

# 2 Timothy 2:20, 21

by St. John Chrysostom

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*The sermon emphasizes the importance of almsgiving and mercy, and warns against the dangers of covetousness and iniquity.*

**Scripture:** Isaiah 1:16, Matthew 7:21, Luke 6:36, Ephesians 5:27, 1 Timothy 4:12, 2 Timothy 2:20, 2 Timothy 2:23-26

**Topics:** "Sanctification", "Righteous Living"

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## Description

John Chrysostom preaches about the importance of purging oneself from dishonorable behaviors to become vessels of honor, sanctified for the Master's use. He explains that in a great house, there are vessels of different materials, symbolizing the diversity of people in the world, some for honor and some for dishonor. Chrysostom emphasizes the need for individuals to cleanse themselves from sinful behaviors and choose to be vessels of honor through their own decisions. He also highlights the significance of fleeing youthful lusts, following righteousness, faith, charity, and peace, and avoiding foolish and unlearned questions that lead to strife.

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## Transcript

But in a great house there are not only vessels of gold and of silver, but also of wood and of earth; and some to honor, and some to dishonor. If a man therefore purge himself from these, he shall be a vessel unto honor, sanctified, and meet for the master's use, and prepared unto every good work.

Many men are still even now perplexed to account for the fact, that the wicked are suffered to remain, and are not yet destroyed. Now doubtless various reasons may be assigned for this, as, that they may be converted, or that by their punishment they may be made an example to the multitude. But Paul here mentions a similar case. For he says,

In a great house there are not only vessels of gold and silver, but also of wood and earth. Showing by this, that as in a great house it is likely there should be a great difference of vessels, so here also, in the whole world, for he speaks not of the Church only, but of the world at large. For think not, I pray, that he means it of the Church; for there he would not have any vessels of wood or of earth, but all of gold or silver where is the body of Christ, where is that pure virgin, without spot, or wrinkle, or any such thing. Ephesians 5:27 And this is what he means to say: Let it not disturb you that there are corrupt and wicked men. For in a great house there are such vessels. But what then? They do not receive the same honor. But some are to honor and some to dishonor. Nay, says one, in a house they may be of some use, but not at all in the world. Though God employs them not for such honorable service, he makes use of them for other

purposes. For instance, the vainglorious man builds much, so does the covetous man, the merchant, the tradesman, the magistrate; there are certain works in the world suited to these. But the golden vessel is not of such a nature. It is employed about the royal table. He does not say however that wickedness is a necessary thing, (for how should it be?) but that the wicked also have their work. For if all were of gold or of silver, there would be no need of the viler sort. For instance, if all were hardy, there would be no need of houses; if all were free from luxury, there would be no need of dainties. If all were careful only for necessities, there would be no need of splendid building.

If therefore a man purge himself from these, he shall be a vessel unto honor, sanctified. Do you see that it is not of nature, nor of the necessity of matter, to be a vessel of gold or of earth, but of our own choice? For otherwise the earthen could not become gold, nor could the golden descend to the vileness of the other. But in this case there is much change, and alteration of state. Paul was an earthen vessel, and became a golden one. Judas was a golden vessel, and became an earthen one. The earthen vessels, therefore, are such from uncleanness. The fornicator and the covetous man become earthen vessels. But how then does he say elsewhere, 'We have this treasure in earthen vessels,' so that he does not despise but honor the earthen vessel, speaking of it as the recipient of the treasure? There he shows the nature itself, and not the form of the material. For he means to say that our body is an earthen vessel. For as earthenware is nothing else but baked clay, so is our body nothing but clay consolidated by the heat of the soul; for that it is earthen, is evident. For as such a vessel is often by falling broken and dashed to pieces, so our body falls and is dissolved by death. For how do our bones differs from a potsherd, hard and dry as they are? Or our flesh from clay, being, like it, composed of water? But, as I said, how is it that he does not speak contemptuously of it? Because there he is discoursing of its nature, here of our choice. If a man, he says, purge himself from these, not merely cleanse, but cleanse out, that is, cleanse himself perfectly, he shall be a vessel unto honor, sanctified, and meet for the Master's use. The others therefore are useless for any good purpose, though some use is made of them. And prepared unto every good work. Even though he do it not, he is fit for it, and has a capacity for it. We ought therefore to be prepared for everything, even for death, for martyrdom, for a life of virginity, or for all these.

Ver. 22. Flee also youthful lusts.

Not only the lust of fornication, but every inordinate desire is a youthful lust. Let the aged learn that they ought not to do the deeds of the youthful. If one be given to insolence, or a lover of power, of riches, of bodily pleasures, it is a youthful lust, and foolish. These things must proceed from a heart not yet established, from a mind not deeply grounded, but in a wavering state. What then does he advise in order that none may be captivated by these things? Flee youthful imaginations, but

Follow righteousness, faith, charity, peace, with them that call on the Lord out of a pure heart.

He calls virtue in general, righteousness: godliness of life, faith, meekness, charity.

What is meant by those that call upon the Lord out of a pure heart? It is as if he said, Rejoice not in those who only call upon the Lord; but those who call upon Him sincerely and unfeignedly, who have nothing of deceit about them, who approach Him in peace, who are not contentious. With these associate yourself. But with others be not easy, but only as far as lies in you, be peaceable.

Ver. 23. But foolish and unlearned questions avoid, knowing that they do gender strifes.

Do you see how he everywhere draws him off from questions; not that he was not able to overthrow them; for he was well able. For had he not been able he would have said, Be diligent, that you may be able to refute them; as when he says, Give attendance to reading, for by so doing you shall both save yourself and them that hear you. 1 Timothy 4:13-16 But he knew that it was useless to enter at all into these disputes, that there will be no end of it, save contentions, enmities, insults, and reproaches. These questions therefore avoid; so that there are other questions, some relating to the Scriptures, some to other things.

Ver. 24. And the servant of the Lord must not strive.

Not even in questions ought he to strive, for the servant of the Lord must keep far from strife, since God is the God of peace, and what should the servant of the God of peace have to do with strife?

But be gentle unto all men.

How is it then he says, Rebuke with all authority Titus 2:15; and again, Let no man despise your youth 1 Timothy 4:12: and again, Rebuke them sharply? Titus 1:13 Because this is consistent with meekness. For a strong rebuke, if it be given with gentleness, is most likely to wound deeply: for it is possible, indeed it is, to touch more effectually by gentleness, than one overawes by boldness.

Apt to teach; that is, those who are willing to be taught. For a man that is an heretic, he says, after the first and second admonition reject. Titus 3:10 Patient. He has well added this, for it is a quality which a teacher above all things ought to possess. All things are vain without it. And if fishermen do not despair, though often they cast their nets for a whole day without catching anything, much more should not we. For see what is the result. From constant teaching, it often happens that the plow of the word, descending to the depth of the soul, roots out the evil passion that troubled it. For he that hears often will at length be affected. A man cannot go on hearing continually without some effect being produced. Sometimes therefore, when he was on the point of being persuaded, he is lost by our becoming weary. For the same thing occurs, as if an unskillful husbandman should in the first year dig about the vine he had planted, and seeking to reap some fruit in the second year, and again in the third, and gathering nothing, should after three years despair, and in the fourth year, when he was about to receive the recompense of his labors, abandon his vine. And having said, Patient, he is not satisfied, but goes on to say,

Ver. 25. In meekness instructing those that oppose themselves.

For he that teaches must be especially careful to do it with meekness. For a soul that wishes to learn cannot gain any useful instruction from harshness and contention. For when it would apply, being thus thrown into perplexity, it will learn nothing. He who would gain any useful knowledge ought above all things to be well disposed towards his teacher, and if this be not previously attained, nothing that is requisite or useful can be accomplished. And no one can be well disposed towards him who is violent and overbearing. How is it then that he says, A man that is an heretic, after the first and second admonition, reject? He speaks there of one incorrigible, of one whom he knows to be diseased beyond the possibility of cure.

If God perhaps will give them repentance to the acknowledging of the truth.

Ver. 26. And that they may recover themselves out of the snare of the devil.

What he says amounts to this. Perhaps there will be a reformation. Perhaps! For it is uncertain. So that we ought to withdraw only from those, of whom we can show plainly, and concerning whom we are fully persuaded, that whatever be done, they will not be reformed. In meekness, he says. In this temper, you see, we ought to address ourselves to those who are willing to learn, and never cease from conversing with them till we have come to the demonstration.

Who are taken captive by him at his will. It is truly said, Who are taken captive, for meanwhile they float in error. Observe here how he teaches to be humble-minded. He has not said, if perhaps you should be able, but, if perhaps God should grant them a recovery; if anything be done, therefore, all is of the Lord. Thou plantest, you water but He sows and makes it produce fruit. Let us not therefore be so affected, as if we ourselves wrought the persuasion, even if we should persuade any one. Taken captive by him, he says, to His will. This no one will say relates to doctrine, but to life. For His will is that we live rightly. But some are in the snare of the devil by reason of their life, we ought not therefore to be weary even with respect to these.

If perhaps, he says, they may recover, that are taken captive, unto His will. Now If perhaps, implies much longsuffering. For not to do the will of God is a snare of the devil.

For as a sparrow, though it be not wholly enclosed, but only caught by the foot, is still under the power of him who set the snare; so though we be not wholly subverted, both in faith and life, but in life only, we are under the power of the devil. For Not every one that says unto me, Lord, Lord, shall enter into the kingdom of heaven; and again, I know you not; depart from me, you that work iniquity. Matthew 7:21-23 You see there is no advantage from our faith, when our Lord knows us not: and to the virgins he says the same, I know you not. Matthew 25:12 What then is the benefit of virginity, or of many labors, when the Lord knows us not? And in many places we find men not blamed for their faith, but punished for their evil life only; as elsewhere, not reprov'd for evil lives, but perishing for their pravity of doctrine. For these things hold together. You see that when we do not the will of God, we are under the snare of the devil. And often not only from a bad life, but from one defect, we enter into Hell, where there are not good qualities to counterbalance it, since the virgins were not accused of fornication or adultery, nor of envy or ill-will, nor of drunkenness, nor of unsound faith, but of a failure of oil, that is, they failed in almsgiving, for that is the oil meant. And those who were pronounced accursed in the words, Depart from me, you cursed, into everlasting fire, were not accused of any such crimes, but because they had not fed Christ.

Moral. Do you see that a failure in almsgiving is enough to cast a man into hell fire? For where will he avail who does not give alms? Do you fast every day? So also did those virgins, but it availed them nothing. Do you pray? What of that? prayer without almsgiving is unfruitful, without that all things are unclean and unprofitable. The better part of virtue is destroyed. He that loves not his brother, it is said, knows not God. 1 John 4:8 And how do you love him, when you do not even impart to him of these poor worthless things?

Tell me, therefore, do you observe chastity? On what account? From fear of punishment? By no means. It is of a natural endowment that you observe it, since if you were chaste from fear of punishment, and did violence to nature in submitting to so severe a rule, much more ought thou to do alms. For to govern the desire of wealth, and of bodily pleasures, is not the same thing. The latter is much more difficult to restrain. And wherefore? Because the pleasure is natural, and the desire of it is innate and of natural growth in the body.

It is not so with riches. Herein we are able to resemble God, in showing mercy and pity. When therefore we have not this quality, we are devoid of all good. He has not said, you shall be like your Father, if you fast, nor if you be virgins, nor if you pray, has He said, you shall be like your Father, for none of these things can be applied to God, nor are they His acts. But what? Be merciful, as your Father in Heaven is merciful. Luke 6:36 This is the work of God. If therefore you have not this, what have you?

He says: I will have mercy, and not sacrifice. Hosea 6:6 God made Heaven, and earth, and sea. Great works these, and worthy of His wisdom! But by none of these has He so powerfully attracted human nature to Himself, as by mercy and the love of mankind. For that indeed is the work of power and wisdom and goodness. But it is far more so that He became a servant. Do we not for this more especially admire Him? Are we not for this still more amazed at Him? Nothing attracts God to us so much as mercy.

And the prophets from beginning to end discourse upon this subject. But I speak not of mercy that is accompanied with covetousness. That is not mercy. For it is not the root of the thorn but of the olive that produces the oil ; so it is not the root of covetousness, of iniquity, or of rapine, that produces mercy. Do not put a slander on almsgiving. Do not cause it to be evil spoken of by all. If you commit robbery for this, that you may give alms, nothing is more wicked than your almsgiving.

For when it is produced by rapine, it is not almsgiving, it is inhumanity, it is cruelty, it is an insult to God. If Cain so offended, by offering inferior gifts of his own, shall he not offend, who offers the goods of another? An offering is nothing else but a sacrifice, a purification, not a pollution. And thou who darest not to pray with unclean hands, do you offer the dirt and filth of robbery, and think you do nothing wrong? Thou sufferest not your hands to be full of dirt and filth, but having first cleansed these, you offer.

Yet that filth is no charge against you, while the other deserves reproach and blame. Let it not therefore be our consideration, how we may offer prayers and oblations with clean hands, but how the things offered may be pure. If one, after having washed a vessel clean, should fill it with unclean gifts, would it not be ridiculous mockery? Let the hands be clean; and they will be so, if we wash them not with water only, but first with righteousness. This is the purifier of the hands.

But if they be full of unrighteousness, though they be washed a thousand times, it avails nothing. Wash you, make you clean Isaiah 1:16, He says, but does He add, Go to the baths, the lakes, the rivers? No; but what? Put away the evil of your doings from your souls. This is to be clean. This it is to be cleansed from defilement. This is real purity. The other is of little use; but this bestows upon us confidence towards God. The one may be obtained by adulterers, thieves, murderers, by worthless, and dissolute, and effeminate persons, and especially the latter.

For they are ever careful of the cleanliness of their bodies, and scented with perfumes, cleansing their sepulcher. For their body is but a sepulcher, since the soul is dead within it. This cleanness therefore may be theirs, but not that which is inward.

To wash the body is no great matter. That is a Jewish purification, senseless and unprofitable, where purity within is wanting. Suppose one to labor under a putrefying sore, or consuming ulcer; let him wash his body ever so much, it is of no advantage. And if the putrefaction of the body receives no benefit from cleansing and disguising the outward appearance; when the soul is infected with rottenness, what is gained by the purity of the body? Nothing! Our prayers ought to be pure, and pure they cannot be, if they are sent forth from a corrupt soul, and nothing so corrupts the soul as avarice and rapine. But there are some who after committing numberless sins during the day, wash themselves in the evening and enter the

churches, holding up their hands with much confidence, as if by the washing of the bath they had put off all their guilt. And if this were the case, it would be a vast advantage to use the bath daily! I would not myself cease to frequent the baths, if it made us pure, and cleansed us from our sins! But these things are trifling and ridiculous, the toys of children. It is not the filth of the body, but the impurity of the soul, to which God is averse. For He says, Blessed are the pure -- does He say in body? No -- in heart: for they shall see God. Matthew 5:8 And what says the Prophet: Create in me a clean heart, O God. Psalm 51:10 And again, Wash my heart from wickedness. Jeremiah 4:14

It is of great use to be in the habit of doing good actions. See how trifling and unprofitable these washings are. But when the soul is prepossessed by a habit, it does not depart from it, nor does it venture to draw near in prayer, till it has fulfilled these ceremonies. For instance, we have brought ourselves to a habit of washing and praying, and without washing we do not think it right to pray. And we do not willingly pray with unwashed hands, as if we should offend God, and violate our conscience. Now if this trifling custom has so great power over us, and is observed every day; if we had brought ourselves to a habit of almsgiving, and had determined so constantly to observe it, as never to enter a house of prayer with empty hands, the point would be gained. For great is the power of habit both in good things and in evil, and when this carries us on, there will be little trouble. Many are in the habit of crossing themselves continually, and they need no one to remind them of it, but often when the mind is wandering after other things, the hand is involuntarily drawn by custom, as by some living teacher, to make the sign. Some have brought themselves into a habit of not swearing at all, and therefore neither willingly nor unwillingly do they ever do it. Let us then bring ourselves into such a habit of almsgiving.

What labors were it worth to us to discover such a remedy. For say, were there not the relief of almsgiving, while we still by our numberless sins rendered ourselves liable to Divine vengeance, should we not have lamented sadly? Should we not have said, O that it were possible by our wealth to wash away our sins, and we would have parted with it all! O that by our riches we could put away the wrath of God, then we would not spare our substance? For if we do this in sickness, and at the point of death we say, If it were possible to buy off death, such an one would give all his possessions; much more in this matter. For see how great is the love of God for man. He has granted us power to buy off not temporal but eternal death. Do not purchase, He says, this short life, but that life that is everlasting. It is that I sell you, not the other: I do not mock you. Did you gain the present life, you had gained nothing. I know the worth of that which I offer you. The bargainers and traffickers in worldly goods do not act thus. They, when they can impose on whom they will, give a little to receive a great deal. It is not so with God. He gives the greater by far for the less.

Tell me, if you were to go to a merchant, and he were to set before you two stones, one of little worth, and the other very precious, and sure to fetch a large amount of wealth; if he allowed you for the price of the cheap one to carry off the more costly, should you complain of him? No! You would rather admire his liberality. So now, two lives are set before us, the one temporal, the other eternal. These God offers us for sale, but He would sell us the latter rather than the former. Why do we complain, like silly children, that we receive the more precious? Is it possible then to purchase life for money? Yes, when what we bestow is our own, and not the property of another; when we do not practice an imposture. But, you say, henceforth the goods are mine. They are not yours after rapine. They are still your neighbor's, though thou were a thousand times the master of them. For if you should receive a deposit, it would not be your own even for the short season that the depositor was traveling, though it might be laid up with you. If therefore that is not ours, which we received with the consent and thanks of those who deposited it, even for the short

period that we retain it, much less is that ours, which we plundered against the will of its owner. He is the master of it, however long you may withhold it. But Virtue is really our own; as for money, even our own is not strictly ours, much less that of others. Today it is ours, tomorrow it belongs to another. What is of virtue is our own possession. This does not suffer loss, like other things, but is entirely possessed by all who have it. This therefore let us acquire, and let us despise riches, that we may be able to attain those real goods, of which God grant that we may be thought worthy to partake, through the grace and lovingkindness, etc.

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