

Homily 15 on Ephesians

by St. John Chrysostom

The sermon emphasizes the importance of putting away bitterness and malice from one's soul in order to live a healthy and happy life.

Scripture: Proverbs 10:9, Matthew 7:2, Acts 2:46, 1 Corinthians 3:18, Ephesians 4:31

Topics: "Holy Spirit", "Christian Living"

Description

John Chrysostom preaches on Ephesians 4:31, emphasizing the importance of putting away bitterness, wrath, anger, clamor, railing, and malice from our hearts. He compares the Holy Spirit to bees that will not settle in an unclean vessel, highlighting the need for cleansing our souls to receive spiritual gifts. Chrysostom warns against the destructive nature of bitterness, anger, and malice, urging believers to rid themselves of these harmful traits to avoid grieving the Holy Spirit and experiencing misfortunes.

Transcript

Ephesians 4:31

Let all bitterness, and wrath, and anger, and clamor, and railing, be put away from you, with all malice.

As bees will never settle down in an unclean vessel -- and this is the reason why those who are skilled in these matters sprinkle the spot with perfumes, and scented ointments, and sweet odors; and the wicker baskets also, in which they will have to settle as soon as they come out of the hives they sprinkle with fragrant wines, and all other sweets, that there may be no noisome smell to annoy them, and drive them away again -- so in truth is it also with the Holy Spirit. Our soul is a sort of vessel or basket, capable of receiving the swarms of spiritual gifts; but if there shall be within it gall, and bitterness, and wrath, the swarms will fly away.

Hence this blessed and wise husbandman well and thoroughly cleanses our vessels, withholding neither knife nor any other instrument of iron, and invites us to this spiritual swarm; and as he gathers it, he cleanses us with prayers, and labors, and all the rest. Mark then how he cleanses out our heart. He has banished lying, he has banished anger. Now, again, he is pointing out how that evil may be yet more entirely eradicated; if we be not, says he, bitter in spirit. For it is as is wont to happen with our bile, if there chance to be but little of it, there will be but little disturbance if the receptacle should burst: but if ever the strength and acridness of this quality becomes excessive, the vessel which before held it, containing it no longer, is as if it were eaten through by a scorching fire, and it is no longer able to hold it and contain it

within its appointed bounds, but, rent asunder by its intense sharpness, it lets it escape and injure the whole body.

And it is like some very fierce and frightful wild beast, that has been brought into a city; as long as it is confined in the cages made for it, however it may rage, however it may roar, it will be unable to do harm to any one; but if it is overcome by rage, and breaks through the intervening bars, and is able to leap out, it fills the city with all sorts of confusion and disturbance, and puts everybody to flight. Such indeed is the nature also of bile. As long as it is kept within its proper limits, it will do us no great mischief; but as soon as ever the membrane that incloses it bursts, and there is nothing to hinder its being at once dispersed over the whole system, then, I say, at that moment, though it be so very trifling in quantity, yet by reason of the inordinate strength of its quality it taints all the other elements of our nature with its own peculiar virulence.

For finding the blood, for instance, near to it, alike in place and in quality, and rendering the heat which is in that blood more acrid, and everything else in fact which is near it; passing from its just temperature it overflows its bounds, turns all into gall, and therewith at once attacks likewise the other parts of the body; and thus infusing into all its own poisonous quality, it renders the man speechless, and causes him to expire, expelling life. Now, why have I stated all these things with such minuteness?

It is in order that, understanding from this bitterness which is of the body the intolerable evil of that bitterness which is of the soul, and how entirely it destroys first of all the very soul that engenders it, making everything bitter, we may escape experience of it. For as the one inflames the whole constitution, so does the other the thoughts, and carries away its captive to the abyss of hell. In order then that by carefully examining these matters we may escape this evil, and bridle the monster, or rather utterly root it out, let us hearken to what Paul says, Let all bitterness be (not destroyed, but) put away from you.

For what need have I of trouble to restrain it, what necessity is there to keep watch on a monster, when it is in my power to expel him from my soul, to remove him and drive him out, as it were, into banishment? Let us hearken then to Paul when he says, Let all bitterness be put away from you. But, ah, the perversity that possesses us! Though we ought to do everything to effect this, yet are there some so truly senseless as to congratulate themselves upon this evil, and to pride themselves upon it, and to glory in it, and who are envied by others.

Such a one, say they, is a bitter man, he is a scorpion, a serpent, a viper. They look upon him as one to be feared. But wherefore, good man, do you fear the bitter person? I fear, you say, lest he injure me, lest he destroy me; I am not proof against his malice, I am afraid lest he should take me who am a simple man, and unable to foresee any of his schemes, and throw me into his snares, and entangle us in the toils which he has set to deceive us. Now I cannot but smile. And why forsooth?

Because these are the arguments of children, who fear things which are not to be feared. Surely there is nothing we ought so to despise, nothing we ought so to laugh to scorn, as a bitter and malicious man. For there is nothing so powerless as bitterness. It makes men fools and senseless.

Do ye not see that malice is blind? Have ye never heard, that he that digs a pit for his neighbors, digs it for himself? How, it may be said, ought we not to fear a soul full of tumult? If indeed we are to fear the bitter in the same way as we fear evil spirits, and fools and madmen, (for they indeed do everything at random,) I grant it myself; but if we are to fear them as men skillful in the conduct of affairs, that never. For nothing is so necessary for the proper conduct of affairs as prudence; and there is no greater hindrance to prudence

than wickedness, and malice, and hollowness.

Look at bilious persons, how unsightly they are, with all their bloom withered away. How weak they are, and puny, and unfit for anything. So also are souls of this nature. What else is wickedness, but a jaundice of the soul? Wickedness then has no strength in it, indeed it has not. Have ye a mind that I again make what I am saying plain to you by an instance, by setting before you the portraits of a treacherous and a guileless man? Absalom was a treacherous man, and stole all men's hearts. 2 Samuel 15:6 And observe how great was his treachery.

He went about, it says, and said, 'Have you no judgment.' wishing to conciliate every one to himself. But David was guileless. What then? Look at the end of them both, look, how full of utter madness was the former! For inasmuch as he looked solely to the hurt of his father, in all other things he was blinded. But not so David. For he that walks uprightly, walks surely Proverbs 10:9; and reasonably; he is one that manages nothing over-subtly, the man who devises no evil. Let us listen then to the blessed Paul, and let us pity, yea, let us weep for the bitter-minded, and let us practice every method, let us do everything to extirpate this vice from their souls.

For how is it not absurd, that when there is bile within us (though that indeed is a useful element, for without bile a man cannot possibly exist, that bile, I mean, which is an element of his nature,) how then, I say, is it not absurd that we should do all we can to get rid of this, though we are so highly benefited by it; and yet that we should do nothing, nor take any pains, to get rid of that which is in the soul, though it is in no case beneficial, but even in the highest degree injurious.

He that thinks that he is wise among you, says he, let him become a fool, that he may become wise. 1 Corinthians 3:18 Hearken too again to what Luke says, They did take their food with gladness and singleness of heart, praising God, and having favor with all the people. Acts 2:46-47 Why, do we not see even now that the simple and guileless enjoy the common esteem of all? No one envies such an one when he is in prosperity, no one tramples upon him when he is in adversity, but all rejoice with him when he does well, and grieve with him in misfortune.

Whereas whenever a bitter man fares prosperously, one and all lament it, as though some evil thing happened; but if he is unfortunate, one and all rejoice. Let us then pity them, for they have common enemies all over the world. Jacob was a guileless man, yet he overcame the treacherous Esau. For into a malicious soul wisdom shall not enter. Wisdom 1:4 Let all bitterness be put away from you. Let not even a remnant remain, for it will be sure, if stirred, as if from a smouldering brand, to turn all within to an entire blaze.

Let us then distinctly understand what this bitterness is. Take, for example, the hollow-hearted man, the crafty, the man who is on the watch to do mischief, the man of evil suspicion. From him then wrath and anger are ever produced; for it is not possible for a soul like this to be in tranquillity, but the very root of anger and wrath is bitterness. The man of this character is both sullen, and never unbends his soul; he is always moody, always gloomy. For as I was saying, they themselves are the first to reap the fruit of their own evil ways.

And clamor, he adds.

What now, and do you take away clamor also? Yes, for the mild man must needs be of such a character, because clamor carries anger, as a horse his rider; trip the horse, and you will throw the rider.

Moral. This let women above all attend to, them who on every occasion cry aloud and bawl. There is but one thing in which it is useful to cry aloud, in preaching and in teaching. But in no other case whatever, no, not even in prayer. And if you would learn a practical lesson, never cry aloud at all, and then will you never be angry at all. Behold a way to keep your temper; for as it is not possible that the man that does not cry out should be enraged, so is it not that the man who does cry out should be otherwise than enraged. For tell me not of a man being implacable, and revengeful, and of pure natural bitterness, and natural choler. We are now speaking of the sudden paroxysm of this passion.

It contributes then no little to this end, to discipline the soul never to raise the voice and cry aloud at all. Cut off clamor, and you will clip the wings of anger, thou dost repress the first rising of the heart. For as it is impossible for a man to wrestle without lifting up his hands, so is it not possible that he should be entangled in a quarrel without lifting up his voice. Bind the hands of the boxer, and then bid him strike. He will be unable to do so. So likewise will wrath be disarmed. But clamor raises it, even where it does not exist. And hence it is especially that the female sex are so easily overtaken in it. Women, whenever they are angry with their maid-servants, fill the whole house with their own clamor. And oftentimes too, if the house happens to be built along a narrow street, then all the passers-by hear the mistress scolding, and the maid weeping and wailing. What can possibly be more disgraceful than the sound of those wailings? What in the world has happened there? All the women round immediately peep in and one of them says, Such a one is beating her own maid. Whatever can be more shameless than this? What then, ought one not to strike at all? No, I say not so, (for it must be done,) but then it must be neither frequently, nor immoderately, nor for any wrongs of your own, as I am constantly saying, nor for any little failure in her service, but only if she is doing harm to her own soul. If you chastise her for a fault of this kind, all will applaud, and there will be none to upbraid you; but if you do it for any reasons of your own, all will condemn your cruelty and harshness. And what is more base than all, there are some so fierce and so savage as to lash them to such a degree, that the bruises will not disappear with the day. For they will strip the damsels, and call their husbands for the purpose, and oftentimes tie them to the pallets. Alas! At that moment, tell me, does no recollection of hell come over you? What? Do you strip your handmaid, and expose her to your husband? And are you not ashamed, lest he should condemn you for it? And then do you exasperate him yet more, and threaten to put her in chains, having first taunted the wretched and pitiable creature with ten thousand reproachful names, and called her Thessalian witch, runaway, and prostitute?

For her passion allows her not to spare even her own mouth, but she looks to one single object, how she may wreak her vengeance on the other, even though she disgrace herself. And then after all these things forsooth, she will sit in state like any tyrant, and call her children, and summon her foolish husband, and treat him as a hangman. Ought these things to take place in the houses of Christians? Aye say ye, but slaves are a troublesome, audacious, impudent, incorrigible race.

True, I know it myself, but there are other ways to keep them in order; by terrors, by threats, by words; which may both touch her more powerfully, and save you from disgrace. Thou who art a free woman hast uttered foul words, and do you not disgrace yourself more than her? Then if she shall have occasion to go out to the bath, there are bruises on her back when she is naked, and she carries about with her the marks of your cruelty. But, say ye, the whole tribe of slaves is intolerable if it meet with indulgence.

True, I know it myself. But then, as I was saying, correct them in some other way, not by the scourge only, and by terror, but even by flattering them, and by acts of kindness. If she is a believer, she is your sister. Consider that you are her mistress, and that she ministers unto you. If she be intemperate, cut off the

occasions of drunkenness; call your husband, and admonish her. Or do you not feel how disgraceful a thing it is for a woman to be beaten? They at least who have enacted ten thousand punishments for men, -- the stake, and the rack -- will scarcely ever hang a woman, but limit men's anger to smiting her on the cheek; and so great respect have they observed towards the sex, that not even when there is absolute necessity have they often hung a woman, if she happen to be pregnant.

For it is a disgrace for a man to strike a woman; and if for a man, much more for one of her own sex. It is moreover by these things that women become odious to their husbands. What then, ye may say, if she shall act the harlot? Marry her to a husband; cut off the occasions of fornication, allow her not to be too high fed. What then, if she shall steal? Take care of her, and watch her.-- Extravagant! you will say; What, am I to be her keeper? How absurd! And why, I pray, are you not to be her keeper?

Has she not the same kind of soul as thou? Has she not been vouchsafed the same privileges by God? Does she not partake of the same table? Does she not share with you the same high birth? But what then, you will say, if she shall be a railer, or a gossip, or a drunkard? Yet, how many free women are such? Now, with all the failings of women God has charged men to bear: only, He says, let not a woman be an harlot, but every other failing besides bear with. Yea, be she drunkard, or railer, or gossip, or evil-eyed, or extravagant, and a squanderer of your substance, you have her for the partner of your life.

Train and restrain her. Necessity is upon you. It is for this you are the head. Regulate her therefore, do your own part. Yea, and if she remain incorrigible, yea, though she steal, take care of your goods, and do not punish her so much. If she be a gossip, silence her. This is the very highest philosophy.

Now, however, some have come to such a height of indecency as to uncover the head, and to drag their maid-servants by the hair.-- Why do ye all blush? I am not addressing myself to all, but to those who are carried away into such brutal conduct. Paul says, Let not a woman be uncovered. 1 Corinthians 11:5-15 And do you then entirely strip off her headdress? Do you see how you are doing outrage to yourself? If indeed she makes her appearance to you with her head bare, you call it an insult. And do you say that there is nothing shocking when you bare it yourself? Then you will say, What if she be not corrected? Chasten her then with the rod and with stripes. And yet how many failings have you also yourself, and yet you are not corrected! These things I am saying not for their sakes, but for the sake of you free-women, that you do nothing so unworthy, nothing to disgrace you, that you do yourselves no wrong. If you will learn this lesson in your household in dealing with your maid-servant, and not be harsh but gentle and forbearing, much more will you be so in your behavior to your husband. For she who, though having authority, does nothing of the sort, will do it much less where there is a check. So that the discipline employed about your maid-servants, will be of the greatest service to you in gaining the goodwill of your husbands. For with what measure you measure, He says, it shall be measured unto you. Matthew 7:2 Set a bridle upon your mouth. If you are disciplined to bear bravely with a servant when she answers back, you will not be annoyed with the insolence of an equal, and in being above annoyance, will have attained to the highest philosophy. But some there are who add even oaths, but there is nothing more shocking than a woman so enraged. But what again, you will say, if she dress gaily? Why then, forbid this; you have my consent; but check it by first beginning with yourself, not so much by fear as by example. Be in everything yourself a perfect pattern.

And let railing, says he, be put away from you. Observe the progress of mischief. Bitterness produces wrath, wrath anger, anger clamor, clamor railing, that is, revilings; next from evil-speaking it goes on to blows, from blows to wounds, from wounds to death. Paul, however, did not wish to mention any of these,

but only this, let this, says he, be put away from you, with all malice. What is with all malice? It ends with this. For there are some, like those dogs that bite secretly, which do not bark at all at those that come near them, nor are angry, but which fawn, and display a gentle aspect; but when they catch us off our guard, will fix their teeth in us.

These are more dangerous than those that take up open enmity. Now since there are men too that are dogs, who neither cry out, nor fly in a passion, nor threaten us when they are offended, yet in secret are weaving plots, and contriving ten thousand mischiefs, and revenging themselves not in words but in deeds; he hints at these. Let those things be put away from you, says he, with all malice. Do not spare your words, and then revenge yourself in acts. My purpose in chastising my tongue and curtailing its clamor, is to prevent its kindling up a more violent blaze.

But if you without any clamor art doing the same thing, and art cherishing the fire and the live coals within, where is the good of your silence? Do you not know that those conflagrations are the most destructive of all which are fed within, and appear not to those that are without? And that those wounds are the deadliest which never break out to the surface; and those fevers the worst which burn up the vitals? So also is this anger the most dangerous that preys upon the soul.

But let this too be put away from you, says he, with all malice, of every kind and degree, great and little. Let us then hearken to him, let us cast out all bitterness and all malice, that we grieve not the Holy Spirit. Let us destroy all bitterness; let us cut it up by the very roots. Nothing good, nothing healthful, can ever come from a bitter soul; nothing but misfortunes, nothing but tears, nothing but weeping and wailing. Do ye not see those beasts that roar or cry out, how we turn away from them; the lion, for instance, and the bear?

But not so from the sheep; for there is no roaring, but a mild and gentle voice. And so again with musical instruments, those which are loud and harsh are the most unpleasant to the ear, such as the drum and trumpet; whereas those which are not so, but are soothing, these are pleasant, as the flute and lyre and pipe. Let us then prepare our soul so as never to cry aloud, and thus shall we be enabled also to gain the mastery over our anger. And when we have cut out this, we ourselves shall be the first to enjoy the calm, and we shall sail into that peaceful haven, which God grant we may all attain, in Jesus Christ our Lord, with whom, together with the Holy Ghost, be unto the Father, glory, might, and honor, now, and ever, and throughout all ages. Amen.

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