

Homily 31 on the Acts of the Apostles

by St. John Chrysostom

The sermon emphasizes the importance of gentleness and compassion in the face of adversity, using the example of Paul's reaction to being stoned and dragged out of the city.

Scripture: Proverbs 16:1, Acts 14:15-27, 2 Corinthians 12:9, Ephesians 4:29, Ephesians 6:12, Philippians 1:30

Topics: "Apostolic Ministry", "Christian Persecution"

Description

John Chrysostom preaches on the fervent response of the Apostles, Barnabas and Paul, to the people who mistook them for gods, emphasizing their humility and the urgency to turn from idolatry to the living God who created all things. Despite facing persecution and stoning, Paul and Barnabas continued to preach the Gospel, confirming and exhorting the disciples to endure tribulations for the sake of entering the kingdom of God. Chrysostom highlights the importance of responding to insults and wrongs with gentleness and patience, following the example of Paul who endured suffering and persecution without seeking revenge, ultimately preaching the word of faith and patience.

Transcript

Acts XIV. 14, 15

Which when the Apostles, Barnabas and Paul, heard of, they rent their clothes, and ran in among the people, crying out and saying, Sirs, why do ye these things? We also are men of like passions with you, and preach unto you that you should turn from these vanities unto the living God, which made heaven, and earth, and the sea, and all things that are therein.

Mark the vehemence with which all this is done by the Apostles: rent their clothes, ran in, cried out, all from strong affection of the soul, revolted by the things that were done. For it was a grief, indeed a grief inconsolable, that they should needs be thought gods, and introduce idolatry, the very thing which they came to destroy! This also was a contrivance of the devil-- but he did not prevail. But what say they? We also are men of like passions with you. At the very outset they overthrew the evil.

They said not simply, Men, but As ye. Then, that they may not seem to honor the gods, hear what they add: Preaching unto you, that you should turn from these vanities unto the living God, Who made heaven, the sea, and all things that are therein. Observe how they nowhere mention things invisible. (b) For they had learned that one should study not so much to say somewhat worthy of God, as to say what is profitable for the hearers. (a) What then? If He be Maker of all things, why does He not also attend to

these things by His Providence? -- Who in times past suffered all nations to walk in their own ways Acts 14:16-- but wherefore He suffered them, this he does not say, for at present he keeps to the matter of immediate importance, nowhere bringing in the name of Christ.

Observe, he does not wish to swell the accusation against them, but rather that they themselves should refer all to God. Nevertheless, He left not Himself without witness, in that He did good, giving you rain from heaven, and fruitful seasons, filling your hearts with food and gladness. Acts 14:17 (c) See how covertly he puts the accusation in that He did good, etc. And yet if God did this, He could not have let them alone; on the contrary, they ought to be punished, for that, enjoying so great benefits, they had not acknowledged Him, not even as their feeder.

From heaven, he says, giving you rain. Thus also David said, From the fruit of their grain and wine and oil were they made to abound Psalm 4:7, and in many places speaking of Creation, he brings forward these benefits: and Jeremiah mentions first Creation, then Providence (shown) by the rains, so that the Apostle here discourses as taught from those Scriptures. Filling, he says, with food and gladness. Jeremiah 5:24 With large liberality (φιλοτιμία) the food is given, not merely for a frugal sufficiency, nor stinted by the need.

And saying these things, they scarcely stopped the multitudes Acts 14:18-- indeed by this very thing they gained most admiration -- from sacrificing to them. Do you observe that this was the point with them to put an end to that madness? But there came, it says, certain Jews from Antioch and Iconium Acts 14:19.-- Indeed children of the devil, that not in their own cities only, but also beyond them, they did these things, and as much made it their study to make an end of the preaching, as the Apostles were in earnest to establish it!-- and having persuaded the multitude and stoned Paul, they dragged him out of the city. (e) So then, the Gentiles regarded them as gods, but these dragged him, out of the city, supposing he had been dead.

Having persuaded the multitude -- for it is not likely that all thus revered them. In the very city in which they received this reverence, in the same were they thus terribly ill treated. And this also profited the beholders. Lest any man, he says, should think of me above that which he sees me to be, or that he hears anything from me. (v. 20.)-- Howbeit as the disciples stood round about him, he rose up and came into the city. (d) Here is fulfilled that saying, My grace is sufficient for you, for My strength is made perfect in weakness. 2 Corinthians 12:9 Greater this than the raising of the lame man! (f) Came into the city.

Do you mark the zeal, do you mark how fervent he is, how set on fire! He came into the city itself again: for proof that if on any occasion he did retire, it was because he had sown the word, and because it was not right to inflame their wrath. (h) Then they went over all the cities in which they had been in danger. And on the morrow, it says, he went forth with Barnabas to Derbe. And when they had preached the Gospel to that city, and had taught many, they returned again to Lystra, and to Iconium, and Antioch, confirming the souls of the disciples, and exhorting them to continue in the faith, and that we must through much tribulation enter into the kingdom of God. (v. 21, 22.)

This they said, this they showed. But it is purposely so done, not only by the Apostles, but by the disciples also, that they may learn from the very outset both the might of the preaching, and that they must themselves also suffer such things, that they may stand nobly, not idly gaping for the miracles, but much more (ready) for the trials. Therefore also the Apostle himself said, Having the same conflict which you saw in me and heard. Philippians 1:30 Persecutions succeeded to persecutions: wars, fightings, stonings.

(g) These things, not less than the miracles, both made them more illustrious, and prepared for them a greater rejoicing.

The Scripture nowhere says that they returned rejoicing because they had done miracles, but (it does say that they rejoiced), that they were counted worthy for that Name to suffer shame. Acts 5:41 And this they were taught of Christ, saying, Rejoice not that the devils obey you. Luke 10:20 For the joy indeed and without alloy is this, to suffer anything for Christ's sake. (i) And that through much tribulation: what sort of cheering (προτρυπ■) is this? How did they persuade them, by telling them at the outset of tribulations?

Then also another consolation. And when they had appointed for them elders in every Church, and had prayed with fasting, they commended them to the Lord, on whom they believed. Acts 14:23 Do you mark Paul's ardor?-- Then other consolation: Commended them, it says, to the Lord. And after they had passed throughout Pisidia, they came to Pamphylia. And when they had preached the word in Perga, they went down into Attalia (v. 24, 25): (I) and thence sailed to Antioch, from whence they had been recommended to the grace of God for the work which they fulfilled.

Acts 14:26 Why do they come back to Antioch? To report what had taken place yonder. And besides, there is a great purpose of Providence concerned: for it was needful that they should thenceforth preach with boldness to the Gentiles. They come therefore, reporting these things, that they may be able to know them: and it is providentially ordered, that just then came those who forbade to keep company with the Gentiles in order that from Jerusalem they might obtain great encouragement, and so go their ways with boldness.

And besides, it shows that in their temper there was nothing of self-will: for they come, at the same time showing their boldness, in that without the authority of those (at Jerusalem) they had preached to the Gentiles, and their obedience, in that they refer the matter to them: for they were not made arrogant, as (■ πεινο■θησαν) having achieved so great successes. Whence, it says, they had been recommended to the grace of God for the work which they had fulfilled. And yet moreover the Spirit had said, Separate Me Barnabas and Saul for the work whereunto I have called them.

Acts 13:2 And when they had come, and had gathered the Church together, they rehearsed all that God had done with them, and how He had opened the door of faith unto the Gentiles. And there they abode long time with the disciples. (v. 27, 28.) For the city being great had need of teachers.-- But let us look over again what has been said.

(Recapitulation.) Which when the Apostles, etc. Acts 14:14. First by the sight they checked them, by rending their garments. This did Joshua the Son of Nun upon the occasion of the defeat of the people. Then think not that this action was unworthy of them: for such was the eagerness, they would not otherwise have restrained it would not otherwise have quenched the conflagration (π■ρην). Therefore when need is to do something that is fit to be done, let us not decline it. For if even after all this they hardly persuaded them, if they had not acted thus, what might have been the consequence?

For if they had not done thus, they would have been thought to make a show of humility (ταπεινοθρονε■ν), and to be all the more desirous of the honor. And observe their language, how in rebuking it is moderated, alike full of wonder and of rebuke. This above all it was that hindered them, the saying, Preaching unto you to turn from these vanities unto God. Acts 14:15 We are men indeed, they say, but greater than these: for these are dead things. Mark how they not only subvert (the false), but teach (the true), saying nothing about things invisible -- Who made, say they, heaven and earth, and the sea,

and all things that are therein.

Who in times past, etc. (v. 16, 17.) He names as witnesses even the years (in their courses). And there came there certain Jews, etc. Acts 14:19 O that Jewish madness! Among a people that had so honored the Apostles, they had the hardihood to come, and to stone Paul. And they dragged him out of the city, being afraid of those (others) --Supposing he had been dead. (k) Howbeit, etc. and came into the city. Acts 14:20 For that the spirits of the disciples might not be downcast because they who were accounted gods suffered such treatment, they came in unto them and discoursed.

Then on the morrow, etc. And observe, first he goes forth to Derbe, and then comes back to Lystra and Iconium and Antioch, Acts 14:21 giving way to them while their passions are roused, but when they have ceased, then attacking them again. Do you mark, that it was not by (supernatural) grace that they managed all that they did, but by their own diligence? Confirming, it says the souls of the disciples: ■ πιστην■ζοντες, further establishing; so that they were established, but they added more thereto.

And that we must, etc. Acts 14:22: they foretold (this), that they might not be offended. And when they had appointed for them, etc. Again the ordinations accompanied with fastings: and again fasting, that purifying of our souls. (m) And having prayed, it says, with fastings, they commended them unto the Lord Acts 14:23: they taught them to fast also in their trials. (o) Why did they not make elders in Cyprus nor in Samaria? Because the latter was near to Jerusalem, the former to Antioch, and the word was strong there; whereas in those parts they needed much consolation, especially they of the Gentiles, who behooved to have much instruction.

And when they had come, etc. Acts 14:27 They came, teaching them that with good reason had they been ordained by the Spirit. (n) They said not what they themselves, but what God had done with them. It seems to me, that they mean their trials. It was not for nothing that they come here, nor to rest, but providentially guided by the Spirit, to the end that the preaching to the Gentiles might be firmly established. (p) And mark Paul's ardor. He does not ask whether it be right to speak to Gentiles, but he straightway speaks: therefore it is that he says, I did not refer myself to flesh and blood. Galatians 1:16

For it is indeed a great thing, a great, a generous soul (like this)! How many have since believed, and none of them all has shone like him! What we want is earnestness, exceeding ardor, a soul ready to encounter death. Else is it not possible to attain unto the Kingdom, not being crucified. Let us not deceive ourselves. For if in war it is impossible to come off safe while living daintily, and trafficking, and huckstering and idling, much more in this war. Or think ye not that it is a war worse than all others? (Infra, p. 204, note 1.)

For we wrestle not, he says, against flesh and blood. Ephesians 6:12 Since even while taking our meals and walking, and bathing, the enemy is present with us, and knows no time of truce, except that of sleep only: nay, often even then he carries on the war, injecting into us unclean thoughts, and making us lewd by means of dreams. We watch not, we do not rouse ourselves up, do not look to the multitude of the forces opposed to us, do not reflect, that this very thing constitutes the greatest misfortune -- that though surrounded by so great wars, we live daintily as in time of peace.

Believe me, worse than Paul suffered may have to be suffered now. Those enemies wounded him with stones: there is a wounding with words, even worse than stones. What then must we do? The same that he did: he did not hate those who cast stones at him, but after they had dragged him out, he entered again into their city, to be a benefactor to those who had done him such wrongs. If you also endurest him who harshly insults you, and has done you wrongs, then have you too been stoned.

Say not, I have done him no injury. For what injury had Paul done, that he should be stoned? He was announcing a Kingdom, he was bringing men away from error, and bringing them to God: benefits these, worthy of crowns, worthy of proclamation by voice of herald, worthy of a thousand good things -- not of stones. And yet (far from resenting) he did just the contrary. For this is the splendid victory. And they dragged him, Acts 14:19 it says. These too they often drag: but be not thou angry; on the contrary, preach thou the word with gentleness.

Hath one insulted you? Hold your peace, and bless if you can, and thou also hast preached the word, hast given a lesson of gentleness, a lesson of meekness. I know that many do not so smart under wounds, as they do under the blow which is inflicted by words: as indeed the one wound the body receives the other the soul. But let us not smart, or rather feeling the smart let us endure. Do you not see the pugilists, how, with their heads sorely battered, they bite their teeth into their lips, and so bear their smarts kindly?

No need to grind the teeth, no need to bite (the lips). Remember your Master, and by the remembrance you have at once applied the remedy. Remember Paul: reflect that thou, the beaten hast conquered, and he the beater, is defeated; and by this have you cured the whole. It is the turning of the scale a moment and you have achieved the whole: be not hurried away, do not even move, you have extinguished the whole (fire). Great eloquence of persuasion there is in suffering anything for Christ: you preach not the word of faith, but you preach the word of patience (φιλοσοφία).

But, you will say, the more he sees my gentleness, the more he sets upon me. Is it for this then that you are pained, that he increases your rewards the more? But this is the way, you say, to make him unbearable. This is mere pretext of your own littleness of mind: on the contrary, the other is the way to make him unbearable, namely, that you avenge yourself. If God had known, that through forbearance of revenge, the unjust became unbearable, He would not have done this Himself: on the contrary, He would have said, Avenge yourself: but He knew, that other than this is the more likely way to do good.

Make not thou a law contrary to God: do as He bids you. You are not kinder than He that made us. He has said, Bear to be wronged: you say, I requite wrong for wrong, that he may not become unbearable. Have you then more care for him than God has? Such talk is mere passion and ill temper, arrogance and setting up laws against God's laws. For even if the man were hurt (by our forbearance), would it not be our duty to obey? When God orders anything, let us not make a contrary law.

A submissive answer, we read, turns away wrath Proverbs 16:1: not an answer of opposition. If it profits you, it profits him also: but if it hurts you who art to set him right, how much more will it hurt him? Physician, heal yourself. Hath one spoken ill of you? Commend him thou. Hath he reviled you? Praise him thou. Hath he plotted against you? Do him a kindness. Requite him with the contrary things, if at least thou at all carest for his salvation and wish not thou to revenge your own suffering.

And yet, you will say, though he has often met with long-suffering from me he has become worse. This is not your affair, but his. Will you learn what wrongs God suffered? They threw down His altars, and slew His prophets 1 Kings 19:10, yet He endured it all. Could He not have launched a thunderbolt from above? Nay, when He had sent His prophets, and they killed them, then He sent His Son Matthew 21:37, when they wrought greater impieties, then He sent them greater benefits. And thou too, if you see one exasperated, then yield the more: since this madness has greater need of soothing (παράμυθος).

The more grievous his abuse of you, the more meekness does he need from you: and even as a gale when it blows strong, then it requires yielding to, so also he who is in a passion. When the wild beast is

most savage, then we all flee: so also should we flee from him that is angry. Think not that this is an honor to him: for is it an honor we show to the wild beast, and to madmen, when we turn aside out of their way? By no means it is a dishonor and a scorn: or rather not dishonor and scorn, but compassion and humanity.

Do you see not how the sailors, when the wind blows violently, take down their sails, that the vessel may not sink? How, when the horses have run away with the driver, he only leads them into the (open) plain, and does not pull against them that he may not voluntarily exhaust his strength? This do thou also. Wrath is afire, it is a quick flame needing fuel: do not supply food to the fire, and you have soon extinguished the evil. Anger has no power of itself; there must be another to feed it.

For you there is no excuse. He is possessed with madness, and knows not what he does; but when thou, seeing what he is, fallest into the same evils, and art not brought to your right senses by the sight, what excuse can there be for you? If coming to a feast thou see at the very outset of the feast some one drunken and acting unseemly, would not he, who after seeing him makes himself drunk, be much more inexcusable? Just so it is here. Do we think it any excuse to say, I was not the first to begin?

This is against us, that even the sight of the other in that condition did not bring us to our right senses. It is just as if one should say, I did not murder him first. For this very thing makes you deserving of punishment, that even upon the warning of such a spectacle thou did not restrain yourself. If you should see the drunken man in the act of vomiting, retching, bursting, his eyes strained, filling the table with his filthiness, everybody hurrying out of his way, and then should fall into the same state yourself, would you not be more hateful?

Like him is he that is in a passion: more than he who vomits, he has his veins distended, his eyes inflamed, his bowels racked; he vomits forth words far more filthy than that food; all crude what he utters, nothing duly digested, for his passion will not let it be. But as in that case excess of fumes (χρῦμων), making an uproar in the stomach, often rejects all its contents; so here, excess of heat, making a tumult in the soul suffers him not to conceal what it were right to leave unsaid, but things fit and unfit to be spoken, he says all alike, not putting the hearers but himself to shame.

As then we get out of the way of those that vomit, so let us from those who are angry. Let us cast dust upon their vomit: By doing what? By holding our peace: let us call the dogs to eat up the vomit. I know that you are disgusted at hearing this: but I wish you to feel this same disgust when you see these things take place, and not to be pleased at the thing. The abusive man is filthier than the dog that returns to its own vomit. For if indeed having vomited once he were done with it, he would not be like that dog: but if he vomits the same things again, it is plain that he does so from having eaten the same again.

What then is more abominable than such an one? What filthier than that mouth which chews such food? And yet this is a work of nature, but the other not or rather both the one and the other are contrary to nature. How? Since it is not according to nature to be causelessly abusive, but against nature: he speaks nothing then like a man, but part as beast, part as madman. As then the disease of the body is contrary to nature, so also is this. And to show that it is contrary to nature, if he shall continue in it, he will perish little by little: but if he continue in that which is natural, he will not perish.

I had rather sit at table with a man who eats dirt, than with one who speaks such words. See ye not the swine devouring dung? So also do these. For what is more stinking than the words which abusive men utter? It is their study to speak nothing wholesome, nothing pure, but whatever is base, whatever is unseemly, that they study both to do and say: and what is worse, they think to disgrace others, while they

in fact are disgracing themselves. For that it is themselves they disgrace is plain.

For, leaving out of the question those who speak lies (in their railings), say it be some notorious harlot, or even from the stage some other (abandoned creature), and let that person be having a fight with some other person: then let the latter cast this up to the former (what she or he is), and the former retort upon the latter the same reproach: which of them is most damaged by the words? For the former is but called what in fact he or she is, which is not the case with the other: so that the first gets nothing more in the way of shame (than there was before), while to the other there accrues a great accession of disgrace.

But again, let there be some hidden actions (mod. text ἐργασμῶνα which have been done), and let only the person abusing know of them: then, holding his peace until now, let him openly parade (ἐκπομπῇ) the reproach: even so, he himself is more disgraced than the other. How? By making himself the herald of the wickedness, so getting for himself either the imputation of not being privy to any such thing, or the character of one not fit to be trusted. And you shall see all men immediately accuse him: If indeed he had been privy to a murder being done, he ought to have revealed it all: and so they regard him with aversion as not human even, they hate him, they say he is a wild beast, fierce and cruel: while the other they pardon much rather than him.

For we do not so much hate those that have wounds, as those that compel one to uncover and show them. Thus that man has not only disgraced the other, but himself as well and his hearers, and the common nature of men: he has wounded the hearer, done no good. For this reason Paul says: If there be any word that is good for edifying, that it may minister grace unto the hearers. Ephesians 4:29 Let us get a tongue speaking only good things, that we may be lovely and amiable. But indeed, everything has come to that pitch of wickedness, that many boast of the very things, for which they should hide their faces.

For the threats of the many are of this kind: you can not bear my tongue, say they. Words, these, worthy only of a woman, of an abandoned drunken old hag, one of those that are dragged (to punishment) in the forum, a procuress. Nothing more shameful than these words, nothing more unmanly, more womanlike, than to have your strength in the tongue, and to think great things of yourself because you can rail, just like the fellows in processions, like the buffoons, parasites, and flatterers.

Swine they are rather than men, who pride themselves upon this. Whereas you should (sooner) have buried yourself, and if another gave you this character, should recoil from the charge as odious and unmanly, instead of that you have made yourself the herald of (your own) disgrace (βρεῶν). But you will not be able to hurt him you speak ill of. Wherefore I beseech you, considering how the wickedness has come to such a height, that many boast of it, let us return to our senses, let us recover those who are thus mad, let us take away these councils out of the city, let us make our tongue gracious, let us rid it of all evil speaking, that being clean from sins, we may be able to draw down upon us the good-will from above, and to have mercy vouchsafed unto us from God, through the grace and compassion of His only-begotten Son, with Whom to the Father, together with the Holy Spirit, be glory, might, honor, now and ever, world without end. Amen.

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