

# Homily 14 on the Acts of the Apostles

by St. John Chrysostom

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*Gamaliel's speech and the Apostles' response to persecution demonstrate the power of mercy, forgiveness, and patience in the face of adversity.*

**Topics:** "Christian Living", "Mercy And Forgiveness"

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## Description

John Chrysostom preaches on the importance of imitating Gamaliel's wisdom and mercy, urging the congregation to show compassion and forgiveness towards enemies, to share their blessings generously, and to refrain from retaliating against those who wrong them. He emphasizes the power of enduring insults and injuries with grace, highlighting that true strength lies in showing mercy and responding to hatred with love. Chrysostom encourages the listeners to focus on cultivating a noble soul, unaffected by external circumstances, and to seek glory in humility and selflessness, following the example of Christ.

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## Transcript

Acts V. 34

Then stood there up one in the council, a Pharisee, named Gamaliel, a doctor of the law, had in reputation among all the people, and commanded the men to be put forth a little space.

This Gamaliel was Paul's teacher. And one may well wonder, how, being so right-minded in his judgment, and withal learned in the law, he did not yet believe. But it cannot be that he should have continued in unbelief to the end. Indeed it appears plainly from the words he here speaks. He commanded, it says, to put the men forth a little space [and said to them.] Observe how judiciously he frames his speech, and how he immediately at the very outset puts them in fear. And that he may not be suspected of taking their part, he addresses them as if he and they were of the same opinion, and does not use much vehemence, but as speaking to men intoxicated through passion, he thus expresses himself: You men of Israel, take heed to yourselves what ye intend to do as touching these men.

Acts 5:35 Do not, he would say, go to work rashly and in a hurry. For before these days rose up Theudas, boasting himself to be somebody: to whom a number of men, about four hundred, joined themselves: who was slain; and all, as many as obeyed him, were scattered, and brought to naught. Acts 5:36 By examples he teaches them prudence; and, by way of encouragement, mentions last the man who seduced the greatest number. Now before he gives the examples, he says, Take heed to yourselves; but when he has cited them, then he declares his opinion, and says, Refrain from these men.

For, says he, there rose up Judas of Galilee in the days of the taxing, and drew away much people after him: he also perished; and all, even as many as obeyed him, were dispersed. And now I say unto you, Refrain from these men, and let them alone: for if this council or this work be of men, it will come to naught. But if it be of God, you cannot overthrow them. (al. it) Acts 5:37-39 Then what is there, he would say, to hinder you to be overthrown? For, says he (take heed), lest haply ye be found even to fight against God.

He would dissuade them both by the consideration that the thing is impossible, and because it is not for their good. And he does not say by whom these people were destroyed, but that there they were scattered, and their confederacy fell away to nothing. For if, says he, it be of man, what needs any ado on your part? But if it be of God, for all your ado you will not be able to overcome it. The argument is unanswerable. And they were persuaded by him. Acts 5:40 How were they persuaded?

So as not to slay them, but merely to scourge. For, it says, And when they had called the Apostles, and beaten them, they commanded that they should not speak in the name of Jesus, and let them go. See after what great works they are scourged! And again their teaching became more extended: for they taught at home and in the temple, And they departed from the presence of the council, rejoicing that they were counted worthy to suffer shame for His name. And daily in the temple, and in every house, they ceased not to teach and preach Jesus Christ. (v. 41, 42.)

And in those days, when the number of the disciples was multiplied, there arose a murmuring of the Hellenists against the Hebrews, because their widows were neglected in the daily ministrations. Acts 6:1 Not absolutely in those immediate days; for it is the custom of Scripture to speak of things next about to happen, as taking place in immediate succession. But by Hellenists I suppose he means those who spoke Greek [against the Hebrews]: for they did not use the Greek language.

Behold another trial! Observe how from within and from without there are warrings, from the very first! Then, it says, the twelve called the multitude of the disciples unto them, and said, It is not reason that we should leave the word of God, and serve tables. Acts 6:2 Well said: for the needful must give precedence to the more needful. But see, how straightway they both take thought for these (inferior matters), and yet do not neglect the preaching. Because their widows were overlooked: for those (the Hebrews) were treated as the persons of greater consequence (α■δεσιμ■τεροι).

Wherefore, brethren, look ye out among you seven men of honest report, full of the Holy Ghost and wisdom, whom we may appoint over this business. But we will give ourselves continually to prayer, and to the ministry of the word. And the saying pleased the whole multitude: and they chose Stephen, a man full of faith and of the Holy Ghost Acts 6:3-5 so were the others also full of faith; not to have the same things happening as in the case of Judas, as in the case of Ananias and Sapphira -- and Philip, and Prochoras, and Nicanor, and Timon, and Parmenas, and Nicolas a proselyte of Antioch: whom they set before the Apostles: and when they had prayed, they laid their hands on them. And the word of God increased; and the number of the disciples multiplied in Jerusalem greatly; and a great company of the priests were obedient to the faith. Acts 6:5-7

But let us look over again what has been spoken. You men of Israel take heed to yourselves. Recapitulation, Acts 5:35 See here, I pray you, how mildly Gamaliel reasons, and how he says but a few words to them, and does not recount ancient histories, although he might have done so, but more recent instances, which are most powerful to produce belief. With this view he throws out a hint himself, saying,

For before these days Acts 5:36: meaning, not many days before. Now had he at once said, Let these men go, both himself would have fallen into suspicion, and his speech would not have been so effective: but after the examples, it acquired its own proper force.

And he mentions not one instance, but a second also: for, says the Scripture, in the mouth of two witnesses Matthew 18:16: and yet he had it in his power to mention even three. Refrain from these men. Acts 5:38 See how mild his manner is, and his speech not long, but concise, and his mention even of those (impostors) how free from passion: And all, as many as obeyed him, were scattered. And for all this he does not blaspheme Christ. They heard him, all these unbelievers, heard him, these Jews. [For if this council or this work be of men, it will come to naught.]

Well then, since it did not come to nought, it is not of men. [But if it be of God, you cannot overthrow it.] Acts 5:39 Once more he checks them by the impossibility and the inexpediency of the thing, saying, Lest haply ye be found even to fight against God. And he does not say, If Christ be God; but the work (itself) declares (this). He does not pronounce upon it, either that, it is of men, or that it is of God; but he leaves the proof to the future. They were persuaded [by him].

Acts 5:40 Then why, it may be asked, do ye scourge them? Such was the incontrovertible justness of his speech, they could not look it in the face; nevertheless, they sated their own animosity; and again they expected to terrify them in this way. By the fact also of his saying these things not in the presence of the Apostles, he gained a hearing more than he would otherwise have done; and then the suavity of his discourse and the justness of what was said, helped to persuade them.

In fact, this man all but preached the Gospel. You were persuaded, one may say, that you had not strength to overthrow it. Wherefore did ye not believe? Such is the witness borne even by enemies. There it is four hundred, there, four thousand: and here the first movers were twelve. Let not the number which added itself affright you. ch. 2:41; 4:4 He might also have mentioned another instance, that of the Egyptian, but what he has spoken is fully sufficient. And he closes his speech with an alarming topic: Lest haply, etc.

And he does not pronounce upon it, lest he should seem to be pleading their cause; but he reasons by way of syllogism from the issue of the matter. And he does not venture to pronounce that it is not of men, nor yet that it is of God; for had he said that it was of God, they would have gainsaid him: but had he said that it was of men, they would again have taken prompt measures. Therefore he bids them wait for the end, saying, Refrain. But they once more threaten knowing indeed that they avail nothing, but doing after their manner.

Such is the nature of wickedness: it attempts even impossibilities.-- And after this man rose up Judas, etc. These things Josephus relates in detail. (Ant. xx. 8; ib. v. 2; xviii. 1. B. J. ii. 8. 1.) But what a great thing it was that he ventured to affirm: that it was of God, when in the sequel it received its proof from the events! Great boldness of speech, great freedom from all respect of persons! And he does not say, But if you do not overthrow it, it is of God; but, If it be of God, it will not be overthrown.

And to him they agreed. Acts 5:40 They revered the high character of the man. And they departed from the presence of the council, rejoicing that they were counted worthy to suffer shame for the name of Christ. Acts 5:41 What miracles so wonderful as this? Nowhere is the like of this recorded of the old saints: for Jeremiah indeed was scourged for the word of God, and they threatened Elijah, and the rest: but in this case, even by this very thing, and not only by their miracles, these showed forth the power of God.

He does not say, that they were not pained, but that though pained they rejoiced. How does this appear? From their boldness afterwards: they were so instant still, even after their beatings, in preaching the word. But in the temple, it says, and in every house, they ceased not to teach and preach Jesus Christ. Acts 5:42 And in those days -- when these things were done, when there were scourgings, when there were threatenings, when the disciples were multiplying -- also, it says, there arose a murmuring.

Acts 6:1 And this comes of the multitude: for it is impossible to have strict order in a multitude. There arose a murmuring, etc. to --And a great company of the priests were obedient to the faith.-- There arose murmuring against the Hebrews -- for that description of people seemed to be more honorable-- because their widows were neglected in the daily ministration. Acts 6:1-7 So then there was a daily ministration for the widows. And observe how he calls it a ministration (διακονία), and not directly alms: extolling by this at once the doers, and those to whom it was done.

Were neglected. This did not arise from malice, but perhaps from the carelessness of the multitude. And therefore he brought it forward openly, for this was no small evil. Observe, how even in the beginning the evils came not only from without, but also from within. For you must not look to this only, that it was set to rights, but observe that it was a great evil that it existed. Then the twelve, etc. Acts 6:2 Do you observe how outward concerns succeed to inward? They do not act at their own discretion, but plead for themselves to the congregation.

So ought it to be done now. It is not reason, says he, that we should leave the word of God, and serve tables. First he puts to them the unreasonableness of the thing; that it is not possible for both things to be done with the same attention: just as when they were about to ordain Matthias, they first show the necessity of the thing, that one was deficient, and there must needs be twelve. And so here they showed the necessity; and they did it not sooner, but waited till the murmuring arose; nor, on the other hand, did they suffer this to spread far.

And, lo! They leave the decision to them: those who pleased all, those who of all were honestly reputed, them they present: not now twelve, but seven, full of the Spirit and of wisdom: well reported of for their conversation. Acts 6:3 Now when Matthias was to be presented, it was said, Therefore must one of these men which have companied with us all the time Acts 1:21: but not so here: for the case was not alike. And they do not now put it to the lot; they might indeed themselves have made the election, as moved by the Spirit: but nevertheless, they desire the testimony of the people.

The fixing the number, and the ordaining them, and for this kind of business, rested with them: but the choice of the men they make over to the people, that they might not seem to act from favor: just as God also leaves it to Moses to choose as elders those whom he knew. Numbers 11:16 And of wisdom. For indeed there needs much wisdom in such ministrations. For think not, because he has not the word committed unto him, that such an one has no need of wisdom: he does need it, and much too.

But we, says he, will give ourselves continually to prayer, and to the ministry of the word. Acts 6:4 Again they plead for themselves, beginning and ending with this. Will give ourselves continually, he says. For so it behooved, not just to do the mere acts, or in any chance way, but to be continually doing them. And the saying, we are told, pleased the whole multitude. (v. 5, 6.) This too was worthy of their wisdom. All approved of what was said so sensible was it. And they chose, it says (again it is the people (αὐτοὶ) that choose,) Stephen, a man full of faith and of the Holy Ghost, and Philip, and Prochorus, and Nicanor, and Timon, and Parmenas, and Nicolas a proselyte of Antioch: whom they set before the Apostles: and when

they had prayed, they laid their hands on them.

They separated them from the multitude, and it is the people (α■το■) that draw them, not the Apostles that lead them. Observe how he avoids all that is superfluous: he does not tell in what way it was done, but that they were ordained (■ χειροτον■θησαν) with prayer: for this is the meaning of χειροτον■α, (i.e. putting forth the hand,) or ordination: the hand of the man is laid upon (the person,) but the whole work is of God, and it is His hand which touches the head of the one ordained, if he be duly ordained.

And the word of God, it says, increased: and the number of the disciples multiplied. Acts 6:7 It is not for nothing that he says this: it shows how great is the virtue of alms and good order. And as he is about in the sequel to enlarge (α■ξειν) upon the affair of Stephen, he puts first the causes which led to it. And many, he says, of the priests were obedient to the faith. For since they perceived such to be the mind of their ruler and teacher, they put the matter to the test of facts.-- It is also a subject for wonder, how it was that the multitude was not divided in its choice of the men, and how it was that the Apostles were not rejected by them.

But what sort of rank these bore, and what sort of office they received, this is what we need to learn. Was it that of Deacons? And yet this is not the case in the Churches. But is it to the Presbyters that the management belongs? And yet at present there was no Bishop, but the Apostles only. Whence I think it clearly and manifestly follows, that neither Deacons nor Presbyters is their designation: but it was for this particular purpose that they were ordained. And this business was not simply handed over to them without further ceremony, but the Apostles prayed over them, that power might be given to them.

But observe, I pray you, if there were need of seven men for this, great in proportion must have been the sums of money that flowed in, great in proportion also the number of widows. So then the prayers were not made in an off-hand way, but with much deliberate attention: and this office, as well as preaching, was thus brought to good effect; for what they did, they effected mostly by the means of these (their prayers.) Thus they were enabled to give their attention to things spiritual; thus were these also free to undertake long journeys; thus were these put in trust with the word.

But the writer does not say this, nor extol them, but that it was not reason that they should leave the work given to them. Thus they had been taught by Moses's example not to undertake the management of everything by themselves. Numbers 11:14 Only, it is said, that we should remember the poor. Galatians 2:10 And how did they bring these forward? They fasted. Look you out seven men, etc. Acts 6:3 It is not simply, spiritual men, but, full of the Spirit and of wisdom, for it needed very great superiority of mind (φιλοσοφ■ας) to bear the complainings of widows.

For what profits it, that the dispenser of alms steal not, if nevertheless he waste all, or be harsh and easily provoked? And they chose Stephen, a man full of faith and of the Holy Ghost. Acts 6:5 And in this regard Philip also was admirable: for it is of him that the writer says: And we entered into the house of Philip the Evangelist, which was one of the seven; and abode with him.-- Acts 21:8 Do you mark how matters are ordered quite otherwise than after the matter of men?

And the number of disciples was multiplied in Jerusalem. Acts 6:7 In Jerusalem the multitude increased. Wonderful, where Christ was slain, there the preaching increased! And not only was it not the case that some were offended then in the manner of Ananias, but the awe became even greater: while these are scourged, those threatening, those tempting the Spirit, those murmuring. But I would have you remark under what circumstances the multitude increased: after these trials, then it was that the multitude

increased, and not before.

Mark also how great the mercy of God. Of those chief-priests, of the very men who had indignation and sore displeasure and so cried out and said, He saved others, Himself He cannot save; of these same, Many, it says, were obedient unto the faith. Matthew 27:42

Him therefore let us also imitate. He received them, and did not cast them out. So let us requite those our enemies, who have wrought us even numberless ills. Whatever good thing we may have, let us impart to them: let us not pass them by, in our acts of beneficence. For if we ought, by suffering ill, to sate their rage, much more, by doing them good: for this is a less thing than the other. For it is not all alike, to do good to an enemy, and to be willing to suffer greater wrongs than he wishes (to inflict): from the one we shall come on to the other.

This is the dignity of Christ's disciples. Those crucified Him, when He had come for the very purpose of doing them good; His disciples they scourged; and after all this, He admits them to the same honor with His disciples, making them equally partakers of His gifts. I beseech you, let us be imitators of Christ: in this regard it is possible to imitate Him: this makes a man like God: this is more than human. Let us hold fast to Mercy: she is the schoolmistress and teacher of that higher Wisdom.

He that has learned to show mercy to the distressed, will learn also not to resent injuries; he that has learned this, will be able to do good even to his enemies. Let us learn to feel for the ills our neighbors suffer, and we shall learn to endure the ills they inflict. Let us ask the person himself who ill-treats us, whether he does not condemn himself? Would he not be glad to show a nobler spirit (φιλοσοφῆσαι)? Must he not own that his behavior is nothing but passion, that it is little-minded, pitiful?

Would he not like to be of those who are wronged and are silent, and not of those who do wrong, and are beside themselves with passion? Can he go away not admiring the patient sufferer? Do not imagine that this makes men despicable. Nothing makes men so despicable, as insolent and injurious behavior: nothing makes men so respectable, as endurance under insolence and injury. For the one is a ruffian, the other a philosopher; the one is less than man, the other is equal to angels.

For though he be inferior to the wrong-doer, yet, for all that, he has the power, if he had the mind, to be revenged. And besides, the one is pitied by all, the other hated. What then? The former will be much the better of the two: for everybody will treat the one as a madman, the other as a man of sense. He cannot speak of him in evil sort: yea, you fear, says one, lest perchance he be not such (as you would represent). Best that thou speak not evil in your thought even; next, that you speak it not to another.

Pray not then to God against this man: if you hear him evil-spoken of, take his part: say, It was passion that spoke such words, not the man; say, It was anger, not my friend: his madness, not his heart. Thus let us account of each offense. Wait not for the fire to be kindled, but check it before it comes to that: do not exasperate the savage beast, rather do not suffer it to become exasperated: for you will no longer be able to check it, if once the flame be kindled. For what has the man called you?

Thou fool and simpleton. And which then is liable to the name? The called, or the caller? For the one, be he ever so wise, gets the character of being a fool: but the other, even if he be a simpleton, gets credit for being wise, and of philosophic temper. Say, which is the simpleton? He who alleges against another what is untrue, or he who even under such treatment is unmoved? For if it be the mark of true philosophy to be unmoved however moved; to fall into a passion when none moves to anger-- what folly is it!

I say not yet, how sore a manner of punishment is in store for those who utter such reproaches and revilings against their neighbor. But how? Has he called you a low fellow and low-born, a sorry creature and of sorry extraction? Again he has turned the taunt against himself. For the other will appear worthy and respectable, but he a sorry creature indeed: for to cast up such things, that is to say, meanness of birth, as a disgrace, is little-minded indeed: while the other will be thought a great and admirable character, because he thinks nothing of such a taunt, and is no more affected by it than if he were told that he had about him any other ordinary and quite indifferent circumstance.

But does he call you adulterer, and such like? At this you may even laugh: for, when the conscience is not smitten, there can be no occasion for wrath. \* \* For when one has considered what bad and disgraceful disclosures he makes, still for all that, there is no need to grieve. He has but laid bare now, what everybody must be apprised of by and bye: meanwhile, as regards himself he has shown all men that he is not to be trusted, for that he knows not how to screen his neighbor's faults: he has disgraced himself more than he has the other; has stopped up against himself every harbor: has made terrible to himself the bar at which he must hereafter be tried.

For not the person (whose secrets are betrayed) will be the object of everybody's aversion, but he, who where he ought not to have raised the veil, has stripped off the clothes. But speak thou nothing of the secrets you know, hold thou your peace if you would bear off the good fame. For not only will you overthrow what has been spoken, and hide it: but you will also bring about another capital result: you will stop sentence being given against yourself. Does somebody speak evil of you?

Say thou: Had he known all, he would not have spoken only thus much.-- So you admire what has been said, and are delighted with it? Aye, but you must follow it. For when we tell you all these maxims of the heathen moralists, it is not because Scripture does not contain hundreds of such sayings, but because these are of more force to put you to the blush. As in fact Scripture itself is wont to use this appeal to our sense of shame; for, instance, when it says, Do ye even as the heathen.

Jeremiah 35:3 And the prophet Jeremiah brought forward into public view the children of Rechab, how they would not consent to violate the command of their father.-- Miriam and her company spoke evil of Moses, and he immediately begged them off from their punishment; nay, would not so much as let it be known that his cause was avenged. Numbers 12 But not so we: on the contrary, this is what we most desire; to have all men know that they have not passed unpunished. How long shall we breathe of the earth?-- One party cannot make a fight.

Pluck the madmen from both sides, you will exasperate them the more: but pluck from right or from left, and you have quenched the passion. The striker, if he has to do with one who will not put up with blows, is the more set on: but if with one who yields, he is the sooner unnerved, and his blow is spent upon himself. For no practised pugilist so unnerves the strength of his antagonist, as does a man who being injuriously treated makes no return. For the other only goes off ashamed, and condemned, first by his own conscience, and secondly by all the lookers on.

And there is a proverb too, which says, that to honor another, is to honor one's self: therefore also to abuse another is to abuse one's self. None, I repeat, will be able to harm us, unless we harm ourselves; nor will any make me poor, unless I make myself such. For come, let us look at it in this way. Suppose that I have a beggarly soul, and let all lavish all their substance upon me, what of that? So long as the soul is not changed, it is all in vain. Suppose I have a noble soul, and let all men take from me my substance:

what of that?

So long as you do not make the soul beggarly, no harm is done. Suppose my life be impure, and let all men say just the contrary of me: what of that? For though they say it, yet they do not judge thus of me in their heart. Again, suppose my life be pure, and let all say of me just the reverse: and what of that? For in their own conscience they will condemn themselves: since they are not persuaded of what they say. Just as we ought not to admit the praise, so neither the criminations.

And why say I these things? None will ever be able to plot against us, nor lay us under any evil charge, if we choose (that they shall not). For how now, I ask you? Let him drag me into a court of justice, let him lay vexatious informations, let him, if you will, have the very soul out of me: and what of that? For a little while, undeservedly to suffer these things, what does it signify? Well, wouldest thou, my friend, rather see me justly than unjustly put to death?" Down. ap.

Sav.)--> but this, say you, is of itself an evil. Well, but of itself this is a good, to suffer undeservedly. What? Would you have the suffering to be deserved? Let me mention again a piece of philosophy, from one of the sages. A certain person, says the story, had been put to death. And one of the sage's disciples said to him, Woe is me, that he should have suffered unjustly! The other turned upon him, Why, how now? said he, would you have had him justly suffer? (Socrates ap.

Diog. Laert. and Xen. Mem. Socr.) John also, was not he unjustly put to death? Which then do you rather pity: them that justly suffer death, or [him? Do you not count them miserable, while] him you even admire? Then what is a man injured, when from death itself he has got great gain, not merely no hurt? If indeed the man had been immortal, and this made him mortal, no doubt it would be a hurt: but if he be mortal, and in the course of nature must expect death a little later, and his enemy has but expedited his death, and glory with it, what is the harm?

Let us but have our soul in good order, and there will be no harm from without. But you are not in a condition of glory? And what of that? That which is true of wealth, the same holds for glory: if I be magnanimous (μεγαλοπρεπής), I shall need none; if vainglorious, the more I get, the more I shall want. In this way shall I most become illustrious, and obtain greater glory; namely, if I despise glory. Knowing these things, let us be thankful to Him Who has freely given us such a life, and let us ensue it unto His glory; for to Him belongs the glory, forever. Amen.

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