

Homily 24 on the Acts of the Apostles

by St. John Chrysostom

The sermon emphasizes the importance of glorifying God for the good things that befall our neighbors and being vigilant against the dangers of ease and comfort.

Topics: "Holy Spirit", "Church Growth"

Description

John Chrysostom preaches on the events in Acts where the Holy Spirit falls on the Gentiles, emphasizing God's providential management and Peter's role in justifying the inclusion of Gentiles. Despite initial resistance from the circumcision, Peter defends his actions by highlighting the Spirit's work and God's plan. Chrysostom urges the congregation to focus on personal growth and excellence rather than mere numbers, emphasizing the importance of discipline, correction, and reverence in worship to avoid distractions and maintain holiness.

Transcript

Acts X. 44, 46

While Peter yet spoke these words, the Holy Ghost fell on all them which heard the word. And they of the circumcision which believed were astonished, as many as came with Peter, because that on the Gentiles also was poured out the gift of the Holy Ghost. For they heard them speak with tongues, and magnify God.

Observe God's providential management. He does not suffer the speech to be finished, nor the baptism to take place upon a command of Peter, but, when He has made it evident how admirable their state of mind is, and a beginning is made of the work of teaching, and they have believed that assuredly baptism is the remission of sins, then immediately comes the Spirit upon them. Now this is done by God's so disposing it as to provide for Peter a mighty ground of justification. And it is not simply that the Spirit came upon them, but, they spoke with tongues: which was the thing that astonished those who had come together. They altogether disliked the matter, wherefore it is that the whole is of God; and as for Peter, it may almost be said, that he is present only to be taught (with them) the lesson, that they must take the Gentiles in hand, and that they themselves are the persons by whom this must be done. For whereas after all these great events, still both in Cæsarea and in Jerusalem a questioning is made about it, how would it have been if these (tokens) had not gone step by step with the progress of the affair? Therefore it is that this is carried to a sort of excess. Peter seizes his advantage, and see the plea he makes of it. Can any man forbid water, that these should not be baptized, which have received the Holy Ghost as well as we? Acts 10:47 Mark the issue to which he brings it; how he has been travailing to bring this forth. So (entirely) was he of

this mind! Can any one, he asks, forbid water? It is the language, we may almost say, of one triumphantly pressing his advantage (■ πεμβα■νοντος) against such as would forbid, such as should say that this ought not to be. The whole thing, he says, is complete, the most essential part of the business, the baptism with which we were baptized. And he commanded them to be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ. Acts 10:48 After he has cleared himself, then, and not before, he commands them to be baptized: teaching them by the facts themselves. Such was the dislike the Jews had to it! Therefore it is that he first clears himself, although the very facts cry aloud, and then gives the command. Then prayed they him-- well might they do so -- to tarry certain days: and with a good courage thenceforth he does tarry.

And the Apostles and brethren that were in Judea heard that the Gentiles had also received the word of God. And when Peter had come up to Jerusalem, they that were of the circumcision contended with him, saying, You went in to men uncircumcised, and ate with them. Acts 11:1-3 After such great things, they of the circumcision contended: not the Apostles; God forbid! It means, they took no small offense. And see what they allege. They do not say, Why did you preach? But, Why did you eat with them?

But Peter, not stopping to notice this frigid objection -- for frigid indeed it is -- takes his stand (■ σταται) on that great argument, If they had the Spirit Itself given them, how could one refuse to give them the baptism? But how came it that in the case of the Samaritans this did not happen, but, on the contrary, neither before their baptism nor after it was there any controversy, and there they did not take it amiss, nay, as soon as they heard of it, sent the Apostles for this very purpose?

Acts 8:14 True, but neither in the present case is this the thing they complain of; for they knew that it was of Divine Grace: what they say is, Why did you eat with them? Besides, the difference is not so great for Samaritans as it is for Gentiles. Moreover, it is so managed (as part of the Divine plan) that he is accused in this way: on purpose that they may learn: for Peter, without some cause given, would not have related the vision. But observe his freedom from all elation and vainglory.

For it says, But Peter rehearsed the matter from the beginning, and expounded it by order unto them, saying, I was in the city of Joppa, praying: he does not say why, nor on what occasion: and in a trance I saw a vision, a certain vessel descend, as it had been a great sheet, let down from heaven by four corners; and it came even to me (v. 4, 5): upon the which when I had fastened my eyes, I considered, and saw fourfooted beasts of the earth, and wild beasts, and creeping things, and fowls of the air.

And I heard a voice saying unto me, Arise, Peter; slay and eat. (v. 6, 7.) As much as to say, This of itself was enough to have persuaded me -- my having seen the linen sheet: but moreover a Voice was added. But I said, Not so, Lord: for nothing common or unclean has at any time entered into my mouth. Acts 11:8 Do you mark? I did my part, says he: I said, that I have never eaten anything common or unclean: with reference to this that they said, You went in, and ate with them.

But this he does not say to Cornelius: for there was no need to mention it to him. But the voice answered me again from heaven, What God has cleansed, that call not thou common. And this was done three times: and all were drawn up again into heaven. (v. 9, 10.) The essential points were those (that ensued at Cæsarea); but by these he prepares the way for them. Observe how he justifies himself (by reasons), and forbears to use his authority as teacher. For the more mildly he expresses himself, the more tractable he makes them.

At no time, says he, has anything common or unclean entered into my mouth.-- And, behold -- this too was part of his defense -- three men stood at the house in which I was, sent to me from Cæsarea. And the

Spirit bade me go with them, nothing doubting. (v. 11, 12.) Do you mark that it is to the Spirit the enacting of laws belongs! And these also accompanied me-- nothing can be more lowly, when he alleges the brethren for witnesses!-- these six men, and we entered into the man's house: and he showed us how he had seen an angel in his house, which stood and said to him, Send men to Joppa, and call for Simon, whose surname is Peter; who shall tell you words, whereby thou and all your house shall be saved. (v. 13, 14.)

And he does not mention the words spoken by the Angel to Cornelius, Your prayers and your alms have come up for a memorial before God, that he may not disgust them; but what says he? He shall tell you words, whereby thou and all your house shall be saved: with good reason this is added. Also he says nothing of the man's fitness (■ πικ■). The Spirit, he might say, having sent (me), God having commanded, on the one part having summoned (me) through the Angel, on the other urging (me) on, and solving my doubt about the things, what was I to do?

He says none of these things, however: but makes his strong point of what happened last, which even in itself was an incontrovertible argument. And as I began to speak, etc. Acts 11:15 Then why did not this happen alone? Of superabundance (■ κ περιουσι■) this is wrought by God, that it might be shown that the beginning too was not from the Apostle. But had he set out of his own motion, without any of these things having taken place, they would have been very much hurt: so that from the beginning he disposes their minds in his favor*: saying to them, Who have received the Holy Ghost even as we.

And not content with this, he reminds them also of the words of the Lord: Then remembered I the word of the Lord, how that he said, John indeed baptized with water; but you shall be baptized with the Holy Ghost. Acts 11:16 He means, that no new thing has happened, but just what the Lord foretold. But there was no need to baptize? (Comp. p. 158.) But the baptism was completed already. And he does not say, I ordered them to be baptized: but what says he? Forasmuch then as God gave them the like gift as He did unto us, who believed on the Lord Jesus Christ; what was I, that I could withstand God?

Acts 11:17 He shows that he had himself done nothing: for the very thing which we have obtained, he says, that same did those men receive. That he may more effectually stop their mouths, therefore he says, The like gift. Do you perceive how he does not allow them to have less: when they believed, says he, the same gift did God give unto them, as He did to us who believed on the Lord, and Himself cleanses them. And he does not say, To you, but to us. Why do you feel aggrieved, when we call them partakers (with us?)

When they heard these things, they held their peace, and glorified God, saying, Then has God also to the Gentiles granted repentance unto life. Acts 11:18 Do you mark that it all came of Peter's discourse, by his admirably skilful way of relating the facts? They glorified God that He had given repentance to themselves (κα■ α■το■) also: they were humbled by these words. Hence was the door of faith opened thenceforth to the Gentiles. But, if you please, let us look over again what has been said.

While Peter yet spoke, etc. (Recapitulation.) He does not say that Peter was astonished, but, They of the circumcision: since he knew what was in preparation. And yet they ought to have marvelled at this, how they themselves had believed. When they heard that they had believed, they were not astonished, but when God gave them the Spirit. Then answered Peter and said, etc. Acts 10:47 And therefore it is that he says, God has shown that I should not call common or unclean any human being. Acts 10:28 He knew this from the first, and plans his discourse beforehand (with a view to it). Gentiles? What Gentiles henceforth?

They were no longer Gentiles, the Truth having come. It is nothing wonderful, he says, if before the act of baptism they received the Spirit: in our own case this same happened. Peter shows that not as the rest either were they baptized, but in a much better way. This is the reason why the thing takes place in this manner, that they may have nothing to say, but even in this way may account them equal with themselves. And they besought him, it says, to tarry certain days. Acts 10:48 And the Apostles and brethren, etc. And they of the circumcision contended with him. ch. 11:1, 2 Do you remark how they were not kindly disposed towards him? Saying You went in to men uncircumcised, and ate with them. Acts 11:3 Do you note what zeal they had for the Law? Not Peter's authority abashed them, not the signs which had taken place, not the success achieved, what a thing it was, the Gentiles having received the word: but they contended about those petty things. For if none of those (signs) had taken place, was not the success (itself) enough? But not so does Peter frame his defense: for he was wise, or rather it was not his wisdom, but the Spirit that spoke the words. And by the matter of his defense, he shows that in no one point was he the author, but in every point God, and upon Him he casts the whole. The trance, he says -- it was He that caused me to fall into it, for I was in Joppa, etc.: the vessel -- it was He that showed it; I objected: again, He spoke, and even then I did not hear: the Spirit commanded me to go, and even then though I went, I did not run: I told that God had sent me, and after these things, even then I did not baptize, but again God did the whole. God baptized them, not I. And he does not say, Was it not right then to add the water? But, implying that nothing was lacking, What was I, that I should withstand God? What a defense is here! For he does not say, Then knowing these things, hold your peace; but what? He stands their attack, and to their impeachment he pleads -- What was I, to be able to hinder God? It was not possible for me to hinder -- a forcible plea indeed, and such as might well put them to shame. Whence being at last afraid, they held their peace and glorified God.

In like manner ought we also to glorify God for the good things which befall our neighbors, only not in the way that the rest of the newly-baptized are insulted, when they see others receiving baptism, and immediately departing this life. It is right to glorify God, even though all be saved: and as for you, if you be willing, you have received a greater gift (than they): I do not mean in respect of the baptism, for the gift there is the same for him as for you, but in regard that you have received a set time for winning distinction.

The other put on the robe, and was not suffered to exhibit himself therewith in the procession, whereas to you, God has given full opportunity to use your arms for the right purpose, thereby to make proof of them. The other goes his way, having only the reward of his faith: you stand in the course, both able to obtain an abundant recompense for your works, and to show yourself as much more glorious than he, as the sun is than the smallest star, as the general, nay rather as the Emperor himself, than the lowest soldier.

Then blame yourself, or rather not blame, but correct: for it is not enough to blame yourself; it is in your power to contend afresh. Have you been thrown? Have you taken grievous hurt? Stand up, recover yourself: you are still in the course, the meeting (θύατρον) is not yet broken up. Do you not see how many that have been thrown in the wrestling have afterwards resumed the combat? Only do not willingly come by your fall. Do you count him a happy man for departing this life?

Much rather count yourself happy. Was he released of his sins? But you, if you will, shall not only wash away your sins, but shall also have achievements (of good works), which in his case is not possible. It is in our power to recover ourselves. Great are the medicinal virtues (φάρμακα) of repentance: let none despair of himself. That man truly deserves to be despaired of, who despairs of himself; that man has no more salvation, nor any hopes. It is not the having fallen into a depth of evils, it is the lying there when fallen, that is dreadful, it is not the having come into such a condition, it is the making light of it that is

impious.

The very thing that ought to make you earnest, say, is it this that makes you reckless? Having received so many wounds, have you fallen back? Of the soul, there can be no incurable wound; for the body, there are many such, but none for the soul: and yet for those we cease not in our endeavors to cure them, while for these we are supine. Do you see not the thief (on the cross), in how short a time he achieved (his salvation)? Do you see not the Martyrs, in how short a time they accomplished the whole work?

But martyrdom is not to be had nowadays. True, but there are contests to be had, as I have often told you, if we had the mind. For they that wish, says the Apostle, to live godly in Christ Jesus, shall suffer persecution. 2 Timothy 3:12 They that live godly are always undergoing persecution, if not from men, at any rate from evil spirits, which is a more grievous persecution. Yes, and it is in consequence, first and foremost, of ease and comfort, that those who are not vigilant undergo this.

Or do you think it is a trifling persecution to be living at ease? This is more grievous than all, this is worse than persecution. For, like a running flux, ease makes the soul languid (χαλνο■): and as summer and winter, so persecution and ease. But to show you that this is the worse persecution, listen: it induces sleep in the soul, an excessive yawning and drowsiness, it stirs up the passions on every side, it arms pride, it arms pleasure, it arms anger, envy, vainglory, jealousy.

But in time of persecution none of these is able to make a disturbance; but fear, entering in, and plying the lash vigorously, as one does to a barking dog, will not let any of these passions so much as attempt to give tongue. Who shall be able in time of persecution to indulge in vainglory? Who to live in pleasure? Not one: but there is much trembling and fear, making a great calm, composing the harbor into stillness, filling the soul with awe. I have heard from our fathers (for in our own time God grant it may not happen, since we are bidden not to ask for temptation), that in the persecution of old time one might see men that were indeed Christian.

None of them cared for money, none for wife, none for children, nor home, nor country: the one great concern with all was to save their lives (or, souls). There were they hiding, some in tombs and sepulchres, some in deserts: yes tender and dainty women too, fighting all the while with constant hunger.

Then think whether any longing for sumptuous and dainty living at all came into the mind of a woman, while in hiding beside a coffin (παρ■ λ■ρνακι), and waiting for her maid-servant to bring her meal, and trembling lest she should be taken, and lying in her terror as in a furnace: was she even aware that there ever was such a thing as dainty living, that such things as dress and ornaments exist at all (■ τι κ■σμος ■λως ■στ■ν)? Do you see that now is the persecution, with our passions, like wild beasts, setting upon us on every side?

Now is the trying persecution, both in this regard, and especially if it is not even thought to be persecution at all. For this (persecution) has also this evil in it, that being war, it is thought to be peace, so that we do not even arm ourselves against it, so that we do not even rise: no one fears, no one trembles. But if you do not believe me, ask the heathen, the persecutors, at what time was the conduct of the Christians more strict, at what time were they all more proved?

Few indeed had they then become in number, but rich in virtue. For say, what profit is it, that there should be hay in plenty, when there might be precious stones? The amount consists not in the sum of numbers, but in the proved worth. Elias was one: yet the whole world was not worth so much as he. And yet the

world consists of myriads: but they are no myriads, when they do not even come up to that one. Better is one that does the will of God, than ten thousand who are transgressors: for the ten thousands have not yet reached to the one.

Desire not a multitude of unprofitable children. Sirach 16:1 Such bring more blasphemy against God, than if they were not Christians. What need have I of a multitude? It is (only) more food for the fire. This one might see even in the body, that better is moderate food with health, than a (fatted) calf with damage. This is more food than the other: this is food, but that is disease. This too one may see in war: that better are ten expert and brave men, than ten thousand of no experience.

These latter, besides that they do no work, hinder also those that do work. The same too one may see to be the case in a ship, viz. that better are two experienced mariners, than ever so great a number of unskilful ones: for these will sink the ship. These things I say, not as looking with an evil eye upon your numbers, but wishing that all of you should be approved men, and not trust in your numbers. Many more in number are they who go down into hell: but greater than it is the Kingdom, however few it contain.

As the sand of the sea was the multitude of the people (Israel) yet one man saved them. Moses was but one, and yet he availed more than they all: Joshua was one and he was enabled to do more than the six hundred thousand. Let us not make this our study merely, that (the people) may be many, but rather, that they may be excellent; when this shall have been effected, then will that other follow also. No one wishes at the outset to make a spacious house, but he first makes it strong and sure, then spacious: no one lays the foundations so that he may be laughed at.

Let us first aim at this, and then at the other. Where this is, that also will be easy: but where this is not, the other, though it be, is to no profit. For if there be those who are able to shine in the Church, there will soon be also numbers: but where these are not, the numbers will never be good for anything. How many, suppose you, may there be in our city who are likely to be saved (το■ς σωζομ■νους)? It is disagreeable, what I am going to say, but I will say it nevertheless.

Among all these myriads, there are not to be found one hundred likely to be saved: nay, even as to these, I question it. For think, what wickedness there is in the young, what supineness in the aged! None makes it his duty to look after his own boy, none is moved by anything to be seen in his elder, to be emulous of imitating such an one. The patterns are defaced, and therefore it is that neither do the young become admirable in conduct. Tell not me, We are a goodly multitude: this is the speech of men who talk without thought or feeling (ψυχρ■v.)

In the concerns of men indeed, this might be said with some show of reason: but where God is concerned, (to say this with regard to Him) as having need of us, can never be allowed. Nay, let me tell you, even in the former case, this is a senseless speech (ψυχρ■v). Listen. A person that has a great number of domestics, if they be a corrupt set what a wretched time will he have of it! For him who has none, the hardship, it seems, amounts to this, that he is not waited on: but where a person has bad servants, the evil is, that he is ruining himself withal, and the damage is greater (the more there are of them.)

For it is far worse than having to be one's own servant, to have to fight with others, and take up a (continual) warfare. These things I say, that none may admire the Church because of its numbers, but that we may study to make the multitude proof-worthy; that each may be earnest for his own share of the duty -- not for his friends only, nor his kindred as I am always saying, nor for his neighbors, but that he may attract the strangers also. For example, Prayer is going on; there they lie (on bended knees), all the

young, stupidly unconcerned (ψυχρο■), (yes,) and old too: filthy nuisances rather than young men; giggling, laughing outright, talking -- for I have heard even this going on -- and jeering one another as they lie along on their knees: and there stand you, young man or elder: rebuke them, if you see them (behaving thus): if any will not refrain, chide him more severely: call the deacon, threaten, do what is in your power to do: and if he dare do anything to you, assuredly you shall have all to help you.

For who is so irrational, as, when he sees you chiding for such conduct, and them chidden not to take your part? Depart, having received your reward from the Prayer. -- In a master's house, we count those his best-disposed servants, who cannot bear to see any part of his furniture in disorder. Answer me; if at home you should see the silver plate lie tossed out of doors, though it is not your business, you will pick it up and bring it into the house: if you see a garment flung out of its place, though you have not the care of it, though you be at enmity with him whose business it is, yet, out of good-will to the master, will you not put it right?

So in the present case. These are part of the furniture: if you see them lying about in disorder, put them to rights: apply to me, I do not refuse the trouble: inform me, make the offender known to me: it is not possible for me to see all: excuse me (in this). See, what wickedness overspreads the whole world! Said I without reason that we are (no better than) so much hay (disorderly as) a troubled sea? I am not talking of those (young people), that they behave thus; (what I complain of, is) that such a sleepy indifference possesses those who come in here, that they do not even correct this misbehavior.

Again I see others stand talking while Prayer is going on; while the more consistent of them (do this) not only during the Prayer, but even when the Priest is giving the Benediction. O, horror! When shall there be salvation? When shall it be possible for us to propitiate God? -- Soldiers go to their diversion, and you shall see them, all keeping time in the dance, and nothing done negligently, but, just as in embroidery and painting, from the well-ordered arrangement in each individual part of the composition, there results at once an exceeding harmony and good keeping, so it is here: we have one shield, one head, all of us (in common): and if but some casual point be deranged by negligence, the whole is deranged and is spoilt, and the good order of the many is defeated by the disorder of the one part.

And, fearful indeed to think of, here you come, not to a diversion, not to act in a dance, and yet you stand disorderly. Know you not that you are standing in company with angels? With them you chant, with them sing hymns, and do you stand laughing? Is it not wonderful that a thunderbolt is not launched not only at those (who behave thus), but at us? For such behavior might well be visited with the thunderbolt. The Emperor is present, is reviewing the army: and do you, even with His eyes upon you, stand laughing, and endure to see another laughing?

How long are we to go on chiding, how long complaining? Ought not such to be treated as very pests and nuisances; as abandoned, worthless reprobates, fraught with innumerable mischiefs, to be driven away from the Church? When will these forebear laughing, who laugh in the hour of the dread Mystery (■ v ■p■ φρ■κης)? When refrain from their trifling, who talk at the instant of the Benediction? Have they no sense of shame before those who are present? Have they no fear of God? Are our own idle thoughts not enough for us, is it not enough that in our prayers we rove hither and there, but laughter also must needs intrude, and bursts of merriment?

Is it a theatrical amusement, what is done here? Aye, but, methinks, it is the theatres that do this: to the theatres we owe it that the most of you so refuse to be curbed by us, and to be reformed. What we build

up here, is thrown down there: and not only so, but the hearers themselves cannot help being filled with other filthinesses besides: so that the case is just the same as if one should want to clean out a place with a fountain above it discharging mire; for however much you may clean out, more runs in.

So it is here. For when we clean people out, as they come here from the theatres with their filthiness, there they go again, and take in a larger stock of filthiness, as if they lived for the purpose of only giving us trouble, and then come back to us, laden with ordure, in their manners, in their movements, in their words, in their laughter, in their idleness. Then once more we begin shovelling it out afresh, as if we had to do this only on purpose that, having sent them away clean, we may again see them clogging themselves with filth.

Therefore I solemnly protest to you, the sound members, that this will be to you judgment and condemnation, and I give you over to God from this time forth, if any having seen a person behaving disorderly, if any having seen any person talking, especially in that part (of the Service), shall not inform against him, not bring him round (to a better behavior). To do this is better than prayer. Leave your prayer and rebuke him, that you may both do him good, and yourself get profit, and so we may be enabled all to be saved and to attain unto the Kingdom of Heaven, through the grace and loving-kindness of our Lord Jesus Christ, with Whom to the Father and the Holy Ghost together be glory, dominion, honor, now and ever, and world without end. Amen.

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