To Those Who Had Not Attended the Assembly

John Chrysostom (c. AD 349–407)

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To Those Who Had Not Attended the Assembly

To those who had not attended the assembly; On the apostolic saying, "If thy enemy hunger feed him," and concerning resentment of injuries.

1. I Did no good as it seems by the prolonged discourse which I lately addressed to you with a view to kindling your zeal for the assemblies here: for again our Church is destitute of her children. Wherefore also I am again compelled to seem vexatious and burdensome, reproving those who are present, and finding fault with those who have been left behind: with them because they have not put away their sloth, and with you because you have not given a helping hand to the salvation of your brethren. I am compelled to seem burdensome and vexatious, not on behalf of myself, or my own possessions, but on your behalf and for your salvation, which is more precious to me than anything else. Let him who pleases take it in bad part, and call me insolent and impudent, yet will I not cease continually annoying him for the same purpose; for nothing is better for me than this kind of impudence. For it may be, it may be, that this is at least if nothing else, will put you to shame, and that to avoid being perpetually importuned concerning the same things, ye will take part in the tender care of your brethren. For what profit is there to me in praise when I do not see you making advances in virtue? and what harm is there from the silence of the hearers when I behold your piety increasing?

For the praise of the speaker does not consist in applause, but in the zeal of the hearers for godliness: not in noise made just at the time of hearing, but in lasting earnestness. As soon as applause has issued from the lips it is dispersed in air and perishes; but the moral improvement of the hearers brings an imperishable and immortal reward both to him who speaks and to them who obey. The praise of your cheers makes the speaker illustrious here, but the piety of your soul affords the teacher much confidence before the judgment-seat of Christ. Wherefore if any one loves the speaker, let him not desire the applause but the profit of the hearers. To neglect our brethren is no ordinary wrong, but one which brings extreme punishment, and an inexorable penalty. And the case of the man who buried the talent proves this: he was not reproached at least on account of his own life: for as regarded the deposit itself he did not turn out a bad man, since he restored it intact: nevertheless he

did turn out a bad man as regarded his management of the deposit. For he did not double that which was entrusted to him; and so was punished. Whence it is manifest that even if we are earnest and well trained, and have much zeal about hearing the holy scriptures this does not suffice for our salvation.

For the deposit must be doubled, and it becomes doubled when together with our own salvation we undertake to make some provision for the good of others. For the man in the parable said ”Lo! there thou hast that is thine: but this did not serve him for a defence: for it was said to him ”thou oughtest to have put the money to the exchangers”

And observe I pray how easy the commands of the Master are: for men indeed make those who lend out capital sums at interest answerable for recalling them; ”you have made the deposit,” one says, ”you must call it in: I have no concern with the man who has received it.” But God does not act thus; He only commands us to make the deposit, and does not render us liable for the recall. For the speaker has the power of advising, not of persuading. Therefore he says: ”I make thee answerable for depositing only, and not for the recall.” What can be easier than this? And yet the servant called the master hard, who was thus gentle and merciful. For such is the wont of the ungrateful and indolent; they always try to shift the blame of their offences from themselves to their master. And therefore the man was thrust out with torture and bonds into the outer darkness. And lest we should suffer this penalty let us deposit our teaching with the brethren, whether they be persuaded by it, or not. For if they be persuaded they will profit both themselves and us: and if they are not, they involve themselves indeed in inevitable punishment, but will not be able to do us the slightest injury. For we have done our part, by giving them advice: but if they do not listen to it no harm will result to us from that. For blame would attach to us not for failing to persuade, but for failing to advise: and after prolonged and continual exhortation and counsel they and not we, have to reckon henceforth with God.

I have been anxious at any rate to know clearly, whether you continue to exhort your brethren, and if they remain all the time in the same condition of indolence: otherwise I would never have given you any trouble: as it is, I have fears that they may remain uncorrected in consequence of your neglect and indifference. For it is impossible that a man who continually has the benefit of exhortation and instruction should not become better and more diligent. The proverb which I am about to cite is certainly a common one, nevertheless it confirms this very truth. For ”a perpetual dropping of water” it says, ”wears a rock,” yet what is softer than water? and what is harder than a rock? Nevertheless perpetual action conquers nature: and if it conquers nature much more will it be able to prevail over the human will. Christianity is no child’s play, my beloved: no matter of secondary importance. I am continually saying these things, and yet I effect nothing.

2. How am I distressed, think you, when I call to mind that on the festival days the multitudes assembled resemble the broad expanse of the sea, but now not even the smallest part of that multitude is gathered together here? Where are they now who oppress us with their presence on the feast days? I look for them, and am grieved on their account when I

mark what a multitude are perishing of those who are in the way of salvation, how large a loss of brethren I sustain, how few are reached by the things which concern salvation, and how the greater part of the body of the Church is like a dead and motionless carcase. ”And what concern is that to us? you say. The greatest possible concern if you pay no attention to your brethren, if you do not exhort and advise, if you put no constraint on them, and do not forcibly drag them hither, and lead them away out of their deep indolence. For that one ought not to be useful to himself alone, but also to many others, Christ declared plainly, when He called us salt, and leaven, and light: for these things are useful and profitable to others. For a lamp does not shine for itself, but for those who are sitting in darkness: and thou art a lamp not the thou mayest enjoy the light by thyself, but that thou mayest bring back yonder man who has gone astray.

For what profit is a lamp if it does not give light to him who sits in darkness? and what profit is a Christian when he benefits no one, neither leads any one back to virtue? Again salt is not an astringent to itself but braces up those parts of the body which have decayed, and prevents them from falling to pieces and perishing. Even so do thou, since God has appointed thee to be spiritual salt, bind and brace up the decayed members, that is the indolent and sordid brethren, and having rescued them from their indolence as from some form of corruption, unite them to the rest of the body of the Church. And this is the reason why He called you leaven: for leaven also does not leaven itself, but, little though it is, it affects the whole lump however big it may be. So also do ye: although ye are few in number, yet be ye many and powerful in faith, and in zeal towards God. As then the leaven is not weak on account of its littleness, but prevails owing to its inherent heat, and the force of its natural quality, so ye also will be able to bring back a far larger number than yourselves, if you will, to the same degree of zeal as your own. Now if they make the summer season their excuse:

for I hear of their saying things of this kind, ”the present stifling heat is excessive, the scorching sun is intolerable, we cannot bear being trampled and crushed in the crowd, and to be steaming all over with perspiration and oppressed by the heat and confined space: I am ashamed of them, believe me: for such excuses are womanish: indeed even in their case who have softer bodies, and a weaker nature, such pretexts do not suffice for justification. Nevertheless, even if it seems a disgrace to make a reply to a defence of this kind, yet is it necessary. For if they put forward such excuses as these and do not blush, much more does it behove us not to be ashamed of replying to these things. What then am I to say to those who advance these pretexts? I would remind them of the three children in the furnace and the flame, who when they saw the fire encircling them on all sides, enveloping their mouth and their eyes and even their breath, did not cease singing that sacred and mystical hymn to God, in company with the universe, but standing in the midst to the pyre sent up their song of praise to the common Lord of all with greater cheerfulness than they who abide in some flowery field: and together with these three children I should think it proper to remind them also of the lions which were in Babylon, and of Daniel and the den:

and not of this one only but also of another den, and the prophet Jeremiah, and the mire in which he was smothered up to the neck. And emerging from these dens, I would conduct these per sons who put forward heat as an excuse into the prison and exhibit Paul to them there, and Silas bound fast in the stocks, covered with bruises and wounds lacerated all over their body with a mass of stripes, yet singing praises to God at midnight and celebrating their holy vigil. For is it not a monstrous thing that those holy men, both in the furnace and the fire, and the den, and amongst wild beasts, and mire, and in a prison and the stocks, and amidst stripes and gaolers, and intolerable sufferings, never complained of any of these things, but were continually uttering prayers and sacred songs with much energy and fervent zeal, whilst we who have not undergone any of their innumerable sufferings small or great, neglect our own salvation on account of a scorching sun and a tittle short lived heat and toil, and forsaking the assembly wander away, depraving ourselves by going to meetings which are thoroughly unwholesome? When the dew of the divine oracles is so abundant dost thou make heat thy excuse? "The water which I will give him," saith Christ "shall be in him a well of water springing up into everlasting life; and again;

"He that believeth on me as the Scripture hath said, out of his belly shall flow rivers of living water" Tell me; when thou hast spiritual wells and rivers, art thou afraid of material heat? Now in the market place where there is so much turmoil and crowding, and scorching wind, how is it that you do not make suffocation and heat an excuse for absenting yourself? For it is impossible for you to say that there you can enjoy a cooler temperature, and that all the heat is concentrated here with us:-the truth is exactly the reverse; here indeed owing to the pavement floor, and to the construction of the building in other respects (for it is carried up to a vast height), the air is lighter and cooler: whereas there the sun is strong in every direction, and there is much crowding, and vapour and dust, and other things which add to discomfort far more than these. Whence it is plain that these senseless excuses are the offspring of indolence and of a supine disposition, destitute of the fire of the Holy Spirit.

3. Now these remarks of mine are not so much directed to them, as to you who do not bring them forward, do not rouse them from their indolence, and draw them to this table of salvation. Household slaves indeed when they have to discharge some service in common, summon their fellow slaves, but you when you are going to meet for this spiritual ministry suffer your fellow servants to be deprived of the advantage by your neglect. "But what if they do not desire it?" you say. Make them desire it by your continual importunity: for if they see you insisting upon it they certainly will desire it. Nay these things are a mere excuse and pretence. How many fathers at any rate are there here who have not their sons standing with them? Was it so difficult for thee to bring hither some of thy children? Whence it is clear that the absence of all the others who remain outside is due not only to their own indolence, but also to your neglect. But now at least, if never before, rouse yourselves up, and let each person enter the Church accompanied by a member of his family: let them incite and urge one another to the assembly here, the father his son, the son his father, the husbands their wives, and the wives their husbands, the master his slave, brother his brother, friend his friend: or rather let us not summon friends only but also enemies to this common treasury

of good things. If thy enemy sees thy care for his welfare, he will undoubtedly relinquish his hatred.

Say to him: "art thou not ashamed and dost thou not blush before the Jews who keep their sabbath with such great strictness, and from the evening of it abstain from all work? And if they see the sun verging towards setting on the day of the Preparation they break off business, and cut short their traffic: and if any one who has been making a purchase from them, before the evening, comes in the evening bringing the price, they do not suffer themselves to take it, or to accept the money. And why do I speak of the price of market wares and transaction of business? Even if it were possible to receive a treasure they would rather lose the gain than trample on their law. Are the Jews then so strict, and this when they keep the law out of due season, and cling to an observance of it which does not profit them, but rather does them harm: and wilt thou, who art superior to the shadow, to whom it has been vouchsafed to see the Sun of Righteousness, who art ranked as a citizen of the Heavenly commonwealth, wilt thou not display the same zeal as those who unseasonably cleave to what is wrong, thou who hast been entrusted with the truth, but although thou art summoned here for only a short part of the day, canst thou not endure to spend even this upon the hearing of the divine oracles? and what kind of indulgence, pray, could you obtain?

and what answer will you have to make which is reasonable and just? It is utterly impossible that one who is so indifferent and indolent should ever obtain indulgence, even if he should allege the necessities of wordly affairs ten thousand times over as an excuse. Do you not know that if you come and worship God and take part in the work which goes on here, the business you have on hand is made much easier for you? Have you worldly anxieties? Come here on that account that by the time you spend here you may win for yourself the favour of God, and so depart with a sense of security; that you may have Him for your ally, that you may become invincible to the daemons because you are assisted by the heavenly hand. If you have the benefit of prayers uttered by the fathers, if you take part in common prayer, if you listen to the divine oracles, if you win for yourself the aid of God, if, armed with these weapons, you then go forth, not even the devil himself will be able henceforth to look you in the face, much less wicked men who are eager to insult and malign you. But if you go from your house to the market place, and are found destitute of these weapons, you will be easily mastered by all who insult you.

This is the reason why both in public and private affairs, many things occur contrary to our expectation, because we have not been diligent about spiritual things in the first place, and secondarily about the secular, but have inverted the order. For this reason also the proper sequence and right arrangement of things has been upset, and all our affairs are full of much confusion. Can you imagine what distress and grief I suffer when I observe, that if a public holy day and festival is at hand there is a concourse of all the inhabitants of the city, although there is no one to summon them; but when the holy day and festival are past, even if we should crack our voice by continuing to call you all day long there is no one

who pays any heed? For often when turning these things over in my mind I have groaned heavily, and said to myself: What is the use of exhortation or advice, when you do everything merely by the force of habit, and do not become a whit more zealous in consequence of my teaching? For whereas in the festivals you need no exhortation from me, but, when they are past you profit nothing by my teaching, do you not show that my discourse, so far as you are concerned, is superfluous?

4. Perhaps many of those who hear these things are grieved. But such is not the sentiment of the indolent: else they would put away their carelessness, like ourselves, who are daily anxious about your affairs. And what gain do you make by your secular transactions in proportion to the damage you sustain? It is impossible to depart from any other assembly, or gathering, in the possession of so much gain as you receive from the time spent here, whether it be the law court, or council-chamber, or even the palace itself. For we do not commit the administration of nations or cities nor the command of armies to those who enter here, but another kind of government more dignified than that of the empire itself; or rather we do not ourselves commit it, but the grace of the spirit.

What then is the government, more dignified than that of the empire, which they who enter here receive? They are trained to master untoward passions, to rule wicked lusts, to command anger, to regulate ill-will, to subdue vainglory. The emperor, seated on the imperial throne, and wearing his diadem, is not so dignified as the man who has elevated his own inward right reason to the throne of government over base passions, and by his dominion over them has bound as it were a glorious diadem upon his brow. For what profit is there, pray, in purple, and raiment wrought with gold, and a jewelled crown, when the soul is in captivity to the passions? What gain is there in outward freedom when the ruling element within us is reduced to a state of disgraceful and pitiable servitude. For just as when a fever penetrates deep, and inflames all the inward parts, there is no benefit to be got from the outward surface of the body, although it is not affected in the same way: even so when our soul is violently carried away by the passion within, no outward government, not even the imperial throne, is of any profit, since reason is deposed from the throne of empire by the violent usurpation of the passions, and bows and trembles beneath their insurrectionary movements.

Now to prevent this taking place prophets and apostles concur on all sides in helping us, repressing our passions, and expelling all the ferocity of the irrational element within us, and committing a mode of government to us far more dignified than the empire. This is why I said that they who deprive themselves of this care receive a blow in the vital parts, sustaining greater damage than can be inflicted from any other quarter inasmuch as they who come here get greater gain than they could derive from any other source: even as Scripture has declared. The law said ”Thou shalt not appear before the Lord empty; that is, enter not into the temple without sacrifices. Now if it is not right to go into the house of God without sacrifices, much more ought we to enter the assembly accompanied by our brethren: for this sacrifice and offering is better than that, when thou bringest a soul with thee into the

Church. Do you not see doves which have been trained, how they hunt for others when they are let out? Let us also do this. For what kind of excuse shall we have, if irrational creatures are able to hunt for an animal of their own species, while we who have been honoured with reason and so much wisdom neglect this kind of pursuit? I exhorted you in my former discourse with these words:

"Go, each of you to the houses of your neighbours, wait for them to come out, lay hold of them, and conduct them to their common mother: and imitate those who are mad upon theatre going, who diligently arrange to meet each other and so wait at early dawn to see that iniquitous spectacle. Yet I have not effected anything by this exhortation. Therefore I speak again and shall not cease speaking, until I have persuaded you. Hearing profits nothing unless it is accompanied by practice. It makes our punishment heavier, if we continually hear the same things and do none of the things which are spoken. That the chastisement will be heavier, hear the statement of Christ. "If I had not come and spoken to them they had not sin: but now they have no cloke for their sin. And the Apostle says "for not the hearers of the law shall be justified. These things He says to the hearers; but when He wishes to instruct the speaker also, that even he will not gain anything from his teaching unless his behaviour is in close correspondence with his doctrine, and his manner of life is in harmony with his speech, hear how the Apostle and the prophet address themselves to him: for the latter says "but to the sinner said God, why dost thou preach my laws and takest my covenant in thy mouth, whereas thou hast hated instruction? And the Apostle, addressing himself to these same again who thought great things of their teaching, speaks on this wise:

"Thou art confident that thou thyself art a leader of the blind, a light of those who are in darkness, an instructor of the foolish, a teacher of babes: thou therefore that teachest another teachest thou not thyself? Inasmuch then as it could neither profit me the speaker to speak, nor you the hearers to hear, unless we comply with the things which are spoken, but rather would increase our condemnation, let us not limit the display of our zeal to hearing only, but let us observe what is said, in our deeds. For it is indeed a good thing to spend time continually in hearing the divine oracles: but this good thing becomes useless when the benefit to be derived from hearing is not linked with it.

Therefore that you may not assemble here in vain I shall not cease beseeching you with all earnestness, as I have often besought you before, "conduct your brethren to us, exhort the wanderers, counsel them not by word only but also by deed. This is the more powerful, teaching-that which comes through our manners and behaviour-Even if you do not utter a word, but yet, after you have gone out of this assembly, by your mien, and your look, and your voice and all the rest of your demeanour you exhibit to the men who have been left behind the gain which you have brought away with you, this is sufficient for exhortation and advice. For we ought to go out from this place as it were from some sacred shrine, as men who have descended from heaven itself, who have become sedate, and philosophical, who do and say everything in proper measure: and when a wife sees her husband returning

from the assembly, and a father his son, and a friend his friend, and an enemy his enemy, let them all receive an impression of the benefit which you have derived from coming here: and they will receive it, if they perceive that you have become milder, more philosophical, more devout. Consider what privileges you enjoy who hast been initiated into the mysteries. with what company thou offerest up that mystic hymn, with what company thou criest aloud the ”Ter sanctus.

Teach ”them that are without” that thou hast joined the chorus of the Seraphim, that thou art ranked as a citizen of the commonwealth above, that thou hast been enrolled in the choir of Angels, that thou hast conversed with the Lord, that thou hast been in the company of Christ. If we regulate ourselves in this way we shall not need to say anything, when we go out to those who are left behind: but from our advantage they will perceive their own loss and will hasten hither, so as to enjoy the same benefits themselves. For when, merely by the use of their senses, they see the beauty of your soul shining forth, even if they are the most stupid of men, they will become enamoured of your goodly appearance. For if corporeal beauty excites those who behold it, much more will symmetry of soul be able to move the spectator, and stimulate him to equal zeal. Let us then adorn our inward man, and let us be mindful of the things which are said here, when we go out: for there especially is it a proper time to remember them; and just as an athlete displays in the lists the things which he has learned in the training school: even so ought we to display in our transactions in the world without the things which we have heard here.

5. Bear in mind then the things which are said here, that when you have gone out and the devil lays hold of you either by means of anger or vainglory, or any other passion, you may call to remembrance the teaching which you have received here and may be able easily to shake off the grasp of the evil one. Do you not see the wrestling-masters in the practising grounds, who, after countless contests having obtained exemption from wrestling on account of their age, sit outside the lines by the side of the dust and shout to those who are wrestling inside, telling one to grasp a hand, or drag a leg, or seize upon the back, and by many other directions of that kind, saying, ”if you do so and so you will easily throw your antagonist,” they are of the greatest service to their pupils? Even so do thou look to thy training master, the blessed Paul, who after countless victories is now sitting outside the boundary, I mean this present life, and cries aloud to us who are wrestling, shouting out by means of his Epistles, when he sees us overcome by wrath and resentment of injuries, and choked by passion; ”if thy enemy hunger feed him, if he thirst give him drink;” -a beautiful precept full of spiritual wisdom, and serviceable both to the doer and the receiver. But the reminder of the passage causes much perplexity, and does not seem to correspond to the sentiment of him who uttered the former words.

And what is the nature of this? the saying that ”by so doing thou shalt heap coals of fire on his head. For by these words he does a wrong both to the doer and the receiver: to the latter by setting his head on fire, and placing coals upon it; for what good will he get from receiving food and drink in proportion to the evil he will suffer from the heaping of coals

on his head? Thus then the recipient of the benefit is wronged, having a greater vengeance inflicted on him, but the benefactor also is injured in another way. For what can he gain from doing good to his enemies when he acts in the hope of revenge? For he who gives meat and drink to his enemy for the purpose of heaping coals of fire on his head would not become merciful and kind, but cruel and harsh, having inflicted an enormous punishment by means of a small benefit. For what could be more unkind than to feed a person for the purpose of heaping coals of fire on his head? This then is the contradiction: and now it remains that the solution should be added, in order that by those very things which seem to do violence to the letter of the law you may clearly see all the wisdom of the lawgiver. What then is the solution?

That great and noble-minded man was well aware of the fact that to be reconciled quickly with an enemy is a grievous and difficult thing; grievous and difficult, not on account of its own nature, but of our moral indolence. But he commanded us not only to be reconciled with our enemy, but also to feed him; which was far more grievous than the former. For if some are infuriated by the mere sight of those who have annoyed them, how would they be willing to feed them when they were hungry? And why do I speak of the sight infuriating them? If any one makes mention of the persons, and merely introduces their name in sorely, it revives the wound in our imagination, and increases the heat of passion. Paul then being aware of all these things and wishing to make what was hard and difficult of correction smooth and easy, and to persuade one who could not endure to see his enemy, to be ready to confer that benefit already mentioned upon him, added the words about coals of fire, in order that a man prompted by the hope of vengeance might hasten to do this service to one who had annoyed him. And just as the fisherman surrounding the hook on all sides with the bait presents it to the fishes in order that one of them hastening to its accustomed food may be captured by means of it and easily held fast:

even so Paul also wishing to lead on the man who has been wronged to below a benefit on the man who has wronged him does not present to him the bare hook of spiritual wisdom, but having covered it as it were with a kind of bait, I mean the ”coals of fire,” invites the man who has been noyed him; but when he has come he holds him fast in future, and does not let him make off, the very nature of the deed attaching him to his enemy; and he all but says to him: ”if thou art not willing to feed the man who has wronged thee for piety’s sake: feed him at least from the hope of punishing him. For he knows that if the man once sets his hand to the work of conferring this benefit, a starting-point is made and a way of reconciliation is opened for him. For certainly no one would have the heart to regard a man continually as his enemy to whom he has given meat and drink, even if he originally does this in the hope of vengeance. For time as it goes on relaxes the tension of his anger. As then the fisherman, if he presented the bare hook would never allure the fish, but when he has covered it gets it unawares into the mouth of the creature who comes up to it:

so also Paul if he had not advanced the expectation of inflicting punishment would never have persuaded those who were wronged to undertake to benefit those who had annoyed

them. Wishing then to persuade those who recoiled in disgust, and were paralysed by the very sight of their enemies, to confer the greatest benefits upon them, he made mention of the coals of fire, not with a view of thrusting the persons in question into inexorable punishment, but in order that when he had persuaded those who were wronged to benefit their enemies in the expectation of punishing them, he might afterwards in time persuade them to abandon their anger altogether.

6. Thus then did he encourage the man who has been wronged; but observe also how he unites again the man who has done the wrong to him who has been provoked. First of all by the very manner of the benefit: (for there is no one so degraded and unfeeling as to be unwilling, when he receives meat and drink, to become the servant and friend of him who does this for him): and in the second place through the dread of vengeance. For the passage, "by so doing thou shalt heap coals of fire on his head" seems indeed to be addressed to the person who gives the food; but it more especially touches him who has caused the annoyance, in order that through fear of this punishment he may be deterred from remaining continually in a state of enmity, and being aware that the reception of food and drink might do him the greatest mischief if he constantly retains his animosity, may suppress his anger. For thus he will be able to quench the coals of fire. Wherefore the proposed punishment and vengeance both induces the one who has been wronged to benefit him who has annoyed him, and it deters and checks him who has given the provocation, and impels him to reconciliation with the man who gives him meat and drink. Paul therefore linked the two persons by a twofold bond, the one depending on a benefit, the other on an act of vengeance.

For the difficulty is to make a beginning and to find an opening for the reconciliation: but when that has once been reared in whatever way it may be, all which follows will be smooth and easy. For even if at first the man who has been annoyed feeds his enemy in the hope of punishing him, yet becoming his friend by the act of giving him food he will be able to expel the desire of vengeance. For when he has become a friend he will no longer feed the man who has been reconciled to him, with an expectation of this kind. Again he who has given the provocation, when he sees the man who has been wronged electing to give him meat and drink, casts out all his animosity, both on account of this deed, and also of his fear of the punishment which is in store for him, even if he be excessively hard and harsh and stony hearted, being put to shame by the benevolence of him who gives him food, and dreading the punishment reserved for him, if he continues to be an enemy after accepting the food.

For this reason Paul did not stop even here in his exhortation, but when he has emptied each side of wrath he proceeds to correct their disposition, saying, "be not overcome of evil. "For if," he says, "you continue to bear resentment and to seek revenge you seem indeed to conquer your enemy, but in reality you are being conquered by evil, that is, by wrath: so that if you wish to conquer, be reconciled, and do not make an attack upon your adversary; for a brilliant victory is that in which by means of good, that is to say by forbearance, you overcome evil expelling wrath and resentment. But the injured man, when inflamed with

passion would not have borne these words. Therefore when he had satisfied his wrath he proceeded to conduct him to the best reason for reconciliation, and did not permit him to remain permanently animated by the wicked hope of vengeance. Dost thou perceive the wisdom of the lawgiver? And that you may learn that he introduced this law only on account of the weakness of those who would not otherwise be content to make terms amongst themselves, hear how Christ, when He ordained a law on this same subject did not propose the same reward, as the Apostle; but, having said "Love your enemies do good to them that hate you," which means give them food and drink, He did not add "for in so doing ye shall heap coals of fire on their heads: but what did He say?

"that ye may become like your Father who is in Heaven. Naturally so, for He was discoursing to Peter, James, and John and the rest of the apostolic band: therefore He proposed that reward. But if you say that even on this understanding the precept is onerous you improve once more the defence which I am making for Paul, but you deprive yourself of every plea of indulgence. For I can prove to you that this which seems to you onerous was accomplished under the Old Dispensation when the manifestation of spiritual wisdom was not so great as it is now. Impressions which were employed by him who originally brought it in, that he might leave no room for excuse to those who do not observe it: for the precept "if thine enemy hunger feed him, if he thirst give him drink" is not the utterance of Paul in the first instance, but of Solomon. For this reason he quoted the words that he might persuade the hearer that for one who has been advanced to such a high standard of wisdom to regard an old law as onerous and grievous which was often fulfilled by the men of old time, is one of the basest things possible. Which of the ancients, you ask, fulfilled it? There were many, but amongst others David especially did so more abundantly? He did not indeed merely give food or drink to his enemy, but also rescued him several times from death, when he was in jeopardy;

and when he had it in his power to slay him he spared him once, twice, yea many times. As for Saul he hated and abhorred him so much after the countless good services which he had done, after his brilliant triumphs, and the salvation which he had wrought in the matter of Goliath, that he could not bear to mention him by his own name, but called him after his father. For once when a festival was at hand, and Saul, having devised some treachery against him, and contrived a cruel plot, did not see him arrive-"where," said he, "is the son of Jesse? He called him by his father's name, both because on account of his hatred he could not endure the recollection of his proper name, and also because he thought to damage the distinguished position of that righteous man by a reference to his low birth;-a miserable and despicable thought: for certainly, even if he had some accusation to bring against the father this could in no wise injure David. For each man is answerable for his own deeds, and by these he can be praised and accused. But as it was, not having any evil deed to mention, he brought forward his low birth, expecting by this means to throw his glory into the shade, which in fact was the height of folly.

For what kind of offence is it to be the child of insignificant and humble then, ”the son of Jesse,” but when David found him sleeping inside the cave, he did not call him the ”son of Kish,” but by his title of honour: ”for I will not lift up my hand,” he said, ”against the Lord’s anointed. So purely free was he from wrath and resentment of injuries: he calls him the Lord’s anointed who had done him such great wrongs, who countless good services had many times attempted to destroy him. For he did not consider how Saul deserved to be treated, but he considered what was becoming for himself both to do and to say, which is the greatest stretch of moral wisdom. How so? When thou hast got thy enemy in a prison, made fast by a twofold, or rather by a triple chain, confinement of space, dearth of assistance, and necessity of sleep, dost thou not demand a penalty and punishment of him? ”No,” he says; ”for I am not now regarding what he deserves to suffer, but what it behoves me to do. He did not look to the facility for slaying, but to the accurate observance of the moral wisdom which was becoming to him. And yet which of the existing circumstances was not sufficient to prompt him to the act of slaughter? Was not the fact that his enemy was delivered bound into his hands a sufficient inducement?

For you are aware I suppose that we hasten more eagerly to deeds for which facilities abound, and the hope of success increases our desire to act, which was just what happened then in his case.

Well! did the captain who then counselled and urged him to the deed, did the memory of past events induce him to slay? no one of these things moved him: in fact the very facility for slaughter averted him from it: for he bethought him that God had put Saul in his hands for the purpose of furnishing ample ground and opportunity for the exercise of moral wisdom. You then perhaps admire him, because he did not cherish the memory of any of his past evils: but I am much more astonished at him for another reason. And what is this? that the fear of future events did not impel him to lay violent hands on his enemy. For he knew dearly that if Saul escaped his hands, he would again be his adversary; yet he preferred exposing himself to danger by letting go the man who had wronged him, to providing for his own security by laying violent hands upon his foe. What could equal then the great and generous spirit of this man, who, when the law commanded eye to be plucked out for eye, and tooth for tooth, and retaliation on equal terms, not only abstained from doing this, but exhibited a far greater measure of moral wisdom?

At least if he had slain Saul at that time he would have retained credit for moral wisdom unimpaired, not merely because he had acted on the defensive, not being himself the originator of violence, but also because by his great moderation he was superior to the precept ”an eye for an eye. For he would not have inflicted one slaughter in return for one; but, in return for many deaths, which Saul endeavoured to bring on him, having attempted to slay him not once or twice but many times, he would have brought only one death on Saul; and not only this, but if he had proceeded to avenge himself out of fear of the future, even this, combined with the things already mentioned, would procure him the reward of forbearance without any deduction. For he who is angry on account of the things which have been done

to him, and demands misses the consideration of all past evils, although they are many and painful, but is compelled to take steps for self-defence from fear of the future, and by way of providing for his own security, no one would deprive him of the rewards of moderation.

7. Nevertheless David did not act even thus, but found a novel and strange form of moral wisdom: and neither the remembrance of things past, nor the fear of things to come, nor the instigation of the captain, nor the solitude of the place, nor the facility for slaying, nor anything else incited him to kill; but he spared the man who was his enemy, and had given him pain just as if he was some benefactor, and had done him much good. What kind of indulgence then shall we have, if we are mindful of past transgressions, and avenge ourselves on those who have given us pain, whereas that innocent man who had undergone such great sufferings and expected more and death the man who would cause him endless troubles?

His moral wisdom then we may perceive, not only from the fact that he did not slay Saul, when there was so strong a compulsion, but also that he did not utter an irreverent word against him, although he who was insulted would not have heard him. Yet we often speak evil of friends when they are absent, he on the contrary not even of the enemy who had done him such great wrong. His moral wisdom then we may perceive from these things: but his lovingkindness and tender care from what he did after these things. For when he had cut off the fringe of Saul's garment, and had taken away the bottle of water he withdrew afar off and stood and shouted, and exhibited these things to him whose life he had by his deeds that he suspected him without a cause as his enemy, and aiming therefore at winning him into friendship. Nevertheless when he had even thus failed to persuade him, and could have laid hands on him, he again chose rather to be an exile from his country and to sojourn in a strange land, and suffer distress every day, in procuring necessary food than to remain at home and vex his adversary. What spirit could be kinder than his? He was indeed justified in saying "Lord remember David and all his meekness. Let us also imitate him, and let us neither say nor do evil to our enemies, but benefit them according to our power:

for we shall do more good to ourselves than to them. "For if ye forgive your enemies," we are told "ye shall be forgiven. Forgive base offences that thou mayest receivea royal pardon for thy offences; but if any one has done thee great wrongs, the greater the wrongs you forgive, the greater will be the pardon which you will receive. Therefore we have been instructed to say "Forgive us, as we forgive," that we may learn that the measure of our forgiveness takes its beginning in the first place from ourselves. Wherefore in proportion to the severity of the evil which the enemy does to us is the greatness of the benefit which he bestows. Let us then be earnest and eager to be reconciled with those who have vexed us, whether their wrath be just or uncessity that the trial of the case should be brought forward in the other world. As then many men when they have a dispute with one another, if they come to a friendly understanding together outside the law court save themselves loss, and alarm, and many risks, the issue of the case turning out in accordance with the sentiment of each party; but if they severally entrust the affair to the judge the only result to them will be loss of money,

and in many cases a penalty, and the permanent endurance of their hatred; even so here if we come to terms during our present life we shall relieve ourselves from all punishment;

but if while remaining enemies we depart to that terrible tribunal in the other world we shall certainly pay the utmost penalty at the sentence of the judge there, and shall both of us undergo inexorable punishment: he who is unjustly wroth because he is thus unjustly disposed, and he who is justly wroth, because he has, however justly, cherished resentment. For even if we have been unjustly ill-treated, we ought to grant pardon to those who have wronged us. And observe how he urges and incites those who have unjustly given pain to reconciliation with those whom they have wronged. ”If thou offerest thy gift before the altar, and there rememberest that thy brother hath ought against thee, go thy way; first be reconciled to thy brother. He did not say, ”assemble, and offer thy sacrifice” but ”be reconciled and then offer it. Let it lie there, he says, in order that the necessity of making the offering may constrain him who is justly wroth to come to terms even against his will. See how he again prompts us to go to the man who has provoked us when he says ”Forgive your debtors in order that your Father may also forgive your trespasses. For He did not propose a small reward, but one which far exceeds the magnitude of the achievement. Considering all these things then, and counting the recompense which is given in this case and remembering that to wipe away sins does not entail much labour and zeal, let us pardon those who have wronged us.

For that which others scarcely accomplish, I mean the blotting out of their own sins by means of fasting and lamentations, and prayers, and sackcloth, and ashes, this it is possible for us easily to effect without sackcloth and ashes and fasting if only we blot out anger from our heart, and with sincerity forgive those who have wronged us. May the God of peace and love, having banished from our soul all wrath and bitterness, and anger, deign to grant that we being closely knit one to another according to the proper adjustment of the parts, may with one accord, one mouth and one soul continually offer up our hymns of thanksgiving due to Him: for to Him be glory and power for ever and ever. Amen.

Source. English translation: an older public-domain translation as collected in the Writings-Database (HistoricalChristianFaith), mostly from the Ante-Nicene, Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers and similar nineteenth-century editions. SermonIndex has only divided it into chapters and short sections; the wording is the translator’s own. Square brackets, Greek or Latin words and footnote-free text are as the source file prints them, and a transcription error may remain. No Greek or Latin text is shown beside it yet, and no modern English version has been made.