

Homily 62 on Matthew

by St. John Chrysostom

St. John Chrysostom's Homily 62 on Matthew explores Jesus' teachings on marriage, divorce, and the importance of humility in faith.

Scripture: Matthew 19:2-4, Matthew 19:11, Matthew 19:13

Topics: "Marriage And Divorce", "Kingdom Of Heaven"

Description

John Chrysostom preaches on the teachings of Jesus in Matthew 19, where Jesus emphasizes the importance of marriage and the sanctity of the union between a man and a woman. Despite the Pharisees' attempts to test Him, Jesus upholds the divine institution of marriage, highlighting God's original plan for one man and one woman to become one flesh. He warns against divorce, stating that what God has joined together, man should not separate. Jesus also praises the innocence and humility of children, teaching His disciples to be like them in order to enter the kingdom of Heaven.

Transcript

Matt. XIX. 1.

And it came to pass, that when Jesus had finished these sayings, He departed from Galilee, and came into the coasts of Judæa beyond Jordan.

Having constantly left Judæa on account of the envy of those men, now He frequents it from this time forth, because the passion was to be near at hand; He goes not up, however, unto Jerusalem for a while, but into the coasts of Judæa.

And, when He had come, great multitudes followed Him, and He healed them. Matthew 19:2

For neither in the teaching by words does He continue always, nor in the wonderful working of signs, but He does now one now the other, variously working the salvation of them that were waiting upon Him and following Him, so as by the miracles to appear, in what He said, a Teacher worthy of belief, and by the teaching of His word to increase the profit from the miracles; and this was to lead them by the hand to the knowledge of God.

But do thou mark, I pray you, this too, how the disciples pass over whole multitudes with one word, not declaring by name each of them that are healed. For they said not, that such a one, and such another, but that many, teaching us to be unostentatious. But Christ healed, benefiting both them, and by them many

others. For the healing of these men's infirmity was to others a foundation for the knowledge of God.

But not so to the Pharisees, but even for this self-same thing they become more fierce, and come unto Him tempting Him. For because they could not lay hold of the works that were doing, they propose to Him questions. For they came unto Him, and tempting Him said, Is it lawful for a man to put away his wife for every cause? Matthew 19:3

O folly! They thought to silence Him by their questions, although they had already received certain proof of this power in Him. When at least they argued much about the Sabbath, when they said, He blasphemeth, when they said, He has a devil, when they found fault with His disciples as they were walking in the grain fields, when they argued about unwashed hands, on every occasion having sewed fast their mouths, and shut up their shameless tongue, He thus sent them away. Nevertheless, not even so do they keep off from Him. For such is wickedness, such is envy, shameless and bold; though it be put to silence ten thousand times, ten thousand times does it assault again.

But mark thou, I pray you, their craft also from the form of their question. For neither did they say unto Him, You commanded not to put away a wife, for indeed He had already discoursed about this law; but nevertheless they made no mention of those words; but took occasion from hence, and thinking to make their snare the greater, and being minded to drive Him to a necessity of contradicting the law, they say not, why did You enact this or that? But as though nothing had been said, they ask, Is it lawful? expecting that He had forgotten having said it; and being ready if on the one hand He said, It is lawful to put away, to bring against Him the things He Himself had spoken, and to say, How then did You affirm the contrary? But if the same things now again as before, to bring against Him the words of Moses.

What then said He? He said not, do you tempt me, you hypocrites? although afterwards He says this, but here He speaks not thus. Why can this be? In order that together with His power He might show forth His gentleness also. For He does neither always keep silence, lest they should suppose they are hidden; nor does He always reprove, in order that He may instruct us to bear all things with gentleness.

How then does He answer them? Have ye not read, that He which made them at the beginning, made them male and female, and said, For this cause shall a man leave his father and his mother, and shall cleave to his wife; and they two shall be one flesh? So that they are no more two but one flesh. What therefore God has joined together, let not man put asunder. Matthew 19:4-6

See a teacher's wisdom. I mean, that being asked, Is it lawful? He did not at once say, It is not lawful, lest they should be disturbed and put in disorder, but before the decision by His argument He rendered this manifest, showing that it is itself too the commandment of His Father, and that not in opposition to Moses did He enjoin these things, but in full agreement with him.

But mark Him arguing strongly not from the creation only, but also from His command. For He said not, that He made one man and one woman only, but that He also gave this command that the one man should be joined to the one woman. But if it had been His will that he should put this one away, and bring in another, when He had made one man, He would have formed many women.

But now both by the manner of the creation, and by the manner of lawgiving, He showed that one man must dwell with one woman continually, and never break off from her.

And see how He says, He which made them at the beginning, made them male and female, that is, from one root they sprung, and into one body came they together, for the two shall be one flesh.

After this, to make it a fearful thing to find fault with this lawgiving, and to confirm the law, He said not, Sever not therefore, nor put asunder, but, What God has joined together, let not man put asunder.

But if you put forward Moses, I tell you of Moses' Lord, and together with this, I rely upon the time also. For God at the beginning made them male and female; and this law is older (though it seem to have been now introduced by me), and with much earnestness established. For not merely did He bring the woman to the man, but also commanded to leave father and mother. And neither did He make it a law for him merely to come to the woman, but also to cleave to her, by the form of the language intimating that they might not be severed. And not even with this was He satisfied, but sought also for another greater union, for the two, He says, shall be one flesh.

Then after He had recited the ancient law, which was brought in both by deeds and by words, and shown it to be worthy of respect because of the giver, with authority after that He Himself too interprets and gives the law, saying, So that they are no more two, but one flesh. Like then as to sever flesh is a horrible thing, so also to divorce a wife is unlawful. And He stayed not at this, but brought in God also by saying, What therefore God has joined together, let not man put asunder, showing that the act was both against nature, and against law; against nature, because one flesh is dissevered; against law, because that when God has joined and commanded it not to be divided, you conspire to do this.

2. What then ought they to have done after this? Ought they not to have held their peace, and to have commended the saying? Ought they not to have marvelled at His wisdom? Ought they not to have stood amazed at His accordance with the Father? But none of these things do they, but as though they were contending for the law, they say, How then did Moses command to give a writing of divorcement, and to put her away? And yet they ought not now to have brought this forward, but rather He to them; but nevertheless He does not take advantage of them, nor does He say to them, I am not now bound by this, but He solves this too.

And indeed if He had been an alien from the old covenant, He would not have striven for Moses, neither would He have argued positively from the things done once for all at the beginning; He would not have studied to show that His own precepts agreed with those of old.

And indeed Moses had given many other commandments besides, both those about meats, and those about the Sabbath; wherefore then do they nowhere bring him forward, as here? From a wish to enlist the multitude of the husbands against him. For this was considered a thing indifferent with the Jews, and all used to do so much as this. Accordingly it was for this reason that when so many things had been said on the mount, they remembered this commandment only now.

Nevertheless, unspeakable wisdom makes a defense even for these things, and says, Moses for the hardness of your hearts thus made the law. And not even him does He suffer to remain under accusation, forasmuch as He had Himself given him the law; but delivers him from the charge, and turns the whole upon their head, as everywhere He does.

For again when they were blaming His disciples for plucking the ears of grain, He shows themselves to be guilty; and when they were laying a transgression to their charge as to their not washing their hands, He shows themselves to be the transgressors, and touching the Sabbath also: both everywhere, and here in

like manner.

Then because the saying was hard to bear, and brought on them much blame, He quickly directs back His discourse to that ancient law, saying as He had said before also, But in the beginning it was not so, that is, God by His acts at the beginning ordained the contrary. For in order that they may not say, Whence is it manifest, that for our hardness Moses said this? hereby again He stops their mouths. For if this were the primary law, and for our good, that other would not have been given at the beginning; God in creating would not have so created, He would not have said such things.

But I say unto you, Whosoever shall put away his wife except it be for fornication, and marry another, commits adultery. For since he had stopped their mouths, He then gives the law with His own authority, like as touching the meats, like as touching the Sabbath.

For with regard to the meats likewise, when He had overcome them, then, and not till then, He declared unto the multitude, that, Not that which goes in defiles the man; Matthew 15:11 and with regard to the Sabbath, when He had stopped their mouths, He says, Wherefore it is lawful to do well on the Sabbath day; Matthew 12:12 and here this self-same thing.

But what took place there, this happened here also. For as there, when the Jews had been put to silence the disciples were troubled, and came unto Him with Peter and said, Declare unto us this parable; Matthew 15:15 even so now also they were troubled and said, If the case of the man be so, it is good not to marry.

For now they understood the saying more than before. Therefore then indeed they held their peace, but now when there has been gainsaying, and answering, and question, and learning by reply, and the law appeared more clear, they ask Him. And openly to contradict they do not dare, but they bring forward what seemed to be a grievous and galling result of it, saying, If the case of the man be so with his wife, it is not good to marry. For indeed it seemed to be a very hard thing to have a wife full of every bad quality, and to endure a wild beast perpetually shut up with one in the house. And that you may learn that this greatly troubled them, Mark said, Mark 10:10 to show it, that they spoke to Him privately.

3. But what is, If such be the case of a man with his wife? That is, if to this end he is joined with her, that they should be one, or, on the other hand, if the man shall get to himself blame for these things, and always transgresses by putting away, it were easier to fight against natural desire and against one's self, than against a wicked woman.

What then says Christ? He said not, yea, it is easier, and so do, lest they should suppose that the thing is a law; but He subjoined, Not all men receive it, but they to whom it is given, Matthew 19:11 raising the thing, and showing that it is great, and in this way drawing them on, and urging them.

But see herein a contradiction. For He indeed says this is a great thing; but they, that it is easier. For it was meet that both these things should be done, and that it should be at once acknowledged a great thing by Him, that it might render them more forward, and by the things said by themselves it should be shown to be easier, that on this ground too they might the rather choose virginity and continence. For since to speak of virginity seemed to be grievous, by the constraint of this law He drove them to this desire. Then to show the possibility of it, He says, There are some eunuchs, who were so born from their mother's womb, there are some eunuchs which were made eunuchs of men, and there be eunuchs which have made themselves eunuchs for the kingdom of Heaven's sake, Matthew 19:12 by these words secretly leading

them to choose the thing, and establishing the possibility of this virtue, and all but saying, Consider if you were in such case by nature, or had endured this selfsame thing at the hands of those who inflict such wanton injuries, what would you have done, being deprived indeed of the enjoyment, yet not having a reward? Thank God therefore now, for that with rewards and crowns you undergo this, which those men endure without crowns; or rather not even this, but what is much lighter, being supported both by hope, and by the consciousness of the good work, and not having the desire so raging like waves within you.

For the excision of a member is not able to quell such waves, and to make a calm, like the curb of reason; or rather, reason only can do this.

For this intent therefore He brought in those others, even that He might encourage these, since if this was not what He was establishing, what means His saying concerning the other eunuchs? But when He says, that they made themselves eunuchs, He means not the excision of the members, far from it, but the putting away of wicked thoughts. Since the man who has mutilated himself, in fact, is subject even to a curse, as Paul says, I would they were even cut off which trouble you. And very reasonably. For such a one is venturing on the deeds of murderers, and giving occasion to them that slander God's creation, and opens the mouths of the Manichæans, and is guilty of the same unlawful acts as they that mutilate themselves among the Greeks. For to cut off our members has been from the beginning a work of demoniacal agency, and satanic device, that they may bring up a bad report upon the work of God, that they may mar this living creature, that imputing all not to the choice, but to the nature of our members, the more part of them may sin in security, as being irresponsible; and doubly harm this living creature, both by mutilating the members, and by impeding the forwardness of the free choice in behalf of good deeds.

These are the ordinances of the devil, bringing in, besides the things which we have mentioned, another wicked doctrine also, and making way beforehand for the arguments concerning destiny and necessity even from hence, and everywhere marring the freedom given to us of God, and persuading us that evil deeds are of nature, and hence secretly implanting many other wicked doctrines, although not openly. For such are the devil's poisons.

Therefore I beseech you to flee from such lawlessness. For together with the things I have mentioned, neither does the force of lust become milder hereby, but even more fierce. For from another origin has the seed that is in us its sources, and from another cause do its waves swell. And some say from the brain, some from the loins, this violent impulse has its birth; but I should say from nothing else than from an ungoverned will and a neglected mind: if this be temperate, there is no evil result from the motions of nature.

Having spoken then of the eunuchs that are eunuchs for nought and fruitlessly, unless with the mind they too practise temperance, and of those that are virgins for Heaven's sake, He proceeds again to say, He that is able to receive it, let him receive it, at once making them more earnest by showing that the good work is exceeding in greatness, and not suffering the thing to be shut up in the compulsion of a law, because of His unspeakable gentleness. And this He said, when He showed it to be most possible, in order that the emulation of the free choice might be greater.

And if it is of free choice, one may say, how does He say, at the beginning, All men do not receive it, but they to whom it is given? That you might learn that the conflict is great, not that you should suspect any compulsory allotments. For it is given to those, even to the willing.

But He spoke thus to show that much influence from above is needed by him who enters these lists, whereof He that is willing shall surely partake. For it is customary for Him to use this form of speech when the good work done is great, as when He says, To you it is given to know the mysteries.

And that this is true, is manifest even from the present instance. For if it be of the gift from above only, and they that live as virgins contribute nothing themselves, for nought did He promise them the kingdom of Heaven, and distinguish them from the other eunuchs.

But mark thou, I pray, how from some men's wicked doings, other men gain. I mean, that the Jews went away having learned nothing, for neither did they ask with the intent of learning, but the disciples gained even from hence.

4. Then were there brought unto Him little children, that He should put His hands on them, and pray: and the disciples rebuked them. But He said to them, Suffer the little children to come unto me, for of such is the kingdom of Heaven. And He laid His hands on them, and departed thence. Matthew 19:13-15

And wherefore did the disciples repel the little children? For dignity. What then does He? Teaching them to be lowly, and to trample under foot worldly pride, He does receive them, and takes them in His arms, and to such as them promises the kingdom; which kind of thing He said before also. Matthew 18:3-4

Let us also then, if we would be inheritors of the Heavens, possess ourselves of this virtue with much diligence. For this is the limit of true wisdom; to be simple with understanding; this is angelic life; yes, for the soul of a little child is pure from all the passions. Towards them who have vexed him he bears no resentment, but goes to them as to friends, as if nothing had been done; and how much soever he be beaten by his mother; after her he seeks, and her does he prefer to all. Though thou show him the queen with a diadem, he prefers her not to his mother clad in rags, but would choose rather to see her in these, than the queen in splendor. For he uses to distinguish what pertains to him and what is strange to him, not by its poverty and wealth, but by friendship. And nothing more than necessary things does he seek, but just to be satisfied from the breast, and then he leaves sucking. The young child is not grieved at what we are grieved, as at loss of money and such things as that, and he does not rejoice again at what we rejoice, namely, at these temporal things, he is not eager about the beauty of persons.

Therefore He said, of such is the kingdom of Heaven, that by choice we should practise these things, which young children have by nature. For since the Pharisees from nothing else so much as out of craft and pride did what they did, therefore on every hand He charges the disciples to be single hearted, both darkly hinting at those men, and instructing these. For nothing so much lifts up unto haughtiness, as power and precedence. Forasmuch then as the disciples were to enjoy great honors throughout the whole world, He preoccupies their mind, not suffering them to feel anything after the manner of men, neither to demand honors from the multitude, nor to have men clear the way before them.

For though these seem to be little things, yet are they a cause of great evils. The Pharisees at least being thus trained were carried on into the very summit of evil, seeking after the salutations, the first seats, the middle places, for from these they were cast upon the shoal of their mad desire of glory, then from thence upon impiety. So therefore those men went away having drawn upon themselves a curse by their tempting, but the little children a blessing, as being freed from all these.

Let us then also be like the little children, and in malice be we babes. 1 Corinthians 14:20 For it cannot be, it cannot be for one otherwise to see Heaven, but the crafty and wicked must needs surely be cast into

hell.

5. And before hell too, we shall here suffer the utmost ills. For if you be evil, it is said, thou alone shall endure the evil; but if good, it is for yourself and for your neighbor. Mark, at any rate, how this took place in the former instances also. For neither was anything more wicked than Saul, nor more simple and single-hearted than David. Which therefore was the stronger? Did not David get him twice into his hands, and having the power to slay him, forebore? Had he not him shut up as in a net and prison, and spared him? And this when both others were urging him, and when he himself was able to accuse him of countless charges; but nevertheless he suffered him to go away safe. And yet the other was pursuing him with all his army, but he was, with a few desperate fugitives, wandering and changing from place to place; nevertheless the fugitive had the advantage of the king, forasmuch as the one came to the conflict with simplicity, the other with wickedness.

For what could be more wicked than that man, who when he was leading his armies, and bringing all his wars to a successful issue, and undergoing the labors of the victory and the trophies, but bringing the crowns to him, assayed to slay him?

6. Such is the nature of envy, it is ever plotting against its own honors, and wasting him that has it, and encompassing him with countless calamities. And that miserable man, for instance, until David departed, burst not forth into that piteous cry, bewailing himself and saying, I am sore distressed, and the Philistines make war against me, and the Lord is departed from me. 1 Samuel 28:15 Until he was separated from David, he fell not in war, but was both in safety and in glory; for indeed unto the king passed the glory of the captain. For neither was the man disposed to usurpation, nor did he assay to depose the other from his throne, but for him did he achieve all things, and was earnestly attached to him, and this is evident even from what followed afterwards. For when indeed he was set under him, any one of them who do not search carefully might perhaps suppose these things to be by the usual custom of a subject; but after he had withdrawn himself out of Saul's kingdom, what then was there to restrain him, and to him even to slay? Had not the other been evil towards him once, twice, and often? Was it not after having received benefits from him? Was it not having nothing whereof to accuse him? Was not Saul's kingdom and safety danger and insecurity to himself? Must he not needs wander and be a fugitive, and be in trembling for fear of the utmost ills, while the other is alive, and reigning? Nevertheless none of these things constrained him to stain his sword with blood, but when he saw him asleep, and bound, and alone, and in the midst of his own men, and had touched his head, and when there were many rousing him to it, and saying the opportunity thus favorable was a judgment of God, he at once rebuked those who were urging him on, and refrained from the murder, and sent him away both safe and well; and as though he had been rather a body guard of his, and a shield-bearer, not an enemy, so did he chide the host for their treachery towards the king. 1 Samuel 26:16

What could be equal to this soul? What to that mildness? For this it is possible to see even by the things that have been mentioned but much more by what are done now. For when we have considered our vileness, then we shall know more perfectly the virtue of those saints. Wherefore I entreat you to hasten towards the emulation of them.

For indeed if you love glory, and for this cause art plotting against your neighbor, then shall you enjoy it more largely, when having spurned it, you will abstain from the plotting. For like as to become rich is contrary to covetousness, so is the loving of glory to the obtaining of glory. And if you be minded, let us inquire into each. For since we have no fear of hell, nor much regard for the kingdom, come and even from

the things present let us lead you on.

For who are they that are ridiculous? Tell me. Is it not they that are doing anything for the sake of glory from the multitude? And who are the objects of praise? Is it not they who spurn the praise of the multitude? Therefore if the love of vainglory be matter of reproach, and it cannot be concealed that the vainglorious man loves it, he will assuredly be an object of reproach, and the love of glory has become to him a cause of dishonor. And not in this respect only does he disgrace himself, but also in that he is compelled to do many things shameful, and teeming with the utmost disgrace. And like as with respect to their gains men are wont to suffer harm more than anything from the disease of covetousness (they become at least the subjects of many tricks, and of small gains make great losses, wherefore this saying has prevailed even to be a proverb); and as to the voluptuous man likewise, his passion becomes a hindrance to the enjoyment of his pleasure. These at least that are exceedingly given up thereto, and are the slaves of women these above all do women carry about as servants, and will never vouchsafe to treat them as men, buffeting, spurning them, leading, and taking them about everywhere, and giving themselves airs, and in everything merely giving them orders.

Even so also than him that is arrogant and mad about glory, and accounts himself to be high, nothing is more base and dishonored. For the race of man is fond of contention, and against nothing else does it set itself so much, as against a boaster, and a contemptuous man, and a slave of glory.

And he himself too, in order to maintain the fashion of his pride, exhibits the conduct of a slave to the common sort, flattering, courting them, serving a servitude more grievous than that of one bought for money.

Knowing then all these things, let us lay down these passions, that we may not both pay a penalty here, and there be punished without end. Let us become lovers of virtue. For so both before reaching the kingdom we shall reap the greatest benefits here, and when we are departed there we shall partake of the eternal blessings; unto which God grant we may all attain by the grace and love towards man of our Lord Jesus Christ, to whom be glory and might world without end. Amen.

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