ludicrous nonsense! Worthy of the extremest punishment. For this reason also the Lord counsels the man who wishes to build a tower, not to lay the foundation before he has taken his own ability to build into account, lest he should give the passers by innumerable opportunities of mocking at him. But in his case the penalty only consists in becoming a laughing-stock; while in that before us the punishment is that of fire unquenchable, and of an undying worm, Isaiah 66:24 gnashing of teeth, outer darkness, and being cut asunder, and having a portion with the hypocrites.

But my accusers are unwilling to consider any of these things. For otherwise they would cease to blame a person who is unwilling to perish without cause. It is not the management of grain and barley, oxen or sheep, that is now under our consideration, nor any such like matters, but the very Body of Jesus. For the Church of Christ, according to St. Paul, is Christ's Body, and he who is entrusted with its care ought to train it up to a state of healthiness, and beauty unspeakable, and to look everywhere, lest any spot or wrinkle, Ephesians 5:27 or other like blemish should mar its vigor and comeliness. For what is this but to make it appear worthy, so far as human power can, of the incorruptible and ever-blessed Head which is set over it? If they who are ambitious of reaching an athletic condition of body need the help of physicians and trainers, and exact diet, and constant exercise, and a thousand other rules (for the omission of the merest trifle upsets and spoils the whole), how shall they to whose lot falls the care of the body, which has its conflict not against flesh and blood, but against powers unseen, be able to keep it sound and healthy, unless they far surpass ordinary human virtue, and are versed in all healing proper for the soul?

3. Pray, are you not aware that that body is subject to more diseases and assaults than this flesh of ours, is more quickly corrupted, and more slow to recover? And by those who have the healing of these bodies, various medicines have been discovered, and an apparatus of different instruments, and diet suitable for the sick; and often the condition of the atmosphere is of itself enough for the recovery of a sick man; and there are instances of seasonable sleep having saved the physician all further labor. But in the case before us, it is impossible to take any of these things into consideration; nay there is but one method and way of healing appointed, after we have gone wrong, and that is, the powerful application of the Word. This is the one instrument, the only diet, the finest atmosphere. This takes the place of physic, cautery and cutting, and if it be needful to sear and amputate, this is the means which we must use, and if this be of no avail, all else is wasted; with this we both rouse the soul when it sleeps, and reduce it when it is inflamed; with this we cut off excesses, and fill up defects, and perform all manner of other operations which are requisite for the soul's health. Now as regards the ordering of our daily life for the best, it is true that the life of another may provoke us to emulation. But in the matter of spurious doctrine, when any soul is diseased thereby, then there is great need of the Word, not only in view of the safety of our own people, but in view of the enemy without. If, indeed, one had the sword of the spirit, and the shield of faith, Ephesians 6:16-17 so as to be able to work miracles, and by means of these marvels to stop the mouths of impudent gainsayers, one would have little need of the assistance of the Word; still in the days of miracles the Word was by no means useless, but essentially necessary. For St. Paul made use of it himself, although he was everywhere so great an object of wonder for his miracles; and another of those who belonged to the glorious company of the Apostles exhorts us to apply ourselves to acquiring this power, when he says: Be ready always to give an answer to every man that asks you a reason concerning the hope that is in you, and they all, with one accord, committed the care of the poor widows to Stephen, for no other reason than that they themselves might have leisure for the ministry of the Word. Acts 6:4 To this we ought equally to apply ourselves, unless indeed we are endued with a power of working miracles. But if there is not the least sign of such a power being left us, while on every side many enemies are constantly attacking us, why then it necessarily follows that we should arm ourselves with this weapon, both in order that we may

not be wounded ourselves with the darts of the enemy, and in order that we may wound him.

4. Wherefore it should be our ambition that the Word of Christ dwell in us richly. Colossians 3:16 For it is not for one kind of battle only that we have to be prepared. This warfare is manifold, and is engaged with a great variety of enemies; neither do all these use the same weapons, nor do they practice the same method of attack; and he who has to join battle with all, must needs know the artifices of all, and be at once both archer and slinger, captain and general, in the ranks and in command, on foot and on horseback, in sea-fight and in siege.

In common warfare, indeed, each man repels the enemy by discharging the particular duty which he has undertaken. But here it is otherwise; and if any one wishes to come off conqueror in this warfare, he must understand all forms of the art, as the devil knows well how to introduce his own assailants through any one spot which may happen to be unguarded, and to carry off the sheep. But not so where he perceives the shepherd coming equipped with accurate knowledge at all points, and well acquainted with his plottings.

Wherefore we ought to be well-guarded in all parts: for a city, so long as it happens to be surrounded with a wall, laughs to scorn the besiegers, abiding in great security; but if any one makes a breach in the wall, though but of the size of a gate, the rest of the circuit is of no use, although the whole of it stand quite securely; so it is with the city of God: so long as the presence of mind and wisdom of the shepherd, which answers to the wall, protect it on all sides, all the enemy's devices end in his confusion and ridicule, and they who dwell within the wall abide unmolested, but wherever any one has been able to demolish a single part, though the rest stand never so fast, through that breach ruin will enter upon the whole.

For to what purpose does a man contend earnestly with the Greeks, if at the same time he becomes a prey to the Jews? Or get the better of both these and then fall into the clutches of the Manichæans? or after he has proved himself superior to them even, if they who introduce fatalism enter in, and make havoc of the flock? But not to enumerate all the heresies of the devil, it will be enough to say that unless the shepherd is well skilled in refuting them all, the wolf, by means of any one of them, can enter, and devour the greater part of the flock.

In ordinary warfare we must always look for victory being won or defeat sustained by the soldiers who are on the field of battle. But in the spiritual warfare the case is quite different. For there it often happens that the combat with one set of enemies secures a victory for others who never engaged in battle at all, nor took any trouble, but were sitting still all the while; and he who has not much experience in such occurrences will get pierced, so to say, with his own sword, and become the laughing-stock of friends and foes alike.

I will try by an example to make clear what I am saying. They who receive the wild doctrines of Valentinus and Marcion, and of all whose minds are similarly diseased, exclude the Law given by God to Moses from the catalogue of the Divine Scriptures. But Jews so revere the Law, that although the time has come which annuls it, they still contend for the observance of all its contents, contrary to the purpose of God. But the Church of God, avoiding either extreme, has trodden a middle path, and is neither induced on the one hand to place herself under its yoke, nor on the other does she tolerate its being slandered, but commends it, though its day is over, because of its profitableness while its season lasted.

Now it is necessary for him who is going to fight with both these enemies, to be fully conversant with this middle course. For if in wishing to teach the Jews that they are out of date in clinging to the old law, he

begins to find fault with it unsparingly, he gives no little handle to those heretics who wish to pull it to pieces; and if in his ambition to stop their mouths he extols it immoderately, and speaks of it with admiration, as necessary for this present time, he unseals the lips of the Jews.

Again they who labor under the frenzy of Sabellius and the craze of Arius, have both fallen from a sound faith for want of observing a middle course. The name of Christian is applied to both these heretics; but if any one examines their doctrines, he will find the one sect not much better than the Jews, and differing from them only in name, and the other very nearly holding the heresy of Paul of Samosata, and that both are very wide of the truth. Great, therefore, is the danger in such cases, and the way of orthodoxy is narrow and hemmed in by threatening crags on either side, and there is no little fear lest when intending to strike at one enemy we should be wounded by the other.

For if any one assert the unity of the Godhead, Sabellius straightway turns that expression to the advantage of his own mental vagary, and if he distinguish the Persons, and say that the Father is one, and the Son another, and the Holy Spirit a third, up gets Arius, ready to wrest that distinction of Persons into a difference of substance; so we must turn and flee both from the impious confounding of the Persons by the one, and the senseless division of the substance by the other, confessing, indeed, that the Godhead of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost, is all one, while we add thereunto a Trinity of Persons.

For then we shall be able to fortify ourselves against the attacks of both heretics. I might tell you besides these, of several other adversaries against which, except we contend bravely and carefully, we shall leave the field covered with wounds.

5. Why should any one describe the silly chatter of our own people? For these are not less than the attacks upon us from without, while they give the teacher even more trouble. Some out of an idle curiosity are rashly bent upon busying themselves about matters which are neither possible for them to know, nor of any advantage to them if they could know them. Others again demand from God an account of his judgments, and force themselves to sound the depth of that abyss which is unfathomable. For your judgments, says the Scriptures, are a great deep, and about their faith and practice you would find few of them anxious, but the majority curiously inquiring into matters which it is not possible to discover, and the mere inquiry into which provokes God. For when we make a determined effort to learn what He does not wish us to know, we fail to succeed (for how should we succeed against the will of God?); and there only remains for us the danger arising from our inquiry. Now, though this be the case, whenever any one authoritatively stops the search, into such fathomless depths, he gets himself the reputation of being proud and ignorant; so that at such times much tact is needed on the Bishop's part, so as to lead his people away from these unprofitable questions, and himself escape the above-named censures. In short, to meet all these difficulties, there is no help given but that of speech, and if any be destitute of this power, the souls of those who are put under his charge (I mean of the weaker and more meddlesome kind) are no better off than ships continually storm-tossed. So that the Priest should do all that in him lies, to gain this means of strength.

6. Basil: Why, then, was not St. Paul ambitious of becoming perfect in this art? He makes no secret of his poverty of speech, but distinctly confesses himself to be unskilled, even telling the Corinthians so, who were admired for their eloquence, and prided themselves upon it.

Chrysostom: This is the very thing which has ruined many and made them remiss in the study of true doctrine. For while they failed to fathom the depths of the apostle's mind, and to understand the meaning

of his words, they passed all their time slumbering and yawning, and paying respect not to that ignorance which St. Paul acknowledges, but to a kind from which he was as free as any man ever was in the world.

But leaving this subject to await our consideration, I say this much in the meantime. Granting that St. Paul was in this respect as unskilled as they would have him to be, what has that to do with the men of today? For he had a greater power by far than power of speech, power which brought about greater results too; which was that his bare presence, even though he was silent, was terrible to the demons. But the men of the present day, if they were all collected in one place, would not be able, with infinite prayers and tears, to do the wonders that once were done by the handkerchief of St. Paul. He too by his prayers raised the dead, Acts 20:10 and wrought such other miracles, that he was held to be a god by heathen; Acts 14:11 and before he was removed from this life, he was thought worthy to be caught up as far as the third heaven, and to share in such converse as it is not lawful for mortal ears to hear. 2 Corinthians 12:2-4 But the men of today -- not that I would say anything harsh or severe, for indeed I do not speak by way of insult to them, but only in wonder -- how is it that they do not shudder when they measure themselves with so great a man as this? For if we leave the miracles and turn to the life of this blessed saint, and look into his angelic conversation, it is in this rather than in his miracles that you will find this Christian athlete a conqueror. For how can one describe his zeal and forbearance, his constant perils, his continual cares, and incessant anxiety for the Churches; his sympathy with the weak, his many afflictions, his unwonted persecutions, his deaths daily? Where is the spot in the world, where is the continent or sea, that is a stranger to the labours of this righteous man? Even the desert has known his presence, for it often sheltered him in time of danger. For he underwent every species of attack, and achieved every kind of victory, and there was never any end to his contests and his triumphs.

Yet, all unawares, I have been led to do this man an injury. For his exploits are beyond all powers of description, and beyond mine in particular, just as the masters of eloquence surpass me. Nevertheless, since that holy apostle will judge us, not by the issue, but by the motive, I shall not forbear till I have stated one more circumstance which surpasses anything yet mentioned, as much as he himself surpasses all his fellow men. And what is this? After so many exploits, after such a multitude of victories, he prayed that he might go into hell, and be handed over to eternal punishment, if so be that those Jews, who had often stoned him, and done what they could to make away with him, might be saved, and come over to Christ. Romans 9:3 Now who so longed for Christ? If, indeed, his feelings towards him ought not to be described as something nobler than longing; shall we then any more compare ourselves with this saint, after so great grace was imparted to him from above, after so great virtue was manifested in himself? What could be more presumptuous?

Now, that he was not so unskilled, as some count him to be, I shall try to show in what follows. The unskilled person in men's estimation is not only one who is unpracticed in the tricks of profane oratory, but the man who is incapable of contending for the defense of the right faith, and they are right. But St. Paul did not say that he was unskilled in both these respects, but in one only; and in support of this he makes a careful distinction, saying that he was rude in speech, but not in knowledge. 2 Corinthians 11:6 Now were I to insist upon the polish of Isocrates, the weight of Demosthenes, the dignity of Thucydides, and the sublimity of Plato, in any one bishop, St. Paul would be a strong evidence against me. But I pass by all such matters and the elaborate ornaments of profane oratory; and I take no account of style or of delivery; yea let a man's diction be poor and his composition simple and unadorned, but let him not be unskilled in the knowledge and accurate statement of doctrine; nor in order to screen his own sloth, deprive that holy apostle of the greatest of his gifts, and the sum of his praises.

7. For how was it, tell me, that he confounded the Jews which dwelt at Damascus, Acts 9:22 though he had not yet begun to work miracles? How was it that he wrestled with the Grecians and threw them? and why was he sent to Tarsus? Was it not because he was so mighty and victorious in the word, and brought his adversaries to such a pass that they, unable to brook their defeat, were provoked to seek his life? At that time, as I said, he had not begun to work miracles, nor could any one say that the masses looked upon him with astonishment on account of any glory belonging to his mighty works, or that they who contended with him were overpowered by the force of public opinion concerning him. For at this time he conquered by dint of argument only. How was it, moreover, that he contended and disputed successfully with those who tried to Judaize in Antioch? And how was it that that Areopagite, Acts 17:34 an inhabitant of Athens, that most devoted of all cities to the gods, followed the apostle, he and his wife? Was it not owing to the discourse which they heard? And when Eutychus Acts 20:9 fell from the lattice, was it not owing to his long attendance even until midnight to St. Paul's preaching? How do we find him employed at Thessalonica and Corinth, in Ephesus and in Rome itself? Did he not spend whole nights and days in interpreting the Scriptures in their order? And why should any one recount his disputes with the Epicureans and Stoics. Acts 17:18 For were we resolved to enter into every particular, our story would grow to an unreasonable length.

When, therefore, both before working miracles, and after, St. Paul appears to have made much use of argument, how can any one dare to pronounce him unskillful whose sermons and disputations were so exceedingly admired by all who heard them? Why did the Lycaonians Acts 14:11 imagine that he was Hermes? The opinion that he and Barnabas were gods indeed, arose out of the sight of their miracles; but the notion that he was Hermes did not arise from this, but was a consequence of his speech. In what else did this blessed saint excel the rest of the apostles? And how comes it that up and down the world he is so much on every one's tongue? How comes it that not merely among ourselves, but also among Jews and Greeks, he is the wonder of wonders? Is it not from the power of his epistles? Whereby not only to the faithful of today, but from his time to this, yea and up to the end, even the appearing of Christ, he has been and will be profitable, and will continue to be so as long as the human race shall last. For as a wall built of adamant, so his writings fortify all the Churches of the known world, and he as a most noble champion stands in the midst, bringing into captivity every thought to the obedience of Christ, casting down imaginations, and every high thing which exalts itself against the knowledge of God, 2 Corinthians 10:5 and all this he does by those epistles which he has left to us full of wonders and of Divine wisdom. For his writings are not only useful to us, for the overthrow of false doctrine and the confirmation of the true, but they help not a little towards living a good life. For by the use of these, the bishops of the present day fit and fashion the chaste virgin, which St. Paul himself espoused to Christ, 2 Corinthians 11:2 and conduct her to the state of spiritual beauty; with these, too, they drive away from her the noisome pestilences which beset her, and preserve the good health thus obtained. Such are the medicines and such their efficacy left us by this so-called unskillful man, and they know them and their power best who constantly use them. From all this it is evident that St. Paul had given himself to the study of which we have been speaking with great diligence and zeal.

8. Hear also what he says in his charge to his disciple: 1 Timothy 4:13 Give heed to reading, to exhortation, to teaching, and he goes on to show the usefulness of this by adding, For in doing this you shall save both yourself and them that hear you. 1 Timothy 4:16 And again he says, The Lord's servant must not strive, but be gentle towards all, apt to teach, forbearing; 2 Timothy 2:24 and he proceeds to say, But abide thou in the things which you have learned, and hast been assured of, knowing of whom you have learned them, and that from a babe you have known the sacred writings which are able to make you

wise unto salvation, 2 Timothy 3:14-15 and again, Every Scripture is inspired of God, and also profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for instruction which is in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete.

Hear what he adds further in his directions to Titus about the appointment of bishops. The bishop, he says, must be holding to the faithful word which is according to the teaching, that he may be able to convict the gainsayers. But how shall any one who is unskillful as these men pretend, be able to convict the gainsayers and stop their mouths? Or what need is there to give attention to reading and to the Holy Scriptures, if such a state of unskillfulness is to be welcome among us?

Such arguments are mere makeshifts and pretexts, the marks of idleness and sloth. But some one will say, it is to the priests that these charges are given:-- certainly, for they are the subjects of our discourse. But that the apostle gives the same charge to the laity, hear what he says in another epistle to other than the priesthood: Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly in all wisdom, Colossians 3:16 and again, Let your speech be always with grace seasoned with salt, that you may know how ye ought to answer each one, Colossians 4:6 and there is a general charge to all that they be ready to 1 Peter 3:15 render an account of their faith, and to the Thessalonians, he gives the following command: Build each other up, even as also ye do. 1 Thessalonians 5:11 But when he speaks of priests he says, Let the elders that rule well be counted worthy of double honor, especially those who labor in the word, and in teaching. 1 Timothy 5:17 For this is the perfection of teaching when the teachers both by what they do, and by what they say as well, bring their disciples to that blessed state of life which Christ appointed for them.

For example alone is not enough to instruct others. Nor do I say this of myself; it is our Saviour's own word. For whosoever shall do and teach them, he shall be called great. Matthew 5:19 Now if doing were the same as teaching, the second word here would be superfluous; and it had been enough to have said whosoever shall do simply. But now by distinguishing the two, he shows that practice is one thing, and doctrine another, and that each needs the help of the others in order to complete edification.

You hear too what the chosen vessel of Christ says to the Ephesian elders: Wherefore watch ye, remembering that for the space of three years, I ceased not to admonish every one, night and day, with tears. Acts 20:31 But what need was there for his tears or for admonition by word of mouth, while his life as an apostle was so illustrious? His holy life might be a great inducement to men to keep the commandments, yet I dare not say that it alone could accomplish everything.

9. But when a dispute arises concerning matters of doctrine, and all take their weapons from the same Scriptures, of what weight will any one's life be able to prove? What then will be the good of his many austerities, when after such painful exercises, any one from the Priest's great unskillfulness in argument fall into heresy, and be cut off from the body of the Church, a misfortune which I have myself seen many suffering. Of what profit then will his patience be to him? None; no more than there will be in a sound faith if the life is corrupt. Wherefore, for this reason more than for all others, it concerns him whose office it is to teach others, to be experienced in disputations of this kind. For though he himself stands safely, and is unhurt by the gainsayers, yet the simple multitude under his direction, when they see their leader defeated, and without any answer for the gainsayers, will be apt to lay the blame of his discomfiture not on his own weakness, but on the doctrines themselves, as though they were faulty; and so by reason of the inexperience of one, great numbers are brought to extreme ruin; for though they do not entirely go over to the adversary, yet they are forced to doubt about matters in which formerly they firmly believed, and those whom they used to approach with unswerving confidence, they are unable to hold to any longer

steadfastly, but in consequence of their leader's defeat, so great a storm settles down upon their souls, that the mischief ends in their shipwreck altogether. But how dire is the destruction, and how terrible the fire which such a leader brings upon his own wretched head for every soul which is thus lost, you will not need to learn from me, as you know all this perfectly. Is this then pride, is this vainglory in me, to be unwilling to be the cause of the destruction of so many souls? And of procuring for myself greater punishment in the world to come, than that which now awaits me there? Who would say so? Surely no one, unless he should wish to find fault where there is none, and to moralize over other men's calamities.

Source: <https://sermonindex.net/speakers/st-john-chrysostom/on-the-priesthood-part-5/>

Grow in Your Walk with Christ

Listen and read messages that will stir your heart for Christ and point you to deeper repentance and devotion.

- 50,000+ Sermons from speakers past and present
- 3,900+ Classic Christian Books freely readable online
- 1,200+ Bible Translations and Commentaries
- Over 450k forum posts — Join our vibrant online Christian forum

www.sermonindex.net