

Philippians 3:13, 14

by St. John Chrysostom

The sermon emphasizes the importance of forgetting the past, focusing on the future, and imitating a virtuous model, as exemplified by Paul's humility and perseverance in Philippians 3:13, 14.

Scripture: Matthew 11:29, 1 Corinthians 9:24, Philippians 3:13, Philippians 3:20, 1 Timothy 4:7

Topics: "Spiritual Growth", "Christian Perseverance"

Description

John Chrysostom emphasizes the importance of continuous spiritual growth and humility by using the analogy of a runner striving for the prize. He encourages believers to forget past successes, remain focused on the goal of virtue, and imitate the examples of faithful leaders. Chrysostom highlights the need for perseverance, eagerness, and diligence in the Christian journey, reminding that true virtue shines through all circumstances and challenges. He urges believers to be steadfast in their faith, imitate Christ, and seek the eternal prize of the kingdom of heaven.

Transcript

Brethren, I count not myself yet to have apprehended: but one thing I do, forgetting the things which are behind, and stretching forward to the things which are before, I press on toward the goal unto the prize of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus.

Nothing so renders our real excellences vain and puffs them away, as to be remembering the good deeds we have done; for this produces two evils, it both renders us remiss, and raises us to haughtiness. Wherefore see how Paul, since he knew our nature to be easily inclined to remissness, though he had given great praise to the Philippians, now subdues their mind by many other things above, but chiefly by his present words. And what are they? Brethren, I count not myself to have apprehended.

But if Paul had not as yet apprehended, and is not confident about the Resurrection and things to come, hardly should they be so, who have not attained the smallest proportion of his excellence. That is, I consider that I have not as yet apprehended all virtue, as if one were speaking of a runner. Not as yet, says he, have I completed all. And if in another place he says, I have fought the good fight 2 Timothy 4:7, but here, I count myself not as yet to have apprehended; any one who reads carefully will well know the reason both of those, and of the present words; (for it is not necessary to dwell continually on the same point;) and that he spoke these words at a much earlier date, but the others near his death.

But I am solely engaged on one thing, says he, in stretching forward to the things which are before. But one thing, says he, forgetting the things which are behind, and stretching forward to the things which are before, I press on toward the goal unto the prize of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus. For what made him reach forward unto the things which are before, was his forgetting the things that are behind. He then, who thinks that all is accomplished, and that nothing is wanting to him for the perfecting of virtue, may cease running, as having apprehended all.

But he who thinks that he is still distant from the goal, will never cease running. This then we should always consider, even though we have wrought ten thousand good deeds; for if Paul, after ten thousand deaths, after so many dangers, considered this, how much more should we? For I fainted not, says he, although I availed not, after running so much; nor did I despair, but I still run, I still strive. This thing only I consider, that I may in truth advance. Thus too we should act, we should forget our successes, and throw them behind us.

For the runner reckons not up how many circuits he has finished, but how many are left. We too should reckon up, not how far we are advanced in virtue, but how much remains for us. For what does that which is finished profit us, when that which is deficient is not added? Moreover he did not say, I do not reckon up, but I do not even remember. For we thus become eager, when we apply all diligence to what is left, when we give to oblivion everything else. Stretching forward, says he; before we arrive, we strive to obtain.

For he that stretches forward is one who, though his feet are running, endeavors to outstrip them with the rest of his body, stretching himself towards the front, and reaching out his hands, that he may accomplish somewhat more of the course. And this comes from great eagerness, from much warmth; thus the runner should run with great earnestness, with so great eagerness, without relaxation. As far as one who so runs differs from him who lies supine, so far does Paul differ from us.

He died daily, he was approved daily, there was no season, there was no time in which his course advanced not. He wished not to take, but to snatch the prize; for in this way we may take it. He who gives the prize stands on high, the prize is laid up on high.

See how great a distance this is that must be run over! See how great an ascent! Thither we must fly up with the wings of the Spirit, otherwise it is impossible to surmount this height. Thither must we go with the body, for it is allowed. For our citizenship is in heaven Philippians 3:20, there is the prize; do you see the runners, how they live by rule, how they touch nothing that relaxes their strength, how they exercise themselves every day in the palaestra, under a master, and by rule? Imitate them, or rather exhibit even greater eagerness, for the prizes are not equal: many are those who would hinder you; live by rule: many are the things which relax your strength; make its feet agile: for it is possible so to do, it comes not naturally, but by our will. Let us bring it to lightness, lest our swiftness of foot be hindered by the weight of other things. Teach your feet to be sure, for there are many slippery places, and if you fall, straightway you lose much. But yet if you fall, rise up again. Even thus may you obtain the victory. Never attempt slippery things, and you will not fall; walk upon firm ground, up with your head, up with your eyes; these commands the trainers give to those who run. Thus your strength is supported; but if you stoop downward, you fall; you are relaxed. Look upward, where the prize is; the sight of the prize increases the determination of our will. The hope of taking it suffers not to perceive the toils, it makes the distance appear short. And what is this prize? No palm branch; but what? The kingdom of heaven, everlasting rest, glory together with Christ, the inheritance, brotherhood, ten thousand good things, which it is impossible to name. It is impossible to describe the beauty of that prize; he who has it alone knows it, and he who is about to receive it. It is not of

gold, it is not set with jewels, it is far more precious. Gold is mire, in comparison with that prize, precious stones are mere bricks in comparison with its beauty. If you have this, and takest your departure to heaven, you will be able to walk there with great honor; the angels will reverence you, when you bear this prize, with much confidence will you approach them all. In Christ Jesus. See the humility of his mind; this I do, says he, in Christ Jesus, for it is impossible without an impulse from Him to pass over so vast an interval: we have need of much aid, of a mighty alliance; He has willed that you should struggle below, on high He crowns you. Not as in this world; the crown is not here, where the contest is; but the crown is in that bright place. See ye not, even here, that the most honored of the wrestlers and charioteers are not crowned in the course below, but the king calls them up, and crowns them there? Thus too is it here, in heaven you receive the prize.

Ver. 15. Let us, therefore, as many as be perfect, be thus minded, says he. And if in anything you are otherwise minded, even this shall God reveal unto you. What sort of thing? That we should forget the things which are behind. Wherefore it belongs to him who is perfect not to consider himself perfect. How therefore do you say, as many as are perfect? For tell me, are we minded as you are? For if you have not attained nor art perfected, how do you command those that are perfect to be so minded as you are, who art not yet perfect? Yea, for this, says he, is perfection. And if you are in anything otherwise minded, even this shall God reveal unto you. That is, if any one considers that he has attained all excellence. He puts them on their guard, not by speaking directly, but what says he? If in anything you are otherwise minded, even this shall God reveal unto you. See how humbly he says this! God shall teach you, i.e. God shall persuade you, not teach you; for Paul was teaching, but God shall lead them on. And he said not, shall lead you on, but shall reveal, that this may rather seem to spring from ignorance. These words were spoken not concerning doctrines, but concerning perfection of life, and our not considering ourselves to be perfect, for he who considers that he has apprehended all, has nothing.

Ver. 16. Only, whereunto we have already attained, by that same rule let us walk, let us mind the same thing.

Only, whereunto we have attained. What means this? Let us hold fast, he says, that in which we have succeeded; love, concord, and peace: for in this we have succeeded. Whereunto we have attained: to walk by the same rule, to mind the same thing. Whereunto we have attained, i.e. in this we have already succeeded. Do you see, that he wills that his precepts should be a rule to us? And a rule admits neither addition, nor subtraction, since that destroys its being a rule. By the same rule, i.e. by the same faith, within the same limits.

Ver. 17. Brethren, be ye imitators of me, and mark them which so walk even as you have us for an ensample.

He had said above, beware of dogs, from such he had led them away; he brings them near to these whom they ought to imitate. If any one, says he, wishes to imitate me, if any one wishes to walk the same road, let him take heed to them; though I am not present, you know the manner of my walk, that is, my conduct in life. For not by words only did he teach, but by deeds too; as in the chorus, and the army, the rest must imitate the leader of the chorus or the army, and thus advance in good order. For it is possible that the order may be dissolved by sedition.

The Apostles therefore were a type, and kept throughout a certain archetypal model. Consider how entirely accurate their life was, so that they are proposed as an archetype and example, and as living

laws. For what was said in their writings, they manifested to all in their actions. This is the best teaching; thus he will be able to carry on his disciple. But if he indeed speaks as a philosopher, yet in his actions does the contrary, he is no longer a teacher. For mere verbal philosophy is easy even for the disciple: but there is need of that teaching and leading which comes of deeds.

For this both makes the teacher to be revered, and prepares the disciple to yield obedience. How so? When one sees him delivering philosophy in words, he will say he commands impossibilities; that they are impossibilities, he himself is the first to show, who does not practice them. But if he sees his virtue fully carried out in action, he will no longer be able to speak thus. Yet although the life of our teacher be careless, let us take heed to ourselves, and let us listen to the words of the prophet; They shall be all taught of God.

Isaiah 54:13 And they shall teach no more every man his brother, saying, Know the Lord, for they shall all know me from the least of them to the greatest of them. Jeremiah 31:34 Have you a teacher who is not virtuous? Still you have Him who is truly a Teacher, whom alone you should call a Teacher. Learn from Him: He has said, Learn of Me, for I am meek. Matthew 11:29 Take not heed, then, to your teacher, but to Him and to His lessons. Take thence your examples, you have a most excellent model, to it conform yourself.

There are innumerable models laid before you in the Scriptures of virtuous lives; whichever you will, come, and after the Master find it in the disciples. One has shown forth through poverty, another through riches; for example, Elijah through poverty, Abraham through riches. Go to that example, which you esteem most easy, most befitting yourself to practice. Again, one by marriage, the other by virginity; Abraham by marriage, the other by virginity. Follow whichever you will: for both lead to heaven.

One shone forth by fasting, as John, another without fasting, as Job. Again, this latter had a care for his wife, his children, his daughters, his family, and possessed great wealth; the other possessed nothing but the garment of hair. And why do I make mention of family, or wealth, or money, when it is possible that even one in a kingdom should lay hold on virtue, for the house of a king would be found more full of trouble than any private family. David then shone forth in his kingdom; the purple and the diadem rendered him not at all remiss.

To another it was entrusted to preside over a whole people, I mean Moses, which was a more difficult task, for there the power was greater, whence the difficulty too became greater. You have seen men approved in wealth, you have seen them in poverty also, you have seen them in marriage, you have seen them in virginity too; on the contrary, behold some lost in marriage and in virginity, in wealth and in poverty. For example, many men have perished in marriage, as Samson, yet not from marriage, but from their own deliberate choice.

Likewise in virginity, as the five virgins. In wealth, as the rich man, who disregarded Lazarus: in poverty, innumerable poor men even now are lost. In a kingdom, I can point to many who have perished, and in ruling the people. Would you see men saved in the rank of a soldier? There is Cornelius; and in the government of a household? There is the eunuch of the Ethiopian Queen. Thus is it universally. If we use our wealth as is fit, nothing will destroy us; but if not, all things will destroy us, whether a kingdom, or poverty, or wealth. But nothing will have power to hurt the man, who keeps well awake.

For tell me, was captivity any harm? None at all. For consider, I pray you, Joseph, who became a slave, and preserved his virtue. Consider Daniel, and the Three Children, who became captives, and how much

the more they shone forth, for virtue shines everywhere, is invincible, and nothing can put hindrances in its way. But why make I mention of poverty, and captivity, and slavery; and hunger, and sores, and grievous disease? For disease is more hard to endure than slavery. Such was Lazarus, such was Job, such was also Timothy, straitened by often infirmities. 1 Timothy 5:23 You see that nothing can obtain the mastery over virtue; neither wealth, nor poverty, nor dominion, nor subjection, nor the pre-eminence in affairs, nor disease, nor contempt, nor abandonment. But having left all these things below, and upon the earth, it hastens towards Heaven. Only let the soul be noble, and nought can hinder it from being virtuous. For when he who works is in vigor, nothing external can hinder him; for as in the arts, when the artificer is experienced and persevering, and thoroughly acquainted with his art, if disease overtakes him, he still has it; if he became poor, he still has it; whether he has his tools in his hand or has them not, whether he works or works not, he loses not at all his art: for the science of it is contained within him. Thus too the virtuous man, who is devoted to God, manifests his art, if you cast him into wealth, or if into poverty, if into disease, if into health, if into dishonor, if into great honor. Did not the Apostles work in every state, By glory and dishonor, by good report and evil report? 2 Corinthians 6:8 This is an athlete, to be prepared for everything; for such is also the nature of virtue.

If you say, I am not able to preside over many, I ought to lead a solitary life; you offer an insult to virtue, for it can make use of every state, and shine through all: only let it be in the soul. Is there a famine? Or is there abundance? It shows forth its own strength, as Paul says, I know how to abound, and how to be in want. Philippians 4:12; Acts 28:30 Was he required to work? He was not ashamed, but wrought two years. Was hunger to be undergone? He sank not under it, nor wavered. Was death to be borne? He became not dejected, through all he exhibited his noble mind and art. Him therefore let us imitate, and we shall have no cause of grief: for tell me, what will have power to grieve such an one? Nothing. As long as no one deprives us of this art, this will be the most blessed of all men, even in this life as well as in that to come. For suppose the good man has a wife and children, and riches, and great honor, with all these things he remains alike virtuous. Take them away, and again in like sort he will be virtuous, neither overwhelmed by his misfortunes, nor puffed up by prosperity, but as a rock stands equally unmoved in the raging sea and in calm, neither broken by the waves nor influenced at all by the calm, thus too the solid mind stands firm both in calm and in storm. And as little children, when sailing in a ship, are tossed about, while the pilot sits by, laughing and undisturbed, and delighted to see their confusion; thus too the soul which is truly wise, when all others are in confusion, or else are inopportunately smiling at any change of circumstance, sits unmoved, as it were, at the tiller and helm of piety. For tell me, what can disturb the pious soul? Can death? This is the beginning of a better life. Can poverty? This helps her on toward virtue. Can disease? She regards not its presence. She regards neither ease, nor affliction; for being beforehand with it, she has afflicted herself. Can dishonor? The world has been crucified to her. Can the loss of children? She fears it not, when she is fully persuaded of the Resurrection. What then can surprise her? None of all these things. Does wealth elevate her? By no means, she knows that money is nothing. Does glory? She has been taught that all the glory of man is as the flower of grass. Isaiah 40:6 Does luxury? She has heard Paul say, She that gives herself to pleasure is dead while she lives. 1 Timothy 5:6 Since then she is neither inflamed nor cramped, what can equal such health as this?

Other souls, meanwhile, are not such, but change more frequently than the sea, or the cameleon, so that you have great cause to smile, when you see the same man at one time laughing, at another weeping, at one time full of care, at another beyond measure relaxed and languid. For this cause Paul says, Be not fashioned according to this world. Romans 12:2 For we are citizens of heaven, where there is no turning. Prizes which change not are held out to us. Let us make manifest this our citizenship, let us thence

already receive our good things. But why do we cast ourselves into the Euripus, into tempest, into storm, into foam? Let us be in calm. It all depends not on wealth, nor on poverty, nor honor, nor dishonor, nor on sickness, nor on health, nor on weakness, but on our own soul. If it is solid, and well-instructed in the science of virtue, all things will be easy to it. Even hence it will already behold its rest, and that quiet harbor, and, on its departure, will there attain innumerable good things, the which may we all attain, by the grace and love of our Lord Jesus Christ, with whom, to the Father, together with the Holy Spirit, be glory, dominion, honor, now and ever, and world without end. Amen.

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