

St John Chrysostom Homily 61 on Matthew

“Then came Peter to Him, and said, Lord, how oft shall my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? Till seven times? Jesus says unto him, I say not unto you, Until seven times, but, Until seventy times seven.”

Peter supposed he was saying something great, wherefore also as aiming at greatness he added, “Until seven times?” For this thing, says he, which You have commanded to do, how often shall I do? For if he forever sins, but forever when reprov'd repents, how often do you command us to bear with this man? For with regard to that other who repents not, neither acknowledges his own faults, You have set a limit, by saying, “Let him be to you as the heathen and the publican;” but to this no longer so, but You have commanded to accept him.

How often then ought I to bear with him, being told his faults, and repenting? Is it enough for seven times?

What then says Christ, the good God, who is loving towards man? “I say not unto you, until seven times, but, until seventy times seven,” not setting a number here, but what is infinite and perpetual and forever. For even as ten thousand times signifies often, so here too. For by saying, “The barren has borne seven,” 1 Samuel 2:5 the Scripture means many. So that He has not limited the forgiveness by a number, but has declared that it is to be perpetual and forever.

This at least He indicated by the parable that is put after. For that He might not seem to any to enjoin great things and hard to bear, by saying, “Seventy times seven,” He added this parable, at once both leading them on to what He had said, and putting down him who was priding himself upon this, and showing the act was not grievous, but rather very easy. Therefore let me add, He brought forward His own love to man, that by the comparison, as He says, you might learn, that though thou forgive seventy times seven, though thou continually pardon your neighbour for absolutely all his sins, as a drop of water to an endless sea, so much, or rather much more, does your love to man come short in comparison of the boundless goodness of God, of which you stand in need, for that you are to be judged, and to give an account.

Wherefore also He went on to say, “The Kingdom of Heaven is likened unto a certain king, which would take account of his servants. And when he had begun to reckon, one was brought unto him, which owed him ten thousand talents. But forasmuch as he had not to pay, he commanded him to be sold, and his wife, and his children, and all that he had.”

Then after this man had enjoyed the benefit of mercy, he went out, and “took by the throat his fellow-servant, which owed him an hundred pence;” Matthew 18:28 and having by these doings moved his lord, he caused him to cast him again into prison, until he should pay off the whole.

Do you see how great the difference between sins against man and against God? As great as between ten thousand talents, and a hundred pence, or rather even much more. And this arises both

from the difference of the persons, and the constant succession of our sins. For when a man looks at us, we stand off and shrink from sinning: but when God sees us every day, we do not forbear, but do and speak all things without fear.

But not hereby alone, but also from the benefit and from the honour of which we have partaken, our sins become more grievous.

And if you are desirous to learn how our sins against Him are ten thousand talents, or rather even much more, I will try to show it briefly. But I fear lest to them that are inclined to wickedness, and love continually to sin, I should furnish still greater security, or should drive the meeker sort to despair, and they should repeat that saying of the disciples, "who can be saved?"

Nevertheless for all that I will speak, that I may make those that attend more safe, and more meek. For they that are incurably diseased, and past feeling, even without these words of mine, do not depart from their own carelessness, and wickedness; and if even from hence they derive greater occasion for contempt, the fault is not in what is said, but in their insensibility; since what is said surely is enough both to restrain those that attend to it, and to prick their hearts; and the meeker sort, when they see on the one hand the greatness of their sins, and learn also on the other hand the power of repentance, will cleave to it the more, wherefore it is needful to speak.

I will speak then, and will set forth our sins, both wherein we offend against God, and wherein against men, and I will set forth not each person's own, but what are common; but his own let each one join to them after that from his conscience.

And I will do this, having first set forth the good deeds of God to us. What then are His good deeds? He created us when we were not, and made all things for our sakes that are seen, Heaven, sea, air, all that in them is, living creatures, plants, seeds; for we must needs speak briefly for the boundless ocean of the works. Into us alone of all that are on earth He breathed a living soul such as we have, He planted a garden, He gave a help-meet, He set us over all the brutes, He crowned us with glory and honour.

After that, when man had been unthankful towards his benefactor, He vouchsafed unto him a greater gift.

2. For look not to this only, that He cast him out of paradise, but mark also the gain that arose from thence. For after having cast him out of paradise, and having wrought those countless good works, and having accomplished His various dispensations, He sent even His own Son for the sake of them that had been benefited by Him and were hating Him, and opened Heaven to us, and unfolded paradise itself, and made us sons, the enemies, the unthankful.

Wherefore it were even seasonable now to say, "O the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God!" Romans 11:33

And He gave us also a baptism of the remission of sins, and a deliverance from vengeance, and an inheritance of a kingdom, and He promised numberless good things on our doing what is right, and stretched forth His hand, and shed abroad His Spirit into our hearts.

What then? After so many and such great blessings, what ought to be our disposition; should we indeed, even if each day we died for Him who so loves us, make due recompense, or rather should we repay the smallest portion of the debt? By no means, for moreover even this again is turned to our advantage.

How then are we disposed, whose disposition ought to be like this? Each day we insult His law. But be ye not angry, if I let loose my tongue against them that sin, for not you only will I accuse, but myself also.

Where then would ye that I should begin? With the slaves, or with the free? With them that serve in the army, or with private persons? With the rulers, or with the subjects? With the women, or with the men? With the aged men, or with the young? With what age? With what race? With what rank? With what pursuit?

Would ye then that I should make the beginning with them that serve as soldiers? What sin then do not these commit every day, insulting, reviling, frantic, making a gain of other men's calamities, being like wolves, never clear from offences, unless one might say the sea too was without waves. What passion does not trouble them? What disease does not lay siege to their soul?

For to their equals they show a jealous disposition, and they envy, and seek after vainglory; and to those that are subject to them, their disposition is covetous; but to them that have suits, and run unto them as to a harbour, their conduct is that of enemies and perjured persons. How many robberies are there with them! How many frauds! How many false accusations, and meannesses! How many servile flatteries!

Come then, let us apply in each case the law of Christ. "He that says to his brother, You fool, shall be in danger of hell fire. Matthew 5:22 He that has looked on a woman to lust after her, has already committed adultery with her. Matthew 5:28 Unless one humble himself as the little child, he shall not enter into the Kingdom of Heaven."

But these even study haughtiness, becoming towards them that are subject to them, and are delivered into their hands, and who tremble at them, and are afraid of them, more fierce than a wild beast; for Christ's sake doing nothing, but all things for the belly, for money, for vainglory.

Can one indeed reckon up in words the trespass of their actions? What should one say of their decisions, their laughter, their unseasonable discourses, their filthy language? But about covetousness one cannot so much as speak. For like as the monks on the mountains know not even what covetousness is, so neither do these; but in an opposite way to them. For they indeed, because of being far removed from the disease, know not the passion, but these, by reason of being exceedingly intoxicated with it, have not so much as a perception how great the evil is. For this vice has so thrust aside virtue and tyrannises, that it is not accounted so much as a heavy charge with those madmen.

But will you, that we leave these, and go to others of a gentler kind? Come then, let us examine the race of workmen and artisans. For these above all seem to live by honest labours, and the sweat of

their own brow. But these too, when they do not take heed to themselves, gather to themselves many evils from hence. For the dishonesty that arises from buying and selling they bring into the work of honest labor, and add oaths, and perjuries, and falsehoods to their covetousness often, and are taken up with worldly things only, and continue riveted to the earth; and while they do all things that they may get money, they do not take much heed that they may impart to the needy, being always desirous to increase their goods. What should one say of the revilings that are uttered touching such matters, the insults, the loans, the usurious gains, the bargains full of much mean trafficking, the shameless buyings and sellings.

3. But will you that we leave these too, and go to others who seem to be more just? Who then are they? They that are possessed of lands, and reap the wealth that springs from the earth. And what can be more unjust than these? For if any one were to examine how they treat their wretched and toil-worn labourers, he will see them to be more cruel than savages. For upon them that are pining with hunger, and toiling throughout all their life, they both impose constant and intolerable payments, and lay on them laborious burdens, and like asses or mules, or rather like stones, do they treat their bodies, allowing them not so much as to draw breath a little, and when the earth yields, and when it does not yield, they alike wear them out, and grant them no indulgence. And what can be more pitiable than this, when after having laboured throughout the whole winter, and being consumed with frost and rain, and watchings, they go away with their hands empty, yea moreover in debt, and fearing and dreading more that this famine and shipwreck, the torments of the overlookers, and their dragging them about, and their demands, and their imprisonments, and the services from which no entreaty can deliver them!

Why should one speak of the merchandise which they make of them, the sordid gains which they gain by them, by their labours and their sweat filling winepresses, and wine vats, but not suffering them to take home so much as a small measure, but draining off the entire fruits into the casks of their wickedness, and flinging to them for this a little money?

And new kinds of usuries also do they devise, and not lawful even according to the laws of the heathens, and they frame contracts for loans full of many a curse. For not the hundredth part of the sum, but the half of the sum they press for and exact; and this when he of whom it is exacted has a wife, is bringing up children, is a human being, and is filling their threshing floor, and their winepress by his own toils.

But none of these things do they consider. Wherefore now it were seasonable to bring forward the prophet and say, "Be astonished, O Heaven, and be horribly afraid, O earth," Jeremiah 2:12 to what great brutality has the race of man been madly carried away!

But these things I say, not blaming crafts, nor husbandry, nor military service, but ourselves. Since Cornelius also was a centurion, and Paul a worker in leather, and after his preaching practised his craft, and David was a king, and Job enjoyed the possession of land and of large revenues, and there was no hindrance hereby to any of these in the way of virtue.

Bearing in mind all these things, and considering the ten thousand talents, let us at least hence hasten to remit to our neighbours their few and trifling debts. For we too have an account to give of the commandments wherewith we have been trusted, and we are not able to pay all, no not whatever we may do. Therefore God has given us a way to repayment both ready and easy, and which is able to cancel all these things, I mean, not to be revengeful.

In order then that we may learn this well, let us hear the whole parable, going on regularly through it. "For there was brought unto Him," it says, "one which owed ten thousand talents, and when he had not to pay, He commanded him to be sold, and his wife, and his children." Wherefore, I pray you? Not of cruelty, nor of inhumanity (for the loss came back again upon himself, for she too was a slave), but of unspeakable tenderness.

For it is His purpose to alarm him by this threat, that He might bring him to supplication, not that he should be sold. For if He had done it for this intent, He would not have consented to his request, neither would He have granted the favour.

Wherefore then did He not do this, nor forgive the debt before the account? Desiring to teach him, from how many obligations He is delivering him, that in this way at least he might become more mild towards his fellow servant. For even if when he had learned the weight of his debt, and the greatness of the forgiveness, he continued taking his fellow-servant by the throat; if He had not disciplined him beforehand with such medicines, to what length of cruelty might he not have gone?

What then says the other? "Have patience with me, and I will pay you all. And his Lord was moved with compassion, and loosed him, and forgave him the debt." Matthew 18:26-27

Do you see again surpassing benevolence? The servant asked only for delay and putting off the time, but He gave more than he asked, remission and forgiveness of the entire debt. For it had been his will to give it even from the first, but he did not desire the gift to be his only, but also to come of this man's entreaty, that he might not go away uncrowned. For that the whole was of him, although this other fell down to him and prayed, the motive of the forgiveness showed, for "moved with compassion" he forgave him. But still even so he willed that other also to seem to contribute something, that he might not be exceedingly covered with shame, and that he being schooled in his own calamities, might be indulgent to his fellow-servant.

4. Up to this point then this man was good and acceptable; for he confessed, and promised to pay the debt, and fell down before him, and entreated, and condemned his own sins, and knew the greatness of the debt. But the sequel is unworthy of his former deeds. For going out straightway, not after a long time but straightway, having the benefit fresh upon him, he abused to wickedness the gift, even the freedom bestowed on him by his master.

For, "he found one of his fellow-servants, which owed him an hundred pence, and took him by the throat, saying, Pay me what you owe." Matthew 18:28

Do you see the master's benevolence? Do you see the servant's cruelty? Hear, you who do these things for money. For if for sins we must not do so, much more not for money.

What then says the other? "Have patience with me, and I will pay you all." But he did not regard even the words by which he had been saved (for he himself on saying this was delivered from the ten thousand talents), and did not recognize so much as the harbour by which he escaped shipwreck; the gesture of supplication did not remind him of his master's kindness, but he put away from him all these things, from covetousness and cruelty and revenge, and was more fierce than any wild beast, seizing his fellow-servant by the throat.

What doest thou, O man? Do you not perceive, you are making the demand upon yourself, thou art thrusting the sword into yourself, and revoking the sentence and the gift? But none of these things did he consider, neither did he remember his own state, neither did he yield; although the entreaty was not for equal objects.

For the one besought for ten thousand talents, the other for a hundred pence; the one his fellow-servant, the other his lord; the one received entire forgiveness, the other asked for delay, and not so much as this did he give him, for "he cast him into prison."

"But when his fellow-servants saw it, they accused him to their lord." Not even to men is this well-pleasing, much less to God. They therefore who did not owe, partook of the grief.

What then says their lord? "O thou wicked servant, I forgave you all that debt, because you desired me; should not thou also have had compassion, even as I had pity on you?"

See again the lord's gentleness. He pleads with him, and excuses himself, being on the point of revoking his gift; or rather, it was not he that revoked it, but the one who had received it. Wherefore He says, "I forgave you all that debt, because you desired me; should not thou also have had compassion on your fellow-servant?" For even if the thing does seem to you hard; yet should you have looked to the gain, which has been, which is to be. Even if the injunction be galling, you ought to consider the reward; neither that he has grieved you, but that you have provoked God, whom by mere prayer you have reconciled. But if even so it be a galling thing to you to become friends with him who has grieved you, to fall into hell is far more grievous; and if you had set this against that, then you would have known that to forgive is a much lighter thing.

And whereas, when he owed ten thousand talents, he called him not wicked, neither reproached him, but showed mercy on him; when he had become harsh to his fellow-servant, then he says, "O thou wicked servant."

Let us hearken, the covetous, for even to us is the word spoken. Let us hearken also, the merciless, and the cruel, for not to others are we cruel, but to ourselves. When then you are minded to be revengeful, consider that against yourself are you revengeful, not against another; that you are binding up your own sins, not your neighbors. For as to you, whatsoever you may do to this man, you do as a man and in the present life, but God not so, but more mightily will He take vengeance on you, and with the vengeance hereafter.

“For He delivered him over till he should pay that which was due,” that is, for ever; for he will never repay. For since you are not become better by the kindness shown you, it remains that by vengeance thou be corrected.

And yet, “The graces and the gifts are without repentance,” but wickedness has had such power as to set aside even this law. What then can be a more grievous thing than to be revengeful, when it appears to overthrow such and so great a gift of God.

And he did not merely “deliver” him, but “was angry.” For when he commanded him to be sold, his were not the words of wrath (therefore neither did he do it), but a very great occasion for benevolence; but now the sentence is of much indignation, and vengeance, and punishment.

What then means the parable? “So likewise shall my Father do also unto you,” He says, “if you from your hearts forgive not every one his brother their trespasses.”

He says not “your Father,” but “my Father.” For it is not meet for God to be called the Father of such a one, who is so wicked and malicious.

5. Two things therefore does He here require, both to condemn ourselves for our sins, and to forgive others; and the former for the sake of the latter, that this may become more easy (for he who considers his own sins is more indulgent to his fellow-servant); and not merely to forgive with the lips, but from the heart.

Let us not then thrust the sword into ourselves by being revengeful. For what grief has he who has grieved you inflicted upon you, like you will work unto yourself by keeping your anger in mind, and drawing upon yourself the sentence from God to condemn you? For if indeed you are watchful, and keep yourself under control, the evil will come round upon his head, and it will be he that will suffer harm; but if you should continue indignant, and displeased, then yourself wilt undergo the harm not from him, but from yourself.

Say not then that he insulted you, and slandered you, and did unto you ills beyond number; for the more you tell, so much the more do you declare him a benefactor. For he has given you an opportunity to wash away your sins; so that the greater the injuries he has done you, so much more is he become to you a cause of a greater remission of sins.

For if we be willing, no one shall be able to injure us, but even our enemies shall advantage us in the greatest degree. And why do I speak of men? For what can be more wicked than the devil; yet nevertheless, even hence have we a great opportunity of approving ourselves; and Job shows it. But if the devil has become a cause of crowns, why are you afraid of a man as an enemy?

See then how much you gain, bearing meekly the spiteful acts of your enemies. First and greatest, deliverance from sins; secondly, fortitude and patience; thirdly, mildness and benevolence; for he that knows not how to be angry with them that grieve him, much more will he be ready to serve them that love him. Fourthly, to be free from anger continually, to which nothing can be equal. For of him that is free from anger, it is quite clear that he is delivered also from the despondency hence arising, and will not spend his life on vain labours and sorrows. For he that knows not how to hate,

neither does he know how to grieve, but will enjoy pleasure, and ten thousand blessings. So that we punish ourselves by hating others, even as on the other hand we benefit ourselves by loving them.

Besides all these things, you will be an object of veneration even to your very enemies, though they be devils; or rather, you will not so much as have an enemy while you are of such a disposition.

But what is greater than all, and first, you gain the favour of God. Should thou have sinned, you will obtain pardon; should you have done what is right, you will obtain a greater confidence. Let us accomplish therefore the hating no one, that God also may love us, that, though we be in debt for ten thousand talents, He may have compassion and pity us.

But have you been injured by him? Pity him then, do not hate him; weep and mourn, do not turn away from him. For you are not the one that has offended against God, but he; but you have even approved yourself, if you endure it. Consider that Christ, when about to be crucified, rejoiced for Himself, but wept for them that were crucifying Him. This ought to be our disposition also; and the more we are injured, so much the more should we lament for them that are injuring us. For to us many are the benefits hence arising, but to them the opposites.

But did he insult you, and strike you before all? Then has he disgraced and dishonoured himself before all, and has opened the mouths of a thousand accusers, and for you has he woven more crowns, and gathered for you many to publish your forbearance.

But did he slander you to others? And what is this? God is the one that is to demand the account, not they that have heard this. For to himself has he added occasion of punishment, so that not only for his own sins he should give account, but also of what he said of you. And upon you has he brought evil report with men, but he himself has incurred evil report with God.

And if these things are not sufficient for you, consider that even your Lord was evil reported of both by Satan and by men, and that to those most loved by Him; and His Only-Begotten the same again. Wherefore He said, "If they have called the Master of the house Beelzebub, much more shall they call them of His household." Matthew 10:25

And that wicked demon did not only slander Him, but was also believed, and slandered Him not in ordinary matters, but with the greatest reproaches and accusations. For he affirmed Him to be possessed, and to be a deceiver, and an adversary of God.

But have you also done good, and received evil? Nay, in respect of this most of all lament and grieve for him that has done the wrong, but for yourself rather rejoice, because you have become like God, "Who makes the sun to rise upon evil and good." Matthew 5:45

But if to follow God is beyond you, although to him that watches not even this is hard; yet nevertheless if this seem to you to be too great for you, come let us bring you to your fellow-servants, to Joseph, who suffered countless things, and did good unto his brethren; to Moses, who after their countless plots against him, prayed for them; to the blessed Paul, who cannot so much as number what he suffered from them, and is willing to be accursed for them; to Stephen, who is stoned, and entreating this sin may be forgiven them. And having considered all these things, cast

away all anger, that God may forgive us also all our trespasses by the grace and love towards man of our Lord Jesus Christ, with whom to the Father and the Holy Ghost be glory, might, honour, now and always, and world without end. Amen.