

Seven Pulpit Paradigms from the Prince of Preachers: John Chrysostom

Joel Pless

Imagine, if you will, being such a dynamic and appealing preacher that when you leave your call, your parishioners start a riot in the city to protest your departure and accompany their actions with this shout: "Better let the sun cease to shine than stop that golden mouth!"¹ Imagine, if you will, a preacher having to contend with this problem during his worship services—the congregation would listen so intently to every word that the preacher spoke that pickpockets could carry out their illicit activity among the listeners.² Imagine, if you will, ultimately receiving this accolade after your death: "He counts among the greatest preachers in the whole history of the church."³ These were the experiences of the master preacher of the early Christian church, John of Antioch and Constantinople, better known as John Chrysostom.

This article will address the key question of why John Chrysostom is universally praised in both the Eastern and the Western Church as one of Christendom's greatest pulpit orators. What was this man's secret that made him so successful in the pulpit? Chrysostom achieved such homiletic excellence that he ended up being virtually hijacked from his pastorate in Syrian Antioch so he could be the bishop of Constantinople, Emperor Constantine's "New Rome."⁴ Chrysostom's mesmerizing homiletical skills have been synopsisized into seven thesis-like paradigms, paradigms which can still serve as outstanding examples of excellence in preaching the Christian gospel. By examining Chrysostom's sermons and pulpit skills, the preacher of today and tomorrow will learn the trade secrets of the greatest preacher of the East, John Chrysostom.

PARADIGM #1: Excellence in preaching calls for a thorough knowledge of, a proper use of, and the highest reverence for the Holy Scriptures.

Martin Franzmann was fond of referring to the Holy Scriptures as the only game in town. John Chrysostom shared Franzmann's sentiment. Like so many other famous and not so famous churchmen, Chrysostom grew up under the influence of a loving and godly mother, Anthusa. Widowed while still a very young woman, Anthusa single-handedly raised John and shared with him her piety and knowledge of the Scriptures.

Chrysostom's mother not only taught her son Christianity, but also gave him the very best secular education available in the large city of Antioch in Syria. Chrysostom's training in Greek grammar and literature served him well in his future biblical studies and preaching responsibilities. But his biographers are unanimous in saying that John Chrysostom was most influenced in his view toward the Scriptures by his teacher, Diodorus of Tarsus. J. F. D'Alton writes:

For Chrysostom the teaching of Diodorus was one of the most important of the formative influences in his life. This master was remarkable both for his lofty spirituality and profound erudition. He was recognized as the leader of the Antiochene school of Scriptural exegesis which espoused the literal as opposed to the allegorical interpretation favoured by the Alexandrian

¹Edwin C. Dargan, *A History of Preaching*, vol. 1, *From the Apostolic Fathers to the Great Reformers, A.D. 70-1572*, with an introduction by J. B. Weatherspoon, (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1954), p. 90.

²Hugh T. Kerr, *Preaching in the Early Church*, (New York: Fleming H. Revell, 1942), p. 178.

³David F. Wright, "John Chrysostom," *Great Leaders of the Christian Church*, John D. Woodbridge, gen. ed., (Chicago: Moody Press, 1988), p. 81.

⁴Wright, p. 83.

scholars. In those years Chrysostom must have laid the foundation of that marvellous knowledge of Sacred Writ which illuminates every page he wrote, and makes of his works a treasure house for the Scripture scholar no less than for the pulpit orator.⁵

John Chrysostom learned to do biblical exegesis from Diodorus at a combination monastery and Bible institute, the "Asceterion." The bishop Neletius seems to have ordained John as a rector after the latter had completed his studies under Diodorus.⁶ Like so many others in and around Antioch at the time, Chrysostom yearned for a more ascetic lifestyle and he eventually became an anchorite in the hills around Antioch. First living with an older monk, and then for two years completely alone, Chrysostom spent his days and a good part of his nights studying the Holy Scriptures during his sojourn as an ascetic. His thorough knowledge of Scripture is evident in each sermon he preached, as they are filled with quotations of and illustrations from the Scriptures. Chrysostom's first homily in the series "Concerning the Statues" demonstrates both his reverence for Holy Writ and his colorful and creative illustrative style:

Yea, rather the reading of the divine Scriptures is not a meadow only, but a paradise; for the flowers here have not a mere fragrance only, but fruit too, capable of nourishing the soul.⁷

Chrysostom in the same sermon describes scriptural truth as gold that needs to be mined out and applied to souls:

Inasmuch, then, as we likewise have to roast the gold drawn from the Apostolic mines, not by casting it into the furnace, but by depositing it in the thoughts of your souls; not lighting an earthly flame, but kindling the fire of the Spirit, let us collect the little particles with diligence.⁸

Also in the first "Statues" homily, John Chrysostom demonstrated his reverence for the Scriptures as the only source and norm for doctrine and preaching after he listed eight biblical reasons why God's people suffer afflictions:

These then are the reasons; but it is necessary to establish them all from the Scriptures, and to show with exactness that all that has been said on this subject is not an invention of human reasoning, but the very sentence of the Scriptures.⁹

In summary, Chrysostom's first secret in his outstanding homiletics was that he was a man who knew his Bible inside and out. Jaroslav Pelikan regards him as the classic example of the Antiochene school of exegesis, which stressed literal and not allegorical interpretation of Scripture.¹⁰ His high view of the Scriptures and his usually sound exegesis made him a true expository preacher of the Word. John Chrysostom's approach to and use of the Scriptures in his preaching made him in one regard a forerunner of the Lutheran Reformation.

PARADIGM #2: Excellence in preaching calls for sermons which proclaim both the severity of the law and the sweetness of the gospel.

⁵J.F. D'Alton, ed., *Selections from St. John Chrysostom*, (London: Burns, Oates & Washbourne, 1940), p. 3.

⁶Ibid.

⁷Homily 1:2, "Concerning the Statues," vol. IX., *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, Philip Schaff, ed., (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, reprinted 1989), p. 331.

⁸Homily 1:3, "Concerning the Statues," p. 332.

⁹Homily 1:14, "Concerning the Statues," p. 337.

¹⁰Jaroslav Pelikan, ed., *The Preaching of Chrysostom: Homilies on the Sermon on the Mount*, (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1967), p. 12.

A careful reading of Chrysostom's sermons certainly reveals that Chrysostom knew how to use law and gospel properly. Yet it must be remembered and admitted that he also was a child and product of his times. Thus, John knew how to preach the law better than the gospel. Philip Schaff observed in his introduction to Chrysostom's writings in *The Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers* that Chrysostom never seemed to fully understand the biblical doctrine of forensic objective justification.¹¹ Neither did he ever understand, like his younger Western contemporary Augustine, the bondage of the human will and the glory of God's grace. Like all the Greek fathers, John basically believed that God helped those who helped themselves and thus championed free will and man's cooperation with divine grace in conversion. His concept of justification seems to tend toward deification rather than forensic justification on the basis of the merits of Christ.¹²

Chrysostom's law preaching at times is second to none. Regrettably, at times he preached the law in such severity that he ended up sounding like he had neither tact nor common sense. The most memorable example is Chrysostom's less than subtle reference to Empress Eudoxia in one of his sermons after the empress set up a statue of herself near Chrysostom's church in Constantinople. This ultimately led to his exile and subsequent death. Read any of the more than 600 extant sermons, and examples like these are the rule rather than the exception:

You shudder at the word! I knew you would. Now if this law were of my making, at me would be the laughing; but if Another be the Lawgiver, the jeering passes over to Him. Yes and Christ was once spit upon, and smitten with the palm, smitten upon the face! Now also He bears with this, and it is no wonder! For this, hell is prepared; for this the worm that dieth not.¹³

In Homily 10 on Romans, John writes, "What then does the word 'sinners' mean here? To me it seems to mean liable to punishment and condemned to death."¹⁴ A line like that should be more common in pulpit proclamation today! In Homily 2 "Concerning the Statues" John calls upon his audience to do some serious soul searching:

Let us be mindful of our nature. Let us recollect our sins. Let us understand what we are; and this will provide a sufficient groundwork for complete humility.¹⁵

John Chrysostom will always be remembered as a practical preacher rather than a theologian. His message was a sincere and constant call to live the Christian life in light of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. His sermons contain far more of the severity of the law than sweetness of the gospel, but at times, he could truly preach the sweetest gospel. In his sermon on John 3:12,13, John reminded his listeners:

For by the expression, "so loved," and that other, "God the world," He shows the great strength of his love. Large and infinite was the interval between the two. He, the immortal, who is without beginning, the Infinite Majesty, they but dust and ashes, full of ten thousand sins, who, ungrateful, have at all times offended Him; and these He "loved." Again, the words which He added after these are alike significant, when He saith that "He gave His Only-begotten," not a servant, not an Angel, not an Archangel. And yet no one would show such anxiety for his own child, as God did for his ungrateful servants.¹⁶

¹¹Philip Schaff, prologomena, vol. IX., p. 20.

¹²Schaff, prologomena, vol. IX., p. 20.

¹³Homily 8, "Acts," vol. XI., *NPNF*, p. 53.

¹⁴Homily 10, "Romans," vol. XI., *NPNF*, p. 403.

¹⁵Homily 2:18, "Concerning the Statutes," vol. IX, *NPNF*, p. 350.

¹⁶Homily 27:2, "Homilies on St. John," vol. XIV., *NPNF*, p. 95.

Chrysostom also preached sweet gospel in two of his homilies on the general theme "On the Incomprehensible Nature of God." In Homily 5, he proclaims to his listeners:

Surely Christ proved this very thing when he said: "Come to me all you who labor and are burdened, and I will give you rest." Now he calls us, let us not fail to heed him. When he draws us to himself, let us not leap away from him. Even if we have ten thousand sins on our soul, then all the more let us run to him. Men have been burdened with as many faults before. And they were the ones he invited to come to him when he said: "I did not come to call the just but sinners to repentance." And in this text, he means those who are oppressed with burdens, those who are in distress, those who are laboring under the weight of their sins. Because he is constantly working to encourage and console those who are distressed and afflicted even if they have sinned ten thousand times.¹⁷

One of Chrysostom's best statements on the salvific work of Christ is this paragraph, found in Homily 8, "On the Incomprehensible Nature of God":

He erased the curse, he triumphed over death, he opened paradise. He struck down sin, he opened wide the vaults of the sky, he lifted our first fruits to heaven, he filled the whole world with godliness. He drove out error, he led back the truth, he made our firstfruits mount to the royal throne. He accomplished so many good deeds that neither I nor all men together could set them before your minds in words.¹⁸

John Chrysostom knew how to preach both law and gospel, but reading through several of his sermons convincingly suggests he used the law much more than the gospel. While he often uses the law rather than the gospel to motivate his listeners to greater sanctification and purity of living, at times "the Golden Mouth" could proclaim the sweetness of the gospel with the greatest of eloquence.

PARADIGM #3: Excellence in preaching calls for proclamation that is for the glory of God and not the praise of men.

John Chrysostom's motto in life and his dying words were "Glory to God for all things." To understand how John learned to adopt this as his motto and creed, it is again necessary to examine his upbringing and training. Schaff credits Chrysostom's mother with imparting to him his outlook on life:

She gave her son an admirable education, and early planted in his soul the germs of piety, which afterwards bore the richest fruits for him and the church. By her admonitions and the teachings of the Bible, he was secured against the seductions of heathenism.¹⁹

The other factor in the development of Chrysostom as a preacher who preached solely for the glory of God and the extension of his kingdom was his training under the pagan Libanius. Libanius was a cohort and admirer of Julian the Apostate. Chrysostom became his star pupil and received an outstanding education from him in the study of Greek classics and the arts of rhetoric.²⁰ For a while Chrysostom became one of the most skilled lawyers and rhetoricians in all of Antioch. But his Christian conscience, instilled in him through

¹⁷Homily 5:60, "On the Incomprehensible Nature of God," *The Fathers of the Church*, vol. 72, Paul Harkins, trans., (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 1984), p. 163.

¹⁸Homily 8:46, "On the Incomprehensible Nature of God," *The Fathers of the Church*, p. 231.

¹⁹Schaff, prolegomena, vol. 1X., *NPNF*, p. 5.

²⁰Ibid. p. 6.

maternal influences, caught up with him.²¹ Despite receiving accolades from his former teacher for his eloquent speech in the local law courts, Chrysostom became disenchanted with the legal profession. He believed it was immoral to argue a worse cause as the better cause. Through the influence of his mother Anthusa, his devoted and devout friend Basil, his acquaintance with Melitius, the bishop of Antioch, and through his own study of Scripture, Chrysostom turned away from the law and toward service in the church.²² His years as an ascetic gave him a deep sense and desire to give glory to God for all things.

An interesting sidebar to Chrysostom's creed in life is a look into the mindset and method of operation of Greek rhetoricians during the late Roman Empire. Rhetoricians would at times move from place to place, but they also often settled in one locality where they would attract their own following. They would often speak on any subject under the sun, sometimes taking requests from their listeners. Greek rhetoricians lived on praise and applause. Over a century ago, Edwin Hatch gave a series of lectures in which he described how a rhetorician would fish for praise and glory:

"I want your praise," said a rhetorician to Epictetus. "What do you mean by praise?" "I want you to say 'Bravo' and 'Wonderful.'" After the discourse the speaker sought out his hearers. "What did you think of me today?" "Upon my life, sir, I thought you were admirable." The rhetoricians, like some preachers, had a tendency to overestimate their audiences. "A much larger audience today, I think," says the orator. "Yes, much larger. Five hundred I would guess." "Oh, nonsense. It could not have been less than a thousand."²³

After being trained to orate in order to win the praise of men, Chrysostom's faith and love toward God compelled him to become a different type of orator. He would still employ the use of Greek rhetorical methods of public speaking, but now his sole purpose was to advance the kingdom of God and to give glory to God for all things. The rhetorical skills so polished under the tutelage of the pagan Libanius became employed to preach the gospel of Jesus Christ, a fact which Libanius openly lamented to his dying day.²⁴ John Chrysostom described how contempt for the praise of men and the power of eloquent rhetoric go hand in hand in his "Treatise Concerning the Christian Priesthood." According to Chrysostom, excellence in preaching calls for both:

If either is lacking, the one left is made useless through divorce from the other. If a preacher despises praise, yet does not produce the kind of teaching which is "with grace, seasoned with salt," (Col 4:6) he is despised by the people and gets no advantage from his sublimity. And if he manages this side of things perfectly well, but is a slave to the sound of applause, again an equal damage threatens both him and the people, because through his passion for praise he aims to speak more for the pleasure than the profit of his hearers. The man who is unaffected by acclamation, yet skilled in preaching, does not ruckle to the people's pleasure; but no more can he confer any real benefit upon them, because he has nothing to say. And equally, the man who is carried away with the desire for eulogies may have the ability to improve the people, but chooses instead to provide nothing but entertainment. That is the price he pays for rounds of applause.²⁵

²¹Ibid.

²²Schaff, prolegomena, vol. IX., *NPNF*, p. 6.

²³Edwin Hatch, "Hibbert Lectures of 1888," quoted in Kerr, p. 160.

²⁴Schaff, prolegomena, vol. IX., p. 6.

²⁵Book 5: 2, "On the Priesthood," PG. 48. 637, (Migne, *Patrologia Graeca*), cited in Thomas K. Carroll, *Preaching the Word: Message of the Fathers of the Church*, vol. 11, Thomas Halton, gen. ed., (Wilmington, DE: Michael Glazier, 1988), pp. 100,101.

Chrysostom's reference to applause reveals that he had to contend with a problem few modern preachers have had, dealing with clapping and cheering during his sermons. In reaction to the widescale flattery that Greek rhetoricians of that day sought and received, Chrysostom spoke out against the applause he received, but at times, it seemed the more he renounced it, the more his audience did it. "If you will applaud," he said, "do it in the market or when you hear the harpers and actors: the church is no theatre."²⁶ Chrysostom wanted praise of a different sort. Committed to giving glory to God for all things, his glory was to see his congregation bring glory to God by their daily lives: "What need have I of these plaudits, these cheers and tumultuous signs of approval? The praise I seek, is that ye show forth all I have said in your works."²⁷

Chrysostom was the kind of preacher God wants the most. He demonstrated excellence in preaching by seeing himself as a delivery vehicle through whom God would announce his message to the world. He sought to deliver God's Word and gave glory to God for all things.²⁸ In his *A History of Preaching*, Edwin C. Dargan aptly summarized Chrysostom's temperament in preaching:

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 no matter who it hit. Fidelity to duty as he saw it animated him in all his work. He, too, was one who wore himself out for his Master.²⁹

PARADIGM #4: Excellence in preaching calls for proclamation that is spoken at the level of the listener and specifically addresses issues he/she daily confronts in life.

John Chrysostom's preaching, probably more than any other preaching in the early Christian church, was preaching that very deliberately addressed the need of the times and the particular sins and concerns of his audience. Fant and Pinson attribute Chrysostom's uncanny ability to size up the contemporary situation and evaluate it with an appropriate text of Scripture as the chief reason for his success:

Chrysostom's great strength lay in his ability to apply scriptural truth to existing situations. He was amazingly relevant and aware of the world about him. Some historians have called Chrysostom an ascetic who lived in ignorance of the surrounding world; perhaps so, in the broadest sense. But no one could read his indictment of the heathen, or his "Homilies on the Statues" without sensing his keen awareness of the civic difficulties of his day. He could speak about the games, the problems of wealth or poverty, the various forms of heathen idolatry, public conduct in the forum, or any one of a number of other social conditions. His preaching seems to have thrust itself boldly into the area of public affairs.³⁰

Commensurate with his zeal to address the need of the times with the will of God was John's ability to speak to the level of the listener in a way that he/she could relate to and benefit from. His years as an ascetic helped him to understand his own heart and the hearts of people in general. His years as a deacon brought him in touch with the common people, and there Chrysostom learned to talk to people at their own level.³¹ An often quoted line of Chrysostom in regard to the content of his sermons is this: "I treat of so many things in each of my sermons and make them so varied because I want everybody to find something special in it and not go home

²⁶Kerr, p. 178.

²⁷Homily 2:12, "Concerning the Statues," p. 347.

²⁸Paul Scott Wilson, *A Concise History of Preaching*, (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1992), p. 42.

²⁹Dargan, p. 93.

³⁰Clyde E. Fant, Jr. & William M. Pinson, Jr., *20 Centuries of Great Preaching: An Encyclopedia of Preaching*, vol. 1: Biblical Sermons to Saonarola, (Waco, TX: Word Books, 1976), p. 58.

³¹Kerr, p. 176,177.

empty-handed."³² Excellence in preaching is indeed consciously striving to include something special for everyone in what is proclaimed from the pulpit.

The most memorable example of Chrysostom's preaching to meet the needs of the times are his twenty-one homilies, "Concerning the Statues," preached in March and April of 387 A.D. As a result of a tax revolt, Chrysostom's hometown of Antioch was threatened with complete destruction by the imperial forces of Emperor Theodosius. Statues of the emperor and his deceased wife Flacilla were thrown down and dragged throughout the city.³³ The aged bishop Flavian made a diplomatic mission to Constantinople to plead before the emperor to spare the city from destruction. In his absence, Chrysostom rose to the occasion and delivered a series of sermons that have become legendary as examples of preaching to the needs of the times. Chrysostom proclaimed hope to the Christians in Antioch when a pall of despair had come over the city:

But afford me your attention! Lend me your ears awhile! Shake off this despondency! Let us return to our former custom; and as we have been used always to meet here with gladness, so let us also do now, casting all upon God. And this will contribute towards our actual deliverance from calamity.³⁴

For weeks the citizens of Antioch waited in anxiety for the Roman legions to come and begin their killing and destruction in retribution for the earlier sedition. All the while, Chrysostom functioned as pastor, preacher, counselor, and unofficial media spokesman. The news of Theodosius' clemency toward the Antiochenes reached the city on Easter Day, 387 A.D. Few Easters in Christendom have been celebrated with more fervent joy. Chrysostom proclaimed:

For all these things, let us give thanks to the merciful God, and be amazed at the power, the loving kindness, the wisdom, and the tender care which has been manifested on behalf of the city. For the devil had attempted its entire subversion through the daring crimes committed, but God, by means of this same calamity, hath adorned the city, the Priest, and the Emperor; and hath made them all more illustrious.³⁵

John Chrysostom's reputation was cemented in history as a result of these sermons and he reached the apex of his power and popularity in Antioch. Dargan considers the "Concerning the Statues" homilies to be "one of the most remarkable series of discourses in the literature of the pulpit."³⁶ John's excellence in preaching had addressed the times while at the same time it had calmed troubled hearts with God's message of sin and grace.

One other factor that is generally recognized as a window to understanding Chrysostom's rapport with his preaching audiences is that John was no ivory-tower theologian. In many ways, despite his ascetic lifestyle, he was a man out and about with people. His work among the poor in Antioch has already been cited. As bishop of Constantinople, he oversaw the charitable institutions in and around the city, the hospitals, and the poorhouses.³⁷ He also became interested and active in working to establish a Christian mission among the peasants of Thrace and to encourage wealthy property owners to build churches on their country estates.³⁸ His use of the bishopric to further the cause of the poor and to promote his various benevolent enterprises produced more than a few enemies, but these activities also gave John a deep-seated affinity with the citizens of Constan-

³²Wright, p. 84.

³³W.R.W. Stephens, Preface, "Concerning the Statues," vol. IX., *NPNF*, p. 317.

³⁴Homily 2:9, "Concerning the Statues," p. 346.

³⁵Homily 21:1, "Concerning the Statues," p. 482.

³⁶Dargan, p. 89.

³⁷J.N.D. Kelly, *Golden Mouth: The Story of John Chrysostom: Ascetic, Preacher, Bishop*, (Ithaca, (NY: Cornell University Press, 1995), p. 141.

³⁸*Ibid.*

tinople, among whom he labored diligently as their chief pastor. His pastoral work away from the pulpit demonstrated the old adage: "A pastor finds the themes of his sermons among his people." J. F. D'Alton issues this summary of how John Chrysostom could speak on the level of his listeners:

Rich and poor, learned and ignorant, were eager to learn from him, and all yielded to the spell of his eloquence. They saw that in that small emaciated frame was housed an indomitable spirit ever ready to do battle with the forces of evil. They recognized his profound and genuine sympathy with them in their trials and affliction, and his ardent zeal for their spiritual welfare.³⁹

PARADIGM #5: Excellence in preaching calls for a preacher who lives the doctrine he preaches and who inspires others toward the goal of increased sanctification.

John Chrysostom was a man who believed that the pulpit was the surest way to promote the living of the Christian life among his people. He was a preacher who called upon his audience to demonstrate how Christ was living and active through the words and actions of their personal lives. Philip Schaff said: "He preached an earnest Christianity fruitful in good works, he insisted on strict discipline, and boldly attacked the vices of his age."⁴⁰

Central to John's success as a Christian preacher of sanctification was his own spiritual fervor. He was a man of the noblest character who lived his faith in Christ and who then could inspire others to do the same. One author and commentator after another attests to Chrysostom's intense moral earnestness, his zeal for the moral betterment of everyone under his pastoral care, and his frugal, ascetic lifestyle which impressively demonstrated that he was God's man in the world, but not of the world.⁴¹ Truly the goldenmouth was backed up by a golden life.⁴² John Chrysostom demonstrated excellence in preaching before he even mounted his ambo, for his personal lifestyle enhanced the power of his pulpit rather than detracted from it.

An inspired man works to inspire others, and reading through several of Chrysostom's sermons reveals a pulpit master who sought to inspire others toward sanctification by the power of the Word of God. Chrysostom's high view of Scripture gave him the means to inspire his listeners. He simply took for granted that the Scriptures were the authoritative source of knowledge for godly living.⁴³

It is said that he knew almost the entire Bible by heart.⁴⁴ While that might be an overstatement, his constant quotations and allusions to Scripture in his writings and sermons number in the tens of thousands. Inspired and motivated by an arduous study of the Scriptures, John then proceeded to inspire others toward greater love and service to Christ.

Did he succeed? To a point, he did. During the years John occupied the episcopal chair in Constantinople, it was said: "Better that Constantinople cease to be than John Chrysostom should cease to preach."⁴⁵ Scores of people lived on his sermons as the spiritual food for their souls. When Chrysostom was all

³⁹D'Alton, p. 89.

⁴⁰Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*, vol. III., *Nicene and Post-Nicene Christianity*, fifth ed. revised, Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, reprinted 1977), p. 938.

⁴¹D'Alton, p. 16.

⁴²John G. Mager, *Chrysostom: A Study of His Theology, His Sermon Methods, and His Preaching*, B.D. thesis, Concordia Seminary, St. Louis, 1947, p. 50.

⁴³Pamela Jackson, "John Chrysostom's Use of Scripture in Initiatory Preaching," *Greek Orthodox Theological Review*, vol. 35204, no. 4, 1990, pp. 348,349.

⁴⁴John A. Broadus, *Lectures on the History of Preaching*, new ed., (New York: A. C. Armstrong & Son, 1896), p. 76.

⁴⁵Ilion T. Jones, *Principles and Practice of Preaching*, (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1956), p. 27.

but kidnapped and taken to Constantinople, he believed he had come to a city which was full of nominal Christians, who saw their Christianity as nothing more than the latest fashion: "From among so many thousands, it is impossible to find more than one hundred who are truly saving their souls, and I am not even sure that there are that many."⁴⁶

Chrysostom's sermons reveal that he preached to the New Man, and he called upon his listeners to repent and then to reform every aspect of their lives. Chrysostom's call for increased sanctification in both the rich and the poor can be seen in a series of sermons he preached on the parable of Lazarus and the rich man. In his first sermon, John attacked the sin of living in luxury at the expense of one's spiritual life:

There is nothing more grievous than luxury...Luxury often leads to forgetfulness. As for you, my beloved, if you sit at table, remember that from the table you must go to prayer. Fill your belly so moderately that you may not become too heavy to bend your knees and call upon your God...Let us accustom ourselves to eat only enough to live, not enough to be distracted and weighed down. For we were not born, we do not live, in order to eat and drink; but we eat in order to live.⁴⁷

The "Golden Mouth," true to form, in the same sermon also had a message to the poor in his audience:

Knowing all these things, let us be wise. Let us not say if God loved so and so, He would not have allowed him to become poor. This very fact is the greatest evidence of God's love: "For the Lord disciplines him whom he loves, and chastises every son whom He receives." . . . Collecting all these thoughts in your minds, therefore, my beloved, let us call fortunate not the wealthy but the virtuous; let us call miserable not the poor but the wicked. Let us not regard what is present, but consider what is to come. Let us examine not the outer garments but the conscience of each person. Let us pursue the virtue and joy which come from righteous actions; and let us, both rich and poor, emulate poor Lazarus.⁴⁸

The fact that John Chrysostom spoke to real people concerning real sins and real temptations has already been noted. Excellence in preaching calls for preaching that not only encourages sanctification but also warns against what is not sanctified. Chrysostom became a living legend for doing the latter. Chrysostom was unashamed to proclaim from his pulpit how frustrated he became when his sermons faced competition from secular and often sinful attractions, similar to the competition that modern preachers face from sporting events, deer hunting season, and other like diversions. Whether it was the theater, the hippodrome with its chariot and horse races, the circus, or gladiator fights, John preached against them and their pagan influences.⁴⁹ Notice the frustration in his voice as he begins one of his sermons during a time of stiff competition from the local circus:

I have no idea what I shall say to you today. I see that since the Feast of Pentecost the attendance at divine service has fallen off, the Prophets neglected, the Apostles are little valued, the Fathers are set aside....There is divine service once a week, and even this day you cannot spend without the cares of business. Some say they are poor and must take care of making their living, while others have urgent business. As a matter of fact the whole city is at the circus.⁵⁰

⁴⁶Quoted by George Florovsky, *The Eastern Fathers of the Fourth Century*, vol. VII., Richard S. Haugh, gen. ed., Catherine Edmunds, trans., (Vaduz, FRG: Buechervertriebsanstalt, 1987), p. 243.

⁴⁷"First Sermon on Lazarus and the Rich Man," *St. John Chrysostom: On Wealth and Poverty*, translated and introduced by Catharine P. Roth, (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1984), pp. 26-28.

⁴⁸"First Sermon on Lazarus and the Rich Man," *On Wealth and Poverty*, pp. 35-37.

⁴⁹D'Alton, pp. 224-229.

⁵⁰"On Anna," PG. 54:374., quoted in Carroll, p. 105.

Chrysostom saw himself as a forgiven sinner preaching to forgiven sinners of the need to show their love for their God by leading the Christian life. One can see himself in his sermons and one can even see the audience to whom he was preaching. One gets a very real understanding of what daily life must have been like in Antioch and Constantinople from reading through John Chrysostom's sermons. Here was a man who met the sins of the times with the sanctifying power of the Spirit. "All of the basic elements of the Christian sermon are to be found in this master of the Greek homily."⁵¹

PARADIGM #6: Excellence in preaching calls for the effective use of rhetorical devices which not only appeal to a listener's intellect but also stir his/her emotions.

If one is asked to put a finger on exactly what combination of traits made Chrysostom the "greatest preacher of antiquity," perhaps it could be put this way: Combine an immense talent for polished public speaking with a fervent zeal and love for God and his people, and the result is excellence in preaching demonstrated by the prince of preachers, John Chrysostom.⁵² Stephen Neill gives this comparison between the pagan Libanius and his peerless pupil, Chrysostom:

There is an immense contrast between Libanius and his pupil. The old pagan really had nothing much to say, and said it at great length; what he wrote is hardly readable. Chrysostom had something to say. He had been seized by the Christian Gospel; he is charged with a living message to living men. In consequence Chrysostom at his worst is usually more interesting than the best of his pagan contemporaries.⁵³

One key to understanding Chrysostom's spellbinding effect on his listeners was that he was not just a preacher, he was a bona fide orator. Genuine oratory today has all but passed out of existence. In this electronic age, the art of oratory has been replaced by the science of the fifteen-second sound bite. World-renowned orators in the mold of Daniel Webster, Edward Everett, and William Jennings Bryan are not nearly as much in demand today as those who exhibit an imposing presence on television. Chrysostom lived in the age of Greek rhetoric, and he excelled in the oratorical skills of his day. Furthermore, his audience was trained to listen to and expected to hear polished rhetoric from their pastors. Chrysostom did not disappoint them. What made him so spellbinding and so dearly loved is that he combined oratory with the living and active Word of God, which then made him the pulpit sensation of the early church.

In confessional Lutheran circles, what is stressed most in preaching is the substance of the message, as opposed to the style in which the message is delivered. This stress is Lutheran, biblical, and necessary. But what made Chrysostom a world-renowned preacher is that he had both substance and style. The use of rhetorical devices does not receive nearly as much attention or use today in preaching as it did back during the time of the Chrysostom. Chrysostom is described as a preacher who "drew out every stop of pulpit oratory, harsh rebuke, tender appeal, apt illustration from daily life, and always with a copious store of biblical material."⁵⁴ Consider how he used a series of rhetorical questions in his sermon on John 2:4:

⁵¹Yngve Brilioth, *A Brief History of Preaching*, Karl E. Mattson, trans., (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1965), p. 38.

⁵²James W. Cox, "Eloquent, Mighty in the Scriptures: Biblical Preachers from Chrysostom to Thielicke," *Review and Expositor*, vol. 72., Spring 1975, p. 189.

⁵³Stephen Neill, *Chrysostom and His Message*, World Christian Books, no. 44, (London: United Society for Christian Literature; Lutterworth Press, 1962), p. 10.

⁵⁴Ibid, p.24.

What do these words mean? I have brought together more instances, that I may give one explanation of all. And what is that explanation? . . . And what was it, that He did not the miracle before they filled them, which would have been more marvelous by far? . . . "But why," says one, "did not He Himself produce the water which He afterwards showed to be wine, instead of bidding the servants bring it?"⁵⁵

Moreover, John was highly skilled in employing dialogues between himself and the listener. He had the ability to speak to probably hundreds as if he were speaking to only one individual. His use of thesis/antithesis also must be noted. This rhetorical device can best be seen in his series of sermons on Lazarus and the rich man. What of course is totally lost in the sands of time is John's actual delivery style. Opinion is divided about the strength of John Chrysostom's speaking voice. As one reads his sermons and hears descriptions of them by contemporaries, one gets the very distinct impression that he was a master of inflection and gestures, which kept the audience almost in a state of rapture. It is no wonder, following the custom of the day, that at the end of his sermons, the audience often would break out in wild applause and stamp their feet.⁵⁶ John Chrysostom's excellence in preaching was that good. He was a master of exegesis who took a text and always found a way to say something interesting and edifying about it. His clever but sanctified use of his Greek rhetorical skills touched the intellect but at the same time stirred the deepest emotions among his listeners. It is no wonder then that parishioners would sometimes jostle and shove each other for position in Chrysostom's Hagia Sophia to get the best place to stand so they could hear a sermon which they could not but listen to.⁵⁷ This is what excellence in preaching does when it touches both intellect and emotion!

PARADIGM #7: Excellence in preaching calls for a tremendous command of the language which enables the preacher to effectively use illustrations and to turn the event of the moment to a beneficial account.

Every great preacher in church history has possessed an excellent command of the vernacular, and it was here again that Chrysostom had no equal. Trained in Greek classics and rhetoric, his Attic Greek reached the highest forms of eloquence in the Eastern Church. While sometimes he made too much of a good thing and lost his audience with his flowery speech and eloquence, Chrysostom was a pioneer in the use of sermon illustrations. As God's man serving God's people in God's way, he wanted his hearers to grasp spiritual truth and to come to know the personages of the Bible as if they had actually met them. Most often John's illustrations were either examples from the everyday life of the listeners or they were biblical allusions:

Suppose an Emperor had ordered thee to build an house that he might lodge there, wouldest thou not have done everything to please him? And here now it is a palace of Christ, the Church which thou buildest. Look not at the cost, but calculate the profit.⁵⁸

I know many instances of persons engendering diseases by giving loose to anger: and the worst fevers are precisely these. But if they do so injure the body, think of the soul!⁵⁹

For many of those who were approved and distinguished by God have been subjected to an unjust end; and first of all Abel.⁶⁰

⁵⁵Homily 22:1, "Homilies on John," vol. XIV., *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, Philip Schaff, ed., (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1989), pp. 76,77.

⁵⁶Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*, vol. III., p. 938.

⁵⁷Kelly, p. 130.

⁵⁸Homily 18; Acts 7:54, "On the Acts of the Apostles," vol. XI, *NPNF*, p. 118.

⁵⁹Homily 6; Acts 2:22, "On the Acts of the Apostles," vol. XL, *NPNF*, p. 43.

⁶⁰Homily 5:9, "On the Statues," vol. IX., *NPNF*, p. 374.

Him [Job] do thou too imitate; and when any comer announces that soldiers have encircled the city, and are about to plunder its wealth, flee to thy Lord and say, "The Lord gave, the Lord hath taken away; as it seemeth good to the Lord, so it is done. Blessed be the name of the Lord forever." The experience of the actual events did not terrify him; yet the mere report frightens thee.⁶¹

Another characteristic of preaching excellence is the ability to turn a phrase instantly, to respond immediately and extemporaneously to an event at the moment. As John looked out one evening from his pulpit, he saw people being distracted by the local lamplighters in the royal city:

Please listen to me; you are not paying attention. I am talking to you about the Holy Scriptures and you are looking at the lamps and the people who are lighting them. It is very frivolous to be more interested in what the lamplighters are doing than in what the preacher is saying. After all I, too, am lighting a lamp, the lamp of God's Word.⁶²

In summary, Chrysostom had the gift that all preachers of the gospel crave. He had the persistent ability to say here and now the thing that ought to be said, while always ready to make an impromptu remark for the benefit of his listeners if the situation called for it. Stephen Neill summed up the momentous effect of his preaching in this way:

In general Chrysostom seems to have come well prepared to the pulpit. But he is also able quickly to improvise, to take advantage of some situation. The sermon is often conceived as a kind of dialogue with the hearers; the preacher is in touch with them, is quick to feel their mood and to respond to it. It is this that gives life to his preaching; and helps us to realize why it was that crowds came to hear the little, unimpressive man, hung on his words, and felt that what was being imparted to them was the living word of the Lord Himself.⁶³

These seven paradigms, condensed from the pulpit skills of one of Christianity's greatest preachers, can serve to help the modern preacher understand what true excellence in preaching calls for since he will soon face the daunting challenge of preaching to God's people in the age of 21st-century postmodernism. Chrysostom was a man who gave glory to God for all things, and yet, against his wishes, his name is now revered as one who knew what excellence in preaching was all about. Let the modern preacher strive to emulate these seven paradigms of Chrysostom's preaching, not for his own glory, but for the glory of God alone and the extension of his kingdom. The "Golden Mouth" would want it no other way.

⁶¹Homily 16:2, "On the Statues," vol. IX., *NPNF*, p. 445.

⁶²Kerr, p. 180.

⁶³Neill, p. 28.

SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Brilioth, Yngve. *A Brief History of Preaching*. Karl E. Mattson, trans. Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1965.
- Broadus, John A. *Lectures on Preaching*. New Edition. New York: A. C. Armstrong & Son, 1896.
- Carroll, Thomas K. *Preaching the Word. Message of the Fathers of the Church*, vol. 11. Wilmington, DE: Michael Glazier, Inc., 1984.
- Cox, James W. "Eloquent, Mighty in the Scriptures: Biblical Preachers from Chrysostom to Thielicke." *Review and Expositor*, vol. 72:189-201. Spring 1975.
- D'Alton, J. F., ed. *Selections from St. John Chrysostom*. London: Burns, Oates & Washbourne, Ltd., 1940.
- Dargan, Edwin Charles. *A History of Preaching, vol. I*. Introduction by J. B. Weatherspoon. Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1954.
- Fant, Clyde E., Jr. & Pinson, William M., Jr. *20 Centuries of Great Preaching: An Encyclopedia of Great Preaching, vol. I. Biblical Sermons to Savonarola*. Waco, TX: Word Books, 1972.
- Florovsky, George. *The Eastern Fathers of the Fourth Century, vol. VII*. Richard S. Haugh, gen. ed. Catherine Edmunds, trans. Vaduz, FRG: Buechvertriebsanstalt, 1987.
- Harkins, Paul W. trans. "St. John Chrysostom: On the Incomprehensible Nature of God." *The Fathers of the Church*, vol. 72. Washington DC: Catholic University Press, 1984.
- Jackson, Pamela. "John Chrysostom's Use of Scripture in Initiatory Preaching." *Greek Orthodox Theological Review*, vol. 35, no. 4, 1990. pp 348,349.
- Jones, Ilion T. *Principles and Practice of Preaching*. Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1956.
- Kelly, J. N. D. *Golden Mouth: The Story of John Chrysostom: Ascetic, Preacher, Bishop*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1995.
- Kerr, Hugh Thomson. *Preaching in the Early Church*. New York: Fleming H. Revell, 1942.
- Mager, John. *Chrysostom: A Study of His Theology, His Sermon Methods, and His Preaching*. B.D. thesis. Concordia Seminary, St. Louis, Missouri, 1943.
- Neill, Stephen. *Chrysostom and His Message*. London: United Society for Christian Literature; Lutterworth Press, 1962.
- Pelikan, Jaroslav, ed. *The Preaching of Chrysostom: Homilies on the Sermon on the Mount*. Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1967.
- Roth, Catherine P., trans. *St. John Chrysostom: On Wealth and Poverty*. Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1984.

Schaff, Philip. *History of the Christian Church, vol. III. Nicene and PostNicene Christianity*. Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, reprinted 1977.

FROM THE PRINCE OF PREACHERS: JOHN CHRYSOSTOM 209

Schaff, Philip, ed. *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, vol. IX. St. Chrysostom: On the Priesthood; Ascetic Treatises; Select Homilies and Letters; Homilies on the Statues*. Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, reprinted 1989.

Schaff, Philip, ed. *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, vol. XI. St. Chrysostom: Homilies on Acts and Romans*. Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, reprinted 1989.

Schaff, Philip, ed. *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, vol. XIV. St. Chrysostom: Homilies on the Gospel of John and Hebrews*. Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, reprinted 1989.

Wilson, Paul Scott. *A Concise History of Preaching*. Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1992.

Woodridge, John, gen. ed. *Great Leaders of the Christian Church*. Chicago: Moody Press, 1988