

Homily 39 on Matthew

by St. John Chrysostom

Jesus defends His disciples for plucking grain on the Sabbath and explains the true purpose and significance of the Sabbath.

Scripture: Hosea 6:6, Matthew 12:1-3, Matthew 12:5, Matthew 12:7-8, Mark 2:27, Luke 6:36, Romans 5:10, 1 Corinthians 5:8

Topics: "Sabbath Observance", "Spiritual Growth"

Description

John Chrysostom preaches on Jesus breaking the Sabbath to teach important lessons, defending His disciples' actions by citing David's example and the priests' actions in the temple. Chrysostom emphasizes the importance of understanding the spirit of the law over legalistic observance, pointing out that the Sabbath was made for man's benefit. He encourages believers to focus on spiritual rest, refrain from evil, and strive for continuous spiritual growth, reminding them that the Son of Man is Lord of the Sabbath. Chrysostom urges his audience to emulate the examples of those who go above and beyond in their faith and good works, highlighting the ease of following Christ's teachings with dedication and vigilance.

Transcript

Matt. XII. 1.

At that time Jesus went on the Sabbath day through the grain; and His disciples were a hungered, and began to pluck the ears of grain, and to eat.

But Luke says, On a double Sabbath. Now what is a double Sabbath? When the cessation from toil is twofold, both that of the regular Sabbath, and that of another feast coming upon it. For they call every cessation from toil, a sabbath.

But why could He have led them away from it, who foreknew all, unless it had been His will that the Sabbath should be broken? It was His will indeed, but not simply so; wherefore He never breaks it without a cause, but giving reasonable excuses: that He might at once bring the law to an end, and not startle them. But there are occasions on which He even repeals it directly, and not with circumstance: as when He anoints with the clay the eyes of the blind man; John 9:6, 14 as when He says, My Father works hitherto, and I work. And He does so, by this to glorify His own Father, by the other to soothe the infirmity of the Jews. At which last He is laboring here, putting forward as a plea the necessity of nature; although in the case of acknowledged sins, that could not of course ever be an excuse. For neither may the

murderer make his anger a plea, nor the adulterer allege his lust, no, nor any other excuse; but here, by mentioning their hunger, He freed them from all blame.

But do thou, I pray you, admire the disciples, how entirely they control themselves, and make no account of the things of the body, but esteem the table of the flesh a secondary thing, and though they have to struggle with continual hunger, do not even so withdraw themselves. For except hunger had sorely constrained them, they would not have done so much as this.

What then do the Pharisees? When they saw it, it is said, they said to Him, Behold, Your disciples do that which is not lawful to do upon the Sabbath day. Matthew 12:2

Now here indeed with no great vehemence (yet surely that would have been consistent in them) -- nevertheless they are not vehemently provoked, but simply find fault. But when He stretched out the withered hand and healed it, then they were so infuriated, as even to consult together about slaying and destroying Him. For where nothing great and noble is done, they are calm; but where they see any made whole, they are savage, and fret themselves, and none so intolerable as they are: such enemies are they of the salvation of men.

How then does Jesus defend His disciples? Have ye not read, says He, what David did in the temple, when he was an hungered, himself and all they that were with him? How he entered into the house of God, and did eat the show-bread, which was not lawful for him to eat, neither for them which were with him, but only for the priests? Matthew 12:3-4

Thus, whereas in pleading for His disciples, He brings forward David; for Himself, it is the Father. John 5:17

And observe His reproofing manner: Have ye not read what David did? For great indeed was that prophet's glory, so that Peter also afterwards pleading with the Jews, spoke on this wise, Let me freely speak unto you of the patriarch David, that he is both dead and buried. Acts 2:29

But wherefore does He not call him by the name of his rank, either on this occasion or afterwards? Perhaps because He derived His race from him.

Now had they been a candid sort of persons, He would have turned His discourse to the disciples' suffering from hunger; but abominable as they were and inhuman, He rather rehearses unto them a history.

But Mark says, In the days of Abiathar the High Priest: not stating what was contrary to the history, but implying that he had two names; and adds that he gave unto him, indicating that herein also David had much to say for himself, since even the very priest suffered him; and not only suffered, but even ministered unto him. For tell me not that David was a prophet, for not even so was it lawful, but the privilege was the priests': wherefore also He added, but for the priests only. For though he were ten thousand times a prophet, yet was he not a priest; and though he were himself a prophet, yet not so they that were with him; since to them too we know that he gave.

What then, it might be said, were they all one with David? Why talk to me of dignity, where there seems to be a transgression of the law, even though it be the constraint of nature? Yea, and in this way too He has the more entirely acquitted them of the charges, in that he who is greater is found to have done the same.

And what is this to the question, one may say; for it was not surely the Sabbath, that he transgressed? You tell me of that which is greater, and which especially shows the wisdom of Christ, that letting go the Sabbath, He brings another example greater than the Sabbath. For it is by no means the same, to break in upon a day, and to touch that holy table, which it was not lawful for any man to touch. Since the Sabbath indeed has been violated, and that often; nay rather it is continually being violated, both by circumcision, and by many other works; and at Jericho Joshua 6:15 too one may see the same to have happened; but this happened then only. So that He more than obtains the victory. How then did no man blame David, although there was yet another ground of charge heavier than this, that of the priests' murder, which had its origin from this? But He states it not, as applying himself to the present subject only.

2. Afterwards again He refutes it in another way also. For as at first He brought in David, by the dignity of the person quelling their pride; so when He had stopped their mouths, and had put down their boasting, then He adds also the more appropriate refutation. And of what sort is this? Do you not know, that in the temple the priests profane the Sabbath, and are blameless? Matthew 12:5 For in that other instance indeed, says He, the emergency made the relaxation, but here is the relaxation even without emergency. He did not however at once thus refute them but first by way of permission, afterwards as insisting upon his argument. Because it was meet to draw the stronger inference last, although the former argument also had of course its proper weight.

For tell me not, that it is not freeing one's self from blame, to bring forward another who is committing the same sin. For when the doer incurs no blame, the act on which he has ventured becomes a rule for others to plead.

Nevertheless He was not satisfied with this, but subjoins also what is more decisive, saying that the deed is no sin at all; and this more than anything was the sign of a glorious victory, to point to the law repealing itself, and in two ways doing so, first by the place, then by the Sabbath; or rather even in three ways, in that both the work is twofold that is done, and with it goes also another thing, its being done by the priests; and what is yet more, that it is not even brought as a charge. For they, says He, are blameless.

Do you see how many points He has stated? The place; for He says, In the temple; the persons, for they are the priests; the time, for He says, the Sabbath; the act itself, for they profane; (He not having said, they break, but what is more grievous, they profane;) that they not only escape punishment, but are even free from blame, for they, says He, are blameless.

Do not ye therefore account this, He says, like the former instance. For that indeed was done both but once, and not by a priest, and was of necessity; wherefore also they were deserving of excuse; but this last is both done every Sabbath, and by priests, and in the temple, and according to the law. And therefore again not by favor, but in a legal way, they are acquitted of the charges. For not at all as blaming them did I so speak, says He, nor yet as freeing them from blame in the way of indulgence, but according to the principle of justice.

And He seems indeed to be defending them, but it is His disciples whom He is clearing of the alleged faults. For when He says, those are blameless, He means, much more are these.

But they are not priests. Nay, they are greater than priests. For the Lord of the temple Himself is here: the truth, not the type. Wherefore He said also,

But I say unto you, That in this place is one greater than the temple.

Nevertheless, great as the sayings were which they heard, they made no reply, for the salvation of men was not their object.

Then, because to the hearers it would seem harsh, He quickly draws a veil over it, giving His discourse, as before, a lenient turn, yet even so expressing Himself with a rebuke. But if you had known what this means, I will have mercy and not sacrifice, you would not have condemned the guiltless. Matthew 12:7

Do you see how again He inclines His speech to lenity, yet again shows them to be out of the reach of lenity? For you would not have condemned, says He, the guiltless. Before indeed He inferred the same from what is said of the priests, in the words, they are guiltless; but here He states it on His own authority; or rather, this too is out of the law, for He was quoting a prophetic saying. Hosea 6:6

3. After this He mentions another reason likewise; For the Son of man, says He, is Lord of the Sabbath day; Matthew 12:8 speaking it of Himself. But Mark relates Him to have said this of our common nature also; for He said, The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath. Mark 2:27

Wherefore then was he punished that was gathering the sticks? Numbers 15:32-36 Because if the laws were to be despised even at the beginning, of course they would scarcely be observed afterwards.

For indeed the Sabbath did at the first confer many and great benefits; for instance, it made them gentle towards those of their household, and humane; it taught them God's providence and the creation, as Ezekiel says; Ezekiel 20:12 it trained them by degrees to abstain from wickedness, and disposed them to regard the things of the Spirit.

For because they could not have borne it, if when He was giving the law for the Sabbath, He had said, Do your good works on the Sabbath, but do not the works which are evil, therefore He restrained them from all alike for, You must do nothing at all, says He: and not even so were they kept in order. But He Himself, in the very act of giving the law of the Sabbath, did even therein darkly signify that He will have them refrain from the evil works only, by the saying, You must do no work, except what shall be done for your life. And in the temple too all went on, and with more diligence and double toil. Numbers 28:9-10 Thus even by the very shadow He was secretly opening unto them the truth.

Did Christ then, it will be said, repeal a thing so highly profitable? Far from it; nay, He greatly enhanced it. For it was time for them to be trained in all things by the higher rules, and it was unnecessary that his hands should be bound, who was freed from wickedness, winged for all good works; or that men should hereby learn that God made all things; or that they should so be made gentle, who are called to imitate God's own love to mankind (for He says, Be merciful, as your Heavenly Father); Luke 6:36 or that they should make one day a festival, who are commanded to keep a feast all their life long; (For let us keep the feast, it is said, not with old leaven, neither with leaven of malice and wickedness; but with unleavened bread of sincerity and truth); 1 Corinthians 5:8 as neither need they stand by an ark and a golden altar, who have the very Lord of all for their inmate, and in all things hold communion with Him; by prayer, and by oblation, and by scriptures, and by almsgiving, and by having Him within them. Lo now, why is any Sabbath required, by him who is always keeping the feast, whose conversation is in Heaven?

4. Let us keep the feast then continually, and do no evil thing; for this is a feast: and let our spiritual things be made intense, while our earthly things give place: and let us rest a spiritual rest, refraining our hands from covetousness; withdrawing our body from our superfluous and unprofitable toils, from such as the people of the Hebrews did of old endure in Egypt. For there is no difference between us who are gathering

gold, and those that were bound in the mire, working at those bricks, and gathering stubble, and being beaten. Yea, for now too the devil bids us make bricks, as Pharaoh did then. For what else is gold, than mire? And what else is silver, than stubble? Like stubble, at least, it kindles the flame of desire; like mire, so does gold defile him that possesses it.

Wherefore He sent us, not Moses from the wilderness, but His Son from Heaven. If then, after He has come, thou abide in Egypt, you will suffer with the Egyptians: but if leaving that land thou go up with the spiritual Israel, you shall see all the miracles.

Yet not even this suffices for salvation. For we must not only be delivered out of Egypt, but we must also enter into the promise. Since the Jews too, as Paul says, both went through the Red Sea, and ate manna, and drank spiritual drink, but nevertheless they all perished.

Lest then the same befall us also, let us not be slow, neither draw back; but when you hear wicked spies even now bringing up an evil report against the strait and narrow way, and uttering the same kind of talk as those spies of old, let not the multitude, but Joshua, be our pattern, and Caleb the son of Jephunneh; and do not thou give up, until thou have attained the promise, and entered into the Heavens.

Neither account the journey to be difficult. For if when we were enemies, we were reconciled to God, much more, being reconciled, shall we be saved. Romans 5:10 But this way, it will be said, is strait and narrow. Well, but the former, through which you have come, is not strait and narrow only, but even impassable, and full of savage wild beasts. And as there was no passing through the Red Sea, unless that miracle had been wrought, so neither could we, abiding in our former life, have gone up into Heaven, but only by baptism intervening. Now if the impossible has become possible, much more will the difficult be easy.

But that, it will be said, was of grace only. Why, for this reason especially you have just cause to take courage. For if, where it was grace alone, He wrought with you; will He not much more be your aid, where ye also show forth laborious works? If He saved you, doing nothing, will He not much more help you, working?

Above indeed I was saying, that from the impossibilities you ought to take courage about the difficulties also; but now I add this, that if we are vigilant, these will not be so much as difficult. For mark it: death is trodden under foot, the devil has fallen, the law of sin is extinguished, the grace of the Spirit is given, life is contracted into a small space, the heavy burdens are abridged.

And to convince you hereof by the actual results, see how many have overshot the injunctions of Christ; and are you afraid of that which is just their measure? What plea then will you have, when others are leaping beyond the bounds, and you yourself too slothful for what is enacted?

Thus, you we admonish to give alms of such things as you have, but another has even stripped himself of all his possessions: you we require to live chastely with your wife, but another has not so much as entered into marriage: and you we entreat not to be envious, but another we find giving up even his own life for charity: you again we entreat to be lenient in judgments, and not severe to them that sin, but another, even when smitten, has turned the other cheek also.

What then shall we say, I pray you? What excuse shall we make, not doing even these things, when others go so far beyond us? And they would not have gone beyond us, had not the thing been very easy. For which pines away, he who envies other men's blessings, or he who takes pleasure with them, and

rejoices? Which eyes all things with suspicion and continual trembling, the chaste man, or the adulterer? Which is cheered by good hopes, he that spoils by violence, or he that shows mercy, and imparts of his own to the needy?

Let us then bear in mind these things, and not be torpid in our career for virtue's sake; but having stripped ourselves with all readiness for these glorious wrestlings, let us labor for a little while, that we may win the perpetual and imperishable crowns; unto which may we all attain, by the grace and love towards man of our Lord Jesus Christ, to whom be glory and might forever and ever. Amen.

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