

Homily 11 on Ephesians

by St. John Chrysostom

The sermon emphasizes the importance of unity, humility, and love in building up the church, and warns against the dangers of division and pride.

Scripture: Ephesians 4:4-15

Topics: "Church Unity", "Spiritual Gifts"

Description

John Chrysostom preaches on the importance of unity in the body of Christ, emphasizing the one faith, one baptism, and one God that unites believers. He highlights the need for love that cements believers together, producing glorious fruits and a perfect union. Chrysostom urges believers to use their diverse spiritual gifts for the work of the church, encouraging humility and diligence in serving one another. He warns against division in the Church, equating it to a grave sin that provokes God's anger and brings disgrace before enemies.

Transcript

Ephesians 4:4-7

There is one body, and one Spirit, even as also you were called in one hope of your calling; one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is over all, and through all, and in all. But unto each one of us was the grace given according to the measure of the gift of Christ.

The love Paul requires of us is no common love, but that which cements us together, and makes us cleave inseparably to one another, and effects as great and as perfect a union as though it were between limb and limb. For this is that love which produces great and glorious fruits. Hence he says, there is one body; one, both by sympathy, and by not opposing the good of others, and by sharing their joy, having expressed all at once by this figure. He then beautifully adds, and one Spirit, showing that from the one body there will be one Spirit: or, that it is possible that there may be indeed one body, and yet not one Spirit; as, for instance, if any member of it should be a friend of heretics: or else he is, by this expression, shaming them into unanimity, saying, as it were, You who have received one Spirit, and have been made to drink at one fountain, ought not to be divided in mind; or else by spirit here he means their zeal. Then he adds, Even as you were called in one hope of your calling, that is, God has called you all on the same terms. He has bestowed nothing upon one more than upon another. To all He has freely given immortality, to all eternal life, to all immortal glory, to all brotherhood, to all inheritance. He is the common Head of all; He has raised all up, and made them sit with Him. Ephesians 2:6 You then who in the spiritual world have

so great equality of privileges, whence is it that you are high-minded? Is it that one is wealthy and another strong? How ridiculous must this be? For tell me, if the emperor some day were to take ten persons, and to array them all in purple, and seat them on the royal throne, and to bestow upon all the same honor, would any one of these, think ye, venture to reproach another, as being more wealthy or more illustrious than he? Surely never. And I have not yet said all; for the difference is not so great in heaven as here below we differ. There is one Lord, one faith, one baptism. Behold the hope of your calling. One God and Father of all, who is over all, and through all, and in all. For can it be, that you are called by the name of a greater God, another, of a lesser God? That you are saved by faith, and another by works? That you have received remission in baptism, while another has not? There is one God and Father of all, who is over all, and through all, and in all. Who is over all, that is, the Lord and above all; and through all, that is, providing for, ordering all; and in you all, that is, who dwells in you all. Now this they own to be an attribute of the Son; so that were it an argument of inferiority, it never would have been said of the Father.

But unto each one of us was the grace given.

What then? He says, whence are those diverse spiritual gifts? For this subject was continually carrying away both the Ephesians themselves, and the Corinthians, and many others, some into vain arrogance, and others into despondency or envy. Hence he everywhere takes along with him this illustration of the body. Hence it is that now also he has proposed it, inasmuch as he was about to make mention of diverse gifts. He enters indeed into the subject more fully in the Epistle to the Corinthians, because it was among them that this malady most especially reigned: here however he has only alluded to it. And mark what he says: he does not say, according to the faith of each, lest he should throw those who have no large attainments into despondency. But what says he? According to the measure of the gift of Christ. The chief and principal points of all, he says -- Baptism, the being saved by faith, the having God for our Father, our all partaking of the same Spirit, -- these are common to all. If then this or that man possesses any superiority in any spiritual gift, grieve not at it; since his labor also is greater. He that had received the five talents, had five required of him; while he that had received the two, brought only two, and yet received no less a reward than the other. And therefore the Apostle here also encourages the hearer on the same ground, showing that gifts are bestowed not for the honor of one above another, but for the work of the church, even as he says further on:

For the perfecting of the saints unto the work of ministering unto the building up of the body of Christ.

Hence it is that even he himself says, Woe is unto me, if I preach not the Gospel. 1 Corinthians 9:16 For example: he received the grace of Apostleship, but for this very reason, woe unto him, because he received it: whereas you are free from the danger.

According to the measure.

What is meant by, according to the measure? It means, not according to our merit, for then would no one have received what he has received: but of the free gift we have all received. And why then one more, and another less? There is nothing to cause this, he would say, but the matter itself is indifferent; for every one contributes towards the building. And by this too he shows, that it is not of his own intrinsic merit that one has received more and another less, but that it is for the sake of others, as God Himself has measured it; since he says also elsewhere, But now has God set the members each one of them in the body, even as it pleased Him. 1 Corinthians 12:18 And he mentions not the reason, lest he should deject or dispirit the hearers.

Ver. 8. Wherefore he says, When He ascended on high, He led captivity captive, and gave gifts unto men.

As though he had said, Why are you high-minded? The whole is of God. The Prophet says in the Psalm, You have received gifts among men Psalm 68:18., whereas the Apostle says, He gave gifts unto men. The one is the same as the other.

Ver. 9, 10. Now this, He ascended, what is it, but that He also descended into the lower parts of the earth? He that descended, is the same also that ascended far above all the Heavens, that He might fill all things.

When you hear these words, think not of a mere removal from one place to another; for what Paul establishes in the Epistle to the Philippians Philippians 2:5-8, that very argument is he also insisting upon here. In the same way as there, when exhorting them concerning lowliness, he brings forward Christ as an example, so does he here also, saying, He descended into the lower parts of the earth. For were not this so, this expression which he uses, He became obedient even unto death Philippians 2:8-9, were superfluous; whereas from His ascending, he implies His descent, and by the lower parts of the earth, he means death, according to the notions of men; as Jacob also said, Then shall you bring down my gray hairs with sorrow to the grave. Genesis 32:48 And again as it is in the Psalm, Lest I become like them that go down into the pit Psalm 143:7, that is like the dead. Why does he descant upon this region here? And of what captivity does he speak? Of that of the devil; for He took the tyrant captive, the devil, I mean, and death, and the curse, and sin. Behold His spoils and His trophies.

Now this, He ascended, what is it but that He also descended?

This strikes at Paul of Samosata and his school.

He that descended, is the same also that ascended far above all the Heavens, that He might fill all things.

He descended, says he, into the lower parts of the earth, beyond which there are none other: and He ascended up far above all things, to that place, beyond which there is none other. This is to show His divine energy, and supreme dominion. For indeed even of old had all things been filled.

Ver. 11, 12. And He gave some to be apostles; and some, prophets; and some, evangelists; and some, pastors and teachers; for the perfecting of the saints, unto the work of ministering, unto the building up of the body of Christ.

What he said elsewhere, Wherefore also God has highly exalted Him Philippians 2:9, that says he also here. He that descended, is the same also that ascended. It did Him no injury that He came down into the lower parts of the earth, nor was it any hindrance to His becoming far higher than the Heavens. So that the more a man is humbled, so much the more is he exalted. For as in the case of water, the more a man presses it downwards, the more he forces it up; and the further a man retires to hurl a javelin, the surer his aim; so is it also with humility. However, when we speak of ascents with reference to God, we must needs conceive a descent first; but when with reference to man, not at all so. Then he goes on to show further His providential care, and His wisdom, for He who has wrought such things as these, who had such might, and who refused not to go down even to those lower parts for our sakes, never would He have made these distributions of spiritual gifts without a purpose. Now elsewhere he tells us that this was the work of the Spirit, in the words, In the which the Holy Ghost has made you bishops to feed the Church of God. And here he says that it is the Son; and elsewhere that it is God. And He gave to the Church some apostles, and some prophets. But in the Epistle to the Corinthians, he says, I planted, Apollos watered; but God

gave the increase. And again, Now he that plants and he that waters are one: but each shall receive his own reward according to his own labor. 1 Corinthians 3:6-8 So is it also here; for what if you bring in but little? You have received so much. First, he says, apostles; for these had all gifts; secondarily, prophets, for there were some who were not indeed apostles, but prophets, as Agabus; thirdly, evangelists, who did not go about everywhere, but only preached the Gospel, as Priscilla and Aquila; pastors and teachers, those who were entrusted with the charge of a whole nation. What then? Are the pastors and the teachers inferior? Yes, surely; those who were settled and employed about one spot, as Timothy and Titus, were inferior to those who went about the world and preached the Gospel. However, it is not possible from this passage to frame the subordination and precedence, but from another Epistle. He gave, says he; you must not say a word to gainsay it. Or perhaps by evangelists he means those who wrote the Gospel.

For the perfecting of the saints unto the work of ministering, unto the building up of the body of Christ.

Perceive ye the dignity of the office? Each one edifies, each one perfects, each one ministers.

Ver. 13. Till we all attain, he proceeds, unto the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, unto a full-grown man, unto the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ.

By stature here he means perfect knowledge; for as a man will stand firmly, whereas children are carried about and waver in mind, so is it also with believers.

To the unity, says he, of the faith.

That is, until we shall be shown to have all one faith: for this is unity of faith, when we all are one, when we shall all alike acknowledge the common bond. Till then you must labor to this end. If for this you have received a gift, that you might edify others, look well that thou overturn not yourself, by envying another. God has honored you, and ordained you, that you should build up another. Yea, for about this was the Apostle also engaged; and for this was the prophet prophesying and persuading, and the Evangelist preaching the Gospel, and for this was the pastor and teacher; all had undertaken one common work. For tell me not of the difference of the spiritual gifts; but that all had one work. Now when we shall all believe alike then shall there be unity; for that this is what he calls a perfect man, is plain. And yet he elsewhere calls us babes 1 Corinthians 13:11, even when we are of mature age; but he is there looking to another comparison, for there it is in comparison with our future knowledge that he there calls us babes. For having said, We know in part 1 Corinthians 13:9-12, he adds also the word darkly, and the like: whereas here he speaks with reference to another thing, with reference to changeableness, as he says also elsewhere, But solid food is for full-grown men. Hebrews 5:14 Do you see then also in what sense he there calls them full-grown? Observe also in what sense he calls men perfect here, by the words next added, where he says, that we may be no longer children. That we keep, he means to say, that little measure, which we may have received, with all diligence, with firmness and steadfastness.

Ver. 14. That we may be no longer.-- The word, no longer, shows that they had of old been in this case, and he reckons himself moreover as a subject for correction, and corrects himself. For this cause, he would say, are there so many workmen, that the building may not be shaken, may not be carried about, that the stones may be firmly fixed. For this is the character of children, to be tossed to and fro, to be carried about and shaken. That we may be no longer, says he, children, tossed to and fro, and carried about with every wind of doctrine, by the sleight of men, in craftiness, after the wiles of error. And carried about, says he, with every wind. He comes to this figure of speech, to point out in how great peril doubting souls are. With every wind, says he, by the sleight of men, in craftiness, after the wiles of error. The word

sleight means the art of gamesters. Such are the crafty, whenever they lay hold on the simpler sort. For they also change and shift about everything. He here glances also at human life.

Ver. 15, 16. But speaking truth, says he, in love, may grow up in all things into Him, which is the Head, even Christ, from whom, (that is, from Christ,) all the body fitly framed and knit together, through that which every joint supplies, according to the working in due measure of each several part, makes increase of the body unto the building up of itself in love.

He expresses himself with great obscurity, from his desire to utter everything at once. What he means, however, is this. In the same way as the spirit, or vital principle, which descends from the brain, communicates the sensitive faculty which is conveyed through the nerves, not simply to all the members, but according to the proportion of each member, to that which is capable of receiving more, more, to that which is capable of less, less, (for the spirit is the root or source;) so also is Christ. For the souls of men being dependent upon Him as members, His provident care, and supply of the spiritual gifts according to a due proportion in the measure of every single member, effects their increase. But what is the meaning of this, by the touch of the supply? that is to say, by the sensitive faculty. For that spirit which is supplied to the members from the head, touches, each single member, and thus actuates it. As though one should say, the body receiving the supply according to the proportion of its several members, thus makes the increase; or, in other words, the members receiving the supply according to the proportion of their proper measure, thus make increase; or otherwise again thus, the spirit flowing plenteously from above, and touching all the members, and supplying them as each is capable of receiving it, thus makes increase. But wherefore does he add, in love? Because in no other way is it possible for that Spirit to descend. For as, in case a hand should happen to be torn from the body, the spirit which proceeds from the brain seeks the limb, and if it finds it not, does not leap forth from the body, and fly about and go to the hand, but if it finds it not in its place, does not touch it; so also will it be here, if we be not bound together in love. All these expressions he uses as tending to humility. For what, he seems to say, if this or that man receives more than another? He has received the same Spirit, sent forth from the same Head, effectually working in all alike, communicating itself to all alike.

Fitly framed and knit together.

That is, having great care bestowed upon it; for the body must not be put together anyhow, but with exceeding art and nicety, since if it gets out of place, it is no longer. So that each must not only be united to the body, but also occupy his proper place, since if you shall go beyond this, you are not united to it, neither do you receive the Spirit. Do you not see, that in those dislocations of the bones which take place in any accident, when a bone gets out of its proper place and occupies that of another, how it injures the whole body, and oftentimes will produce death? So that sometimes it will be found to be no longer worth preserving. For many in many cases will cut it off, and leave a void in its place; because everywhere what is in excess is an evil. And so again with the elements, if they lose their proper proportion and be in excess, they impair the whole system. This is the meaning of the being fitly framed and knit together. Consider then of how vast importance it is, that each should remain in his own proper place, and not encroach on another which in nowise appertains to him. You put the members together, He supplies them from above. For as there are in the body such recipient organs, as we have seen, so is it also with the Spirit, the whole root or source being from above. For example, the heart is the recipient of the breath, the liver of the blood, the spleen of the bile, and the other organs, some of one thing, others of another, but all these have their source from the brain. So also has God done, highly honoring man, and being unwilling to be far from him, He has made Himself indeed the source of his dependence, and has constituted them

fellow-workers with Himself; and some He has appointed to one office, and others to another. For example, the Apostle is the most vital vessel of the whole body, receiving everything from Him; so that He makes eternal life to run through them to all, as through veins and arteries, I mean through their discourse. The Prophet foretells things to come, while He alone orders the same; You put the members together, but He supplies them with life, For the perfecting of the saints, for the work of the ministry. Love builds up, and makes men cleave one to another, and be fastened and fitted together.

Moral. If therefore we desire to have the benefit of that Spirit which is from the Head, let us cleave one to another. For there are two kinds of separation from the body of the Church; the one, when we wax cold in love, the other, when we dare commit things unworthy of our belonging to that body; for in either way we cut ourselves off from the fullness of Christ. But if we are appointed to build up others also, what shall not be done to them who are first to make division? Nothing will so avail to divide the Church as love of power. Nothing so provokes God's anger as the division of the Church. Yea, though we have achieved ten thousand glorious acts, yet shall we, if we cut to pieces the fullness of the Church, suffer punishment no less sore than they who mangled His body. For that indeed was brought to pass for the benefit of the world, even though it was done with no such intention; whereas this produces no advantage in any case, but the injury is excessive. These remarks I am addressing not to the governors only, but also to the governed. Now a certain holy man said what might seem to be a bold thing; yet, nevertheless, he spoke it out. What then is this? He said, that not even the blood of martyrdom can wash out this sin. For tell me for what do you suffer as a martyr? Is it not for the glory of Christ? Thou then that yieldest up your life for Christ's sake, how do you lay waste the Church, for whose sake Christ yielded up His life? Hear what Paul says, I am not meet to be called an Apostle 1 Corinthians 15:9, because I persecuted the Church of God and made havoc of it. Galatians 1:13 This injury is not less than that received at the hands of enemies, nay, it is far greater. For that indeed renders her even more glorious, whereas this, when she is warred upon by her own children, disgraces her even before her enemies. Because it seems to them a great mark of hypocrisy, that those who have been born in her, and nurtured in her bosom, and have learned perfectly her secrets, that these should of a sudden change, and do her enemies' work.

I mean these remarks for those who give themselves up indiscriminately to the men who are dividing the Church. For if on the one hand those men have doctrines also contrary to ours, then on that account further it is not right to mix with them: if, on the other hand, they hold the same opinions, the reason for not mixing with them is greater still. And why so? Because then the disease is from lust of authority. Do you not know what was the fate of Korah, Dathan, and Abiram? Numbers 16:1-35 Of them only did I say?

Was it not also of them that were with them? What will you say? Shall it be said, Their faith is the same, they are orthodox as well as we? If so, why then are they not with us? There is one Lord, one faith, one baptism. If their cause is right, then is ours wrong; if ours is right, then is theirs wrong. Children, says he, tossed to and fro, and carried about with every wind. Tell me, do you think this is enough, to say that they are orthodox? Is then the ordination of clergy past and done away?

And what is the advantage of other things, if this be not strictly observed? For as we must needs contend for the faith; so must we for this also. For if it is lawful for any one, according to the phrase of them of old, to fill his hands, and to become a priest, let all approach to minister. In vain has this altar been raised, in vain the fullness of the Church, in vain the number of the priests. Let us take them away and destroy them. God forbid! you will say. You are doing these things, and do ye say, God forbid?

How say ye, God forbid, when the very things are taking place? I speak and testify, not looking to my own interest, but to your salvation. But if any one be indifferent, he must see to it himself: if these things are a care to no one else, yet are they a care to me. I planted, says he, Apollos watered, but God gave the increase. 1 Corinthians 3:6 How shall we bear the ridicule of the Greeks? For if they reproach us on account of our heresies, what will they not say of these things?

If they have the same doctrines, if the same mysteries, wherefore does a ruler in one Church invade another? See ye, say they, how all things among the Christians are full of vainglory? And there is an ambition among them, and hypocrisy. Strip them, say they, of their numbers, and they are nothing. Cut out the disease, the corrupt multitude. Would you have me tell what they say of our city, how they accuse us on the score of our easy compliances? Any one, say they, that chooses may find followers, and would never be at a loss for them.

Oh, what a sneer is that, what a disgrace are these things! And yet the sneer is one thing, the disgrace is another. If any among us are convicted of deeds the most disgraceful, and are about to meet with some penalty, great is the alarm, great is the fear on all sides, lest he should start away, people say, and join the other side. Yea, let such an one start away ten thousand times, and let him join them. And I speak not only of those who have sinned, but if there be any one free from offense, and he has a mind to depart, let him depart.

I am grieved indeed at it, and bewail and lament it, and am cut to the very heart, as though I were being deprived of one of my own limbs; and yet I am not so grieved, as to be compelled to do anything wrong through such fear as this. We have not lordship over your faith 2 Corinthians 1:24, beloved, nor command we these things as your lords and masters. We are appointed for the teaching of the word, not for power, nor for absolute authority. We hold the place of counselors to advise you.

The counselor speaks his own sentiments, not forcing the hearer, but leaving him full master of his choice upon what is said; in this case alone is he blameable, if he fail to utter the things which present themselves. For this cause do we also say these things, these things do we assert, that it may not be in your power in that day to say, No one told us, no one gave us commandment, we were ignorant, we thought it was no sin at all. Therefore I assert and protest, that to make a schism in the Church is no less an evil than to fall into heresy.

Tell me, suppose a subject of some king, though he did not join himself to another king, nor give himself to any other, yet should take and keep hold of his king's royal purple, and should tear it all from its clasp, and rend it into many shreds; would he suffer less punishment than those who join themselves to the service of another? And what, if withal he were to seize the king himself by the throat and slay him, and tear his body limb from limb, what punishment could he undergo, that should be equal to his deserts?

Now if in doing this toward a king, his fellow-servant, he would be committing an act too great for any punishment to reach; of what hell shall not he be worthy who slays Christ, and plucks Him limb from limb? Of that one which is threatened? No, I think not, but of another far more dreadful.

Speak, you women, that are present -- for this generally is a failing of women, -- relate to them that are absent this similitude which I have made; startle them. If any think to grieve me and thus to have their revenge, let them be well aware that they do these things in vain. For if you wish to revenge yourself on me, I will give you a method by which you may take vengeance without injury to yourself; or rather without injury it is not possible to revenge yourself, but at all events with less injury. Buffet me, woman, spit upon

me, when you meet me in the public way, and aim blows at me. Do you shudder at hearing this? When I bid you buffet me, do you shudder, and do you tear your Lord and Master and not shudder? Do you pluck asunder the limbs of your Lord and Master, and not tremble? The Church is our Father's house. There is one body, and one Spirit. But do you wish to revenge yourself on me? Yet stop at me. Why do you revenge yourself on Christ in my stead? Nay, rather, why kick against the nails? In no case indeed is revenge good and right, but to assault one when another has done the wrong is far worse. Is it I that wronged you? Why then inflict pain on Him who has not wronged you? This is the very extreme of madness. I speak not in irony what I am about to say, nor without purpose, but as I really think and as I feel. I would that every one of those who with you are exasperated against me, and who by this exasperation are injuring themselves, and departing elsewhere, would direct his blows at me in my very face, would strip me and scourge me, be his charge against me just or unjust, and let loose his wrath upon me, rather than that they should dare to commit what they now dare. If this were done, it were nothing; nothing, that a man who is a mere nothing and of no account whatever, should be so treated. And besides, I, the wronged and injured person, might call upon God, and He might forgive you your sins. Not because I have so great confidence; but because when he who has been wronged, entreats for him who has done the wrong, he gains great confidence. If one man sin against another, it is said, then shall they pray for him 1 Samuel 2:25; and if I were unable, I might seek for other holy men, and entreat them, and they might do it. But now whom shall we even entreat, when God is outraged by us?

Mark the consistency; for of those who belong to this Church, some never approach to communicate at all, or but once in the year, and then without purpose, and just as it may happen; others more regularly indeed, yet they too carelessly and without purpose, and while engaged in conversation, and trifling about nothing: while those who, forsooth, seem to be in earnest, these are the very persons who work this mischief. Yet surely, if it is for these things you are in earnest, it were better that you also were in the ranks of the indifferent; or rather it were better still, that neither they should be indifferent, nor you such as you are. I speak not of you that are present, but of those who are deserting from us. The act is adultery. And if you bear not to hear these things of them, neither should ye of us. There must be breach of the law either on the one side or the other. If then you have these suspicions concerning me, I am ready to retire from my office, and resign it to whomsoever ye may choose. Only let the Church be one. But if I have been lawfully made and consecrated, entreat those who have contrary to the law mounted the episcopal throne to resign it.

These things I have said, not as dictating to you, but only to secure and protect you. Since every one of you has come to age, and will have to give account of the things which he has done, I entreat you not to cast the whole matter on us, and consider yourselves to be irresponsible, that you may not go on fruitlessly deceiving yourselves, and at last bewail it. An account indeed we shall have to give of your souls; but it will be when we have been wanting on our part, when we fail to exhort, when we fail to admonish, when we fail to protest. But after these words, allow even me to say that I am pure from the blood of all men Acts 20:26; and that God will deliver my soul. Ezekiel 3:19-21 Say what you will, give a just cause why ye depart, and I will answer you. But no, you will not state it. Wherefore I entreat you, endeavor henceforward both to resist nobly and to bring back those who have seceded, that we may with one accord lift up thanksgiving to God; for to Him belongs the glory for ever and ever. Amen.

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