

CHURCH HISTORY (11): John Chrysostom

In this lesson, and the two that follow, I want to consider three important fourth century fathers: John Chrysostom (347-407), Ambrose (339-397), and Jerome (347-420).

I. John Chrysostom

John, surnamed Chrysostom (the Golden-Mouthed), is the greatest pulpit orator and commentator of the Greek Church, and still deservedly enjoys the highest honor in the whole Christian world. No one of the Oriental Fathers has left a more spotless reputation; no one is so much read and so often quoted by modern preachers and commentators.¹

One hundred years after his death, John of Constantinople was given the name by which later ages know him: John Chrysostom – 'the golden-mouthed.' That was a title he well deserved, for in a century that gave the church such great preachers as Ambrose of Milan and Gregory of Nazianzus, John of Constantinople stood above all the rest, a giant above the giants of his time.²

1. *His life and early years.* "John was born in 347, at Antioch, the capital of Syria, and the home of the mother church of Gentile Christianity, where the disciples were first called *Christians*" (Schaff).³ His father, a distinguished military officer in the Syrian army, died while he was an infant. His mother, Anthusa, was a devote Christian. "Left a widow at the age of twenty, she refused all offers of marriage, and devoted herself exclusively to the education of her only son and his older sister" (Schaff).⁴ He was first trained as a lawyer in Antioch by the famous pagan orator Libanius. Reportedly, when Libanius was asked who should succeed him, he said, "John, if only the Christians had not carried him away."⁵ Little is known about John's conversion, other than at twenty years of age, he asked that his name be added to the list of those training for baptism. "His first inclination after his conversion was to adopt the monastic life, agreeably to the ascetic tendencies of the times; and it was only by the entreaties of his mother, who charged him with tears not to forsake her, that he was for a while restrained" (Schaff).⁶ His mother said to him: "When you have committed me to the ground and united me with your father's bones, then set out on your long travels and sail whatever sea you please. Then there will be nobody to hinder. But until I breathe my last, be content to stay with me."⁷ "After the death of his mother, Chrysostom fled from the seductions and tumults of city life to the monastic solitude of the mountains south of Antioch, and there spent six happy years in theological study and sacred meditation and prayer" (Schaff).⁸

2. *His public ministry.* "By excessive self-mortification John undermined his health, and returned about 380 to Antioch. There he was immediately ordained deacon by Meletius in 386, and by Flavian was made presbyter. By his eloquence and his pure and earnest character he soon acquired great reputation and the love of the whole church" (Schaff).⁹ In 397, he was chosen patriarch of Constantinople, where he remained until his exile in 404. "When the bishopric of Constantinople

¹ Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*, 3:933-934

² Justo Gonzalez, *The Story of Christianity*, 1:194

³ Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*, 3:934

⁴ Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*, 3:934

⁵ Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*, 3:934

⁶ Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*, 3:934

⁷ Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, 9:34

⁸ Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*, 3:935

⁹ Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*, 3:936

became vacant, the emperor ordered that John be taken to the capital city to occupy that prestigious position. But his popularity in Antioch was such that the authorities feared a riot, and therefore kept the imperial decree secret. They simply invited the famous preacher to visit a small chapel in the outskirts of the city, and when he was there, they ordered him into a carriage, in which he was forcefully taken to the capital" (Gonzalez).¹⁰ "Chrysostom proved as popular a preacher in Constantinople as he had been in Antioch; the mass of ordinary people in the imperial capital became passionately attached to him. On one Sunday, when Chrysostom unexpectedly did not preach but invited a visiting bishop from Galatia to take his place, the vast congregation streamed out of the church in protest. They wanted to hear Chrysostom, and would put up with no substitutes" (Needham)!¹¹

Once again Chrysostom did not shirk from pressing home on the affluent worshippers of Constantinople their social obligations to the poor, and once again this made him some enemies among the wealthy who did not like what they were hearing. They were especially outraged by something Chrysostom said in his exposition of Colossians, when he criticized rich Christian ladies who had their toilet utensils made from solid silver, as though their dung deserved special treatment, while all around them their poverty-stricken sisters and brothers in Christ were scantily dressed and shivering in the cold of Constantinople. Chrysostom apologized a few days later for using such crude language in a sermon, but no doubt he was upset that people could be more scandalized by his blunt speaking than by the appalling plight of the poor. Such utterances, however, only endeared Chrysostom to the common people. Here was a true bishop, they felt, who loved them and understood their lives.¹²

"As valuable as the contributions of Chrysostom to didactic theology may be, his chief importance and merit lie not in this department, but in homiletical exegesis, pulpit eloquence, and pastoral care. Here he is unsurpassed among the ancient fathers, whether Greek or Latin" (Schaff).¹³ "Over nine hundred of his sermons still survive, while many more have been lost to history. There is scarcely any biblical book, moral topic, theological point, or issue of his day that John Chrysostom did not tackle. His sermons provide us a wealth of insight into the power of the preacher in the ancient church. Such power could bring great benefit, yet it could make enemies too" (Litfin).¹⁴ "He has left us homilies on Genesis, the Psalms, the Gospel of Matthew, the Gospel of John, the Acts, and all the Epistles of Paul, including the Epistle to the Hebrews. His homilies on the Pauline Epistles are especially esteemed" (Schaff).¹⁵ "As an expositor of Scripture, thoughtful and at the same time practical, bringing the truth of the Bible home to the heart and conscience, and in contact with the lives of men, Chrysostom has had few, if any, superiors" (Fisher).¹⁶ "Chrysostom is remembered and admired as a great exegete. Calvin believed that Chrysostom was the supreme exegete of Scripture. While Calvin believed Augustine was the better theologian, he believed Chrysostom was the better exegete. Why was Chrysostom the better exegete but Augustine the better theologian? You would think that the person doing the best exegesis was also the best theologian, but that was not the case. Calvin makes the same point with some wonder" (Calhoun).¹⁷

¹⁰ Justo Gonzalez, *The Story of Christianity*, 1:196

¹¹ Nick Needham, *2000 Years of Christ's Power*, 1:256-257

¹² Nick Needham, *2000 Years of Christ's Power*, 1:257

¹³ Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*, 3:937-938

¹⁴ Bryan Litfin, *Getting to Know the Church Fathers*, 195

¹⁵ Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*, 3:940

¹⁶ George Fisher, *History of the Christian Church*, 124

¹⁷ David Calhoun, *Ancient & Medieval Church History*, 14:6

"The crowning merit of Chrysostom is his excellency as a preacher. He is generally and justly regarded as the greatest pulpit orator of the Greek church. Nor has he any superior or equal among the Latin Fathers" (Schaff).¹⁸ His preaching was pointed and practical. One of his first tasks in entering Constantinople in 397, was to reform the life of the clergy. "Some priests who claimed to be celibate had in their homes what they called 'spiritual sisters,' and this was an occasion of scandal for many. Other clergymen had become rich, and lived with as much luxury as the potentates of the great city. The finances of the church were in shambles, and the care of the flock was largely unattended. John took all those issues head on" (Gonzalez).¹⁹ He said in a sermon against greed and indifference to the poor: "The gold bit on your horse, the gold circlet on the wrist of your slave, the gilding on your shoes, mean that you are robbing the orphan and starving the widow. When you have passed away, each passer-by who looks upon your great mansion will say, 'How many tears did it take to build that mansion; how many orphans were stripped; how many widows wronged; how many laborers deprived of their honest wages.' Even death itself will not deliver you from your accusers."²⁰

Chrysostom attracted large audiences, and among them many who would rather have gone to the theatre than hear any ordinary preacher. He held them spell-bound to the close. Sometimes they manifested their admiration by noisy applause, and when he rebuked them for it, they would applaud his rebuke. 'You praise,' he would tell them, 'What I have said, and receive my exhortation with tumults of applause; but show your approval by obedience; that is the only praise I seek.'²¹

From 375-380, John wrote a treatise entitled, *On the Priesthood*. It is a lengthy treatment on the qualifications and duties of pastors. "One of the great books of church history is Chrysostom's *On the Priesthood*. He actually wrote that book before he was ordained as a priest. He was already a deacon in the church. And as he contemplated a career in the church as a priest, he wrote a book to prepare himself for the task. It is a book of pastoral theology" (Calhoun).²² "This book is the most useful or at least the best known among the works of Chrysostom, and is well calculated to inspire a profound sense of the tremendous responsibilities of the ministry" (Schaff).²³ "The most famous of treatises written at Antioch, was *On the Priesthood*, an exposition of the nature and duties of a Christian pastor. This has been reprinted and translated into other languages more often than any of Chrysostom's other works" (Needham).²⁴

(1) The desire for the work. The treatise, *On the Priesthood*, is comprised of six books, the first two being a defense as to why he was reluctant to assume the office. The entire treatise is an extended dialogue between Chrysostom and his friend Basil (not to be confused with the Basil the Great). "The first book of the treatise on the Priesthood opens with a description of his friendship with Basil; how they studied the same subjects together under the same teachers, and how entirely harmonious they were in all their tastes, and inclinations."²⁵ Around the year 374, the two friends were together beginning to have aspirations for the ministry. "By a custom which was then common in the Church they were liable if elected by the clergy and people to be forcibly seized and ordained however unwilling they might be to accept the dignity."²⁶ "As soon as I heard the humor that we were about to

¹⁸ Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, 9:22

¹⁹ Justo Gonzalez, *The Story of Christianity*, 1:194

²⁰ As quoted by Justo Gonzalez, *The Story of Christianity*, 1:197

²¹ Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, 9:22

²² David Calhoun, *Ancient & Medieval Church History*, 14:6

²³ Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, 9:9

²⁴ Nick Needham, *2000 Years of Christ's Power*, 1:255

²⁵ Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, 9:27

²⁶ Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, 9:28

be advanced to the dignity of the priesthood, I was seized with alarm and perplexity: with alarm lest I should be made captive against my will, and perplexity, inquiring as I often did whence any such idea concerning us could have entered the minds of these men; for looking to myself I found nothing worthy of such an honor" (Chrysostom).²⁷ Chrysostom describes the ministry as the chief expression of love for Christ. It was a work he never fully felt qualified for.

It is obvious that a great and unspeakable reward will be reserved for him whose labors are concerned with these sheep, upon which Christ places such a high value. For when we see any one bestowing care upon members of our household, or upon our flocks, we count his zeal for them as a sign of love towards ourselves: yet all these things are to be bought for money: - with how great a gift then will He repay those who tend the flock which he purchased, not with money, nor anything of that kind, but by His own death, giving His own blood as the price of the heard. Wherefore when the disciple said, Thou knowest Lord that I love Thee, and invoked the beloved one Himself as a witness of his love, the Savior did not stop there, but added that which was the token of love. For He did not at that time wish to show how much Peter loved Him, but how much He Himself loved His own Church, and He desired to teach Peter and all of us that we also should bestow much zeal upon the same. For what purpose did He shed His blood? It was that He might win these sheep which He entrusted to Peter and his successors.²⁸

(2) The dignity of the work. Three things combine to make the work "an awful thing." (a) Pastors represent Christ to the people and thus have authority over the people. "They who inhabit the earth and make their abode there are entrusted with the administration of things which are in Heaven, and have received an authority which God has not given to angels or archangels. For it has not been said to them, 'Whatsoever ye shall bind on earth shall be bound in Heaven, and whatsoever ye shall loose on earth shall be loosed in Heaven.' They who rule on earth have indeed authority to bind, but only the body: whereas this binding lays hold of the soul and penetrates the heavens; and what priests do here below God ratifies above, and the Master confirms the sentence of His servants."²⁹ (b) Pastors engage in heavenly and eternal things, as they are stewards within the household of God. "If any one in charge of a full-sized merchant ship, full of rowers, and laden with a costly freight, were to station me at the helm and bid me cross the Aegean Sea, I should recoil from the proposal at once: and if any one asked me why? I should say, Lest I should sink the ship. Well, where the loss concerns material wealth, and the danger extends only to bodily death, no one will blame those who exercise great prudence; but where the shipwrecked are destined to fall, not into the ocean, but into the abyss of fire, and the death which awaits them is not that which severs the soul from the body, but one which together with this dismisses it to eternal punishment, shall I incur your disapproval because I did not plunge headlong into so great a work?"³⁰ (c) Pastors must give an account to Christ for their care of His sheep. "He indeed who has lost sheep, either through wolves, or the attacks of robbers, or any other disaster befalling them, might perhaps obtain some forgiveness from the owner of the flock; and even if the latter should demand satisfaction the penalty would be only a matter of money: but he who has human beings entrusted to him, the rational flock of Christ, incurs a penalty in the first place for the loss of the sheep, which goes beyond material things and touches his own life."³¹

²⁷ John Chrysostom, *On the Priesthood*, Book 1:6

²⁸ John Chrysostom, *On the Priesthood*, Book 2:1

²⁹ John Chrysostom, *On the Priesthood*, Book 3:5

³⁰ John Chrysostom, *On the Priesthood*, Book 3:7

³¹ John Chrysostom, *On the Priesthood*, Book 2:2

(3) The duties of the work. "When Chrysostom covers the nature of the work, or what the pastor is going to do, he provides much valuable information and reflection for us. He breaks it down into two points. He says there are two jobs: people and preaching. He says a pastor must give equal attention to both. A pastor must give attention to the people he preaches to in order to understand them and communicate with them. And a pastor needs to study how to preach in order to be an effective minister of God's covenant" (Calhoun).³²

(4) The difficulties of the work. "I know my own soul, how feeble and puny it is: I know the magnitude of this ministry, and the great difficulty of the work; for more stormy billows vex the soul of the priest than the gales which disturb the sea."³³ (a) Pride and vainglory. "I do not know whether anyone has ever succeeded in not enjoying praise. And if he enjoys it, he naturally wants to receive it. And if he wants to receive it, he cannot help being pained and distraught at losing it."³⁴ (b) Fierce enemies. "As we are shut up in this body, as in some prison house, we are unable to see anything of the invisible world. But if could see our enemy with the eyes of our soul, we would see the devil's most gloomy battle array, and his frantic onset. For there is no brass or iron there. No horses, or chariots or wheels, no fire and darts. These are visible things. But there are other much more fearful engines than these. One does not need against these enemies breastplate or shield, sword and spear, yet the sight only of this accursed array is enough to paralyze the soul, unless it happen to be very noble, and to enjoy in a high degree as a protection to its own courage the providential care of God."³⁵

(c) Reluctant sheep. "The shepherds with great authority compel the sheep to receive the remedy when they do not willingly submit to it. For it is easy to bind them when cutting is required, and to keep them inside the fold for a long time, whenever it is expedient, and to bring them one kind of food instead of another, and all other things which the shepherds may decide to be conducive to their health, they perform with great ease. But in the case of human infirmities, it is not easy in the first place for a man to discern them, for no man 'knows the things of a man, save the spirit of man which is in him.' How then can any one apply the remedy for the disease of which he does not know the character, often indeed being unable to understand it even should he happen to sicken with it himself? And even when it becomes manifest, it causes him yet more trouble: for it is not possible to doctor all men with the same authority with which the shepherd treats his sheep. For in this case also it is necessary to bind and to restrain from food, and to use the knife: but the reception of the treatment depends on the will of the patient, not of him who applies the remedy. For it is not possible for any one to cure a man by compulsion against his will."³⁶

3. *His exile and death.* Because of his frugal life and bold preaching, Chrysostom had many enemies. (1) Arcadius and Eudoxia. "Arcadius was emperor and only about twenty years old. Of slender build and stammering voice, he was a rather ineffectual personality, easily dominated by others. The one who dominated him was his wife Eudoxia" (Needham).³⁷ Normally the emperor and empress worshipped in their private chapel, but on special occasions they joined the crowds to hear Chrysostom preach in the Church of the Holy Wisdom. "At first, Arcadius and Eudoxia welcomed Chrysostom as their new bishop, and supported him. But things very shortly turned sour. The fact is that Chrysostom's personality just did not fit into the corrupt and complex political world of the Eastern capital and its royal court; Chrysostom was an intense, unworldly man, who had neither taste

³² David Calhoun, *Ancient & Medieval Church History*, 14:6

³³ John Chrysostom, *On the Priesthood*, Book 2:2

³⁴ John Chrysostom, *On the Priesthood*, Book 3:9

³⁵ John Chrysostom, *On the Priesthood*, Book 6:13

³⁶ John Chrysostom, *On the Priesthood*, Book 2:2-3

³⁷ Nick Needham, *2000 Years of Christ's Power*, 1:258

nor talent for politics or intrigue" (Needham).³⁸ (2) Theophilus of Alexandria. Theophilus was the bishop of Alexandria and envious of Chrysostom's fame. "Theophilus, along with Eudoxia's blessing, called a synod in 403 and charged Chrysostom with 29 false charges. Among them were immorality, high treason, abuse, and that he compared the empress to Jezebel" (Schaff).³⁹ Chrysostom was found guilty and banished from Constantinople.

The people besieged the palace and demanded the restoration of their bishop. Constantinople was almost in a state of insurrection. The following night the city was shook by an earthquake, which was felt with peculiar violence in the bedroom of Eudoxia and frightened her into submission. She implored the emperor to avert the wrath of God by recalling Chrysostom. Messengers were dispatched with humble apologies to bring him back. A whole fleet of ships put forth to greet him, the channel blazed with torches and resounded with songs of rejoicing. On passing the gates he was borne aloft by the people to the church, seated in the episcopal chair and forced to make an address. His triumph was complete, but of short duration. Theophilus felt unsafe in Constantinople, and abruptly sailed in the night for Alexandria.⁴⁰

This peace lasted only a few months, until Chrysostom and Eudoxia collided again. "The enemies of Chrysostom flocked like vultures down on their prey. Theophilus directed the plot from a safe distance. Arcadius was persuaded to issue an order for the removal of Chrysostom. He continued to preach and refused to leave the church over which God had placed him, but had to yield to armed force. He was dragged by imperial guards from the cathedral in 404, while the sacrament of baptism was being administered to believers" (Schaff).⁴¹ "The ship took Chrysostom once again along the southern coast of the Black Sea, at length to Armenia, where he was to remain, under constant military guard, for three years, dragged about from one city, town, or village to another" (Needham).⁴² During these three years, Chrysostom wrote 242 letters to fellow bishops, personal friends, and political people. Early in 407, Eudoxia, fearing his continued influence, ordered his transfer further north. The journey of three months on foot was a slow martyrdom to the feeble and sickly bishop. He never reached his destination, but died on September 14, 407, at sixty years of age. "Clothed in his white baptismal robes, he partook of the eucharist and commended his soul to God. His last words were his accustomed doxology, the motto of his life: 'Glory be to God for all things. Amen'" (Schaff).⁴³

When I was driven from the city, I felt no anxiety, but said to myself: If the empress wishes to banish me, let her do so; 'the earth is the Lord's.' If she wants to have me sawn asunder, I have Isaiah for an example. If she wants me to be drowned in the ocean, I think of Jonah. If I am to be thrown into the fire, the three men in the furnace suffered the same. If cast before wild beasts, I remember Daniel in the lion's den. If she wants me to be stoned, I have before me Stephen, the first martyr. If she demands my head, let her do so; John the Baptist shines before me. Naked I came from my mother's womb, naked shall I leave this world. Paul reminds me, 'If I still pleased men, I would not be the servant of Christ.'⁴⁴

³⁸ Nick Needham, *2000 Years of Christ's Power*, 1:259

³⁹ Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, 9:13

⁴⁰ Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, 9:13

⁴¹ Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, 9:14

⁴² Nick Needham, *2000 Years of Christ's Power*, 1:264

⁴³ Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, 9:15-16

⁴⁴ Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, 9:14