

Philippians 2:12-16

by St. John Chrysostom

We should strive to live a virtuous life, pleasing God and growing in faith, with a sense of awe and reverence for His presence and power.

Scripture: Job 1:21, Job 6:7, Psalm 2:11, Psalm 69:20, Ephesians 6:12, Philippians 2:12, Philippians 2:17, 2 Timothy 4:6, Hebrews 4:12

Topics: "Personal Sanctification", "Suffering For Christ"

Description

John Chrysostom preaches about the importance of working out one's salvation with fear and trembling, emphasizing the need for personal responsibility and diligence in following God's will. He encourages believers to do all things without murmuring and disputings, to be blameless and harmless, shining as lights in a dark world, holding forth the word of life. Chrysostom reminds the audience to rejoice in suffering for Christ's sake, to find joy in presenting themselves as sacrifices to God, and to maintain a spirit of gratitude and thanksgiving in all circumstances.

Transcript

So then, my beloved, even as you have always obeyed, not as in my presence only, but now much more in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling; for it is God which works in you both to will and to work for His good pleasure. Do all things without murmurings and disputings: that you may be blameless and harmless, children of God without blemish in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation, among whom you are seen as lights in the world, holding forth the word of life; that I may have whereof to glory in the day of Christ.

The admonitions which we give ought to be accompanied with commendations; for thus they become even welcome, when we refer those whom we admonish to that measure of zeal which they have themselves exhibited; as Paul, for instance, did here; and observe with what singular discretion; So then, my beloved, he says; he did not say simply be obedient, not until he had first commended them in these words, even as you have always obeyed; i.e. it is not other men, but your own selves, whom I bid you take example by. Not as in my presence only, but much more in my absence. And why, much more in my absence? You seemed perhaps at that time to be doing everything out of respect to me, and from a principle of shame, but that is no longer so; if then ye make it evident that you now strive more earnestly, it is also made evident that neither then was it done out of consideration to me, but for God's sake. Tell me, what would you? not that you give heed to me, but that you 'work out your own salvation with fear and

trembling'; for it is impossible for one, who lives devoid of fear, to set forth any high or commanding example; and he said not merely with fear, but and with trembling, which is an excessive degree of fear. Such fear had Paul: and therefore he said, I fear lest having preached to others, I myself should be rejected. 1 Corinthians 9:27 For if without the aid of fear temporal things can never be achieved, how much less spiritual matters; for I desire to know, who ever learned his letters without fear? Who has become a proficient in any art, without fear? But if, when the devil does not lie in the way, where indolence is the only obstacle, so much of fear is necessary merely in order that we may master that indolence which is natural to us; where there is so fierce a war, so great hindrances, how can we by any possibility be saved without fear?

And how may this fear be produced? If we but consider that God is everywhere present, hears all things, sees all things, not only whatsoever is done and said, but also all that is in the heart, and in the depth of the soul, for He is quick to discern the thoughts and intents of the heart Hebrews 4:12, if we so dispose ourselves, we shall not do or say or imagine anything that is evil. Tell me, if you had to stand constantly near the person of a ruler, would you not stand there with fear?

And how standing in God's presence, do you laugh and throw yourself back, and not conceive fear and dread? Let it never be that you despise His patient endurance, for it is to bring you to repentance that He is longsuffering. Whenever you eat, consider that God is present, for He is present; whenever you are preparing to sleep, or giving way to passion, if you are robbing another, or indulging in luxury, or whatever you are about, you will never fall into laughter, never be inflamed with rage.

If this be your thought continually, you will continually be in fear and trembling, forasmuch as you are standing beside the King. The architect, though he be experienced, though he be perfectly master of his art, yet stands with fear and trembling, lest he fall down from the building. Thou too hast believed, you have performed many good deeds, you have mounted high: secure yourself, be in fear as you stand, and keep a wary eye, lest you fall thence. For manifold are the spiritual sorts of wickedness which aim to cast you down.

Ephesians 6:12 Serve the Lord with fear, he says, and rejoice unto Him with trembling. Psalm 2:11 And how is rejoicing compatible with trembling? Yet this, be assured, is the only rejoicing; for when we perform some good work, and such as beseems those who do anything with trembling, then only do we rejoice. Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling: he says not work, but work out, i.e. with much earnestness, with much diligence; but as he had said, with fear and trembling, see how he relieves their anxiety: for what does he say?

It is God that works in you. Fear not because I said, with fear and trembling. I said it not with this view, that you should give up in despair, that you should suppose virtue to be somewhat difficult to be attained, but that you might be led to follow after it, and not spend yourself in vain pursuits; if this be the case, God will work all things. Do thou be bold; for it is God that works in you. If then He works, it is our part to bring a mind ever resolute, clenched and unrelaxed.

For it is God that works in you both to will and to work. If He does Himself work in us to will, how do you exhort us? For if He works Himself even the will, the words, which you speak to us, have no meaning, 'that you have obeyed'; for we have not 'obeyed'; it is without meaning that you say, 'with fear and trembling'; for the whole is of God. It was not for this that I said to you, for it is He that works in you both to will and to work, but my object was to relieve your anxiety.

If you will, in that case He will work in you to will. Be not affrighted, you are not worsted; both the hearty desire and the accomplishment are a gift from Him: for where we have the will, thenceforward He will increase our will. For instance, I desire to do some good work: He has wrought the good work itself, and by means of it He has wrought also the will. Or he says this in the excess of his piety, as when he declares that our well-doings are gifts of grace.

As then, when he calls these gifts, he does not put us out of the pale of free will, but accords to us free will, so when he says, to work in us to will, he does not deprive us of free will, but he shows that by actually doing right we greatly increase our heartiness in willing. For as doing comes of doing, so of not doing comes not doing. Have you given an alms? You are the more incited to give. Have you refused to give? You have become so much the more disinclined. Have you practiced temperance for one day? You have an incitement for the next likewise. Have you indulged to excess? You have increased the inclination to self-indulgence. When a wicked man comes into the depth of vice, then he despises. Proverbs 18:3 As, then, when a man comes into the depth of iniquity, he turns a despiser; so when he comes into the depth of goodness, he quickens his exertions. For as the one runs riot in despair, so the second, under a sense of the multitude of good things, exerts himself the more, fearing lest he should lose the whole. For His good pleasure, he says, that is, for love's sake, for the sake of pleasing Him; to the end that what is acceptable to Him may take place; that things may take place according to His will. Here he shows, and makes it a ground of confidence, that He is sure to work in us, for it is His will that we live as He desires we should, and if He desires it, He Himself both works in us to this end, and will certainly accomplish it; for it is His will that we live aright. Do you see, how he does not deprive us of free will?

Do all things without murmurings and disputings. The devil, when he finds that he has no power to withdraw us from doing right, wishes to spoil our reward by other means. For he has taken occasion to insinuate pride or vainglory, or if none of these things, then murmuring, or, if not this, misgivings. Now then see how Paul sweeps away all these. He said on the subject of humility all that he did say, to overthrow pride; he spoke of vainglory, that is, not as in my presence only; he here speaks of murmuring and disputing.

But why, I want to know, when in the case of the Corinthians he was engaged in uprooting this evil tendency, did he remind them of the Israelites, but here has said nothing of the sort, but simply charged them? Because in that case the mischief was already done, for which reason there was need of a more severe stroke and a sharper rebuke; but here he is giving admonitions to prevent its being done. Severe measures then were not called for in order to secure those that had not yet been guilty; as in leading them to humility he did not subjoin the instance in the Gospel, wherein the proud were punished, but laid the charge as from God's lips; Luke 16:23 and 18:14 and he addresses them as free, as children of pure birth, not as servants; for in the practice of virtue a rightminded and generous person is influenced by those who do well, but one of bad principles by those who do not do well; the one by the consideration of honor, the other of punishment.

Wherefore also writing to the Hebrews, he said, bringing forward the example of Esau, Who for one mess of meat sold his own birthright Hebrews 12:16; and again, if he shrink back, my soul has no pleasure in him. Hebrews 10:38 And among the Corinthians were many who had been guilty of fornication. Therefore he said, Lest when I come again my God should humble me before you, and I should mourn for many that have sinned heretofore, and repented not of the uncleanness, and fornication, and lasciviousness which they committed. 2 Corinthians 12:21 That you may be blameless, says he, and harmless; i.e. irreproachable, unsullied; for murmuring occasions no slight stain.

And what means without disputing? Is it good, or not good? Do not dispute, he says, though it be trouble, or labor, or any thing else whatever. He did not say, that you be not punished, for punishment is reserved for the thing; and this he made evident in the Epistle to the Corinthians; but here he said nothing of the sort; but he says, That you may be blameless and harmless, children of God without blemish, in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation, among whom you are seen as lights in the world, holding forth the word of life, that I may have whereof to glory in the day of Christ.

Observe thou that he is instructing these not to murmur? So that murmuring is left for unprincipled and graceless slaves. For tell me, what manner of son is that, who murmurs at the very time that he is employed in the affairs of his father, and is working for his own benefit? Consider, he says, that you are laboring for yourself, that it is for yourself that you are laying up; it is for those to murmur, when others profit by their labors, others reap the fruit, while they bear the burden; but he that is gathering for himself, why should he murmur?

Because his wealth does not increase? But it is not so. Why does he murmur who acts of free-will, and not by constraint? It is better to do nothing than to do it with murmuring, for even the very thing itself is spoilt. And do you not remark that in our own families we are continually saying this; it were better for these things never to be done, than to have them done with murmuring? And we had often rather be deprived of the services some one owes us, than submit to the inconvenience of his murmuring.

For murmuring is intolerable, most intolerable; it borders upon blasphemy. Otherwise why had those men to pay a penalty so severe? It is a proof of ingratitude; the murmurer is ungrateful to God, but whoever is ungrateful to God does thereby become a blasphemer. Now there were at that time, if ever, uninterrupted troubles, and dangers without cessation: there was no pause, no remission: innumerable were the horrors, which pressed upon them from all quarters; but now we have profound peace, a perfect calm.

Wherefore then murmur? Because you are poor? Yet think of Job. Or because sickness is your lot? What then if, with the consciousness of as many excellencies and as high attainments as that holy man, you had been so afflicted? Again reflect on him, how that for a long time he never ceased to breed worms, sitting upon a dunghill and scraping his sores; for the account says that (after a long time had passed,) then said his wife unto him, How long will you persist, saying, Yet a little while I bide in expectation?

Speak some word against the Lord, and die. Job 2:9, Septuagint But your child is dead? What then if you had lost all your children, and that by an evil fate, as he did? For you know, you know well, that it is no slight alleviation to take our place beside the sick man, to close the mouth, to shut the eyes, to stroke the beard, to hear the last accents; but that just man was vouchsafed none of these consolations, they all being overwhelmed at once. And what do I say? Had you, your own self, been bidden to slay and offer up your own son, and to see the body consumed, like that blessed Patriarch, what then would you have felt while erecting the altar, laying on the wood, binding the child?

But there are some who revile you? What then would be your feelings did your friends, come to administer consolation to you, speak like Job's? For, as it is, innumerable are our sins, and we deserve to be reproached; but in that case he who was true, just, godly, who kept himself from every evil deed, heard the contrary of those laid to his charge by his friends. What then, tell me, if you had heard your wife exclaiming in accents of reproach; I am a vagabond and a servant, wandering from place to place, and from house to house, waiting until the sun goes down, that I may rest from the woes that encompass me.

Job 2:9, Septuagint Why do you speak so, O foolish woman? For is your husband to blame for these things? Nay, but the devil. Speak a word against God, she says, and die;-- and if thereupon the stricken man had cursed and died, how would you be the better?-- No disease you can name is worse than that of his, though you name ten thousand. It was so grievous, that he could no longer be in the house and under cover; such, that all men gave him up. For if he had not been irrecoverably gone, he would never have taken his seat without the city, a more pitiable object than those afflicted with leprosy; for these are both admitted into houses, and they do herd together; but he passing the night in the open air, was naked upon a dunghill, and could not even bear a garment upon his body.

How so? Perhaps there would only have been an addition to his pangs. For I melt the clods of the earth, he says, while I scrape off my sore. Job 7:5, Septuagint His flesh bred sores and worms in him, and that continually. Do you see how each one of us sickens at the hearing of these things? But if they are intolerable to hear, is the sight of them more tolerable? And if the sight of them is intolerable, how much more intolerable to undergo them? And yet that righteous man did undergo them, not for two or three days, but for a long while, and he did not sin, not even with his lips.

What disease can you describe to me like this, so exquisitely painful? For was not this worse than blindness? I look on my food, he says, as a fetid mass. Job 6:7 And not only this, but that which affords cessation to others, night and sleep, brought no alleviation to him, nay, were worse than any torture. Hear his words: Why do you scare me with dreams, and terrify me through visions? If it be morning, I say, When will it be evening? Job 7:14, and he murmured not. And there was not only this; but reputation in the eyes of the world was added; for they immediately concluded him to be guilty of endless crimes, judging from all that he suffered.

And accordingly this is the consideration, which his friends urged upon him; Know therefore that God exacts less of you than your iniquities deserve. Job 11:6 Wherefore he himself said, But now they that are younger than I have me in derision, whose fathers I disdained to set with the dogs of my flock. Job 30:1 And was not this worse than many deaths? Yet though assaulted on all sides by a flood like this, when there raged around him a fearful storm, clouds, rain, lightnings, whirling winds, and waterspouts, he remained himself unmoved, seated as it were in the midst of this surge, thus awful and overwhelming, as in a perfect calm, and no murmur escaped him; and this before the gift of grace, before that anything was declared concerning a resurrection, before anything concerning hell and punishment and vengeance.

Yet we, who hear both Prophets and Apostles and Evangelists speaking to us, and have innumerable examples set before us, and have been taught the tidings of a Resurrection, yet harbor discontent, though no man can say that such a fate as this has been his own. For if one has lost money, yet not all that great number of sons and daughters, or if he has, perchance it was that he had sinned; but for him, he lost them suddenly, in the midst of his sacrifices, in the midst of the service which he was rendering to God.

And if any man has at one blow lost property to the same amount, which can never be, yet he has not had the further affliction of a sore all over his body, he has not scraped the humors that covered him; or if this likewise has been his fate, yet he has not had men to upbraid and reproach him, which is above all things calculated to wound the feelings, more than the calamities we suffer. For if when we have persons to cheer and console us in our misfortunes, and to hold out to us fair prospects, we yet despond, consider what it was to have men upbraiding him.

If the words, I looked for some to have pity, but there was no man, and for comforters, but I found none Psalm 69:20, describe intolerable misery, how great an aggravation to find revilers instead of comforters! Miserable comforters are you all Job 16:2, he says. If we did but revolve these subjects continually in our minds, if we well weighed them, no ills of this present time could ever have force to disturb our peace, when we turned our eyes to that athlete, that soul of adamant, that spirit impenetrable as brass. For as though he had borne about him a body of brass or stone, he met all events with a noble and constant spirit.

Taking these things to heart, let us do everything without murmuring and disputing. Is it some good work that you have before you, and do you murmur? Wherefore? Are you then forced? For that there are many about you who force you to murmur, I know well, says he. This he intimated by saying, in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation; but it is this that deserves admiration, that we admit no such feeling when under galling provocation. For the stars too give light in the night, they shine in the dark, and receive no blemish to their own beauty, yea they even shine the brighter; but when light returns, they no longer shine so. Thus thou too dost appear with the greater lustre, while you hold straight in the midst of the crooked. This it is which deserves our admiration, the being blameless; for that they might not urge this plea, he himself set it down by anticipation. What means holding fast the word of life? I.e. being destined to live, being of those that are gaining salvation. Observe how immediately he subjoins the rewards, which are in reserve. Lights [i.e. luminaries], he says, retain the principle of light; so do ye the principle of life. What means the word of life? Having the seed of life, i.e. having pledges of life, holding life itself, i.e. having in yourselves the seed of life, this is what he calls the word of life. Consequently the rest are all dead, for by these words he signified as much; for otherwise those others likewise would have held the word of life. That I may have whereof to glory, he says; what is this? I too participate in your good deeds, he says. So great is your virtue, as not only to save yourselves, but to render me illustrious. Strange kind of boasting, thou blessed Paul! You are scourged, driven about, reviled for our sakes: therefore he adds, in the day of Christ, that I did not run, he says, in vain, nor labored in vain, but I always have a right to glory, he means, that I did not run in vain.

Yea, and if I am offered. He said not, and if I die even, nor did he when writing to Timothy, for there, too, he has made use of the same expression, For I am already being offered. 2 Timothy 4:6 He is both consoling them about his own death, and instructing them to bear gladly the death that is for Christ's sake. I have become, he says, as it were a libation and a sacrifice. O blessed soul! His bringing them to God he calls a sacrifice. It is much better to present a soul than to present oxen.

If, then, over and above this offering, he says, I add myself, my death as a libation, I rejoice. For this he implies, when he says, Yea, and if I am offered upon the sacrifice and service, I joy and rejoice with you all; and in the same manner do ye also joy and rejoice with me. Why do you rejoice with them? Do you see that he shows that it is their duty to rejoice? On the one hand then, I rejoice in being made a libation; on the other, I rejoice with you, in having presented a sacrifice; and in the same manner do ye also joy and rejoice with me, that I am offered up; rejoice with me, who rejoice in myself.

So that the death of the just is no subject for tears, but for joy. If they rejoice, we should rejoice with them. For it is misplaced for us to weep, while they rejoice. But, it is urged, we long for our wonted intercourse. This is a mere pretext and excuse; and that it is so, mark what he enjoins: Rejoice with me, and joy. Do you miss your wonted intercourse? If you were yourself destined to remain here, there would be reason in what you say, but if after a brief space you will overtake him who has departed, what is that intercourse which thou dost seek?

For it is only when he is forever severed from him that a man misses the society of another, but if he will go the same way that you will go, what is the intercourse which you long for? Why do we not bewail all that are upon foreign travel? Do we not just a little, and cease after the first or the second day? If you long for your wonted intercourse with him, weep so far only. It is no evil that I suffer, says he, but I even rejoice in going to Christ, and do ye not rejoice. Rejoice with me.

Let us too rejoice when we see a righteous man dying, and yet more even when any of the desperately wicked; for the first is going to receive the reward of his labors, but the other has abated somewhat from the score of his sins. But it is said, perhaps he might have altered, had he lived. Yet God would never have taken him away, if there had been really a prospect of an alteration. For why should not He who orders all events for our salvation, allow him the opportunity, who gave promise of pleasing Him?

If He leaves those, who never alter, much more those that do. Let then the sharpness of our sorrow be everywhere cut away, let the voice of lamentation cease. Let us thank God under all events: let us do all things without murmuring; let us be cheerful, and let us become pleasing to Him in all things, that we may also attain the good things to come, by the grace and loving-kindness of our Lord Jesus Christ, with whom, etc.

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