

Homily 34 on the Acts of the Apostles

by St. John Chrysostom

St. John Chrysostom's Homily 34 explores the dynamics of Paul and Barnabas's separation, emphasizing divine providence, character differences, and the importance of humility in ministry.

Topics: "Humility In Ministry", "Effective Evangelism"

Description

John Chrysostom preaches on the humility of Paul and Barnabas in Antioch, where they taught and preached the word of the Lord alongside others. Despite their sharp contention over taking John Mark on their journey, it was a divine plan for each to receive their proper place in leading and being led. The separation led to Barnabas taking Mark to Cyprus and Paul choosing Silas, both being recommended by the brethren. Paul's decision to circumcise Timothy for the sake of the Jews in those quarters showcases his wisdom and care for spreading the Gospel effectively.

Transcript

Acts XV. 35

Paul also and Barnabas continued in Antioch, teaching and preaching the word of the Lord, with many others also.

Observe again their humility, how they let others also take part in the preaching. And some days after Paul said to Barnabas, Let us go again and visit our brethren in every city where we have preached the word of the Lord, and see how they do. And Barnabas determined to take with them John, whose surname was Mark. But Paul thought not good (■ ξ■ου see note 3, p. 213) to take him with them, who departed from them from Pamphylia, and went not with them to the work. And the contention (or exasperation) was so sharp between them, that they departed asunder one from the other.

Acts 15:36-39 And already indeed Luke has described to us the character of the Apostles, that the one was more tender and indulgent, but this one more strict and austere. For the gifts are diverse -- (the gifts, I say), for that this is a gift is manifest -- but the one befitting one, the other another set of characters, and if they change places, harm results instead of good. (b) In the Prophets too we find this: diverse minds, diverse characters: for instance, Elias austere, Moses meek.

So here Paul is more vehement. And observe for all this, how gentle he is. Thought not good, it says, to take him with them that had departed from them from Pamphylia. (a) And there seems indeed to be

exasperation (παροξυσμ■), but in fact the whole matter is a plan of the Divine Providence, that each should receive his proper place: and it behooved that they should not be upon a par, but the one should lead, and the other be led. And so Barnabas took Mark, and sailed unto Cyprus; and Paul chose Silas, and departed, being recommended by the brethren unto the grace of God.

And he went through Syria and Cilicia, confirming the Churches. Acts 15:39-41 And this also is a work of Providence. For the Cyprians had exhibited nothing of the like sort as they at Antioch and the rest: and those needed the softer character, but these needed such a character as Paul's. Which then, say you, did well? He that took, or he that left? *** (c) For just as a general would not choose to have a low person always to his baggage-bearer, so neither did the Apostle. This corrected the other's, and instructed (Mark) himself.

Then did Barnabas ill? say you. And how is it not amiss (■ τοπον), that upon so small a matter there should arise so great an evil? In the first place then, no evil did come of it, if, sufficing each for whole nations, they were divided the one from the other, but a great good. And besides, they would not readily have chosen to leave each other. But admire, I pray you, the writer, how he does not conceal this either. But at any rate, say you, if they must needs part, let it be without exasperation.

Nay, but if nothing more, observe this, that in this too is shown what was of man (in the preaching of the Gospel). For if the like behooved to be shown (even) in what Christ did, much more here. And besides, the contention cannot be said to be evil, when each disputes for such objects (as here) and with just reason. I grant you, if the exasperation were in seeking his own, and contending for his own honor, this might well be (reproved): but if wishing, both the one and the other, to instruct and teach, the one took this way and the other that, what is there to find fault with?

For in many things they acted upon their human judgment; for they were not stocks or stones. And observe how Paul impeaches (Mark), and gives the reason. For of his exceeding humility he revered Barnabas, as having been partner with him in so great works, and being with him: but still he did not so reverence him, as to overlook (what was necessary). Now which of them advised best, it is not for us to pronounce: but thus far (we may affirm), that it was a great arrangement of Providence, if these were to be vouchsafed a second visitation, but those were not to be visited even once.

(a) Teaching and preaching the word of the Lord. Acts 15:35 They did not simply tarry in Antioch, but taught. What did they teach, and what preach (evangelize)? They both (taught) those that were already believers, and (evangelized) those that were not yet such. And some days after, etc. Acts 15:36 For because there were offenses without number, their presence was needed. (d) How they do, he says. And this he did not know: naturally. See him ever alert, solicitous, not bearing to sit idle, though he underwent dangers without end. Do you mark, it was not of cowardice that he came to Antioch? He acts just as a physician does in the case of the sick. And the need of visiting them he showed by saying, In which we preached the word. And Barnabas determined, etc. Acts 15:37-40 (So) Barnabas departed, and went not with (him). (b) The point to be considered, is not that they differed in their opinions, but that they accommodated themselves the one to the other (seeing), that thus it was a greater good their being parted: and the matter took a pretext from this. What then? Did they withdraw in enmity? God forbid! In fact you see after this Barnabas receiving many encomiums from Paul in the Epistles. There was sharp contention, it says, not enmity nor quarrelling. The contention availed so far as to part them. And Barnabas took Mark, etc. And with reason: for what each supposed to be profitable, he did not forego thereafter, because of the fellowship with the other. Nay, it seems to me that the parting took place advisedly (κατ■

σ■νεσιγ), and that they said one to another, As I wish not, and you wish, therefore that we may not fight, let us distribute the places. So that in fact they did this, altogether yielding each to the other: for Barnabas wished Paul's plan to stand, therefore withdrew; on the other hand, Paul wished the other's plan to stand, therefore he withdrew. Would to God we too made such separations, as to go forth for preaching. A wonderful man this is; and exceedingly great! To Mark this contest was exceedingly beneficial. For the awe inspired by Paul converted him, while the kindness of Barnabas caused that he was not left behind: so that they contend indeed, but the gain comes to one and the same end. For indeed, seeing Paul choosing to leave him, he would be exceedingly awed, and would condemn himself, and seeing Barnabas so taking his part, he would love him exceedingly: and so the disciple was corrected by the contention of the teachers: so far was he from being offended thereby. For if indeed they did this with a view to their own honor, he might well be offended: but if for his salvation, and they contend for one and the same object, to show that he who honored him * * * had well determined, what is there amiss (■ τοπον) in it?

(e) But Paul, it says, departed, having chosen Silas, and being commended to the grace of God. What is this? They prayed it says: they besought God. See on all occasions how the prayer of the brethren can do great things. And now he journeyed by land, wishing even by his journeying to benefit those who saw (το■ς ■ρ■ντας) him. For when indeed they were in haste they sailed, but now not so. (c) And he went through Syria and Cilicia, confirming the Churches. Then came he to Derbe and Lystra. Acts 15:41 Mark the wisdom of Paul: he does not go to other cities before he has visited them which had received the Word. For it is folly to run at random. This let us also do: let us teach the first in the first place, that these may not become an hindrance to them that are to come after.

And, behold a certain disciple was there, named Timotheus, the son of a certain woman, which was a Jewess, and believed; but his father was a Greek: which was well reported of by the brethren that were at Lystra and Iconium. Him would Paul have to go forth with him; and took and circumcised him because of the Jews which were in those quarters; for they knew all that his father was a Greek. Acts 16:1-3 It is indeed amazing, the wisdom of Paul! He that has had so many battles about circumcision, he that moved all things to this end, and did not give over until he had carried his point, now that the decree is made sure, circumcises the disciple.

He not only does not forbid others, but himself does this thing. (b) Him, it says, he would have to go forth with him. And the wonder is this, that he even took him unto him. Because of the Jews, it says, which were in those parts: for they would not endure to hear the word from one uncircumcised. (a) Nothing could be wiser. So that in all things he looked to what was profitable: he did nothing upon his own preference (προλ■ψει). (c) And what (then)? Mark the success: he circumcised, that he might take away circumcision: for he preached the decrees of the Apostles.

And as they went through the cities, they delivered them the decrees for to keep, that were ordained of the Apostles and elders which were at Jerusalem. And so were the Churches established in the faith, and increased in number daily. (v. 4, 5.) Do you mark fighting, and by fighting, edification? Not warred upon by others, but themselves doing contrary things, so they edified the Church! They introduced a decree not to circumcise, and he circumcises! And so were the Churches, it says, established in the faith, and in multitude: increased, it says, in number daily.

Then he does not continue to tarry with these, as having come to visit them: but how? He goes further. Now when they had gone throughout Phrygia and the region of Galatia, and were forbidden of the Holy Ghost to preach the word in Asia, Acts 16:6 having left Phrygia and Galatia, they hastened into the

interior. For, it says, After they had come to Mysia, they assayed to go into Bithynia: but the Spirit suffered them not. Acts 16:7 Wherefore they were forbidden, he does not say, but that they were forbidden, he does say, teaching us to obey and not ask questions, and showing that they did many things as men.

And the Spirit, it says, suffered them not: but having passed by Mysia they came down to Troas. Acts 16:8 And a vision appeared to Paul in the night; There stood a man of Macedonia, and prayed him, saying, Come over into Macedonia, and help us. Acts 16:9 Why a vision, and not the Holy Ghost? Because He forbade the other. He would even in this way draw them over: since to the saints also He appeared in a dream, and in the beginning (Paul) himself saw a vision, a man coming in and laying his hands upon him.

Acts 9:12 In this manner also Christ appears to him, saying, You must stand before Cæsar. Then for this reason also He draws him there, that the preaching may be extended. This is why he was forbidden to tarry long in the other cities, Christ urging him on. For these were to enjoy the benefit of John for a long time, and perhaps did not extremely need him (Paul), but there he behoved to go. And now he crosses over and goes forth. And after he had seen the vision, immediately we endeavored to go into Macedonia, assuredly gathering that the Lord had called us for to preach the Gospel unto them.

Acts 16:10 Then the writer mentions also the places, as relating a history, and showing where he made a stay (namely), in the greater cities, but passed by the rest. Therefore loosing from Troas, we came with a straight course to Samothracia, and the next day to Neapolis; and from thence to Philippi, which is the chief city of that part of Macedonia, and a colony. (v. 11, 12.) It is a high distinction for a city, the being a colony. And in this city we were tarrying certain days. But let us look over again what has been said.

(Recapitulation.) And after some days, Paul said, etc. Acts 15:36 He put to Barnabas a necessity for their going abroad, saying Let us visit the cities in which we preached the word. But Paul begged, etc. Acts 15:38 And yet no need for him to beg, who had to make an accusation presently. This happens even in the case where God and men are the parties: the man requests, God is angry. For instance, when He says, If her father had spit in her face Numbers 12:14: and again, Let me alone, and in Mine anger I will blot out this people. Exodus 32:32 And Samuel when he mourns for Saul. 1 Samuel 15:35 For by both, great good is done. Thus also here: the one is angry, the other not so. The same happens also in matters where we are concerned. And the sharp contention with good reason, that Mark may receive a lesson, and the affair may not seem mere stage-playing. For it is not to be thought that he who bids, Let not the sun go down upon your wrath, Ephesians 4:26 would have been angry because of such a matter as this: nor that he who on all occasions gave way would not have given way here, he who so greatly loved Paul that before this he sought him in Tarsus, and brought him to the Apostles, and undertook the alms in common with him, and in common the business relating to the decree. But they take themselves so as to instruct and make perfect by their separation them that need the teaching which was to come from them. And he rebukes others indeed, but bids do good to all men. As in fact he does elsewhere, saying, But you, be not weary in well-doing. 2 Thessalonians 3:13 This we also do in our common practice. Here it seems to me that others also were alike displeased with Paul. And thereupon taking them also apart, he does all, and exhorts and admonishes. Much can concord do, much can charity. Though it be for a great matter you ask, though thou be unworthy, you shall be heard for your purpose of heart: fear not.

He went, it says, through the cities And, behold, there was a disciple, by name Timothy, who had a good report of the brethren which were in Lystra and Iconium. (v. 41; 16:1.) Great was the grace of Timothy. When Barnabas departed (■ π■στη), he finds another, equivalent to him. Of him he says, Remembering your tears and your unfeigned faith, which dwelt first in your grandmother Lois, and in your mother Eunice.

2 Timothy 1:5 His father continued to be a Gentile, and therefore it was that (Timothy) was not circumcised. (a) Observe the Law already broken.

Or if not so, I suppose he was born after the preaching of the Gospel but this is perhaps not so. (c) He was about to make him a bishop, and it was not meet that he should be uncircumcised. (e) And this was not a small matter, seeing it offended after so long a time: (b) for from a child, he says, you have known the Holy Scriptures. 2 Timothy 3:15 (d) And as they went through the cities, they delivered them the decrees for to keep. Acts 16:4 For until then, there was no need for the Gentiles to keep any such.

The beginning of the abrogation was the Gentiles' not keeping these things, and being none the worse for it: nor having any inferiority in respect of faith: anon, of their own will they abandoned the Law. (f) Since therefore he was about to preach, that he might not smite the Jews a double blow, he circumcised Timothy. And yet he was but half (a Jew by birth), his father being a Greek: but yet, because that was a great point carried in the cause of the Gentiles, he did not care for this: for the Word must needs be disseminated: therefore also he with his own hands circumcised him.

And so were the churches established in the faith. Do you mark here also how from going counter (to his own object) a great good results? And increased in number daily. Acts 16:5 Do you observe, that the circumcising not only did no harm, but was even of the greatest service? And a vision appeared unto Paul in the night. Acts 16:9 Not now by Angels, as to Philip, as to Cornelius, but how? By a vision it is now shown to him: in more human sort, not now as before (i.e., v. 6, 7) in more divine manner.

For where the compliance is more easy, it is done in more human sort; but where great force was needed, there in more divine. For since he was but urged to preach, to this end it is shown him in a dream: but to forbear preaching, he could not readily endure: to this end the Holy Ghost reveals it to him. Thus also it was then with Peter, Arise, go down. Acts 10:20 For of course the Holy Spirit did not work what was otherwise easy: but (here) even a dream sufficed him. And to Joseph also, as being readily moved to compliance, the appearance is in a dream, but to the rest in waking vision.

Matthew 1:20; 2:13-19 Thus to Cornelius, and to Paul himself. And lo, a man of Macedonia, etc. and not simply enjoining, but beseeching, and from the very persons in need of (spiritual) cure. ch. 10:3; 9:3 Assuredly gathering, it says, that the Lord had called us. Acts 16:10, that is, inferring, both from the circumstance that Paul saw it and none other, and from the having been forbidden by the Spirit, and from their being on the borders; from all these they gathered. Therefore loosing from Troas, we came with a straight course, etc.

Acts 16:11 That is, even the voyage made this manifest: for there was no tardiness. It became the very root of Macedonia. It was not always in the way of sharp contention that the Holy Spirit wrought: but this so rapid progress (of the Word) was a token that the thing was more than human. And yet it is not said that Barnabas was exasperated, but, Between them there arose a sharp contention. Acts 15:39 If the one was not exasperated neither was the other.

Knowing this, let us not merely pick out (■ κλ■γωμεν) these things, but let us learn and be taught by them: for they were not written without a purpose. It is a great evil to be ignorant of the Scriptures: from the things we ought to get good from, we get evil. Thus also medicines of healing virtue, often, from the ignorance of those who use them, ruin and destroy: and arms which are meant to protect, are themselves the cause of death unless one know how to put them on. But the reason is, that we seek everything rather than what is good for ourselves.

And in the case of a house, we seek what is good for it, and we would not endure to see it decaying with age, or tottering, or hurt by storms: but for our soul we make no account: nay, even should we see its foundations rotting, or the fabric and the roof, we make no account of it. Again, if we possess brute creatures, we seek what is good for them: we call in both horse-feeders and horse-doctors, and all besides: we attend to their housing, and charge those who are entrusted with them, that they may not drive them at random or carelessly, nor take them out by night at unseasonable hours nor sell away their provender; and there are many laws laid down by us for the good of the brute creatures: but for that of our soul there is no account taken.

But why speak I of brute creatures which are useful to us? There are many who keep small birds (or sparrows) which are useful for nothing except that they simply amuse, and there are many laws even about them, and nothing is neglected or without order, and we take care for everything rather than for our own selves. Thus we make our selves more worthless than all. And if indeed a person abusively call us dog, we are annoyed: but while we are opprobrious to ourselves, not in word, but in deed, and do not even bestow as much care on our soul as on dogs, we think it no great harm.

Do you see how all is full of darkness? How many are careful about their dogs, that they may not be filled with more than the proper food, that so they may be keen and fit for hunting, being set on by famine and hunger: but for themselves they have no care to avoid luxury: and the brute creatures indeed they teach to exercise philosophy, while they let themselves sink down into the savageness of the brutes. The thing is a riddle. And where are your philosophic brutes? There are such; or, say, do you not take it to be philosophy, when a dog gnawed with hunger, after having hunted and caught his prey, abstains from the food; and though he sees his meal ready before him, and with hunger urging him on, yet waits for his master?

Be ashamed of yourselves: teach your bellies to be as philosophic. You have no excuse. When you have been able to implant such philosophic self-command in an irrational nature, which neither speaks nor hears reason, shall you not much more be able to implant it in yourself? For that it is the effect of man's care, not of nature is plain: since otherwise all dogs ought to have this habit. Do you then become as dogs. For it is you that compel me to fetch my examples thence: for indeed they should be drawn from heavenly things; but since if I speak of those, you say, Those are (too) great, therefore I speak nothing of heavenly things: again, if I speak of Paul, you say, He was an Apostle: therefore neither do I mention Paul: if again I speak of a man, you say, That person could do it: therefore I do not mention a man even, but a brute creature; a creature too, that has not this habit by nature, lest you should say that it effected this by nature, and not (which is the fact) from choice: and what is wonderful, choice not self-acquired, but (the result of) your care.

The creature does not give a thought to the fatigue, the wear and tear it has undergone in running down the prey, not a thought to this, that by its own proper toil it has made the capture: but casting away all these regards, it observes the command of its master, and shows itself superior to the cravings of appetite. True; because it looks to be praised, it looks to get a greater meal. Say then to yourself, that the dog through hope of future pleasure, despises that which is present: while you do not choose for hope of future good things to despise those which are present; but he indeed knows, that, if he tastes of that food at the wrong time and against his master's will, he will both be deprived of that, and not get even that which was apportioned to him, but receive blows instead of food: whereas you cannot even perceive this, and that which he has learned by dint of custom, you do not succeed in acquiring even from reason.

Let us imitate the dogs. The same thing hawks also and eagles are said to do: what the dogs do with regard to hares and deer, the same do those with regard to birds; and these too act from a philosophy learned from men. These facts are enough to condemn us, these enough to convict us. To mention another thing:-- they that are skilled in breaking horses, shall take them, wild, fierce, kicking, biting, and in a short time so discipline them, that though the teacher be not there, it is a luxury to ride them, their paces are so thoroughly well-ordered: but the paces of the soul may be all disordered, and none cares for it: it bounds, and kicks, and its rider is dragged along the ground like a child, and makes a most disgraceful figure, and yet no one puts curbs on her, and leg-ties, and bits, nor mounts upon her the skilful rider -- Christ, I mean.

And therefore it is that all is turned upside down. For when you both teach dogs to master the craving of the belly, and tame the fury in a lion, and the unruliness of horses, and teach the birds to speak plainly, how inconsistent must it not be -- to implant achievements of reason in natures that are without reason, and to import the passions of creatures without reason into natures endowed with reason? There is no excuse for us, none. All who have succeeded (in mastering their passions) will accuse us, both believers and unbelievers: for even unbelievers have so succeeded; yea, and wild beasts, and dogs, not men only: and we shall accuse our own selves, since we succeed, when we will, but when we are slothful, we are dragged away.

For indeed many even of those who live a very wicked life, have oftentimes changed themselves when they wished. But the cause is, as I said, that we go about seeking for what is good for other things, not what is good for ourselves. If you build a splendid house, you know what is good for the house, not what is good for yourself: if you take a beautiful garment, you know what is good for the body, not for yourself: and if you get a good horse, it is so likewise. None makes it his mark how his soul shall be beautiful; and yet, when that is beautiful, there is no need of any of those things: as, if that be not beautiful, there is no good of them.

For like as in the case of a bride, though there be chambers hung with tapestry wrought with gold, though there be choirs of the fairest and most beautiful women, though there be roses and garlands, though there be a comely bridegroom, and the maidservants and female friends, and everybody about them be handsome, yet, if the bride herself be full of deformity, there is no good of all those; as on the other hand if she were beautiful, neither would there be any loss arising from (the want of) those, nay just the contrary; for in the case of an ugly bride, those would make her look all the uglier, while in the other case, the beautiful would look all the more beautiful: just so, the soul, when she is beautiful, not only needs none of those adjuncts, but they even cast a shade over her beauty.

For we shall see the philosopher shine, not so much when in wealth, as in poverty. For in the former case many will impute it to his riches, that he is not superior to riches: but when he lives with poverty for his mate, and shines through all, and will not let himself be compelled to do anything base, then none claims shares with him in the crown of philosophy. Let us then make our soul beautiful, if at least we would fain be rich. What profit is it, when your mules indeed are white and plump and in good condition, but you who are drawn by them are lean and scurvy and ill-favored?

What is the gain, when your carpets indeed are soft and beautiful, full of rich embroidery and art, and your soul goes clad in rags, or even naked and foul? What the gain, when the horse indeed has his paces beautifully ordered, more like dancing than stepping, while the rider, together with his choral train and adorned with more than bridal ornaments, is more crooked than the lame, and has no more command

over hands and feet than drunkards and madmen? Tell me now, if some one were to give you a beautiful horse, and to distort your body, what would be the profit?

Now you have your soul distorted, and care you not for it? Let us at length, I beseech you, have a care for our own selves. Do not let us make our own selves more worthless than all beside. If anyone insult us with words, we are annoyed and vexed: but insulting ourselves as we do by our deeds, we do not give a thought to it. Let us, though late, come at last to our senses, that we may be enabled by having much care for our soul, and laying hold upon virtue, to obtain eternal good things, through the grace and mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ, with Whom to the Father, together with the Holy Spirit, be glory, might, honor, now and evermore, world without end. Amen.

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