

1 Corinthians 3:12-15

by St. John Chrysostom

St. John Chrysostom's sermon on 1 Corinthians 3:12-15 emphasizes the importance of building a life on the foundation of Christ, the reality of eternal consequences for our actions, and the call to holiness as the Temple of God.

Scripture: Psalm 49:20, Mark 9:44, 1 Corinthians 3:12, Colossians 3:10, Hebrews 10:31

Topics: "Eternal Judgment", "Repentance"

Description

John Chrysostom preaches about the eternal consequences of our actions, emphasizing the importance of building our lives on the foundation of Christ with valuable materials like gold, silver, and precious stones, rather than worthless materials like wood, hay, and stubble. He delves into the topic of whether hell fire has an end, citing biblical references to highlight the severity of eternal punishment for those who reject God's mercy and continue in sin. Chrysostom challenges his listeners to consider the justice of God's punishment, pointing out that even one sin can have grave consequences, and he urges them to repent and turn away from wickedness to avoid eternal suffering.

Transcript

If any man build upon this foundation gold, silver, costly stones, wood, hay, stubble; each man's work shall be made manifest: for the day shall declare it, because it is revealed in fire; and the fire shall prove each man's work of what sort it is. If any man's work abide which he built thereon, he shall receive a reward. If any man's work shall be burned, he shall suffer loss: but he himself shall be saved; yet so as through fire.

This is no small subject of enquiry which we propose, but rather about things which are of the first necessity and which all men enquire about; namely, whether hell fire have any end. For that it has no end Christ indeed declared when he said, Their fire shall not be quenched, and their worm shall not die. [Mark 8:44, 46, 48.]

Well: I know that a chill comes over you (ναρκῶτε) on hearing these things; but what am I to do? For this is God's own command, continually to sound these things in your ears, where He says, Charge this people; Fors. Exodus 19:10, 20. διαμαρτυραῖ, Septuagint. here διστέλλαι and ordained as we have been unto the ministry of the word, we must give pain to our hearers, not willingly but on compulsion. Nay rather, if you will, we shall avoid giving you pain. For says He, Romans 13:3, in substance if you do that which is good, fear not: so that it is possible for you to hear me not only without ill-will, but even with pleasure.

As I said then; that it has no end, Christ has declared. Paul also says, in pointing out the eternity of the punishment, that the sinners shall pay the penalty of destruction, and that for ever 2 Thessalonians 1:9 And again, 1 Corinthians 6:9 Be not deceived; neither fornicators. nor adulterers, nor effeminate, shall inherit the kingdom of God. And also unto the Hebrews he says, Hebrews 12:14 Follow peace with all men, and the sanctification without which no man shall see the Lord. And Christ also, to those who said, In your Name we have done many wonderful works, says, Depart from Me, I know you not, you workers of iniquity Matthew 7:22 And the virgins too who were shut out, entered in no more. And also about those who gave Him no food, He says, Matthew 25:46 They shall go away into everlasting punishment.

2. And say not unto me, where is the rule of justice preserved entire, if the punishment has no end? Rather, when God does any thing, obey His decisions and submit not what is said to human reasonings. But moreover, how can it be any thing else than just for one who has experienced innumerable blessings from the beginning, and then committed deeds worthy of punishment, and neither by threat nor benefit improved at all, to suffer punishment? For if you enquire what is absolute justice; it was meet that we should have perished immediately from the beginning, according to the definition of strict justice. Rather not even then according to the rule of justice only; for the result would have had in it kindness too, if we had suffered this also. For when any one insults him that has done him no wrong, according to the rule of justice he suffers punishment: but when it is his benefactor, who, bound by no previous favor, bestowed innumerable kindnesses, who alone is the Author of his being, who is God, who breathed his soul into him, who gave ten thousand gifts of grace, whose will is to take him up into heaven;-- when, I say, such an one, after so great blessings, is met by insult, daily insult, in the conduct of the other party; how can that other be thought worthy of pardon? Do you not see how He punished Adam for one single sin?

Yes, you will say; but He had given him Paradise and caused him to enjoy much favor. Nay, surely it is not all as one, for a man to sin in the enjoyment of security and ease, and in a state of great affliction. In fact, this is the dreadful circumstance that your sins are the sins of one not in any Paradise but amid the innumerable evils of this life; that you are not sobered even by affliction, as though one in prison should still practise his crime. However, unto you He has promised things yet greater than Paradise. But neither has He given them now, lest He should unnerve you in the season of conflicts; nor has He been silent about them, lest He should quite cast you down with your labors. As for Adam, he committed but one sin and brought on himself certain death; whereas we commit ten thousand transgressions daily. Now if he by that one act brought on himself so great an evil and introduced death; what shall not we suffer who continually live in sins, and instead of Paradise, have the expectation of heaven?

The argument is irksome and pains the hearer: were it only by my own feelings, I know this. For indeed my heart is troubled and throbs; and the more I see the account of hell confirmed, the more do I tremble and shrink through fear. But it is necessary to say these things lest we fall into hell. What you received was not paradise, nor trees and plants, but heaven and the good things in the heavens. Now if he that had received less was condemned, and no consideration exempted him, much more shall we who have sinned more abundantly, and have been called unto greater things, endure the woes without remedy.

Consider, for example, how long a time, but for one single sin, our race abides in death. Five thousand years and more have passed, and death has not yet been done away, on account of one single sin. And we cannot even say that Adam had heard prophets, that he had seen others punished for sins, and it was meet that he should have been terrified thereby and corrected, were it only by the example. For he was at that time first, and alone; but nevertheless he was punished. But you can not have anything of this sort to advance, who after so many examples art become worse; to whom so excellent a Spirit has been

vouch-safed, and yet you draw upon yourself not one sin, nor two, nor three, but sins without number! For do not, because the sin is committed in a small moment, calculate that therefore the punishment also must be a matter of a moment. Do you see not those men, who for a single theft or a single act of adultery, committed in a small moment of time, oftentimes have spent their whole life in prisons, and in mines, struggling with continual hunger and every kind of death? And there was no one to set them at liberty, or to say, The offense took place in a small moment of time; the punishment too should have its time equivalent to that of the sin.

3. But, They are men, some one will say, who do these things; as for God, He is loving unto men. Now, first of all, not even men do these things in cruelty, but in humanity. And God Himself, as He is loving unto men, in the same character does He punish sins. Sirach 16:12 For as His mercy is great, so also is His reproof. When therefore you say unto me, God is loving unto men, then you tell me of so much the greater reason for punishing: namely, our sinning against such a Being. Hence also Paul said, Hebrews 10:31 It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God. Endure I beseech you, the fiery force of the words, for perhaps -- perhaps you will have some consolation from hence! Who among men can punish as God has punished? When He caused a deluge and entire destruction of a race so numerous; and again, when, a little while after, He rained fire from above, and utterly destroyed them all? What punishment from men can be like that? Do you see not that the punishment even in this world is almost eternal? Four thousand years have passed away, and the punishment of the Sodomites abides at its height. For as His mercy is great, so also is His punishment.

Again: if He had imposed any burdensome or impossible things, one might perhaps have been able to urge difficulty of the laws: but if they be extremely easy, what can we say for our not regarding even these? Suppose you are unable to fast or to practice virginity; although you are able if you will, and they who have been able are a condemnation to us. But, however, God has not used this strictness towards us; neither has He enjoined these things nor laid them down as laws, but left the choice to be at the discretion of the hearers. Nevertheless, you are able to be chaste in marriage; and you are able to abstain from drunkenness. Are you unable to empty yourself of all your goods? Nay surely you are able; and they who have done so prove it. But nevertheless He has not enjoined this, but has commanded not to be rapacious, and of our means to assist those who are in want. But if a man say, I cannot even be content with a wife only, he deceives himself and reasons falsely; and they condemn him who without a wife lives in chastity. But how, tell me, can you help using abusive words? Can you not help cursing? Why, the doing these things is irksome, not the refraining from them. What excuse then have we for not observing precepts so easy and light? We cannot name any at all. That the punishment then is eternal is plain from all that has been said.

4. But since Paul's saying appears to some to tell the other way, come let us bring it forward also and search it out thoroughly. For having said, If any man's work abide which he has built thereon, he shall receive a reward; and if any man's work shall be burned, he shall suffer loss, he adds, but himself shall be saved, yet so as through fire. What shall we say then to this? Let us consider first what is the Foundation, and what the gold, and what the precious stones, and what the hay, and what the stubble.

The Foundation, then, he has himself plainly signified to be Christ, saying, For other foundation can no man lay than that which is laid, which, he says is Jesus Christ.

Next, the building seems to me to be actions. Although some maintain that this also is spoken concerning teachers and disciples and concerning corrupt heresies: but the reasoning does not admit it. For if this be

it, in what sense, while the work is destroyed, is the builder to be saved, though it be through fire? Of right, the author ought rather of the two to perish; but now it will be found that the severer penalty is assigned to him who has been built into the work. For if the teacher was the cause of the wickedness, he is worthy to suffer severer punishment: how then shall he be saved? If, on the contrary, he was not the cause but the disciples became such through their own perverseness, he is no whit deserving of punishment, no, nor yet of sustaining loss: he, I say, who built so well. In what sense then does he say, he shall suffer loss?

From this it is plain that the discourse is about actions. For since he means next in course to put out his strength against the man who had committed fornication, he begins high up and long beforehand to lay down the preliminaries. For he knew how while discussing one subject, in the very discourse about that thing to prepare the grounds of another to which he intends to pass on. For so in his rebuke for not awaiting one another at their meals, he laid the grounds of his discourse concerning the mysteries. And also because now he is hastening on towards the fornicator, while speaking about the Foundation, he adds, Do you not know that you are the Temple of God? And that the Spirit of God dwells in you? If any man destroy (Φθε■ρη, rec. version, defile.) the Temple of God, him will God destroy. Now these things, he said, as beginning now to agitate with fears the soul of him that had been unchaste.

1 Corinthians 3:12

5. If any man build upon this foundation, gold, silver, costly stones, wood, hay, stubble. For after the faith there is need of edification: and therefore he says elsewhere, Edify one another with these words. perhaps 1 Thessalonians 5:11; 4:5 For both the artificer and the learner contribute to the edifying. Wherefore he says, But let every man take heed how he builds thereon. 1 Corinthians 3:10 But if faith had been the subject of these sayings, the thing affirmed is not reasonable. For in the faith all ought to be equal, since there is but one faith; Ephesians 4:5 but in goodness of life it is not possible that all should be the same. Because the faith is not in one case less, in another more excellent, but the same in all those who truly believe. But in life there is room for some to be more diligent, others more slothful; some stricter, and others more ordinary; that some should have done well in greater things, others in less; that the errors of some should have been more grievous, of others less notable. On this account he says, Gold, silver, costly stones, wood, hay, stubble -- every man's work shall be made manifest: -- his conduct; that is what he speaks of here:-- If any man's work abide which he built thereupon, he shall receive a reward; if any man's work shall be burned, he shall suffer loss. Whereas, if the saying related to disciples and teachers, he ought not to suffer loss for disciples refusing to hear. And therefore he says, Every man shall receive his own reward according to his own labor not according to the result, but according to the labor. For what if the hearers gave no heed? Wherefore this passage also proves that the saying is about actions.

Now his meaning is this: If any man have an ill life with a right faith, his faith shall not shelter him from punishment, his work being burnt up. The phrase, shall be burned up, means, shall not endure the violence of the fire. But just as if a man having golden armor on were to pass through a river of fire, he comes from crossing it all the brighter; but if he were to pass through it with hay, so far from profiting, he destroys himself besides; so also is the case in regard of men's works. For he does not say this as if he were discoursing of material things being burnt up, but with a view of making their fear more intense, and of showing how naked of all defense he is who abides in wickedness. Wherefore he said, He shall suffer loss: lo, here is one punishment: but he himself shall be saved, but so as by fire; lo, again, here is a second. And his meaning is, He himself shall not perish in the same way as his works, passing into nought, but he shall abide in the fire.

6. He calls it, however, Salvation, you will say; why, that is the cause of his adding, so as by fire: since we also used to say, It is preserved in the fire, when we speak of those substances which do not immediately burn up and become ashes. For do not at sound of the word fire imagine that those who are burning pass into annihilation. And though he call such punishment Salvation, be not astonished. For his custom is in things which have an ill sound to use fair expressions, and in good things the contrary. For example, the word Captivity seems to be the name of an evil thing, but Paul has applied it in a good sense, when he says, Bringing into captivity every thought to the obedience of Christ. 2 Corinthians 10:5 And again, to an evil thing he has applied a good word, saying, Sin reigned, Romans 5:21 here surely the term reigning is rather of auspicious sound. And so here in saying, he shall be saved, he has but darkly hinted at the intensity of the penalty: as if he had said, But himself shall remain forever in punishment. He then makes an inference, saying,

1 Corinthians 3:16

7. Do you not know that you are the Temple of God? For since he had discoursed in the section before, concerning those who were dividing the Church, he thenceforward attacks him also who had been guilty of uncleanness; not indeed as yet in plain terms but in a general way; hinting at his corrupt mode of life and enhancing the sin, by the Gift which had been already given to him. Then also he puts all the rest to shame, arguing from these very blessings which they had already: for this is what he is ever doing, either from the future or from the past, whether grievous or encouraging. First, from things future; For the day shall declare it, because it is revealed by fire. Again, from things already come to pass; Do you not know that you are the Temple of God, and the Spirit of God dwells in you?

1 Corinthians 3:17

If any man destroy the Temple of God, him will God destroy. Do you mark the sweeping vehemence of his words? However, so long as the person is unknown, what is spoken is not so invidious, all dividing among themselves the fear of rebuke.

Him will God destroy, that is, will cause him to perish. And this is not the word of one denouncing a curse, but of one that prophesies.

For the Temple of God is holy: but he that has committed fornication is profane.

Then, in order that he might not seem to spend his earnestness upon that one, in saying, for the Temple of God is holy, he adds, which you are.

1 Corinthians 3:18

8. Let no man deceive himself. This also is in reference to that person, as thinking himself to be somewhat and flattering himself on wisdom. But that he might not seem to press on him at great length in a mere digression; he first throws him into a kind of agony and delivers him over unto fear, and then brings back his discourse to the common fault, saying, If any man among you seems to be wise in this world, let him become a fool, that he may become (γινῆται . rec. vers. be.) wise. And this he does afterwards with great boldness of speech, as having sufficiently beaten them down , and shaken with that fear the mind not of that unclean person only, but of all the hearers also: so accurately does he measure the reach of what he has to say. For what if a man be rich, what if he be noble; he is viler than all the vile, when made captive by sin. For as if a man were a king and enslaved to barbarians, he is of all men most wretched, so also is it

in regard to sin: since sin is a barbarian, and the soul which has been once taken captive she knows not how to spare, but plays the tyrant to the ruin of all those who admit her.

9. For nothing is so inconsiderate as sin: nothing so senseless, so utterly foolish and outrageous. All is overturned and confounded and destroyed by it, wheresoever it may alight. Unsightly to behold, disgusting and grievous. And should a painter draw her picture, he would not, methinks, err in fashioning her after this sort. A woman with the form of a beast, savage, breathing flames, hideous, black; such as the heathen poets depict their Scyllas. For with ten thousand hands she lays hold of our thoughts, and comes on unexpected, and tears everything in pieces, like those dogs that bite slily.

But rather, what need of the painter's art, when we should rather bring forward those who are made after sin's likeness?

Whom then will you that we should portray first? The covetous and rapacious? And what more shameless than those eyes? What more immodest, more like a greedy dog? For no dog keeps his ground with such shameless impudence as he when he is grasping at all men's goods. What more polluted than those hands? What more audacious than that mouth, swallowing all down and not satisfied? Nay, look not on the countenance and the eyes as being a man's. For such looks belong not to the eyes of men. He sees not men as men; he sees not the heaven as heaven. He does not even lift up his head unto the Lord; but all is money in his account. The eyes of men are wont to look upon poor persons in affliction, and to be softened; but these of the rapacious man, at sight of the poor, glare like wild beasts'. The eyes of men do not behold other men's goods as if they were their own, but rather their own as others; and they covet not the things given to others, but rather exhaust upon others their own means: but these are not content unless they take all men's property. For it is not a man's eye which they have, but a wild beast's. The eyes of men endure not to see their own body stripped of clothing, (for it is their own, though in person it belong to others,) but these, unless they strip every one and lodge all men's property in their own home, are never cloyed; yea rather they never have enough. Insomuch that one might say that their hands are not wild beasts' only, but even far more savage and cruel than these. For bears and wolves when they are satiated leave off their kind of eating: but these know not any satiety. And yet for this cause God made us hands, to assist others, not to plot against them. And if we were to use them for that purpose, better had they been cut off and we left without them. But you, if a wild beast rend a sheep, art grieved; but when doing the same unto one of your own flesh and blood, do you think that your deed is nothing atrocious? How then can you be a man? Do you see not that we call a thing humane, when it is full of mercy and loving-kindness? But when a man does any thing cruel or savage, inhuman is the title we give to such a one. You see then that the stamp of man as we portray him is his showing mercy; of a beast the contrary; according to constant saying, Why, is a man a wild beast, or a dog? see 2 Kings 8:13 For men relieve poverty; they do not aggravate it. Again these men's mouths are the mouths of wild beasts; yea rather these are the fiercer of the two. For the words also, which they utter, emit poison, more than the wild beasts' teeth, working slaughter. And if one were to go through all particulars, one should then see clearly how inhumanity turns those who practise it from men into beasts.

10. But were he to search out the mind also of that sort of people, he would no longer call them beasts only, but demons. For first, they are full of great cruelty and of hatred against their fellow-servant: Matthew 18:33 and neither is love of the kingdom there, nor fear of hell; no reverence for men, no pity, no sympathy: but shamelessness and audacity, and contempt of all things to come. And unto them the words of God concerning punishment seem to be a fable, and His threats mirth. For such is the mind of the covetous man. Since then within they are demons, and without, wild beasts; yea, worse than wild beasts;

where are we to place such as they are? For that they are worse even than wild beasts, is plain from this. The beasts are such as they are by nature: but these, endowed by nature with gentleness, forcibly strive against nature to train themselves to that which is savage. The demons too have the plotters among men to help them, to such an extent that if they had no such aid, the greater part of their wiles against us would be done away: but these, when such as they have spitefully entreated are vying with them, still try to be more spiteful than they. Again, the devil wages war with man, not with the demons of his own kind: but he of whom we speak is urgent in all ways to do harm to his own kindred and family, and does not even reverence nature.

I know that many hate us because of these words; but I feel no hatred towards them; rather I pity and bewail those who are so disposed. Even should they choose to strike, I would gladly endure it, if they would but abstain from this their savage mind. For not I alone, but the prophet also with me, banishes all such from the family of men saying, Psalm 49:20, Septuagint. τοσοῦτον οὐκ ἔστιν τοῖς ἀνθρώποις Man being in honor has no understanding, but is like the senseless beasts.

Let us then become men at last, and let us look up unto heaven; and that which is according to His image, Colossians 3:10 let us receive and recover: that we may obtain also the blessings to come through the grace and loving-kindness of our Lord Jesus Christ, with Whom to the Father and the Holy Spirit be glory, power, honor, now and always, and unto everlasting ages. Amen.

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