

Homily 24 on First Corinthians

John Chrysostom

Patristic · Nicene & Post-Nicene · Homily

STROMATA 161

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INTRODUCTION

Chrysostom preaching verse by verse through Paul's warning against idolatry, working outward from a single line, no temptation has overtaken you but what is common to man, into a sustained meditation on the Eucharist as the "cup of blessing." His famous eloquence is on full display in the extended comparison between Christ's blood poured out and a lover's extravagant gift, delivered to a congregation he assumes already knows the sacrament intimately. As Archbishop of Constantinople he preached constantly and left more homilies than any other Greek father, and this one shows why his sermons were transcribed and circulated in his own lifetime. Expect a preacher's voice throughout, direct address, rhetorical questions, real urgency.

1 Corinthians 10:13

There has no temptation taken you, but such as man can bear: but God is faithful, Who will not suffer you to be tempted above that you are able; but will with the temptation make also the way of escape, that you may be able to endure it.

Thus, because he terrified them greatly, relating the ancient examples, and threw them into an agony, saying, Let him that thinks he stands take heed lest he fall; though they had borne many temptations, and had exercised themselves many times therein; for I was with you, says he, in weakness, and in fear, and in much trembling: 1 Corinthians 2:3 lest they should say, Why terrify and alarm us? We are not unexercised in these troubles, for we have been both driven and persecuted, and many and continual dangers have we endured: repressing again their pride, he says, there has no temptation taken you but such as man can bear, i.e., small, brief, moderate. For he uses the expression man can bear, in respect of what is small; as when he says, I speak after the manner of men because of the infirmity of your flesh. Romans 6:19 Think not then great things, says he, as though ye had overcome the storm. For never have ye seen a danger threatening death nor a temptation intending slaughter: which also he said to the Hebrews, you have not yet resisted unto blood, striving against sin. Hebrews 12:4

Then, because he terrified them, see how again he raises them up, at the same time recommending moderation; in the words, God is faithful, Who will not suffer you to be tempted above that you are able. There are therefore temptations which we are not able to bear. And what are these? All, so to

speaking. For the ability lies in God's gracious influence; a power which we draw down by our own will. Wherefore that you may know and see that not only those which exceed our power, but not even these which are common to man is it possible without assistance from God easily to bear, he added,

But will with the temptation also make the way of escape, that you may be able to endure it.

For, says he, not even those moderate temptations, as I was remarking, may we bear by our own power: but even in them we require aid from Him in our warfare that we may pass through them, and until we have passed, bear them. For He gives patience and brings on a speedy release; so that in this way also the temptation becomes bearable. This he covertly intimates, saying, will also make the way of escape, that you may be able to bear it: and all things he refers to Him.

1 Corinthians 10:14

- Wherefore, my brethren, flee from idolatry.

Again he courts them by the name of kindred, and urges them to be rid of this sin with all speed. For he did not say, simply, depart, but flee; and he calls the matter idolatry, and no longer bids them quit it merely on account of the injury to their neighbor, but signifies that the very thing of itself is sufficient to bring a great destruction.

1 Corinthians 10:15

I speak as to wise men: judge ye what I say.

Because he has cried out aloud and heightened the accusation, calling it idolatry; that he might not seem to exasperate them and to make his speech disgusting, in what follows he refers the decision to them, and sets his judges down on their tribunal with an encomium. For I speak as to wise men, says he: which is the mark of one very confident of his own rights, that he should make the accused himself the judge of his allegations.

Thus also he more elevates the hearer, when he discourses not as commanding nor as laying down the law, but as advising with them and as actually pleading before them. For with the Jews, as more foolishly and childishly disposed, God did not so discourse, nor did He in every instance acquaint them with the reasons of the commands, but merely enjoined them; but here, because we have the privilege of great liberty, we are even admitted to be counsellors. And he discourses as with friends, and says, I need no other judges, do ye yourselves pass this sentence upon me, I take you for arbiters.

1 Corinthians 10:16

- The cup of blessing which we bless, is it not a communion of the Blood of Christ?

What do you say, O blessed Paul? When you would appeal to the hearer's reverence, when you are making mention of awful mysteries, do you give the title of cup of blessing to that fearful and most tremendous cup? Yea, says he; and no mean title is that which was spoken. For when I call it 'blessing,' I mean thanksgiving, and when I call it thanksgiving I unfold all the treasure of God's goodness, and call

to mind those mighty gifts. Since we too, recounting over the cup the unspeakable mercies of God and all that we have been made partakers of, so draw near to Him, and communicate; giving Him thanks that He has delivered from error the whole race of mankind ; that being afar off, He made them near; that when they had no hope and were without God in the world, He constituted them His own brethren and fellow-heirs. For these and all such things, giving thanks, thus we approach. How then are not your doings inconsistent, says he, O you Corinthians; blessing God for delivering you from idols, yet running again to their tables?

The cup of blessing which we bless, is it not a communion of the Blood of Christ? Very persuasively spoke he, and awfully. For what he says is this: This which is in the cup is that which flowed from His side, and of that do we partake. But he called it a cup of blessing, because holding it in our hands, we so exalt Him in our hymn, wondering, astonished at His unspeakable gift, blessing Him, among other things, for the pouring out of this self-same draught that we might not abide in error: and not only for the pouring it out, but also for the imparting thereof to us all. Wherefore if you desire blood, says He, redden not the altar of idols with the slaughter of brute beasts, but My altar with My blood. Tell me, What can be more tremendous than this? What more tenderly kind? This also lovers do. When they see those whom they love desiring what belongs to strangers and despising their own, they give what belongs to themselves, and so persuade them to withdraw themselves from the gifts of those others. Lovers, however, display this liberality in goods and money and garments, but in blood none ever did so. Whereas Christ even herein exhibited His care and fervent love for us. And in the old covenant, because they were in an imperfect state, the blood which they used to offer to idols He Himself submitted to receive, that He might separate them from those idols; which very thing again was a proof of His unspeakable affection: but here He transferred the service to that which is far more awful and glorious, changing the very sacrifice itself, and instead of the slaughter of irrational creatures, commanding to offer up Himself.

- The bread which we break, is it not a communion of the Body of Christ? Wherefore said he not, the participation? Because he intended to express something more and to point out how close was the union: in that we communicate not only by participating and partaking, but also by being united. For as that body is united to Christ, so also are we united to him by this bread.

But why adds he also, which we break? For although in the Eucharist one may see this done, yet on the cross not so, but the very contrary. For, A bone of Him, says one, shall not be broken. But that which He suffered not on the cross, this He suffers in the oblation for your sake, and submits to be broken, that he may fill all men.

Further, because he said, a communion of the Body, and that which communicates is another thing from that whereof it communicates; even this which seems to be but a small difference, he took away. For having said, a communion of the Body, he sought again to express something nearer. Wherefore also he added,

1 Corinthians 10:17

For we, who are many, are one bread, one body. For why speak I of communion? says he, we are that self-same body. For what is the bread? The Body of Christ. And what do they become who partake of it? The Body of Christ: not many bodies, but one body. For as the bread consisting of many grains is made one, so that the grains no where appear; they exist indeed, but their difference is not seen by reason of their conjunction; so are we conjoined both with each other and with Christ: there not being one body for you, and another for your neighbor to be nourished by, but the very same for all. Wherefore also he adds,

For we all partake of the one bread. Now if we are all nourished of the same and all become the same, why do we not also show forth the same love, and become also in this respect one? For this was the old way too in the time of our forefathers: for the multitude of them that believed, says the text, were of one heart and soul. Acts 4:32 Not so, however, now, but altogether the reverse. Many and various are the contests between all, and worse than wild beasts are we affected towards each other's members. And Christ indeed made you so far remote, one with himself: but thou dost not deign to be united even to your brother with due exactness, but separatest yourself, having had the privilege of so great love and life from the Lord. For he gave not simply even His own body; but because the former nature of the flesh which was framed out of earth, had first become deadened by sin and destitute of life; He brought in, as one may say, another sort of dough and leaven, His own flesh, by nature indeed the same, but free from sin and full of life; and gave to all to partake thereof, that being nourished by this and laying aside the old dead material, we might be blended together unto that which is living and eternal, by means of this table.

1 Corinthians 10:18

- Behold Israel after the flesh: have not they which eat the sacrifices communion with the altar?

Again, from the old covenant he leads them unto this point also. For because they were far beneath the greatness of the things which had been spoken, he persuades them both from former things and from those to which they were accustomed. And he says well, according to the flesh, as though they themselves were according to the Spirit. And what he says is of this nature: even from persons of the grosser sort ye may be instructed that they who eat the sacrifices, have communion with the altar. Do you see how he intimates that they who seemed to be perfect have not perfect knowledge, if they know not even this, that the result of these sacrifices to many oftentimes is a certain communion and friendship with devils, the practice drawing them on by degrees? For if among men the fellowship of salt and the table becomes an occasion and token of friendship, it is possible that this may happen also in the case of devils.

But do thou, I pray, consider, how with regard to the Jews he said not, they are par-takers with God, but, they have communion with the altar; for what was placed thereon was burnt: but in respect to the Body of Christ, not so. But how? It is a Communion of the Lord's Body. For not with the altar, but with Christ Himself, do we have communion.

But having said that they have communion with the altar, afterwards fearing lest he should seem to discourse as if the idols had any power and could do some injury, see again how he overthrows them, saying,

1 Corinthians 10:19

What say I then? That an idol is any thing? Or that a thing sacrificed to idols is any thing?

As if he had said, Now these things I affirm, and try to withdraw you from the idols, not as though they could do any injury or had any power: for an idol is nothing; but I wish you to despise them. And if you will have us despise them, says one, wherefore do you carefully withdraw us from them? Because they are not offered to your Lord.

1 Corinthians 10:20

For that which the Gentiles sacrifice, says he, they sacrifice to demons, and not to God.

Do not then run to the contrary things. For neither if you were a king's son, and having the privilege of your father's table, should leave it and choose to partake of the table of the condemned and the prisoners in the dungeon, would your father permit it, but with great vehemence he would withdraw you; not as though the table could harm you, but because it disgraces your nobility and the royal table. For verily these too are servants who have offended; dishonored, condemned, prisoners reserved for intolerable punishment, accountable for ten thousand crimes. How then are you not ashamed to imitate the gluttonous and vulgar crew, in that when these condemned persons set out a table, you run there and partakest of the viands? Here is the cause why I seek to withdraw you. For the intention of the sacrificers, and the person of the receivers, makes the things set before you unclean.

And I would not that you should have communion with demon. Perceivest thou the kindness of a careful father? Perceivest thou also the very word, what force it has to express his feeling? For it is my wish, says he, that you have nothing in common with them.

- Next, because he brought in the saying by way of exhortation, lest any of the grosser sort should make light of it as having license, because he said, I would not, and, judge ye; he positively affirms in what follows and lays down the law, saying,

1 Corinthians 10:21

You cannot drink the cup of the Lord, and the cup of demons: ye cannot partake of the Lord's table, and of the table of demons.

And he contents himself with the mere terms, for the purpose of keeping them away. Then, speaking also to their sense of shame,

1 Corinthians 10:22

Do we provoke the Lord to jealousy? are we stronger than He? i.e., Are we tempting Him, whether He is able to punish us, and irritating Him by going over to the adversaries and taking our stand with His enemies? And this he said, reminding them of an ancient history and of their fathers' transgression. Wherefore also he makes use of this expression, which Moses likewise of old used against the Jews, accusing them of idolatry in the person of God. For they, says He, moved Me to jealousy with that which is not God; they provoked Me to anger with their idols. Deuteronomy 32:21

Are we stronger than He? Do you see how terribly, how awfully he rebukes them, thoroughly shaking their very nerves, and by his way of reducing them to an absurdity, touching them to the quick and bringing down their pride? Well, but why, some one will say, did he not set down these things at first, which would be most effectual to withdraw them? Because it is his custom to prove his point by many particulars, and to place the strongest last, and to prevail by proving more than was necessary. On this account then, he began from the lesser topics, and so made his way to that which is the sum of all evils: since thus that last point also became more easily admitted, their mind having been smoothed down by the things said before.

1 Corinthians 10:23-24

All things are lawful for me, but all things are not expedient: all things are lawful for me, but all things edify not. Let no man seek his own, but each his neighbor's good.

Do you see his exact wisdom? Because it was likely that they might say, I am perfect and master of myself, and it does me no harm to partake of what is set before me; Even so, says he, perfect you are and master of yourself; do not however look to this, but whether the result involve not injury, nay subversion. For both these he mentioned, saying, All things are not expedient, all things edify not; and using the former with reference to one's self, the latter, to one's brother: since the clause, are not expedient, is a covert intimation of the ruin of the person to whom he speaks; but the clause, edify not, of the stumbling block to the brother.

Wherefore also he adds, Let no man seek his own; which he every where through the whole Epistle insists upon and in that to the Romans; when he says, For even Christ pleased not Himself: Romans 15:3 and again, Even as I please all men in all things, not seeking my own profit. 1 Corinthians 10:33 And again in this place; he does not, however, fully work it out here. That is, since in what had gone before he had established it at length, and shown that he no where seeks his own, but both to the Jews became as a Jew and to them that are without law as without law, and used not his own liberty and right at random, but to the profit of all, serving all; he here broke off, content with a few words, by these few guiding them to the remembrance of all which had been said.

- These things therefore knowing, let us also, beloved, consult for the good of the brethren and preserve unity with them. For to this that fearful and tremendous sacrifice leads us, warning us above all things to approach it with one mind and fervent love, and thereby becoming eagles, so to mount up to the very heaven, nay, even beyond the heaven. For wheresoever the carcass is, says He, there also will be the eagles, Matthew 24:28 calling His body a carcass by reason of His death. For unless He had fallen, we should not have risen again. But He calls us eagles, implying

that he who draws near to this Body must be on high and have nothing common with the earth, nor wind himself downwards and creep along; but must ever be soaring heavenwards, and look on the Sun of Righteousness, and have the eye of his mind quick-sighted. For eagles, not daws, have a right to this table. Those also shall then meet Him descending from heaven, who now worthily have this privilege, even as they who do so unworthily, shall suffer the extremest torments.

For if one would not inconsiderately receive a king — (why say I a king? Nay were it but a royal robe, one would not inconsiderately touch it with unclean hands;)— though he should be in solitude, though alone, though no man were at hand: and yet the robe is nought but certain threads spun by worms: and if you admire the dye, this too is the blood of a dead fish; nevertheless, one would not choose to venture on it with polluted hands: I say now, if even a man's garment be what one would not venture inconsiderately to touch, what shall we say of the Body of Him Who is God over all, spotless, pure, associate with the Divine Nature, the Body whereby we are, and live; whereby the gates of hell were broken down and the sanctuaries of heaven opened? How shall we receive this with so great insolence? Let us not, I pray you, let us not slay ourselves by our irreverence, but with all awfulness and purity draw near to It; and when you see It set before you, say thou to yourself, Because of this Body am I no longer earth and ashes, no longer a prisoner, but free: because of this I hope for heaven, and to receive the good things therein, immortal life, the portion of angels, converse with Christ; this Body, nailed and scourged, was more than death could stand against; this Body the very sun saw sacrificed, and turned aside his beams; for this both the veil was rent in that moment, and rocks were burst asunder, and all the earth was shaken. This is even that Body, the blood-stained, the pierced, and that out of which gushed the saving fountains, the one of blood, the other of water, for all the world.

Would you from another source also learn its power? Ask of her diseased with an issue of blood, who laid hold not of Itself, but of the garment with which It was clad; nay not of the whole of this, but of the hem: ask of the sea, which bare It on its back: ask even of the Devil himself, and say, Whence have you that incurable stroke? Whence have you no longer any power? Whence are you captive? By whom have you been seized in your flight? And he will give no other answer than this, The Body that was crucified. By this were his goads broken in pieces; by this was his head crushed; by this were the powers and the principalities made a show of. For, says he, having put off from himself principalities and powers, He made a show of them openly, triumphing over them in it. Colossians 2:15

Ask also Death, and say, whence is it that your sting has been taken away? Your victory abolished? Your sinews cut out? And thou become the laughing-stock of girls and children, who wast before a terror even to kings and to all righteous men? And he will ascribe it to this Body. For when this was crucified, then were the dead raised up, then was that prison burst, and the gates of brass were broken, and the dead were loosed, and the keepers of hell-gate all cowered in fear. And yet, had He been one of the many, death on the contrary should have become more mighty; but it was not so. For He was not one of the many. Therefore was death dissolved. And as they who take food which they are unable to retain, on account of that vomit up also what was before lodged in them; so also it happened unto death. That Body, which he could not digest, he received: and therefore had to cast forth that which he had within him. Yea, he travailed in pain, while he held Him, and was straitened until He vomited Him up. Wherefore says the Apostle, Having loosed the pains of death. Acts 11:24 For never woman

labouring of child was so full of anguish as he was torn and racked in sunder, while he held the Body of the Lord. And that which happened to the Babylonian dragon, when, having taken the food it burst asunder in the midst, this also happened unto him. For Christ came not forth again by the mouth of death, but having burst asunder and ripped up in the very midst, the belly of the dragon, thus from His secret chambers Psalm 19:5 right gloriously He issued forth and flung abroad His beams not to this heaven alone, but to the very throne most high. For even there did He carry it up.

This Body has He given to us both to hold and to eat; a thing appropriate to intense love. For those whom we kiss vehemently, we oft-times even bite with our teeth. Wherefore also Job, indicating the love of his servants towards him, said, that they oft-times, out of their great affection towards him, said, Oh! That we were filled with his flesh! Job 31:31 Even so Christ has given to us to be filled with His flesh, drawing us on to greater love.

- Let us draw near to Him then with fervency and with inflamed love, that we may not have to endure punishment. For in proportion to the greatness of the benefits bestowed on us, so much the more exceedingly are we chastised when we show ourselves unworthy of the bountifulness. This Body, even lying in a manger, Magi revered. Yea, men profane and barbarous, leaving their country and their home, both set out on a long journey, and when they came, with fear and great trembling worshipped Him. Let us, then, at least imitate those Barbarians, we who are citizens of heaven. For they indeed when they saw Him but in a manger, and in a hut, and no such thing was in sight as you behold now, drew near with great awe; but you behold Him not in the manger but on the altar, not a woman holding Him in her arms, but the priest standing by, and the Spirit with exceeding bounty hovering over the gifts set before us. You do not see merely this Body itself as they did, but you know also Its power, and the whole economy, and art ignorant of none of the holy things which are brought to pass by It, having been exactly initiated into all.

Let us therefore rouse ourselves up and be filled with horror, and let us show forth a reverence far beyond that of those Barbarians; that we may not by random and careless approaches heap fire upon our own heads. But these things I say, not to keep us from approaching, but to keep us from approaching without consideration. For as the approaching at random is dangerous, so the not communicating in those mystical suppers is famine and death. For this Table is the sinews of our soul, the bond of our mind, the foundation of our confidence, our hope, our salvation, our light, our life. When with this sacrifice we depart into the outer world, with much confidence we shall tread the sacred threshold, fenced round on every side as with a kind of golden armor.

And why speak I of the world to come? Since here this mystery makes earth become to you a heaven. Open only for once the gates of heaven and look in; nay, rather not of heaven, but of the heaven of heavens; and then you will behold what I have been speaking of. For what is there most precious of all, this will I show you lying upon the earth. For as in royal palaces, what is most glorious of all is not walls, nor golden roofs, but the person of the king sitting on the throne; so likewise in heaven the Body of the King. But this, you are now permitted to see upon earth. For it is not angels, nor archangels, nor heavens and heavens of heavens, that I show you, but the very Lord and Owner of these. Perceivest thou how that which is more precious than all things is seen by you on earth; and not seen only, but also touched; and not only touched, but likewise eaten; and after receiving It you go home?

Make your soul clean then, prepare your mind for the reception of these mysteries. For if you were entrusted to carry a king's child with the robes, the purple, and the diadem, you would cast away all things which are upon the earth. But now that it is no child of man how royal soever, but the only-begotten Son of God Himself, Whom you received, do you not thrill with awe, tell me, and cast away all the love of all worldly things, and have no bravery but that wherewith to adorn yourself? Or do you still look towards earth, and love money, and pant after gold? What pardon then can you have? What excuse? Do you not know that all this worldly luxury is loathsome to your Lord? Was it not for this that on His birth He was laid in a manger, and took to Himself a mother of low estate? Did He not for this say to him that was looking after gain, But the Son of Man has not where to lay His head? Matthew 8:20

And what did the disciples? Did they not observe the same law, being taken to houses of the poor and lodged, one with a tanner, another with a tent-maker, and with the seller of purple? For they inquired not after the splendor of the house, but for the virtues of men's souls.

These therefore let us also emulate, hastening by the beauty of pillars and of marbles, and seeking the mansions which are above; and let us tread under foot all the pride here below with all love of money, and acquire a lofty mind. For if we be sober-minded, not even this whole world is worthy of us, much less porticoes and arcades. Wherefore, I beseech you, let us adorn our souls, let us fit up this house which we are also to have with us when we depart; that we may attain even to the eternal blessings, through the grace and mercy, etc.

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