

Tractate 30 (John 7:19-24)

Augustine of Hippo

Patristic · Nicene & Post-Nicene · Exegesis

STROMATA 29

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INTRODUCTION

Delivered as part of Augustine's long preaching cycle through John's Gospel at Hippo, this homily takes up Christ's confrontation with the Jerusalem crowd after the healing at Bethesda, the charge of Sabbath-breaking met by the counter-charge that his accusers themselves do not keep the Law they invoke. Augustine's interest is less juridical than diagnostic: he reads the crowd's agitation as the recoil of weak eyes from sudden light, and uses the scene to press his hearers on the difference between seeing Jesus and recognising him. The Tractates would shape Latin scriptural preaching for a thousand years, and the pastoral directness on display here, the preacher pausing to address "beloved," the unhurried unfolding of a single verse, is part of why. Read it slowly, as a sermon meant to be overheard rather than studied.

The passage of the holy Gospel of which we have before discoursed to you, beloved, is followed by that of today, which has just now been read. Both the disciples and the Jews heard the Lord speaking; both men of truth and liars heard the Truth speaking; both friends and enemies heard Charity speaking; both good men and bad men heard the Good speaking. They heard, but He discerned; He saw and foresaw whom His discourse profited and would profit. Among those who were then, He saw; among us who were to be, He foresaw. Let us therefore hear the Gospel, just as if we were listening to the Lord Himself present: nor let us say, O happy they who were able to see Him! Because there were many of them who saw, and also killed Him; and there are many among us who have not seen Him, and yet have believed. For the precious truth that sounded forth from the mouth of the Lord was both written for our sakes, and preserved for our sakes, and recited for our sakes, and will be recited also for the sake of our prosperity, even until the end of the world. The Lord is above; but the Lord, the Truth, is also here. For the body of the Lord, in which He rose again from the dead, can be only in one place; but His truth is everywhere diffused. Let us then hear the Lord, and let us also speak that which He shall have granted to us concerning His own words.

Did not Moses, says He, give you the law, and yet none of you does the law? Why do ye seek to kill me? For you seek to kill me just for this reason, that none of you does the law; for if you did do the law, you would recognize Christ in its very letters, and you would not kill Him when present with you. And they answered: The crowd answered Him; answered as a tumultuous crowd, things not pertaining to

order, but to confusion; in a word, the crowd was disturbed. See what answer it made: You have a devil: who seeks to kill you? As if it were not worse to say, You have a devil, than to kill Him. To Him, indeed, was it said, that He had a devil, who was casting out devils. What else can a turbulent disorderly crowd say? What else can filth stirred up do but stink? The crowd was disturbed; by what? By the truth. For the eyes that have not soundness cannot endure the brightness of the light.

But the Lord, manifestly not disturbed, but calm in His truth, rendered not evil for evil nor railing for railing; 1 Peter 3:9 although, if He were to say to these men, You have a devil, He would certainly be saying what was true. For they would not have said such things to the Truth, unless the falsehood of the devil had instigated them. What then did He answer? Let us calmly hear, and drink in the serene word: I have done one work, and you all marvel. As if He said, What if you were to see all my works? For they were His works which they saw in the world, and yet they saw not Him who made them all: He did one thing, and they were disturbed because he made a man whole on the Sabbath day. As if, indeed, when any sick man recovered his health on the Sabbath day, it had been any other that made such a man whole than He who offended them, because He made one man whole on the Sabbath day. For who else has made others whole than He who is health itself — He who gives even to the beasts that health which He gave to this man? For it was bodily health. The health of the flesh is repaired, and the flesh dies; and when it is repaired, death is only put off, not taken away. However, even that same health, brethren, is from the Lord, through whomsoever it may be given: by whose care and ministry soever it may be imparted, it is given by Him from whom all health is, to whom it is said in the psalm, O Lord, You will save men and beasts; as You have multiplied Your mercy, O God. For because You are God Your multiplied mercy reaches even to the safety of human flesh, reaches even to the safety of dumb animals; but Thou who givest health of flesh common to men and beasts, is there no health which Thou reservest for men? There is certainly another which is not only not common to men and beasts, but to men themselves is not common to good and bad. In a word, when he had there spoken of this health which men and cattle receive in common, because of that health which men, but only the good, ought to hope for, he added as he went on: But the sons of men shall put their trust under the cover of Your wings. They shall be fully satisfied with the fatness of Your house; and You shall give them drink from the torrent of Your pleasure. For with You is the fountain of life; and in Your light shall they see light. This is the health which belongs to good men, those whom he called sons of men; while he had said above, O Lord, You shall save men and beasts. How then? Were not those men sons of men, that after he had said men, he should go on and say, But the sons of men: as if men and sons of men meant different things? Yet I do not believe that the Holy Spirit had said this without some indication of distinction. The term men refers to the first Adam, sons of men to Christ. Perhaps, indeed, men relate to the first man; but sons of men relate to the Son of man.

I have done one work, and you all marvel. And immediately He subjoined: Moses therefore gave unto you circumcision. It was well done that you received circumcision from Moses. Not that it is of Moses, but of the fathers; since it was Abraham that first received circumcision from the Lord. Genesis 17:10 And ye circumcise on the Sabbath day. Moses has convicted you: you have received in the law to circumcise on the eighth day; you have received in the law to cease from labor on the seventh day; Exodus 20:10 if the eighth day from the child's birth fall on the seventh day of the week, what will you

do? Will ye abstain from work to keep the Sabbath, or will you circumcise to fulfill the sacrament of the eighth day? But I know, says He, what ye do. You circumcise a man. Why? Because circumcision relates to what is a kind of seal of salvation, and men ought not to abstain from the work of salvation on the Sabbath day. Therefore be ye not angry with me, because I have made a man every whit whole on the Sabbath day. If, says He, a man on the Sabbath day receives circumcision that the law should not be broken (for it was something saving that was ordained by Moses in that ordinance of circumcision), why are you angry at me for working a healing on the Sabbath day?

Perhaps, indeed, that circumcision pointed to the Lord Himself, at whom they were indignant, because He worked cures and healing. For circumcision was commanded to be applied on the eighth day: and what is circumcision but the spoiling of the flesh? This circumcision, then, signified the removal of carnal lusts from the heart. Therefore not without cause was it given, and ordered to be made in that member; since by that member the creature of mortal kind is procreated. By one man came death, just as by one man the resurrection of the dead; 1 Corinthians 15:21 and by one man sin entered into the world, and death by sin. Romans 5:12 Therefore every man is born with a foreskin, because every man is born with the vice of propagation; and God cleanses not, either from the vice with which we are born, or from the vices which we add thereto by ill living, except by the stony knife, the Lord Christ. For Christ was the Rock. Now they used to circumcise with stone knives, and by the name of rock they prefigured Christ; and yet when He was present with them they did not acknowledge Him, but besides, they sought to kill Him. But why on the eighth day, unless because after the seventh day of the week the Lord rose again on the Lord's day? Therefore Christ's resurrection, which happened on the third day indeed of His passion, but on the eighth day in the days of the week, that same resurrection it is that does circumcise us. Hear of those that were circumcised with the real stone, while the apostle admonishes them: If then ye be risen with Christ, seek those things which are above, where Christ is, sitting on the right hand of God; set your affection on things above, not on things on the earth. Colossians 3:1-2 He speaks to the circumcised: Christ has risen; He has taken away from you carnal desires, evil lusts, the superfluity with which you were born, and that far worse which you had added thereto by ill living; being circumcised by the Rock, why do you still set your affections on the earth? And finally, for that Moses gave you the law, and you circumcise a man on the Sabbath day, understand that by this is signified the good work which I have done, in that I have made a man every whit whole on the Sabbath day; because he was cured that he might be whole in body, and also he believed that he might be whole in soul.

Judge not according to personal appearance, but judge righteous judgment. What is this? Just now, you who by the law of Moses circumcise on the Sabbath day are not angry with Moses; and because I made a man whole on the Sabbath day you are angry with me. You judge by the person; give heed to the truth. I do not prefer myself to Moses, says the Lord, who was also the Lord of Moses. So consider us as you would two men, as both men; judge between us, but judge a true judgment; do not condemn him by honoring me, but honor me by understanding him. For this He said to them in another place: If you believed Moses ye would certainly believe me also, for he wrote of me. John 5:46 But in this place He willed not to say this, Himself and Moses being as it were placed before these men for judgment. Because of Moses' law you circumcise, even when it happens to be the Sabbath day, and will you not

that I should show the beneficence of healing during the Sabbath? For the Lord of circumcision and the Lord of the Sabbath is the same who is the Author of health; and they are servile works that you are forbidden to do on the Sabbath; if you really understand what servile works are, you sin not. For he that commits sin is the servant of sin. Is it a servile work to heal a man on the Sabbath day? You do eat and drink (to infer somewhat from the admonition of our Lord Jesus Christ, and from His words); at any rate, why do you eat and drink on the Sabbath, but because that what ye do pertains to health? By this ye show that the works of health are not in any wise to be omitted on the Sabbath. Therefore do not judge by person, but judge righteous judgment. Consider me as you would a man; consider Moses as a man: if you will judge according to the truth, you will condemn neither Moses nor me; and when you know the truth you will know me, because I am the Truth.

It requires great labor in this world, brethren to get clear of the vice which the Lord has noted in this place, so as not to judge by appearance, but to keep right judgment. The Lord, indeed, admonished the Jews, but He warned us also; them He convicted, us He instructed; them He reproved, us He encouraged. Let us not imagine that this was not said to us, simply because we were not there at that time. It was written, it is read; when it was recited we heard it; but we heard it as said to the Jews; let us not place ourselves behind ourselves and watch Him reproofing enemies, while we ourselves do that which the truth may reprove in us. The Jews indeed judged by appearance, but for that reason they belong not to the New Testament, they have not the kingdom of heaven in Christ, nor are joined to the society of the holy angels; they sought earthly things of the Lord; for a land of promise, victory over enemies, fruitfulness of child-bearing, increase of children, abundance of fruit — all which things were indeed promised to them by God, the True and the Good, promised to them, however, as unto carnal men, — all these things made for them the Old Testament. What is the Old Testament? The inheritance, as it were, belonging to the old man. We have been renewed, have been made a new man, because He who is the new man has come. What is so new as to be born of a virgin? Therefore, because there was not in Him what instruction might renew, because He had no sin, there was given Him a new origin of birth. In Him a new birth, in us a new man. What is a new man? A man renewed from oldness. Renewed unto what? Unto desiring heavenly things, unto longing for things eternal, unto earnestly seeking the country which is above and fears no foe, where we do not lose a friend nor fear an enemy; where we live with good affection, without any want; where no longer any advances, because none fails; where no man is born, because no man dies; where there is no hungering nor thirsting; where immortality is fullness, and truth our aliment. Having these promises, and pertaining to the New Testament, and being made heirs of a new inheritance, and co-heirs of the Lord Himself, we have a far different hope from theirs: let us not judge by appearance, but hold right judgment. Who is he that judges not according to the person? He that loves equally. Equal love causes that persons be not accepted. It is not when we honor men in diverse measure according to their degrees that we ought to fear lest we are accepting persons. For where we judge between two, and at times between relations, sometimes it happens that judgment has to be made between father and son; the father complains of a bad son, or the son complains of a harsh father; we regard the honor which is due to the father from the son; we do not make the son equal to the father in honor, but we give him preference if he has a good cause: let us regard the son on an equality with the father in the truth, and thus shall we bestow the honor due, so that equity destroy not merit. Thus we profit by the words of the Lord, and that we may profit, we are assisted by His grace.

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