

On Friendship by John Chrysostom

Homily II.
1 Thessalonians 1. 8–10

Chap. ii Ver 7,8

... Though you should name infinite treasures, none of them is comparable to a genuine friend. And first let us speak of the great delight of friendship itself. A friend rejoices at seeing his friend, and expands with joy. He is knit to him with an union of soul that affords unspeakable pleasure. And if he only calls him to remembrance, he is roused in mind, and transported.

I speak of genuine friends, men of one soul, who would even die for each other, who love fervently. Do not, thinking of those who barely love, who are table-companions, mere nominal friends, suppose that my discourse is refuted. If any one has a friend such as I speak of, he will acknowledge the truth of my words. He, though he sees his friend every day, is not satiated. For him he prays for the same things as for himself. I know one, who calling upon holy men in behalf of his friend, besought them to pray first for him, and then for himself.

Page 331. So dear a thing is a good friend, that times and places are loved on his account. For as bodies that are luminous spread their radiance to the neighboring places, so also friends leave a grace of their own in the places to which they have come. And oftentimes in the absence of friends, as we have stood on those places, we have wept, and remembering the days which we passed together, have sighed. It is not possible to represent by speech, how great a pleasure the intercourse with friends affords. But those only know, who have experience. From a friend we may both ask a favor, and receive one without suspicion. When they enjoin anything upon us, then we feel indebted to them; but when they are slow to do this, then we are sorrowful. We have nothing which is not theirs. Often despising all things here, on their account we are not willing to depart hence; and they are more longed for by us than the light.

For, in good truth, a friend is more to be longed for than the light; I speak of a genuine one. And wonder not: for it were better for us that the sun should be extinguished, than that we should be deprived of friends; better to live in darkness, than to be without friends. And I will tell you why. Because many who see the sun are in darkness, but they can never be even in tribulation, who abound in friends. I speak of spiritual friends, who prefer nothing to friendship. Such was Paul, who would willingly have given his own soul, even though not asked, nay would have plunged into hell for them. With so ardent a disposition ought we to love.

I wish to give you an example of friendship. Friends, that is, friends according to Christ, surpass fathers and sons. For tell me not of friends of the present day, since this good thing also has past away with others. But consider, in the time of the Apostles, I speak not of the chief men, but of the believers themselves generally; “all,” he says, “were of one heart and soul: and not one of them said that aught of the things which he possessed was his own...and distribution was made unto each, according as any one had need.” (Acts iv. 32, 35.) There were then no such words as “mine” and “thine.” This is friendship, that a man should not consider his goods his own, but his neighbor’s, that his possessions belong to another; that he should be as careful of his friend’s soul as of his own; and the friend likewise.

And where is it possible, somebody says, that such an one should be found? Because we have not

the will; for it is possible. If it were not possible, neither would Christ have commanded it; he would not have discoursed so much concerning love. A great thing is friendship, and how great, no one can learn, and no discourse represent, but experience itself. It is the want of love. that has caused the heresies. This makes the Greeks to be Greeks.

He who loves does not wish to command, nor to rule, but is rather obliged when he is ruled and commanded. He wishes rather to bestow a favor than to receive one, for he loves, and is so affected, as not having satisfied his desire. He is not so much gratified when good is done to him, as when he is doing good. For he wishes to oblige, rather than to be indebted to him; or rather he wishes both to be beholden to him, and to have him his debtor. And he wishes both to bestow favors, and not to seem to bestow them, but himself to be the debtor. I think that perhaps many of you do not understand what has been said. He wishes to be the first in bestowing benefits, and not to seem to be the first, but to be returning a kindness. Which God also has done in the case of men. He purposed to give His own Son for us; but that He might not seem to bestow a favor, but to be indebted to us, He commanded Abraham to offer his son that whilst doing a great kindness, He might seem to do nothing great.

For when indeed there is no love, we both upbraid men with our kindnesses and we exaggerate little ones; but when there is love, we both conceal them and wish to make the great appear small, that we may not seem to have our friend for a debtor, but ourselves to be debtors to him, in having him our debtor. I know that the greater part do not understand what is said, and the cause is, that I am speaking of a thing which now dwells in heaven. As therefore if I were speaking of any plant growing in India, of which no one had ever had any experience, no speech would avail to represent it, though I should utter ten thousand words: so also now whatever things I say, I say in vain, for no one will be able to understand me. This is a plant that is planted in heaven, having for its branches not heavy-clustered pearls, but a virtuous life, much more acceptable than they. What pleasure would you speak of, the foul and the honorable? But that of friendship excelleth them all, though you should speak of the sweetness of honey. For that satiates, but a friend never does, so long as he is a friend; nay, the desire of him rather increases, and such pleasure never admits of satiety. And a friend is sweeter than the present life. Many therefore after the death of their friends have not wished to live any longer. With a friend one would bear even banishment; but without a friend would not choose to inhabit even his own country. With a friend even poverty is tolerable, but without him both health and riches are intolerable. He has another self: I am straitened, because I cannot instance by an example. For I should in that case make it appear that what has been said is much less than it ought to be.

And these things indeed are so here. But from God the reward of friendship is so great, that it cannot be expressed. He gives a reward, that we may love one another, the thing for which we owe a reward. "Pray," He says, "and receive a reward," for that for which we owe a reward, because we ask for good things. "For that which you ask," He says, "receive a reward. Fast, and receive a reward. Be virtuous, and receive a reward," though you rather owe a reward. But as fathers, when they have made their children virtuous, then further give them a reward; for they are debtors, because they have afforded them a pleasure; so also God acts. "Receive a reward," He says, "if thou be virtuous, for thou delightest thy Father, and for this I owe thee a reward. But if thou be evil, not so: for thou provokest Him that begot thee." Let us not then provoke God, but let us delight Him, that we may obtain the kingdom of Heaven, in Christ Jesus our Lord, to whom be the glory and the strength, world without end.

Amen.