

CHURCH HISTORY LITERACY

Lesson 30

St. John Chrysostom

Do you have a favorite preacher? Is there one preacher that really connects with you? Does he challenge you? Does he inspire you? Have you ever had a chance to hear someone who seemed to take scripture and explain it in ways that impacted you and changed the way you lived day by day? In the church's history, certain preachers during different time periods have stood head and shoulders above others as preachers, ministers of God's word who taught and inspired generations of believers. One of the earliest was St. John Chrysostom.

After you think of your favorite preacher, ask the question, "What makes a good preacher?" Is it smooth eloquence? Is it stunning insight? Perhaps it is the entertainment of good humor. Surely, it is not merely the clothes or physical impression! Does the preacher inspire, perhaps like a grown up pep rally? Maybe he has a big following already, and the energy and momentum accompanying his services are contagious.

Let's assume that church historians are right – that St. John Chrysostom is in fact one of the most loved and successful preachers in church history. While we have considered the four great historical "doctors" of the Roman church,¹ we have not discussed whom the Eastern church considered the four great doctors of the church. Of those four, St. John Chrysostom is one.² What made Chrysostom so revered?

On February 9, 1977, Archpriest Vitali Borovoi, preaching in the Elokovo Epiphany Cathedral in Moscow, delivered a sermon on St. John Chrysostom entitled, "He Was a True Pastor." Borovoi discussed the life of Chrysostom, going into some detail about the message of Chrysostom as a preacher and the power of his delivery. Chrysostom certainly had abundant scriptural insight and smooth delivery. His sermons connected with the everyday person's life and struggles, offering direction and encouragement from God's word. Borovoi pointed out in his sermon that beyond his life and fame as a preacher, Chrysostom also lived a life of true caring for his flock and church. In this sense, Borovoi

¹ Of these four, we have already covered St. Ambrose, St. Augustine, and St. Jerome. We have yet to cover Gregory the Great.

² We have now covered all four of the Eastern doctors. Prior lessons covered St. Basil and St. Gregory Nazianzen (two of the Cappadocian fathers) along with St. Athanasius. Chrysostom is covered in this lesson.

pointed out that Chrysostom was “a true pastor.” For Chrysostom was demanding on the holiness of his church members, but was even more strident and careful in his own lifestyle and holiness.

Borovoi is right about the life adding strength to the mission. This was seen clearly with Chrysostom’s genuine depth of conviction he held for his faith and the practice that should accompany that faith. Chrysostom eventually came into the world of politics and power, but he never played the political game. In the world’s eyes, this was his ultimate undoing. But, Chrysostom was the model of a churchman who “remains loyal to his spiritual mission to the end and who would think it treason to have any regard for political circumstances and the powerful of this world.”³

In covering St. John Chrysostom, we will look at biographical information first. Then, we will focus on several sermons and sermon points of Chrysostom to get a glimpse into what made his preaching so effective. We should also see in the process Chrysostom speaking to us today, over 1600 years after some of his sermons.

BIOGRAPHY

We should start by saying that “John Chrysostom” was not the real name of our subject this week! “Chrysostom” comes from two Greek words (χρυσω and στομος) which mean, “golden mouthed.” It was the name given to John after his death by those who loved his preaching!

John was born in 347 in Antioch (modern Syria). John’s parents were fairly well off and were Christian by faith. His father was a high-ranking military officer who died while John was very young. John’s mother reared him in her Christian faith and also saw that John got a first rate education.

John studied under a pagan teacher named Libanius. Libanius was the top teacher in Antioch. Libanius had studied in Athens and was in close communication with at least one Roman Emperor. Libanius taught a number of important and noteworthy Christians, including Basil, one of the Cappadocian fathers. One can still buy and read works of Libanius today.

³ Hans Von Campenhausen, *The Fathers of the Greek Church*, (Pantheon 1955) at 129.

Under Libanius, John studied to be a lawyer. Libanius marveled at the eloquence and abilities of John, but the law was not John's ultimate destiny. After his baptism at age 23, John decided to dedicate his life to his Christian faith.⁴ John was ordained as a reader in church. This meant that John would not only read the scripture, but would also explain the meaning of the passage read. Of course, this was under the oversight of the local bishop or presbyter.

John started studying theology and changed his urban life to one in a monastery, spending six years there. In addition to the time spent at the monastery, John also spent two years in personal seclusion, living on bread and water in the wilderness. John's health suffered from this ascetic lifestyle, and John soon rejoined his community.

In 380, after being a reader for 10 years, John was ordained a deacon at the age of 33. As a deacon, John was responsible for a limited participation in worship services. His main functions were helping the bishop and presbyters take care of the orphaned, the poor, the sick and aged, and other needy people as well.

In 386, at the age of 39, John was ordained as a priest. For the next ten years, John preached in Antioch. His sermons were so powerful that shorthand notes of the sermons allowed the sermons to be reduced to writing. We have many of those sermons still available today.

As a priest in Antioch, John was extraordinary not only in his sermons, but also in his lifestyle. For example, the Emperor at the time was Theodosius (remember last week's lesson?). Many people in Antioch rioted against Theodosius and an increase in taxes. In the process, the rioters destroyed and mutilated a number of statues of Theodosius and his family. The Emperor was set to punish the city by force. This is the same Emperor who had allowed his general to kill 6,000 people of Thessalonica because of their rebellion. Anticipating the Emperor's retribution, many Christians and others not directly involved in the rebellion left Antioch, but not John. Instead, during the build up to Easter in 387, John preached a series of sermons specifically targeted to move the people to repent and change their ways. John also worked hard to help the poor and those whose conditions were lacking in social justice. The people of Antioch responded. Between the sermons and the daily street work in Antioch, a large number of pagans repented and came to faith. The Emperor was moved, and modified his plans of punishment.

⁴ Prior to that time, John would write that he had been entrapped "by the lusts of the world" (*De Sacerd.* I, 3), but his examples show that the "sins" were far from egregious by our standards today. John was concerned over his early love for rich foods and his attendance at the theater.

John's reputation grew throughout the Eastern half of the Roman Empire. The gifts and skill he brought to his sermons, along with the respect and appreciation of his listeners eventually brought John—against his will—into the world of higher church and state politics. The center of government was still Constantinople. In 398, when a vacancy for the bishopric of Constantinople arose, John was selected as the new Bishop. Needless to say, this was the most important bishopric in the Eastern Roman Empire. It was considered by most in the Eastern Empire as the equivalent of the bishopric of Rome in the West.

John did not choose nor did he want to leave Antioch. He was quite happy preaching where believers were “first called Christians” (Acts 11:26), a point he frequently made in his sermons! Antioch was one of the central learning centers of Christian doctrine and theology. John's choice job was as a priest there, not as a bishop over the church. Still, things were developing in Constantinople that ultimately changed the course of John's life and the church as well.

In 397, the Bishop of Constantinople, Nektarius, died. Court and church intrigue began a vigorous process of political maneuverings to secure the position for one faction or another. A man named Eutropius was a favorite of the young and weak Emperor Arcadius. Eutropius was concerned that the influential position of the Bishopric⁵ would fall into the hands of Theophilus, the powerful Bishop of Alexandria. So, Eutropius decided that the next Bishop of Constantinople should be someone that had no allegiance to any of the parties, was outside of court politics, had respect and power as a man of God, not as mover in the church or state. Eutropius decided that John was the man!

To place John in this position required some clever maneuvering by Eutropius. First, he could not let word out of his intentions before the actual vote. This meant that Eutropius could not even tell John. As the Bishops were coming to convene for a decision on the new Bishop, Eutropius secretly sent government troops to bring John to the capital. Not knowing why he was summoned, John got into the carriage and went hurriedly to Constantinople.

Once John arrived, he was put into the room and the vote was pushed in his favor. Against John's will, he was consecrated Bishop of Constantinople!

By this time, the Bishop of Constantinople had quite a job. He was over a very wealthy church, and he ruled in the town where the Emperor and his family resided. The bishop would give and attend lavish dinner parties with extraordinary food. The clothes worn by the bishop reflected the “high calling” of

⁵ At this point, the Bishopric of Constantinople was held to be the second most powerful next only to the Bishopric of Rome.

his office as well as the wealth of his position. The church had incredibly expensive decorations as well as impressive vessels for the services. The wealthy in the city controlled the church, and historically, the bishop catered to their wealthy desires.

In comes the ascetic monk turned priest John, soon to be called Chrysostom. Oil and water mix better!

John would not use the privileges of his office that entitled him to the best treatment available, second only to that of the Emperor and his family. John would neither host nor readily attend the lavish parties of his predecessors. Likewise, he enjoined his priests from doing so. Instead, John made the priests go out and serve the local and regional churches for no remuneration or pay. John wore the simple clothes of his ascetic lifestyle and gave the monies assigned him to the poor. Moreover, John took the rich vessels and decorations of the churches and sold them, giving the money to the poor to build hospitals and orphanages and to give aid to the old and widowed. John regularly preached on almsgiving, not with the end of accumulating money for the church treasury, but almsgiving directly to the poor. In other words, he would tell his wealthy church members that they should be helping all the poor people they saw. That was why God gave them their wealth.

This lifestyle and these sermons made John extremely popular with the common people and the poor. His services and sermons were the best attended in the entire city. John was not so popular, however, with the priests and the powerful. In fact, certain elements of the church (particularly the Patriarch of Alexandria) worked with the Empress Aelia Eudoxia (wife of Arcadius, the 17 year old son who succeeded his father Theodosius to the throne) to remove John from office and exile him from Constantinople. The people, however, would hear nothing of it. They protested and made enough of a showing that John was brought back, albeit only for six months. John's return was marked with a sermon that started and ended with the proclamation, "Glory to our God for all. For all that was good and all that was bad, glory to our God." Those upset with John had not given up their efforts, however. Within six months, another opportunity presented itself for his banishment.

What had John done to upset the Empress that she would work so hard to see his removal? It seems that a number of John's sermons were interpreted as being directed to the Empress. One that seemed to push the envelope and actually might have been the final straw to break the camel's back was the sermon on Jezebel. Seems some may have had the impression ("some" in this sentence including the Empress herself) that John was directing a part of his sermon to the Empress, equating her actions with those of Jezebel.

John's banishment was to the Caucasus area of Armenia. Today, this area is north of Turkey and Iran but south of Russia and Georgia. The exile was a forced march that ultimately proved too hard for John's fragile health. With no medicine and no rest, John was forced to march through rain and cold. On the eve of his death, while running a high fever, John was forced to march 5 miles to the town of Comana. The little church there warmly received him, but the next morning, the soldiers forced him to continue his march. After going another five miles, John collapsed. John was taken back to Comana and given last rites and communion. Reports have John crossing himself one last time and with his dying breath, uttering, "Glory to our God for all." Thirty years later, the support for John was still so strong in Constantinople that his bones were taken from his interment place in exile and returned to the city and the church where he preached.

John was only five feet tall, but the shadow he cast over the church was long. He influenced preachers, pastors, and the church for centuries. His sermons were especially strong; hence, his nickname after death – "Golden mouthed" or in Greek, "Chrysostom."

SERMONS

One of the reasons John's sermons were so strong was the scriptural insight they contained. John was not one to preach simply "on topic." Rather, his sermons were always scripture based. John would preach almost daily; it was his calling and his joy. He told his congregation, "I cannot let a day pass without feeding you with the *treasures of the Scriptures*."

When John spoke, several stenographers would take down his sermons. There was frequent applause and audience appreciation for the words he spoke. As Von Campenhausen put it, "the charm, freshness, and naturalness of his speech were immediately attractive. In appearance he was plain and homely. His voice was not strong, and he was often in poor health. But preaching was a vital necessity to him. Just as the congregation hungered to listen, so, he said, he hungered to preach."⁶

We have series of John's sermons that cover most every New Testament book and several of the Old Testament as well. It serves our purposes in this class to look at several of these sermons.

When John read scripture, he was concerned with each word. For John, every word had a purpose and was worthy of reflection. For example, in John's sermon on Acts 1, John worked closely with each word to bring full meaning to his listeners. If we hone in on Acts 1:6-8, we read the following:

⁶ Von Campenhausen at 133-134.

⁶ So when they met together, they asked him, “Lord, are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?” ⁷ He said to them: “It is not for you to know the times or dates the Father has set by his own authority. ⁸ But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.”

On this passage, John points out that Jesus responded differently when asked before his crucifixion. When Jesus was asked this question earlier, he had responded, “No one knows about that day or hour, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father” (Mk 13:32). Yet at the time of the questioning in Acts, Jesus did not add that the Son does not know the time. John sees in this Jesus pushing the emphasis on the Apostles, what they knew, and what they needed to know. The knowledge of Jesus was irrelevant to the point of Jesus. John’s sermon points out that Jesus not giving the fullest answer as earlier in his ministry is telling the faithful that there are other things they need to learn, not the time of the kingdom. To this end, the Holy Spirit would come for them to witness to Jesus. That was the important issue.

John explained to his listeners that the Apostles were in need of the Spirit first to educate them. John would say, “Indeed, to me it appears that they had not any clear notion of the nature of that kingdom; for the Spirit had not yet instructed them.”⁷ To John, the Apostles needed to concern themselves with “more important things” like:

1. “There is a Son of God.”
2. “God has a son equal with himself in dignity”
3. “There will be a resurrection.”
4. “When Jesus ascended, He sat on the right hand of God and what is still more stupendous, that Flesh is seated in heaven, and adored by Angels, and that he will come again.”
5. “What will take place in judgment...That the Jews will be cast out and in their stead the Gentiles should come in.”

⁷ Homily II on the Acts of the Apostles, Volume XI of Eerdman’s Library of Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers.

John then puts it quite plainly, “Which is greater, to learn that a person will reign or to learn the time when?”

Ultimately, the purpose of John’s sermons was never merely to expound on scripture for scripture’s sake. John preached at a time when many were Christians in name only. John had dual purposes in his preaching: “the confirmation of his hearers’ faith and the correction of their lives.”⁸ John’s sermons had these effects. We are told that, “no orator has aroused more enthusiasm or exercised so complete a mastery over his audience. Often they interrupted him with cries of admiration, applause, and tears of repentance.”⁹ It is amazing what happens when good scriptural insight is combined with targeted practical teaching presented in an easy to listen to manner!

With more than 600 of John’s sermons still available, it is difficult to pick out portions for illustrative purposes. Still, one stands out in history as the most “used” sermon of John Chrysostom. On a particular Easter Sunday, John preached a sermon that has had a lasting impact on the church. Even today, John’s sermon is read in Eastern Orthodox churches as a part of the Easter celebration each year. Rather than comment on the sermon, we should take the time to read it and let it serve as its own commentary!

If there are devout and God-loving people here, let them enjoy this beautiful, radiant festival. If there are prudent servants, enter joyously into the Lord’s joy. Whoever may be spent from fasting, enjoy now your reward. Whoever has toiled from the first hour, receive today your just settlement. If any came after the third hour, celebrate gratefully. If any of you arrived after the sixth, have no misgivings, you have lost nothing. If some have been as late as the ninth, come forward, do not be at a loss. If any of you have arrived only at the eleventh hour, do not be dismayed for being late.

The Master is gracious; He accepts the last even as the first; He gives rest to those of the eleventh as well as to those who have labored from the first; He is lenient with the last while looking after the first; to the one He gives, to the other He gives freely; He accepts the labors and welcomes the effort; honors the deed, but commends the intent. So, all of you, enter into the joy

⁸ St. John Chrysostom: Baptismal Instructions, Ancient Christian Writer Series, Paulist Press, p. 5.

⁹ *Id.*

*of our Lord: first and second, share the bounty. Rich and poor alike, celebrate together. Sober or heedless, honor the day. Those who fasted, and those who did not, rejoice today. The table is full, everyone fare sumptuously. The calf is fatted; no one go away hungry. Everyone, savor the banquet of faith; relish the riches of His goodness. No one need lament poverty, for the kingdom is seen as universal. No one need grieve over sins; forgiveness has dawned from the tomb. No one need fear death; the Savior's death has freed us from it. While its captive He stifled it. He despoiled Hades as He descended into it; it was angered when it tasted His flesh. Foreseeing this, Isaiah proclaimed: "Hades," he said, "was angered when he met You below." **It was angered** because it was abolished. **It was angered** because it was mocked. **It was angered** because it was slain. **It was angered** because it was shackled. It received a body and encountered God. It took earth and came face-to-face with heaven. It took what I saw and fell by what it could not see. Death, where is your sting? Hades, where is your victory? **Christ is risen** and you are overthrown. **Christ is risen** and demons have fallen. **Christ is risen** and angels rejoice. **Christ is risen** and life rules. **Christ is risen** and not one dead remains in the tomb. For Christ, having risen from the dead, has become the firstfruits of those that slept. To Him be the glory and the dominion, forever. Amen.*

Amen indeed!

Von Campenhausen believes that the sermons of Chrysostom “are probably the only ones from the whole of Greek antiquity which at least in part are still readable today as Christian sermons. They reflect something of the authentic life of the New Testament, just because they are so ethical, so simple, and so clear-headed.”¹⁰ I believe he is right!

In addition to his many sermons, we also have a number of John’s letters. At a time when letter writing was an art, John found it also a lifeline, especially during his time in exile. John also wrote some treatises on subjects ranging from consoling the mentally ill to ministering to young widows.

¹⁰ Von Campenhausen at 144.

POINTS FOR HOME

Before we set out our points for home, we would do good to follow a point John made in one of his sermons on Matthew (Homily V). John told his listeners, "I hear many say, 'While we are here [in church] we are awed, but when we are gone out, we become altered men again, and the flame of zeal is quenched. What then may be done, that this might not come to pass?'" John was asking his listeners what they might do so that the conviction and appreciation of God that comes to them in worship might not so readily depart once they return home. In other words, how can the presence of God be permanent in their lives rather than a church event only?

John's answer was when leaving church, not to immediately step back into the chores of the world and life. Instead, he urged his listeners to take their family and discuss the service and the sermon. Then, the time would come to continue in the world's activities for the day. This was a way of reinforcing the message. John would say that by doing otherwise, the people were merely drawing water into a bucket with holes. Ultimately, it was not too useful!

As part of our points for home, let's take and discuss several scriptural matters that arose in this lesson:

1. "Glory to our God for all. For all that was good and all that was bad, glory to our God." Or, in the words of Malachi, "My name will be great among the nations from the rising to the setting of the sun. In every place..." (Mal. 1:11).
2. "How, then, can they call on the one they have not believed in? And how can they believe in the one of whom they have not heard? And how can they hear without someone preaching to them? And how can they preach unless they are sent? As it is written, "How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news!" (Rom. 10:14-15). Thank God for good preachers!
3. Pray for our pastor search committee! God has blessed the church with certain people who have a spiritual gift of preaching (At Iconium, Paul and Barnabas spoke so effectively in the synagogue that a great number believed). But, a great pastor is someone who has more to offer the church than a golden mouth! A great pastor will lead with sermons AND by example. May we find such a pastor, whose sermons are rooted deep in scripture and whose life is rooted strong in service and love!