

Hebrews 6:13-20

by St. John Chrysostom

God's promise to Abraham is a reminder that He is faithful and will keep His promises, and we should have hope and faith in Him.

Scripture: Matthew 5:42, Luke 6:36, Hebrews 6:17-19, Hebrews 13:2

Topics: "Mercy And Compassion", "Christian Hospitality"

Description

John Chrysostom preaches about the importance of compassion and mercy towards the poor and those in need, emphasizing the need to help without judgment or hesitation. He highlights the significance of offering sacrifices of righteousness, praise, and a broken spirit to God, rather than material offerings. Chrysostom encourages believers to imitate the example of Abraham's hospitality towards strangers, reminding them that God rewards acts of kindness and generosity. He urges the congregation to be merciful as their heavenly Father is, feeding and clothing all in need, without discrimination or suspicion.

Transcript

For when God made promise to Abraham, because He could swear by no greater, He swore by Himself, saying, Surely blessing I will bless you, and multiplying I will multiply you. And so after he had patiently endured, he obtained the promise. For men verily swear by the greater, and an oath for confirmation is to them an end of all strife.

1. Having boldly reflected on the faults of the Hebrews, and sufficiently alarmed them, he consoles them, first, by praises, and secondly (which also is the stronger ground), by the [thought] that they would certainly attain the object of their hope. Moreover he draws his consolation, not from things future, but again from the past, which indeed would the rather persuade them. For as in the case of punishment, he alarms them rather by those [viz. things future], so also in the case of the prizes [set before them], he encourages them by these [viz. by things past], showing [herein] God's way of dealing. And that is, not to bring in what has been promised immediately, but after a long time. And this He does, both to present the greatest proof of His power, and also to lead us to Faith, that they who are living in tribulation without having received the promises, or the rewards, may not faint under their troubles.

And omitting all [the rest], though he had many whom he might have mentioned, he brought forward Abraham both on account of the dignity of his person, and because this had occurred in a special way in his case.

And yet at the end of the Epistle he says, that all these, having seen the promises afar off, and having embraced them, received them not, that they without us should not be made perfect. Hebrews 11:13 For when God made promise to Abraham (he says) because He could swear by no greater, He swore by Himself, saying, Surely blessing I will bless you, and multiplying I will multiply you. And so after he had patiently endured, he obtained the promise. c. xi. 39, 40 How then does he say at the end [of the Epistle] that he received not the promises, and here, that after he had patiently endured he obtained the promise? How did he not receive? How did he obtain? He is not speaking of the same things in this place and in the other, but makes the consolation twofold. God made promises to Abraham, and after a long space of time He gave the things [spoken of] in this place, but those others not yet.

And so after he had patiently endured, he obtained the promise. Do you see that the promise alone did not effect the whole, but the patient waiting as well? Here he alarms them, showing that oftentimes a promise is thwarted through faintheartedness. And this he had indeed shown through [the instance of] the [Jewish] people: for since they were faint-hearted, therefore they obtained not the promise. But now he shows the contrary by means of Abraham. Afterwards near the end [of the Epistle] he proves something more also: [viz.] that even though they had patiently endured, they did not obtain; and yet not even so are they grieved.

2. For men verily swear by the greater, and an Oath for confirmation is to them an end of all strife. But God because He could swear by no greater, swore by Himself. Well, who then is He that swore unto Abraham? Is it not the Son? No, one says. Certainly indeed it was He: however, I shall not dispute [thereon]. So when He [the Son] swears the same oath, Verily, verily, I say unto you, is it not plain that it was because He could not swear by any greater? For as the Father swore, so also the Son swears by Himself, saying, Verily, verily, I say unto you. He here reminds them also of the oaths of Christ, which He was constantly uttering. Verily, verily, I say unto you, he that believes in Me shall never die. John 11:26

What is, And an oath for confirmation is to them an end of all strife? It is instead of, by this every doubtful question is solved: not this, or this, but every one.

Hebrews 6:17

God, however, ought to have been believed even without an oath: Hebrews 6:17 wherein (he says) God willing more abundantly to show unto the heirs of promise the immutability of His counsel, confirmed it [lit. mediated] by an oath. In these words he comprehends also the believers, and therefore mentions this promise which was made to us in common [with them]. He mediated (he says) by an oath. Here again he says that the Son was mediator between men and God.

Hebrews 6:18

That by two immutable things, in which it was impossible that God should lie. What are these two? The speaking and promising; and the adding an oath to the promise. For since among men that which is [confirmed] by an oath is thought more worthy of credit, on this account He added that also.

Do you see that He regards not His own dignity, but how He may persuade men, and endures to have unworthy things said concerning Himself. That is He wishes to impart full assurance. And in the case of Abraham indeed [the Apostle] shows that the whole was of God, not of his patient endurance, since He was even willing to add an oath, for He by whom men swear, by Him also God swore, that is by Himself. They indeed as by one greater, but He not as by one greater. And yet He did it. For it is not the same thing

for man to swear by himself, as for God. For man has no power over himself. You see then that this is said not more for Abraham than for ourselves: that we (he says) might have strong consolation, who have fled for refuge to lay hold on the hope set before us. Here too again, after he had patiently endured he obtained the promise.

Now he means, and he did not say when He swore. But what the oath is, he showed, by speaking of swearing by a greater. But since the race of men is hard of belief, He condescends to the same [things] with ourselves. As then for our sake He swears, although it be unworthy of Him that He should not be believed, so also did [the Apostle] make that other statement: He learned from the things which He suffered Hebrews 5:8, because men think the going through experience more worthy of reliance.

What is the hope set before us? From these [past events] (he says) we conjecture the future. For if these came to pass after so long a time, so certainly the others will. So that the things which happened in regard to Abraham give us confidence also concerning the things to come.

Hebrews 6:19-20

3. Which [hope] we have as an anchor of the soul both sure and steadfast, and which enters into that within the veil: whither the forerunner is for us entered, even Jesus, made High Priest forever after the order of Melchisedec. He shows, that while we are still in the world, and not yet departed from [this] life, we are already among the promises. For through hope we are already in heaven. He said, Wait; for it shall surely be. Afterwards giving them full assurance, he says, nay rather by hope. And he said not, We are within, but 'It has entered within,' which was more true and more persuasive. For as the anchor, dropped from the vessel, does not allow it to be carried about, even if ten thousand winds agitate it, but being depended upon makes it steady, so also does hope.

And see how very suitable an image he has discovered: For he said not, Foundation; which was not suitable; but, Anchor. For that which is on the tossing sea, and seems not to be very firmly fixed, stands on the water as upon land, and is shaken and yet is not shaken. For in regard to those who are very firm, and philosophic, Christ with good reason made that statement, saying, Whosoever has built his house on a rock. Matthew 7:24 But in respect of those who are giving way, and who ought to be carried through by hope, Paul has suitably set down this. For the surge and the great storm toss the boat; but hope suffers it not to be carried hither and there, although winds innumerable agitate it: so that, unless we had this [hope] we should long ago have been sunk. Nor is it only in things spiritual, but also in the affairs of this life, that one may find the power of hope great. Whatever it may be, in merchandise, in husbandry, in a military expedition, unless one sets this before him, he would not even touch the work. But he said not simply Anchor, but sure and steadfast [i.e.] not shaken. Which enters into that within the veil; instead of 'which reaches through even to heaven.'

4. Then after this he led on to Faith also, that there might not only be hope, but a very true [hope]. For after the oath he lays down another thing too, even proof by facts, because the forerunner is for us entered in, even Jesus. But a forerunner is a forerunner of some one, as John was of Christ.

Now he did not simply say, He is entered in, but where He is entered in a forerunner for us, as though we also ought to attain. For there is no great interval between the forerunner and those who follow: otherwise he would not be a forerunner; for the forerunner and those who follow ought to be in the same road, and to arrive after [each other].

Being made an High Priest forever after the order, he says, of Melchisedec. Here is also another consolation, if our High Priest is on high, and far better than those among the Jews, not in the kind [of Priesthood] only, but also in the place, and the tabernacle, and the covenant, and the person. And this also is spoken according to the flesh.

5. Those then, whose High Priest He is, ought to be greatly superior. And as great as the difference is between Aaron and Christ, so great should it be between us and the Jews. For see, we have our victim on high, our priest on high, our sacrifice on high: let us bring such sacrifices as can be offered on that altar, no longer sheep and oxen, no longer blood and fat. All these things have been done away; and there has been brought in their stead the reasonable service. Romans 12:1 But what is the reasonable service? The [offerings made] through the soul; those made through the spirit. (God, it is said, is a Spirit, and they that worship Him must worship Him in spirit and in truth John 4:24); things which have no need of a body, no need of instruments, nor of special places, whereof each one is himself the Priest, such as, moderation, temperance, mercifulness, enduring ill-treatment, long-suffering, humbleness of mind.

These sacrifices one may see in the Old [Testament] also, shadowed out beforehand. Offer to God, it is said, a sacrifice of righteousness Psalm 4:5; Offer a sacrifice of praise Psalm 50:14; and, a sacrifice of praise shall glorify Me Psalm 50:23, and, the sacrifice of God is a broken spirit Psalm 51:17; and what does the Lord require of you but to hearken to Him? Micah 6:8 Burnt-offerings and sacrifices for sin You have had no pleasure in: then I said, Lo I come to do Your will, O God! Psalm 40:6-7, and again, To what purpose do ye bring the incense from Sheba? Jeremiah 6:20 Take away from Me the noise of your songs, for I will not hear the melody of your viols. Amos 5:23 But instead of these I will have mercy and not sacrifice. Hosea 6:6 You see with what kind of sacrifices God is well pleased. Hebrews 13:16 You see also that already from the first the one class have given place, and these have come in their stead.

These therefore let us bring, for the other indeed are [the offerings] of wealth and of persons who have [possessions], but these of virtue: those from without, these from within: those any chance person even might perform; these only a few. And as much as a man is superior to a sheep, so much is this sacrifice superior to that; for here you offer your soul as a victim.

6. And other sacrifices also there are, which are indeed whole burnt-offerings, the bodies of the martyrs: there both soul and body [are offered]. These have a great savor of a sweet smell. Thou also art able, if you will, to bring such a sacrifice.

For what, if you dost not burn your body in the fire? Yet in a different fire you can, for instance, in that of voluntary poverty, in that of affliction. For to have it in one's power to spend one's days in luxury and expense, and yet to take up a life of toil and bitterness, and to mortify the body, is not this a whole burnt-offering? Mortify your body, and crucify it, and you shall yourself also receive the crown of this martyrdom. For what in the other case the sword accomplishes, that in this case let a willing mind effect. Let not the love of wealth burn, or possess you, but let this unreasonable appetite itself be consumed and quenched by the fire of the Spirit; let it be cut in pieces by the sword of the Spirit.

This is an excellent sacrifice, needing no priest but him who brings it. This is an excellent sacrifice, performed indeed below but immediately taken up on high. Do we not wonder that of old time fire came down and consumed all? It is possible now also that fire may come down far more wonderful than that, and consume all the presented offerings: nay rather, not consume, but bear them up to heaven. For it does not reduce them to ashes, but offers them as gifts to God.

7. Such were the offerings of Cornelius. For (it is said) your prayers and your alms have come up for a memorial before God. Acts 10:4 You see a most excellent union. Then are we heard, when we ourselves also hear the poor who come to us. He (it is said) that stops his ears that he may not hear the poor Proverbs 21:13, his prayer God will not hearken to. Blessed is he that considers the poor and needy: the Lord will deliver him in the evil day. Psalm 40:1 But what day is evil except that one which is evil to sinners?

What is meant by he that considers? He that understands what it is to be a poor man, that has thoroughly learned his affliction. For he that has learned his affliction, will certainly and immediately have compassion on him. When you see a poor man, do not hurry by, but immediately reflect what you would have been, had you been he. What would you not have wished that all should do for you? He that considers (he says). Reflect that he is a free-man like yourself, and shares the same noble birth with you, and possesses all things in common with you; and yet oftentimes he is not on a level even with your dogs. On the contrary, while they are satiated, he oftentimes lies, sleeps, hungry, and the free-man has become less honorable than your slaves.

But they perform needful services for you. What are these? Do they serve you well? Suppose then I show that this [poor man] too performs needful services for you far greater than they do. For he will stand by you in the Day of judgment, and will deliver you from the fire. What do all your slaves do like this? When Tabitha died, who raised her up? The slaves who stood around or the poor? But you are not even willing to put the free-man on an equality with your slaves. The frost is hard, and the poor man is cast out in rags, nearly dead, with his teeth chattering, both by his looks and his air fitted to move you: and thou passes by, warm and full of drink; and how do you expect that God should deliver you when in misfortune?

And oftentimes you say this too: 'If it had been myself, and I had found one that had done many wrong things, I would have forgiven him; and does not God forgive?' Say not this. Him that has done you no wrong, whom you are able to deliver, him you neglect. How shall He forgive you, who art sinning against Him? Is not this deserving of hell?

And how amazing! Oftentimes you adorn with vestments innumerable, of varied colors and wrought with gold, a dead body, insensible, no longer perceiving the honor; while that which is in pain, and lamenting, and tormented, and racked by hunger and frost, you neglect, and givest more to vainglory, than to the fear of God.

8. And would that it stopped here; but immediately accusations are brought against the applicant. For why does he not work (you say)? And why is he to be maintained in idleness? But (tell me) is it by working that you have what you have, did you not receive it as an inheritance from your fathers? And even if you dost work, is this a reason why you should reproach another? Do you not hear what Paul says? For after saying, He that works not, neither let him eat 2 Thessalonians 3:10, he says, But ye be not weary in well doing. 2 Thessalonians 3:13

But what say they? He is an impostor. What do you say, O man? Callest thou him an impostor, for the sake of a single loaf or of a garment? But (you say) he will sell it immediately. And do you manage all your affairs well? But what? Are all poor through idleness? Is no one so from shipwreck? None from lawsuits? None from being robbed? None from dangers? None from illness? None from any other difficulties? If however we hear any one bewailing such evils, and crying out aloud, and looking up naked toward heaven, and with long hair, and clad in rags, at once we call him, The impostor! The deceiver! The

swindler! Are you not ashamed? Whom do you call impostor? Give nothing, and do not accuse the man.

But (you say) he has means, and pretends. This is a charge against yourself, not against him. He knows that he has to deal with the cruel, with wild beasts rather than with men, and that, even if he utter a pitiable story, he attracts no one's attention: and on this account he is forced to assume also a more miserable guise, that he may melt your soul. If we see a person coming to beg in a respectable dress, This is an impostor (you say), and he comes in this way that he may be supposed to be of good birth. If we see one in the contrary guise, him too we reproach. What then are they to do? O the cruelty, O the inhumanity!

And why (you say) do they expose their maimed limbs? Because of you. If we were compassionate, they would have no need of these artifices: if they persuaded us at the first application, they would not have contrived these devices. Who is there so wretched, as to be willing to cry out so much, as to be willing to behave in an unseemly way, as to be willing to make public lamentations, with his wife destitute of clothing, with his children, to sprinkle ashes on [himself]. How much worse than poverty are these things? Yet on account of them not only are they not pitied, but are even accused by us.

9. Shall we then still be indignant, because when we pray to God, we are not heard? Shall we then still be vexed, because when we entreat we do not persuade? Do we not tremble for fear, my beloved?

But (you say) I have often given. But do you not always eat? And do you drive away your children often begging of you? O the shamelessness! Do you call a poor man shameless? And thou indeed art not shameless when plundering, but he is shameless when begging for bread! Considerest thou not how great are the necessities of the belly? Do you not do all things for this? Do you not for this neglect things spiritual? Is not heaven set before you and the kingdom of heaven? And thou fearing the tyranny of that [appetite] endurest all things, and thinkest lightly of that [kingdom]. This is shamelessness.

Do you see not old men maimed? But O what trifling! 'Such an one' (you say) 'lends out so many pieces of gold, and such an one so many, and yet begs.' You repeat the stories and trifles of children; for they too are always hearing such stories from their nurses. I am not persuaded of it. I do not believe this. Far from it. Does a man lend money, and beg when he has abundance? For what purpose, tell me? And what is more disgraceful than begging? It were better to die than to beg. Where does our inhumanity stop? What then? Do all lend money? Are all impostors? Is there no one really poor? Yea (you say) and many. Why then do you not assist those persons, seeing you are a strict enquirer into their lives? This is an excuse and a pretense.

Give to every one that asks of you, and from him that would borrow of you turn not thou away. Matthew 5:42 Stretch out your hand, let it not be closed up. We have not been constituted examiners into men's lives, since so we should have compassion on no one. When you call upon God why do you say, Remember not my sins? So then, if that person even be a great sinner, make this allowance in his case also, and do not remember his sins. It is the season of kindness, not of strict enquiry; of mercy, not of account. He wishes to be maintained: if you are willing, give; but if not willing, send him away without raising doubts. Why are you wretched and miserable? Why do you not even yourself pity him, and also turnest away those who would? For when such an one hears from you, This [fellow] is a cheat; that a hypocrite; and the other lends out money; he neither gives to the one nor to the other; for he suspects all to be such. For you know that we easily suspect evil, but good, not [so easily].

10. Let us be merciful, not simply so, but as our heavenly Father is. Luke 6:36 He feeds even adulterers, and fornicators, and sorcerers, and what shall I say? Those having every kind of wickedness. For in so

large a world there must needs be many such. But nevertheless He feeds all; He clothes all. No one ever perished of hunger, unless one did so of his own choice. So let us be merciful. If one be in want and in necessity, help him.

But now we have come to such a degree of unreasonableness, as to act thus not only in regard to the poor who walk up and down the alleys, but even in the case of men that live in [religious] solitude. Such an one is an impostor, you say. Did I not say this at first, that if we give to all indiscriminately, we shall always be compassionate; but if we begin to make over-curious enquiries, we shall never be compassionate? What do you mean? Is a man an impostor in order to get a loaf? If indeed he asks for talents of gold and silver, or costly clothes, or slaves, or anything else of this sort, one might with good reason call him a swindler. But if he ask none of these things, but only food and shelter, things which are suited to a philosophic life, tell me, is this the part of a swindler? Cease we from this unseasonable fondness for meddling, which is Satanic, which is destructive.

For indeed, if a man say that he is on the list of the Clergy, or calls himself a priest, then busy yourself [to enquire], make much ado: since in that case the communicating without enquiry is not without danger. For the danger is about matters of importance, for thou dost not give but receive. But if he want food, make no enquiry.

Enquire, if you will, how Abraham showed hospitality towards all who came to him. If he had been over-curious about those who fled to him for refuge, he would not have entertained angels. Hebrews 13:2 For perhaps not thinking them to be angels, he would have thrust them too away with the rest. But since he used to receive all, he received even angels.

What? Is it from the life of those that receive [your bounty] that God grants you your reward? Nay [it is] from your own purpose, from your abundant liberality; from your loving-kindness; from your goodness. Let this be [found], and you shall attain all good things, which may we all attain, through the grace and lovingkindness of our Lord Jesus Christ, with whom to the Father and together with the Holy Ghost, be glory, power, honor, now and for ever and world without end. Amen.

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