

Instructions to Catechumens - Part 1

by St. John Chrysostom

St. John Chrysostom emphasizes the transformative power of baptism and the necessary preparation for those about to be initiated into the Christian faith.

Topics: "Baptism", "Regeneration"

Description

John Chrysostom preaches to the newly illuminated, emphasizing the great honor and dignity they are about to receive in the kingdom of Heaven. He urges them to remember him in the heavenly kingdom and describes the joy and readiness with which they should approach their illumination. Chrysostom explains the significance of baptism as a laver of regeneration, illumination, burial, circumcision, and cross, highlighting its transformative power to create a new person. He warns against the dangers of oaths, both perjury and those taken in good faith, stressing the importance of avoiding them to escape the consequences and judgment of God.

Transcript

First Instruction

To those about to be illuminated; and for what reason the laver is said to be of regeneration and not of remission of sins; and that it is a dangerous thing not only to forswear oneself, but also to take an oath, even though we swear truly.

1. How delightful and lovable is our band of young brethren! For brethren I call you, even now before you have been brought forth, and before your birth I welcome this relationship with you: For I know, I know clearly, to how great an honour you are about to be led, and to how great a dignity; and those who are about to receive dignity, all are wont to honor, even before the dignity is conferred, laying up for themselves beforehand by their attention good will for the future. And this also I myself now do. For you are not about to be led to an empty dignity, but to an actual kingdom: and not simply to a kingdom, but to the kingdom of the Heavens itself. Wherefore I beseech and entreat you that you remember me when you come into that kingdom, and as Joseph said to the chief butler Remember me when it shall be well with you, Genesis 40:14 this also I say now to you, do ye remember me when it is well with you. I do not ask this in return for interpreting your dreams, as he; for I have not come to interpret dreams for you, but to discourse of matters celestial, and to convey to you glad tidings of such good things as eye has not seen, and ear has not heard and which have entered not into the heart of man, such are the things which God has prepared for them that love him. 1 Corinthians 2:9-10 Now Joseph indeed said to that chief butler, yet

three days and Pharaoh will restore you to your chief butlership. But I do not say, yet three days and you shall be set to pour out the wine of a tyrant, but yet thirty days, and not Pharaoh but the king of Heaven shall restore you to the country which is on high, Jerusalem, which is free -- to the city which is in the heavens; and he said indeed, You shall give the cup into the hands of Pharaoh. But I say not that you shall give the cup into the hands of the king, but that the king shall give the cup into your hand -- that dread cup, full of much power, and more precious than any created thing. The initiated know the virtue of this cup, and you yourselves shall know it a little while hence. Remember me, therefore, when you come into that kingdom, when you receive the royal robe, when you are girt with the purple dipped in the master's blood, when you will be crowned with the diadem, which has lustre leaping forth from it on all sides, more brilliant than the rays of the sun. Such are the gifts of the Bridegroom, greater indeed than your worth, but worthy of his lovingkindness.

Wherefore, I count you blessed already before those sacred nuptials, and I do not only count you blessed, but I praise your prudence in that you have not come to your illumination as the most slothful among men, at your last breath, but already, like prudent servants, prepared with much goodwill to obey your master, have brought the neck of your soul with much meekness and readiness beneath the bands of Christ, and have received His easy yoke, and have taken His light burden.

For if the grace bestowed be the same both for you and for those who are initiated at their last hour, yet the matter of the intention is not the same, nor yet the matter of the preparation for the rite. For they indeed receive it on their bed, but you in the bosom of the Church, which is the common mother of us all; they indeed with lamentation and weeping, but you rejoicing, and exceeding glad: they sighing, you giving thanks; they indeed lethargic with much fever, you filled with much spiritual pleasure; wherefore in your case all things are in harmony with the gift, but in theirs all are adverse to it.

For there is wailing and much lamentation on the part of the initiated, and children stand around crying, wife tearing her cheeks, and dejected friends and tearful servants; the whole aspect of the house resembles some wintry and gloomy day. And if you shall open the heart of him who is lying there, you will find it more downcast than are these. For as winds meeting one another with many a contrary blast, break up the sea into many parts, so too the thought of the terrors preying upon him assail the soul of the sick man, and distract his mind with many anxieties.

Whenever he sees his children, he thinks of their fatherless condition; whenever he looks from them to his wife, he considers her widowhood; when he sees the servants, he beholds the desolation of the whole house; when he comes back to himself, he calls to mind his own present life, and being about to be torn from it, experiences a great cloud of despondency. Of such a kind is the soul of him who is about to be initiated. Then in the midst of its tumult and confusion, the Priest enters, more formidable than the fever itself, and more distressing than death to the relatives of the sick man.

For the entrance of the Presbyter is thought to be a greater reason for despair than the voice of the physician despairing of his life, and that which suggests eternal life seems to be a symbol of death. But I have not yet put the finishing stroke to these ills. For in the midst of relatives raising a tumult and making preparations, the soul has often taken its flight, leaving the body desolate; and in many cases, while it was present it was useless, for when it neither recognizes those who are present, nor hears their voice, nor is able to answer those words by which it will make that blessed covenant with the common master of us all, but is as a useless log, or a stone, and he who is about to be illuminated lies there differing nothing from a corpse, what is the profit of initiation in a case of such insensibility?

2. For he who is about to approach these holy and dread mysteries must be awake and alert, must be clean from all cares of this life, full of much self-restraint, much readiness; he must banish from his mind every thought foreign to the mysteries, and on all sides cleanse and prepare his home, as if about to receive the king himself. Such is the preparation of your mind: such are your thoughts; such the purpose of your soul. Await therefore a return worthy of this most excellent decision from God, who overpowers with His recompense those who show forth obedience to Him. But since it is necessary for his fellow servants to contribute of their own, then we will contribute of our own; yea rather not even are these things our own, but these too are our Master's. For what have you, says He, that thou did not receive? But if you received it, why do you glory, as if you had not received it? 1 Corinthians 4:7 I wished to say this first of all, why in the world our fathers, passing by the whole year, settled that the children of the Church should be initiated at this season; and for what reason, after the instruction from us, removing your shoes and raiment, unclad and unshod, with but one garment on, they conduct you to hear the words of the exorcisers. For it is not thoughtlessly and rashly that they have planned this dress and this season for us. But both these things have a certain mystic and secret reason. And I wish to say this to you. But I see that our discourse now constrains us to something more necessary to say what baptism is, and for what reason it enters into our life, and what good things it conveys to us.

But, if you will, let us discourse about the name which this mystic cleansing bears: for its name is not one, but very many and various. For this purification is called the laver of regeneration. He saved us, he says, through the laver of regeneration, and renewing of the Holy Ghost. Titus 3:5 It is called also illumination, and this St. Paul again has called it, For call to remembrance the former days in which after you were illuminated ye endured a great conflict of sufferings; Hebrews 10:32 and again, For it is impossible for those who were once illuminated, and have tasted of the heavenly gift, and then fell away, to renew them again unto repentance.

Hebrews 6:4-6 It is called also, baptism: For as many of you as were baptized into Christ did put on Christ. Galatians 3:27 It is called also burial: For we were buried says he, with him, through baptism, into death. Romans 6:4 It is called circumcision: In whom you were also circumcised, with a circumcision not made with hands, in the putting off of the body of the sins of the flesh. Galatians 2:11 It is called a cross: Our old man was crucified with him that the body of sin might be done away.

Romans 6:6 It is also possible to speak of other names besides these, but in order that we should not spend our whole time over the names of this free gift, come, return to the first name, and let us finish our discourse by declaring its meaning; but in the meantime, let us extend our teaching a little further. There is that laver by means of the baths, common to all men, which is wont to wipe off bodily uncleanness; and there is the Jewish laver, more honorable than the other, but far inferior to that of grace; and it too wipes off bodily uncleanness but not simply uncleanness of body, since it even reaches to the weak conscience.

For there are many matters, which by nature indeed are not unclean, but which become unclean from the weakness of the conscience. And as in the case of little children, masks, and other bugbears are not in themselves alarming, but seem to little children to be alarming, by reason of the weakness of their nature, so it is in the case of those things of which I was speaking; just as to touch dead bodies is not naturally unclean, but when this comes into contact with a weak conscience, it makes him who touches them unclean.

For that the thing in question is not unclean naturally, Moses himself who ordained this law showed, when he bore off the entire corpse of Joseph, and yet remained clean. On this account Paul also, discoursing to

us about this uncleanness which does not come naturally but by reason of the weakness of the conscience, speaks somewhat in this way, Nothing is common of itself save to him who accounts anything to be common. Romans 14:14 Do you not see that uncleanness does not arise from the nature of the thing, but from the weakness of the reasoning about it? And again: All things indeed are clean, howbeit it is evil to that man who eats with offense. Romans 14:20 Do you see that it is not to eat, but to eat with offense, that is the cause of uncleanness?

3. Such is the defilement from which the laver of the Jews cleansed. But the laver of grace, not such, but the real uncleanness which has introduced defilement into the soul as well as into the body. For it does not make those who have touched dead bodies clean, but those who have set their hand to dead works: and if any man be effeminate, or a fornicator, or an idolator, or a doer of whatever ill you please, or if he be full of all the wickedness there is among men: should he fall into this pool of waters, he comes up again from the divine fountain purer than the sun's rays.

And in order that you may not think that what is said is mere vain boasting, hear Paul speaking of the power of the laver, Be not deceived: neither idolators, nor fornicators, nor adulterers, nor effeminate, nor abusers of themselves with men, nor covetous, not drunkards, not revilers, not extortioners shall inherit the kingdom of God. 1 Corinthians 6:9-10 And what has this to do with what has been spoken? Says one, for prove the question whether the power of the laver thoroughly cleanses all these things.

Hear therefore what follows: And such were some of you, but you were washed, but you were sanctified, but you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, and in the spirit of our God. We promise to show you that they who approach the laver become clean from all fornication: but the word has shown more, that they have become not only clean, but both holy and just, for it does not say only you were washed, but also you were sanctified and were justified. What could be more strange than this, when without toil, and exertion, and good works, righteousness is produced?

For such is the lovingkindness of the Divine gift that it makes men just without this exertion. For if a letter of the Emperor, a few words being added, sets free those who are liable to countless accusations, and brings others to the highest honors; much rather will the Holy Spirit of God, who is able to do all things, free us from all evil and grant us much righteousness, and fill us with much assurance, and as a spark falling into the wide sea would straightway be quenched, or would become invisible, being overwhelmed by the multitude of the waters, so also all human wickedness, when it falls into the pool of the divine fountain, is more swiftly and easily overwhelmed, and made invisible, than that spark.

And for what reason, says one, if the laver take away all our sins, is it called, not a laver of remission of sins, nor a laver of cleansing, but a laver of regeneration? Because it does not simply take away our sins, nor simply cleanse us from our faults, but so as if we were born again. For it creates and fashions us anew not forming us again out of earth, but creating us out of another element, namely, of the nature of water. For it does not simply wipe the vessel clean, but entirely remoulds it again.

For that which is wiped clean, even if it be cleaned with care, has traces of its former condition, and bears the remains of its defilement, but that which falls into the new mould, and is renewed by means of the flames, laying aside all uncleanness, comes forth from the furnace, and sends forth the same brilliancy with things newly formed. As therefore any one who takes and recasts a golden statue which has been tarnished by time, smoke, dust, rust, restores it to us thoroughly cleansed and glistening: so too this nature of ours, rusted with the rust of sin, and having gathered much smoke from our faults, and having lost its

beauty, which He had from the beginning bestowed upon it from himself, God has taken and cast anew, and throwing it into the waters as into a mould, and instead of fire sending forth the grace of the Spirit, then brings us forth with much brightness, renewed, and made afresh, to rival the beams of the sun, having crushed the old man, and having fashioned a new man, more brilliant than the former.

4. And speaking darkly of this crushing, and this mystic cleansing, the prophet of old said, You shall dash them in pieces like a potter's vessel. For that the word is in reference to the faithful, what goes before sufficiently shows us, For you are my Son, he says, today have I begotten you, ask of me and I will give the heathen for three inheritance, the utmost parts of the earth for your possession. Do you see how he has made mention of the church of the Gentiles, and has spoken of the kingdom of Christ extended on all sides?

Then he says again, You shall rule them with a rod of iron; not grievous, but strong: you shall break them in pieces like a potter's vessel. Behold then, the laver is more mystically brought forward. For he does not say earthen vessels: but vessels of the potter. But, give heed: For earthen vessels when crushed would not admit of refashioning, on account of the hardness which was gained by them from the fire. But the fact is that the vessels of the potter are not earthen, but of clay; wherefore, also, when they have been distorted, they can easily, by the skill of the artificer, be brought again to a second shape.

When, therefore, God speaks of an irremediable calamity, he does not say vessels of the potter, but an earthen vessel; when, for instance, he wished to teach the prophet and the Jews that he delivered up the city to an irremediable calamity, he bade him take an earthen wine-vessel, and crush it before all the people, and say, Thus shall this city be destroyed, be broken in pieces. Jeremiah 19:11 But when he wishes to hold out good hopes to them, he brings the prophet to a pottery, and does not show him an earthen vessel, but shows him a vessel of clay, which was in the hands of the potter, falling to the ground: and brings him to it saying, If this potter has taken up and remodelled his vessel which has fallen, shall I not much rather be able to restore you when you have fallen?

Jeremiah 18:6 It is possible therefore for God not only to restore those who are made of clay, through the laver of regeneration, but to bring back again to their original state, on their careful repentance, those who have received the power of the Spirit, and have lapsed. But this is not the time for you to hear words about repentance, rather may the time never come for you to fall into the need of these remedies, but may you always remain in preservation of the beauty and the brightness which you are now about to receive, unsullied.

In order, then, that you may ever remain thus, come and let us discourse to you a little about your manner of life. For in the wrestling schools falls of the athletes are devoid of danger. For the wrestling is with friends, and they practice all their exercises on the persons of their teachers. But when the time of the contest has come, when the lists are open, when the spectators are seated above, when the president has arrived, it necessarily follows that the combatants, if they become careless, fall and retire in great disgrace, or if they are in earnest, win the crowns and the prizes.

So then, in your case these thirty days are like some wrestling school, both for exercise and practice: let us learn from thence already to get the better of that evil demon. For it is to contend with him that we have to strip ourselves, with him after baptism are we to box and fight. Let us learn from thence already his grip, on what side he is aggressive, on what side he can easily threaten us, in order that, when the contest comes on, we may not feel strange, nor become confused, as seeing new forms of wrestling; but having

already practiced them among ourselves, and having learned all his methods, may engage in these forms of wrestling against him with courage.

In all ways, therefore, is he accustomed to threaten us, but especially by means of the tongue, and the mouth. For there is no organ so convenient for him for our deception and our destruction as an unchastened tongue and an unchecked utterance. Hence come many slips on our part: hence many serious accusations against us. And the ease of these falls through the tongue a certain one showed, when he said, Many fell by the sword, but not so many as by the tongue. Sirach 28:22 Now the gravity of the fall the same person shows us again when he says: To slip upon a pavement is better than to slip with the tongue.

Sirach 20:18 And what he speaks of is of this kind. Better it is, says he, that the body should fall and be crushed, than that such a word should go forth as destroys the soul; and he does not speak of falls merely; he also admonishes us that much forethought should be exercised, so that we should not be tripped up, thus saying Make a door and bars for your mouth, Sirach 20:25 not that we should prepare doors and bars, but that with much security, we should shut the tongue off from outrageous words; and again in another place, after showing that we need influence from above, both as accompanying and preceding our own effort so as to keep this wild beast within: stretching forth his hands to God, the prophet said, Let the lifting up of my hands be an evening sacrifice, set a watch, O Lord, before my mouth, keep the door of my lips; and he who before admonished, himself too says again Who shall set a watch before my mouth, and a seal of wisdom upon my lips?

Sirach 22:27 Do you not see, each one fearing these falls and bewailing them, both giving advice, and praying that the tongue may have the benefit of much watchfulness? And for what reason, says one, if this organ brings us such ruin, did God originally place it within us? Because indeed, it is of great use, and if we are careful, it is of use only, and brings no ruin. Hear, for example, what he says who spoke the former words, Death and life are in the power of the tongue. Proverbs 18:21 And Christ points to the same thing when he says, By your words you shall be condemned, and by your words you shall be justified.

Mark 12:27 For the tongue stands in the midst ready for use on either hand. You are its master. Thus indeed a sword lies in the midst, and if you use it against your enemies, this organ becomes a means of safety for you. But if you thrust its stroke against yourself, not the nature of the iron, but your own transgression becomes the cause of your slaughter. Let us then take this view of the tongue. It is a sword lying in the midst; sharpen it for the purpose of accusing your own sins.

Thrust not the stroke against your brother. For this reason God surrounded it with a double fortification; with the fence of the teeth and the barrier of the lips, that it may not rashly and without circumspection utter words which are not convenient. Well, do you say it will not endure this? Bridle it therefore within. Restrain it by means of the teeth, as though giving over its body to these executioners and making them bite it. For it is better that when it sins now it should be bitten by the teeth, than one day when it seeks a drop of water and is parched with heat, to be unable to obtain this consolation. In many other ways indeed it is wont to sin, by raillery and blasphemy, by uttering foul words, by slander, swearing, and perjury.

5. But in order that we may not by saying everything at once today, confuse your minds, we put before you one custom, namely, about the avoidance of oaths, saying this much by way of preface, and speaking plainly -- that if you do not avoid oaths, I say not perjury merely, but those too which happen in the cause of justice, we shall not further discourse upon any other subject. For it is monstrous that teachers of letters

should not give a second lesson to their children until they see the former one fixed well in their memory, but that we, without being able to express our first lessons clearly, should inculcate others before the first are completed.

For this is nothing else than to pour into a perforated jar. Give great care, then, that you silence not our mouth. For this error is grave, and it is exceedingly grave because it does not seem to be grave, and on this account I fear it, because no one fears it. On this account the disease is incurable, because it does not seem to be a disease; but just as simple speech is not a crime, so neither does this seem to be a crime, but with much boldness this transgression is committed: and if any one call it in question, straightway laughter follows, and much ridicule, not of those who are called in question for their oaths, but of those who wish to rectify the disease.

On this account I largely extend my discourse about these matters. For I wish to pull up a deep root, and to wipe out a long-standing evil: I speak not of perjury alone, but even of oaths in good faith. But so and so, says one, a forbearing man, consecrated to the priesthood, living in much self-control and piety, takes an oath. Do not speak to me of this forbearing person, this self-controlled, pious man who is consecrated to the priesthood; but if you will, add that this man is Peter, or Paul, or even an angel descended out of heaven.

For not even in such a case do I regard the dignity of their persons. For the law which I read upon oaths, is not that of the servant, but of the King: and when the edicts of a king are read, let every claim of the servants be silent. But if you are able to say that Christ bade us use oaths, or that Christ did not punish the doing of this, show me, and I am persuaded. But if he forbids it with so much care, and takes so much thought about the matter as to class him who takes an oath with the evil one (for whatsoever is more than these, namely, than yea and nay, says he, is of the devil), Matthew 5:35 why do you bring this person and that person forward?

For not because of the carelessness of your fellow servants, but from the injunctions of his own laws, will God record his vote against you. I have commanded, he says, you ought to obey, not to shelter yourself behind such and such a person and concern yourself with other persons' evil. Since the great David sinned a grievous sin, is it then safe for us to sin? Tell me: on this account then we ought to make sure of this point, and only to emulate the good works of the saints; and if there is carelessness, and transgression of the law anywhere, we ought to flee from it with great care.

For our reckoning is not with our fellow-servants, but with our Master, and to him we shall give account for all done in our life. Let us prepare ourselves therefore for this tribunal. For even if he who transgresses this law be beyond everything revered and great, he shall certainly pay the penalty attaching to the transgression. For God is no respecter of persons. How then and in what way is it possible to flee from this sin? For one ought to show not only that the crime is grievous, but to give counsel how we may escape from it.

Have you a wife, have you a servant, children, friends, acquaintance, neighbors? To all these enjoin caution on these matters. Custom is a grievous thing, terrible to supplant, and hard to guard against, and it often attacks us unwilling and unknowing; therefore in so far as you know the power of custom, to such an extent study to be freed from any evil custom, and transfer yourself to any other most useful one. For as that custom is often able to trip you up, though you are careful, and guardest yourself, and takest thought, and consideration, so if you transfer yourself to the good custom of abstaining from oaths, you will not be

able, either involuntarily or carelessly, to fall into the fault of oaths.

For custom is really great and has the power of nature. In order then that we do not continually distress ourselves let us transfer ourselves to another custom, and ask thou each one of your kindred and acquaintance this favor, that he advise you and exhort you to flee from oaths, and reprove you, when detected in them. For the watch over you which takes place on their part, is to them too counsel and a suggestion to what is right. For he who reproves another for oaths, will not himself easily fall into this pit.

For much swearing is no ordinary pit, not only when it is about little matters but about the greatest. And we, whether buying vegetables, or quarrelling over two farthings, or in a rage with our servants and threatening them, always call upon God as our witness. But a freeman, possessed of some barren dignity, you would not dare to call upon as witness in the market to such things; but even if you attempted it, you will pay the penalty of your insolence. But the King of Heaven, the Lord of Angels, when disputing both about purchases and money, and what not, you drag in for a testimony.

And how can these things be borne? Whence then should we escape from this evil custom? After setting those guards of which I spoke round us, let us fix on a specified time to ourselves for amendment, and adding thereto condemnation if, when the time has passed, we have not amended this. How long time will suffice for the purpose? I do not think that they who are very wary, and on the alert, and watchful about their own salvation, should need more than ten days, so as to be altogether free from the evil custom of oaths.

But if after ten days we be detected swearing, let us add a penalty due to ourselves, and let us fix upon the greatest punishment and condemnation of the transgression; what then is this condemnation? This I do not fix upon, but will suffer you yourselves to determine the sentence. So we arrange matters in our own case, not only in respect of oaths but in respect of other defects, and fixing a time for ourselves, with most grievous punishments, if at any time we have fallen into them, shall come clean to our Master, and shall escape the fire of hell, and shall stand before the judgment seat of Christ with boldness, to which may we all attain, by the grace and lovingkindness of our Lord Jesus Christ, with whom be glory to the Father together with the Holy Spirit for ever and ever: Amen.

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