

Homily 79 on Matthew

by St. John Chrysostom

St. John Chrysostom's Homily 79 on Matthew emphasizes the importance of mercy and the consequences of neglecting those in need in the context of the final judgment.

Topics: "Final Judgment", "Christian Compassion"

Description

John Chrysostom preaches on the powerful message in Matthew 25:31-41, where Jesus describes the final judgment when He will separate the righteous from the wicked based on their acts of kindness and mercy towards others. Chrysostom emphasizes the importance of showing compassion and love to those in need, as Jesus identifies Himself with the hungry, thirsty, stranger, naked, sick, and imprisoned. He highlights the seriousness of the judgment day, where all nations will be gathered, and the division between the righteous and the wicked will be made with exactness. Chrysostom underscores the significance of not only meeting basic needs but also visiting and caring for those who are suffering, as a reflection of our love for God.

Transcript

MATT. XXV. 31--41. "When the Son of Man shall come in the glory of His Father, and all the holy angels with Him, then shall He sit," says He, "upon the throne of His glory, and He shall divide the sheep from the kids;"[and the one He will accept, because they fed Him, when an hungered, and gave Him drink when thirsty, and took Him in when a stranger, and clothed Him when naked, and visited Him when sick, and came to see Him when in prison: and He will give the kingdom to them. But the others, accusing them for the opposite things, He will send into the eternal fire, prepared for the devil and his angels.]

Unto this most delightful portion of Scripture, which we do not cease continually revolving, let us now listen with all earnestness and compunction, this wherewith His discourse ended, even as the last thing, reasonably; for great indeed was His regard for philanthropy and mercy. Wherefore in what precedes He had discoursed concerning this in a different way; and here now in some respects more clearly, and more earnestly, not setting forth two nor three nor five persons, but the whole world; although most assuredly the former places, which speak of two persons, meant not two persons, but two portions of mankind, one of them that disobey, the other of the obedient. But here He handles the word more fearfully, and with fuller light. Wherefore neither does He say, "The kingdom is likened," any more, but openly shows Himself, saying, "When the Son of Man shall come in His glory." For now is He come in dishonor, now in affronts and reproaches; but then shall He sit upon the throne of His glory.

And continually does He make mention of glory. For since the cross was near, a thing that seemed to be matter of reproach, for this cause He raises up the hearer; and brings before his sight the judgment seat, and sets round him all the world.

And not in this way only does He make His discourse awful, but also by showing the Heavens opened. For all the angels will be present with Him, He says, themselves also to bear witness, in how many things they had ministered, when sent by the Lord for the salvation of men.

And everything will help to render that day fearful. Then, "shall be gathered together," He says, "all nations," that is, the whole race of men. "And He shall separate them one from another, as the shepherd his sheep." For now they are not separated, but all mingled together, but the division then shall be made with all exactness. And for a while it is by their place that He divides them, and makes them manifest; afterwards by the names He indicates the dispositions of each, calling the one kids, the other sheep, that He might indicate the unfruitfulness of the one, for no fruit will come from kids; and the great profit from the other, for indeed from sheep great is the profit, as well from the milk, as from the wool, and from the young, of all which things the kid is destitute.

But while the brutes have from nature their unfruitfulness, and fruitfulness, these have it from choice, wherefore some are punished, and the others crowned. And He does not punish them, until He has pleaded with them; wherefore also, when He has put them in their place, He mentions the charges against them. And they speak with meekness, but they have no advantage from it now; and very reasonably, because they passed by a work so much to be desired. For indeed the prophets are everywhere saying this, I will have mercy and not sacrifice, Hosea 6:6 and the lawgiver by all means urged them to this, both by words, and by works; and nature herself taught it.

But mark them, how they are destitute not of one or two things only, but of all. For not only did they fail to feed the hungry, or clothe the naked; but not even did they visit the sick, which was an easier thing.

And mark how easy are His injunctions. He said not, I was in prison, and you set me free; I was sick, and you raised me up again; but, you visited me, and, you came to me. And neither in hunger is the thing commanded grievous. For no costly table did He seek, but what is needful only, and His necessary food, and He sought in a suppliant's garb, so that all things were enough to bring punishment on them; the easiness of the request, for it was bread; the pitiable character of Him that requests, for He was poor; the sympathy of nature, for He was a man; the desirableness of the promise, for He promised a kingdom; the fearfulness of the punishment, for He threatened hell. The dignity of the one receiving, for it was God, who was receiving by the poor; the surpassing nature of the honor, that He vouchsafed to condescend so far; His just claim for what they bestowed, for of His own was He receiving. But against all these things covetousness once for all blinded them that were seized by it; and this though so great a threat was set against it.

For further back also He says, that they who receive not such as these shall suffer more grievous things than Sodom; and here He says, Inasmuch as you did it not unto one of the least of these my brethren, you did it not unto me. What sayest Thou? They are Your brethren; and how dost Thou call them least. Why, for this reason they are brethren, because they are lowly, because they are poor, because they are outcast. For such does He most invite to brotherhood, the unknown, the contemptible, not meaning by these the monks only, and them that have occupied the mountains, but every believer; though he be a secular person, yet if he be hungry, and famishing, and naked, and a stranger, His will is he should have

the benefit of all this care. For baptism renders a man a brother, and the partaking of the divine mysteries.

2. Then, in order that you may see in another way also the justice of the sentence, He first praises them that have done right, and says, Come, you blessed of my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you before the foundation of the world. For I was an hungered, and you gave me meat, and all that follows. Matthew 25:34-40 For that they may not say, we had it not, He condemns them by their fellow-servants; like as the virgins by the virgins, and the servant that was drunken and gluttonous by the faithful servant, and him that buried his talent, by them that brought the two, and each one of them that continue in sin, by them that have done right.

And this comparison is sometimes made in the case of an equal, as here, and in the instance of the virgins, sometimes of him that has advantage, as when he said, The men of Nineveh shall rise up and shall condemn this generation, because they believed at the preaching of Jonas; and, behold, a greater than Jonas is here; and, The queen of the south shall condemn this generation, because she came to hear the wisdom of Solomon; Matthew 12:41-42 and of an equal again, They shall be your judges; Matthew 12:27 and again of one at advantage, Do you not know, that we shall judge angels, how much more things that pertain to this life? 1 Corinthians 6:3

And here, however, it is of an equal; for he compares rich with rich, and poor with poor. And not in this way only does He show the sentence justly passed, by their fellow-servants having done what was right when in the same circumstances, but also by their not being obedient so much as in these things in which poverty was no hindrance; as, for instance, in giving drink to the thirsty, in looking upon him that is in bonds, in visiting the sick. And when He had commended them that had done right, He shows how great was originally His bond of love towards them. For, Come, says He, you blessed of my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world. To how many good things is this same equivalent, to be blessed, and blessed of the Father? And wherefore were they counted worthy of such great honors? What is the cause? I was an hungered, and you gave me meat; I was thirsty, and you gave me drink; and what follows.

Of what honor, of what blessedness are these words? And He said not, Take, but, Inherit, as one's own, as your Father's, as yours, as due to you from the first. For, before you were, says He, these things had been prepared, and made ready for you, forasmuch as I knew you would be such as you are.

And in return for what do they receive such things? For the covering of a roof, for a garment, for bread, for cold water, for visiting, for going into the prison. For indeed in every case it is for what is needed; and sometimes not even for that. For surely, as I have said, the sick and he that is in bonds seeks not for this only, but the one to be loosed, the other to be delivered from his infirmity. But He, being gracious, requires only what is within our power, or rather even less than what is within our power, leaving to us to exert our generosity in doing more.

But to the others He says, Depart from me, you cursed, (no longer of the Father; for not He laid the curse upon them, but their own works), into the everlasting fire, prepared, not for you, but for the devil and his angels. For concerning the kingdom indeed, when He had said, Come, inherit the kingdom, He added, prepared for you before the foundation of the world; but concerning the fire, no longer so, but, prepared for the devil. I, says He, prepared the kingdom for you, but the fire no more for you, but for the devil and his angels; but since you cast yourselves therein, impute it to yourselves. And not in this way only, but by what follows also, like as though He were excusing Himself to them, He sets forth the causes.

For I was an hungered, and you gave me no meat. For though He that came to you had been your enemy, were not His sufferings enough to have overcome and subdued even the merciless? Hunger, and cold, and bonds, and nakedness, and sickness, and to wander everywhere houseless? These things are sufficient even to destroy enmity. But you did not do these things even to a friend, being at once friend, and benefactor, and Lord. Though it be a dog we see hungry, often we are overcome; and though we behold a wild beast, we are subdued; but seeing the Lord, are you not subdued? And wherein are these things worthy of defense?

For if it were this only, were it not sufficient for a recompense? (I speak not of hearing such a voice, in the presence of the world, from Him that sits on the Father's throne, and of obtaining the kingdom), but were not the very doing it sufficient for a reward? But now even in the presence of the world, and at the appearing of that unspeakable glory, He proclaims and crowns you, and acknowledges you as His sustainer and host, and is not ashamed of saying such things, that He may make the crown brighter for you.

So for this cause, while the one are punished justly, the others are crowned by grace. For though they had done ten thousand things, the munificence were of grace, that in return for services so small and cheap, such a heaven, and a kingdom, and so great honor, should be given them.

And it came to pass, when Jesus had finished these sayings, He said to His disciples, You know that after two days is the passover, and the Son of Man is betrayed to be crucified. Matthew 26:1-2 In good season again does He speak of the passion, when He had reminded them of the kingdom, and of the recompense there, and of the deathless punishment; as though He had said, Why are you afraid at the dangers that are for a season, when such good things await you?

3. But mark thou, I pray you, how He has in all His first sayings after a new manner worked up and thrown into the shade what was most painful to them. For He said not, You know that after two days I am betrayed, but, You know that after two days is the passover, to show that what is done is a mystery and that a feast and celebration is being kept for the salvation of the world, and that with foreknowledge He suffered all. So then, as though this were sufficient consolation for them, He did not even say anything to them now about a resurrection; for it was superfluous, after having discoursed so much about it, to speak of it again. And moreover, as I said, He shows that even His very passion is a deliverance from countless evils, having by the passover reminded them of the ancient benefits in Egypt.

Then were assembled together the chief priests, and the scribes, and the elders of the people, in the palace of the high priest, who was called Caiaphas, and consulted that they might take Jesus by subtlety, and kill Him. But they said, Not on the feast day, lest there be an uproar among the people.

Do you see the unspeakable corruption of the Jewish state? Attempting unlawful acts, they come to the high priest, desiring to obtain their authority from that quarter, whence they ought to have found hindrance.

And how many high priests were there? For the law wills there should be one, but then there were many. Whence it is manifest, that the Jewish constitution had begun to dissolve. For Moses, as I said, commanded there should be one, and that when he was dead there should be another, and by the life of this person He measured the banishment of them that had involuntarily committed manslaughter. How then were there at that time many high priests? They were afterwards made for a year. And this the evangelist declared, when he was speaking of Zacharias, saying, that he was of the course of Abia. Those therefore does he here call high priests, who had been high priests.

What did they consult together? That they might seize Him secretly, or that they might put Him to death? Both; for they feared the people. Wherefore also they waited for the feast to be past; for they said, Not on the feast day. For the devil, lest he should make the passion conspicuous, was not willing it should take place at the passover; but they, lest there should be an uproar. Mark them then ever fearing, not the ills from God, neither lest any greater pollution should arise to them from the season, but in every case the ills from men.

Yet for all this, boiling with anger, they changed their purpose again. For though they had said, Not at the feast time; when they found the traitor, they waited not for the time, but slew Him at the feast. But why did they take Him then? They were boiling with rage, as I said; and they expected then to find Him, and all things they did as blinded. For though He Himself made the greatest use of their wickedness for His own dispensation, they were not surely for this guiltless, but deserving of inflictions without number for their temper of mind. At least when all should be set free, even the guilty, then these men slew the guiltless, Him that had conferred on them countless benefits, and who for a time had neglected the Gentiles for their sake. But O loving-kindness! Them that were thus depraved, them that were thus froward, and full of countless evils, He again saves, and sends the apostles to be slain in their behalf, and by the apostles makes entreaty. For we are ambassadors for Christ.

Having then such patterns as these, I say not, let us die for our enemies, for we ought to do even this; but since we are too feeble for this, I say for the present, at least let us not look with an evil eye upon our friends, let us not envy our benefactors. I say not for the present, let us do good to them that evil entreat us, for I desire even this; but since you are too gross for this, at least avenge not yourselves. What is our condition, a scene, and acting? Wherefore can it be that you set yourselves directly against the acts enjoined? It is not for nought that all else has been written and how many things He did at the very cross sufficient to recall them to Him; but that you might imitate His goodness, that you might emulate His lovingkindness. For indeed He cast them to the ground, and restored the servant's ear, and discoursed with forbearance; and great miracles did He show forth, when lifted up, turning aside the sunbeams, bursting the rocks, raising the dead, frightening by dreams the wife of him that was judging Him, at the very judgment showing forth all meekness (which was of power not less than miracles to gain them over), forewarning them of countless things in the judgment hall; on the very cross crying aloud, Father, forgive them their sin. And when buried, how many things did He show forth for their salvation? And having risen again, did he not straightway call the Jews? Did He not give them remission of sins? Did He not set before them countless blessings? What can be more strange than this? They that crucified Him, and were breathing murder, after they crucified Him, became sons of God.

What can be equal to this tenderness? On hearing these things let us hide our faces, to think that we are so far removed from Him whom we are commanded to imitate. Let us at least see how great the distance, that we may at any rate condemn ourselves, for warring with these, in behalf of whom Christ gave His life, and not being willing to be reconciled to them, whom that He might reconcile He refused not even to be slain; unless this too be some expense, and outlay of money, which you object in almsgiving.

4. Consider of how many things you are guilty; and so far from being backward to forgive them that have injured you, you will even run unto them that have grieved you, in order that you may have a ground for pardon, that you may find a remedy for your own evil deeds.

The sons of the Greeks, who look for nothing great, have often shown self-command toward these: and thou who art to depart hence with such hopes, shrinkest, and art slow to act; and that which time effects,

this you endure not to do before the time for God's law, but willest this passion to be quenched without reward, rather than for a reward? For neither, if this should have arisen from the time, will you have any advantage, but rather great will be the punishment, because, what time has effected, this the law of God persuaded you not to do.

But if you say that you burn with the memory of the insult; call to mind if any good has been done you by him that has offended you, and how many ills you have occasioned to others.

Hath he spoken ill of you, and disgraced you? Consider also that you have spoken thus of others. How then will you obtain pardon, which you bestow not on others? But have you spoken ill of no one? But you have heard men so speaking, and allowed it. Neither is this guiltless.

Will you learn how good a thing it is not to remember injuries, and how this more than anything pleases God? Them that exult over persons, justly chastised by Himself, He punishes. And yet they are justly chastised; but you should not rejoice over them. So the prophet having brought many accusations, added this also, saying, They felt nothing for the affliction of Joseph; Amos 6:6 and again, She that inhabites Enan, came not forth to lament for the place near her. And yet both Joseph (that is, the tribes that were sprung from him), and the neighbors of these others, were punished according to the purpose of God; nevertheless, it is His will that we sympathize even with these. For if we, being evil, when we are punishing a servant, if we should see one of his fellow slaves laughing, we at the same time are provoked the more, and turn our anger against him; much more will God punish them that exult over those whom He chastises. But if upon them that are chastised by God it is not right to trample, but to grieve with them, much more with them that have sinned against us. For this is love's sign; love God prefers to all things. For as in the royal purple, those are precious among the flowers and dyes, which make up this robing; so here too, these virtues are the precious ones, which preserve love. But nothing maintains love so much as the not remembering them that have sinned against us.

Why? Did not God guard the other side also? Why? Did He not drive him that has done the wrong to him that is wronged? Does He not send him from the altar to the other, and so after the reconciliation invite him to the table? But do not therefore wait for the other to come, since thus you have lost all. For to this intent most especially does He appoint unto you an unspeakable reward, that you may prevent the other, since, if you are reconciled by his entreaties, the amity is no longer the result of the divine command, but of the other party's diligence. Wherefore also you go away uncrowned, while he receives the rewards.

What do you say? Have you an enemy, and are you not ashamed? Why is not the devil enough for us, that we bring upon ourselves those of our own race also? Would that not even he had been minded to war against us; would that not even he were a devil!

Do you not know how great the pleasure after reconciliation? For what, though in our enmity it appear not great? For that it is sweeter to love him that does us wrong than to hate him, after the enmity is done away you shall be able to learn full well.

5. Why then do we imitate the mad, devouring one another, warring against our own flesh?

Hear even under the Old Testament, how great regard there was for this, The ways of revengeful men are unto death. One man keeps anger against another, and does he seek healing of God? Sirach 28:3 And yet He allowed, 'eye for eye,' and 'tooth for tooth,' how then does He find fault? Because He allowed even those things, not that we should do them one to another, but that through the fear of suffering, we might

abstain from the commission of crime. And besides, those acts are the fruits of a short-lived anger, but to remember injuries is the part of a soul that practises itself in evil.

But have you suffered evil? Yet nothing so great, as you will do to yourself by remembering injuries. And besides, it is not so much as possible for a good man to suffer any evil. For suppose there to be any man, having both children and a wife, and let him practise virtue, and let him have moreover many occasions of being injured, as well abundance of possessions, as sovereign power, and many friends, and let him enjoy honor; only let him practise virtue, for this must be added, and let us in supposition lay plagues upon him. And let some wicked man come unto him, and involve him in losses. What then is that to him who accounts money nothing? Let him kill his children. What this to him, who learns to be wise touching the resurrection? Let him slay his wife; what is this to him who is instructed not to sorrow for them that are fallen asleep? Let him cast him into dishonor. What this to him who accounts the things present, the flower of the grass? If you will, let him also torture his body, and cast him into prison, what this to him that has learned, Though our outward man perish, yet the inward man is renewed; and that tribulation works approval?

Now I had undertaken that he should receive no harm; but the account as it proceeded has shown that he is even advantaged, being renewed, and becoming approved.

Let us not then vex ourselves with others, injuring ourselves, and rendering our soul weak. For the vexation is not so much from our neighbors' wickedness, as from our weakness. Because of this, should any one insult us, we weep, and frown; should any one rob us, we suffer the same like those little children, which the more clever of their companions provoke for nothing, grieving them for small causes; but nevertheless these too, if they should see them vexed, continue to tease them, but if laughing, they on the contrary leave off. But we are more foolish even than these, lamenting for these things, about which we ought to laugh.

Wherefore I entreat, let us let go this childish mind, and lay hold of Heaven. For indeed, Christ wills us to be men, perfect men. On this wise did Paul also command, Brethren, be not children in understanding, he says, howbeit in malice be ye children.

Let us therefore be children in malice, and flee wickedness, and lay hold on virtue, that we may attain also to the good things eternal, 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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