

4-1-1948

## John Chrysostom, the Preacher

John H. Fritz

*Concordia Seminary, St. Louis*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholar.csl.edu/ctm>



Part of the [History of Christianity Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Fritz, John H. (1948) "John Chrysostom, the Preacher," *Concordia Theological Monthly*. Vol. 19, Article 25.  
Available at: <https://scholar.csl.edu/ctm/vol19/iss1/25>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Print Publications at Scholarly Resources from Concordia Seminary. It has been accepted for inclusion in Concordia Theological Monthly by an authorized editor of Scholarly Resources from Concordia Seminary. For more information, please contact [seitzw@csl.edu](mailto:seitzw@csl.edu).

## John Chrysostom, the Preacher

By JOHN H. C. FRITZ

John Chrysostom — the name Chrysostom, the golden mouth, was given him by the Church because of his oratorical ability. He has been known by that name since the seventh century. He was born of noble parentage at Antioch, Syria, on the river Orontes, in 347 A. D. Antioch, Alexandria, Constantinople, and Rome were outstanding cities in those days. Antioch was one of the most splendid cities in the Roman Empire. It had a population of two hundred thousand. Though half of the inhabitants were nominally Christians, their Christianity varied from severe asceticism to almost pagan laxity. The population of Antioch contained Asiatic, Syrian, Greek, Jewish, and Roman elements. "All lands contributed of their resources to its wealth and pleasure and luxury. It was a magnificent city. Its streets were adorned with covered colonnades of marble, on either side, beneath which its inhabitants walked protected from the scorching sun of summer and the rains of winter. From the mountains to the south, massive stone aqueducts, whose solid masonry remains to this day, brought copious streams of water to supply its numerous baths and fountains. Everywhere the cool refreshing spray and the soothing sounds of flowing water delighted the senses. Splendid villas in the midst of beautiful gardens adorned its suburbs; likewise pleasure groves and parks, which the people much frequented. Among the latter was the celebrated Grove of Daphne, described with such fullness by General Wallace in his famous work of fiction [*Ben Hur*]. It was dedicated to the worship of Apollo, was furnished with every enticement to the senses, and so rich in its enchantments that the saying arose concerning it: 'Better be a worm and feed on the mulberries of Daphne than a king's guest.' In the mixed population of this great city, 'the impulsive oriental temperament was the most dominant. They abandoned themselves freely to those voluptuous recreations for which their city and climate afforded every facility and inducement. The bath, the circus, the chariot races and the theatre were their constant amusements, and pursued by them with the eagerness of a pleasure-loving nature.'" (Currier, *Nine Great Preachers*.) Barring our modern inventions, Antioch compares favor-

[262]

ably with the large cities of our own day. And the world in which Chrysostom lived was essentially the same world in which we live today; the human being has not essentially changed.

The Roman Empire at that time was fast declining through internal corruption and through attacks from barbaric people outside of its own borders. Says Currier: "There was decay of every kind, decay of domestic virtue, decay of patriotism, decay of faith in the old religion before faith in the new Christianity was strong enough to take its place, decay in the power of law, decay of industry, decay of all the elements of security." (*Loc. cit.*)

It was in this environment that Chrysostom grew up. His pious mother, Anthusa, who at the age of twenty was left a widow with two children and who did not remarry, exerted a most wholesome Christian influence upon her son John and provided for him also a good schooling under Libanius, the best teacher of rhetoric of that age. It was Libanius who remarked: "What women these Christians have!" And the Emperor Julian, d. 363, blamed the Christian women for preventing him from reviving paganism.

Chrysostom at first studied law and also entered upon its practice. But this profession did not at all appeal to him. Chief among the causes which persuaded him to abandon it was the influence exerted by a schoolmate and friend, Basil, who later became a bishop. Likewise a good influence was exerted upon Chrysostom by Bishop Meletius of Antioch, who induced him to be baptized in the year 370 and to accept the office of a reader, which was the first step toward the ministerial office. Chrysostom had desired to go with Basil to the monastery, but he yielded to the wishes of his mother not to do so. However, at home he led an ascetic life and devoted himself intensely to the study of the Scriptures. In this study he was directed by Diodorus, the friar of a monastery. After his mother's death Chrysostom spent six months in a monastery in the mountains to the south of Antioch. There he led such a severe ascetic life that he injured his health and was compelled to return to Antioch. After fifteen years of such preparation he was finally ordained by Bishop Flavian in the year 386 as a presbyter. He soon became a very popular preacher. The remaining twenty years of his life were about

equally divided between his being a preacher at Antioch and later an archbishop at Constantinople. Chrysostom's life was that of hard work and many trials. Because of his fearless denunciation of sin he was twice sent into exile, where he died in the year 407, at the age of sixty years, his last words being, "Glory to God in all things."

Chrysostom's life may be divided into five periods. (1) His youth and training till his conversion and Baptism, A. D. 347—370. (2) His ascetic and monastic life, 370—381. (3) His public life as priest and preacher at Antioch, 381—398. (4) His episcopate at Constantinople, 398—404. (5) His exile to his death, 404—407.

I thought it well to give this brief historical background in order that Chrysostom's work as a preacher may be better understood and evaluated. Chrysostom was very sincere, took his ministerial office very seriously, and was much concerned about the spiritual welfare of his people. He led a very frugal, even ascetic life, did not shirk hard work, and had the courage to speak what his conscience demanded. In his treatise *On the Priesthood* (Book V), he gives us some idea of his conception of the preacher and his work. He speaks of "the expenditure of great labor upon the preparation of discourses to be delivered in public," warning that the preacher should not seek to attract the hearer unto himself by mere eloquence. He also warns against plagiarism, saying: "If it has occurred to any preacher to weave into his sermons any part of other men's works, he is exposed to greater disgrace than those who steal money." Chrysostom says that the preacher should cultivate the power of preaching well and be indifferent to the praise of his hearers. When his own sermons were often interrupted by applause, a custom of the people transferred from the theater and the circus to the church auditorium, Chrysostom severely reprimanded them, saying: "What need have I of these plaudits, these cheers, and tumultuous signs of approval? The praise I seek is that ye shew forth all I have said in your work. Then am I an enviable and happy man, not when ye approve, but when ye perform with all readiness whatsoever ye hear from me." (Homily II, in the series concerning the statues.) Again Chrysostom says: "Though the preacher may have great ability (and this one would only find in a few), not even in this case is he released from perpetual toil. For

since preaching does not come by nature, but by study, suppose a man to reach a high standard of it, this will then forsake him if he does not cultivate his power by constant application and exercise. . . . Let him not even consider the opinion, so erroneous and inartistic, of the outside world. Let, therefore, the man who undertakes the strain of teaching never give heed to the good opinion of the outside world, nor be dejected in soul on account of such persons; but laboring at his sermons so that he may please God." (Philip Schaff, *The Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, IX.)

Chrysostom was a great orator, but not a great preacher. He sometimes used a text, sometimes not. Even when he used a text, he did not as a rule abide by it. We, of course, do not judge him according to the present accepted standards of homiletics, for our formal way of preaching was not the custom at that time nor even up to the time of the Reformation. The sermon was given in the form of a homily. Yet a homily should preach a text and develop a unit thought and should have logical progression of thought. All of this is missing in the homilies of Chrysostom; his sermons often are merely a rambling religious discourse. Whatever came to his mind while he was preaching, he spoke though he may not have included that in his previous preparation. He tried to bring about a reform in the life of the people by preaching the Law to them. As a rule, he had little or no Gospel in his sermons. He denounced sin most vehemently, but did not show his hearers how to get rid of the curse of sin nor what should prompt a Christian to lead a godly life. He preached six sermons on repentance without ever telling what repentance is. He spoke of faith without telling what saving faith is. Clear statements on the atonement are hard to find in his sermons. He preached work-righteousness and other false doctrines of his time. What I have read of his sermons compels me to agree with Dargan's estimate of Chrysostom as a preacher. "Chrysostom's faults as a preacher were neither few nor little. As great a man as he will have great faults as well as great excellences. His best work is marred by the oriental intensity and exaggeration, in feeling, in thought, in language. The overmuch was his snare. In theology, while he was true to the Athanasian orthodoxy [?], he did not escape the errors of his age and race. He overpraises alms,

celibacy, monasticism, as meritorious works. His view of sin and its remedy is more moral than evangelical. Strong tendency toward the worship of Mary and the saints appears. Also there is the sacerdotal view of the ordinances. In brief, he did not rise above the doctrinal errors current in his day. In his preaching itself there is often loose and forced interpretation of Scripture. Sometimes he doesn't take a text at all, and almost never confines himself to it. While he does not allegorize after the Origenistic fashion, he does not mind twisting a passage to fit his homiletical needs. In the structure of his discourses he is often loose, fond of digressions and sallies, sometimes getting back to his point and sometimes not. In style he is often too familiar, too prolix and repetitious. But serious as such faults are, they serve in a case like his to set off great virtues, and also to check the undue admiration we may be disposed to indulge. John Chrysostom had from early childhood a deep, sincere, and pure religious character. Piety, earnestness, sincerity, and self-sacrifice were realities with him. Splendid courage, even if it did sometimes approach bravado, was his. He feared not empress, nor people, nor his evil-minded brethren. He spoke the truth [as he saw it] no matter whom it might hit. Fidelity to duty as he saw it animated him in all his work." (*A History of Preaching*, I.)

A few excerpts taken from some of the one thousand published sermons of Chrysostom will put the reader somewhat in a position to form his own judgment. In a homily on "Resisting the Temptation of the Devil," Chrysostom says: "See we have shewn five ways of repentance: first, the condemnation of sins; next, the forgiveness of our neighbours' sins; third, that which comes of prayer; fourth, that which comes of almsgiving; fifth, that which comes of humility. Do not thou, then, be lazy; but walk in all these day by day." In another homily on the same subject: "On this account God places together servants and servants in order that the one set may judge the other, and that some being judged by the others may not be able for the future to accuse the master. On this account, He saith, 'The Son of Man cometh in the glory of His Father.' See the equality of the glory: He does not say in glory like to the glory of the Father, but in the glory of the Father, and will gather together all the nations. Terrible is the tribunal: terrible to the sinful and accountable . . .

since to those who are conscious to themselves of good works, it is desirable and mild." And: "Come and let us bring our discourse to another example for thy benefit. There were ten virgins He says. Here again there are purposes which are upright and purposes which are sinful, in order that thou mayest see side by side both the sins of the one and the good works of the others. For the comparison makes these things the plainer. And these and those were virgins; and these were five, and also those. All awaited the bridegroom. How, then, did some enter in, and others did not enter in? Because some indeed were churlish, and others were gentle and loving."

Chrysostom had to contend with false teachers even as we do today. He preached a sermon against the Marcionists and the Manichaeans, who denied the humanity of Christ. Among other things, he said: "The doctrine of the incarnation was very hard to receive. For the exceeding measure of His loving-kindness and the magnitude of His condescension were full of awe and needed much preparation to be accepted. For consider what a great thing it was to hear and to learn that God, the Ineffable, the Incorruptible, the Unintelligible, the Invisible, the Incomprehensible, in whose hand are the ends of the earth (Ps. 95:4), who looketh upon the earth, and causeth it to tremble, who toucheth the mountains, and maketh them smoke (Ps. 104:32), the weight of whose condescension not even the Cherubim were able to bear but veiled their faces by the shelter of their wings, that this God who surpasses all understanding, and baffles all calculation, having passed by angels, archangels, and all the spiritual powers above, deigned to become man, and to take flesh formed of earth and clay, and entered the womb of a virgin, and be borne there the space of nine months, and be nourished with milk, and suffer all things to which man is liable. Inasmuch, then, as that which was to happen was so strange as to be disbelieved by many even when it had taken place, He first of all sends prophets beforehand, announcing this very fact. For instance the patriarch predicted it, saying: 'Thou didst spring from a tender shoot, my son; thou didst lie down and slumber as a lion' (Gen. 49:9); and Esaias, saying: 'Behold the Virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall call His name Emmanuel' (Is. 7:14). . . . But these proofs alone did not suffice, but even when He had come, lest what had taken place

should be deemed an illusion, He warranted the fact not only by the sight but by duration of time and by passing through all the phases incident to man. . . . If, then, after all these things have taken place, the wicked mouth of the devil, speaking through Marcion of Pontus, and Valentinus, and Manichaeus of Persia, and many more heretics, has attempted to overthrow the doctrine of the incarnation and has vented a diabolical utterance, declaring that He did not become flesh, nor was clothed with it, but that this was mere fancy, and illusion, a piece of acting and pretence, although the sufferings, the death, the burial, the thirst, cry aloud against this teaching." One would expect that Chrysostom in this sermon would have shown the purpose and the necessity of the Son of God's assuming our human nature; but instead of doing this, he continues: "This is one consideration, but there is another no less important. And what is this? . Christ having come to earth wished to instruct men in all virtue: now the instructor teaches not only by word, but also by deed: for this is the teacher's best method of teaching." In this sermon he also speaks of "the undefiled nature of Mary." In the sermon he has sixty-seven Scripture references, and seven times he refers to his text.

Chrysostom's oratorical ability is said to have reached its zenith in his homilies preached at the time of the Riot of the Statues. In his second homily in this series, taking as his text 1 Tim. 6:17, he preached against covetousness. Among other things, he said: "That we may live then securely, the sources of our existence have been made common. On the other hand, to the end that we may have an opportunity of gaining crowns and good report, property has not been made common; in order that hating covetousness, and following after righteousness, and freely bestowing our goods upon the poor, we may by this method obtain a certain kind of relief for our sins. God hath made thee rich, why makest thou thyself poor? He hath made thee rich that thou mayest assist the needy; that thou mayest have release of thine own sins, by liberality to others. He hath given thee money, not that thou mayest shut it up for thy destruction, but that thou mayest pour it forth for thy salvation." This is about as close as he comes to calling the people to repentance.

Chrysostom's legalistic procedure can be learned from



the following extract taken from the first homily in the series just mentioned. "Since our discourse has now turned to the subject of blasphemy, I desire to ask one favor of you all, in return for this my address, and speaking with you; which is, that you will correct on my behalf the blasphemers of this city. And should you hear anyone in the public thoroughfare, or in the midst of the forum, blaspheming God; go up to him and rebuke him; and should it be necessary to inflict blows, spare not to do so. Smite him on the face; strike his mouth; sanctify thy hand with the blow; and if any should accuse thee, and drag thee to the place of justice, follow them thither; and when the judge on the bench calls thee to account, say boldly that the man blasphemed the King of angels! For if it be necessary to punish those who blaspheme an earthly king, much more so those who insult God. It is a common crime, a public injury; and it is lawful for everyone who is willing, to bring forward an accusation. Let the Jews and Greeks learn that the Christians are the saviors of the city; that they are its guardians, its patrons, and its teachers."

Chrysostom at times preached to crowds numbering many thousands, but he also preached to empty churches. All his Law preaching and his thundering against the sins of the people was not effective. His church members would listen and applaud and straightway leave the church, even on a Good Friday, and return to the ways of the world. Such preaching, as Luther says, cannot give any comfort to troubled souls nor keep the devil away; for after all, the devil is not concerned about man's so-called good works, his fasting, his almsgiving, and his ascetic life. But where the devil does not find Christ, he has his own way with the souls of men, tearing and devouring them without let or hindrance.

St. Louis, Mo.

