

THE BOOKS OF HOMILIES: Book 2—VI. Against excess of apparel

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Preacher: Alastair Roberts

[0 : 0 0] and homily against excess of apparel, where ye have heretofore been excited and stirred to use temperance of meats and drinks, and to avoid the excess thereof, many ways hurtful to the state of the commonwealth, and also odious before Almighty God, being the author and giver of such creatures, to comfort and establish our frail nature with thanks unto him, and not by abusing of them, to provoke his liberality to severe punishing of that disorder. In like manner it is convenient that ye be admonished of another foul and chargeable excess, I mean of apparel, at these days so outrageous, that neither Almighty God by his word can stay our proud curiosity in the same, neither yet godly and necessary laws, made of our princes and oft repeated with the penalties, can bridle this detestable abuse, whereby both God is openly contemned, and the princes' laws manifestly disobeyed, to the great peril of the realm. Wherefore, that sobriety also in this excess may be espied among us, I shall declare unto you both the moderate use of apparel approved by God in his holy word, and also the abuses thereof, which he forbiddeth and disalloweth, as it may appear by the inconveniences which daily increase by the just judgment of God, where that measure is not kept, which he himself hath appointed. If we consider the end and purpose where unto Almighty God hath ordained his creatures, we shall easily perceive that he alloweth us apparel, not only for necessity's sake, but also for an honest comeliness, even as in herbs, trees, and sundry fruits we have, not only diverse necessary uses, but also the pleasant sight and sweet smell to delight us with all, wherein we may behold the singular love of God towards mankind, in that he hath provided both to relieve our necessities, and also to refresh our senses with an honest and moderate recreation. Therefore David in the 104th Psalm, confessing God's careful providence, sheweth that God not only provideth things necessary for man, as herbs and other meats, but also such things as may rejoice and comfort, as wine to make glad the heart, oils and ointments to make the face to shine, so that they are altogether past the limits of humanity, which, yielding only to necessity, forbid the lawful fruition of God's benefits, with whose traditions we may not be led, if we give ear to St. Paul, who, writing to the Colossians, willet them not to hearken unto such men, as shall say, touch not, taste not, handle not, superstitiously bereaving them of the fruition of God's creatures. And no less truly ought we to beware, lest, under pretense of

Christian liberty, we take license to do what we list, avauncing ourselves in sumptuous apparel, and despising others, preparing ourselves in fine bravery to wanton, lewd, and unchaste behaviour.

To the avoiding whereof, it behooverth us to be mindful of four lessons taught in Holy Scripture, whereby we shall learn to temper ourselves, and to restrain our immoderate affections, to that measure which God hath appointed. The first is, that we make not provision for the flesh, to accomplish the lusts thereof, with costly apparel, as that harlot did, of whom Solomon speaketh, Proverbs the seventh, which perfumed her bed, and decked it with costly ornaments of Egypt, to the fulfilling of her lewd lust. But rather ought we by moderate temperance to cut off all occasions whereby the flesh might get the victory. The second is written by St. Paul in the seventh chapter of his first epistle to the Corinthians, where he teacheth us to use this world as though we used it not, whereby he cutteth away not only all ambition, pride, and vain pomp in apparel, but also all inordinate care and affection, which withdraweth us from the contemplation of heavenly things, and consideration of our duty towards God. They that are much occupied in caring for things pertaining to the body are most commonly negligent and careless in matters concerning the soul.

Therefore our Saviour Christ willeth us not to take thought what we shall eat, or what we shall drink, or wherewith we shall be clothed, but rather to seek the kingdom of God and the righteousness thereof, whereby we may learn to beware, lest we use those things to our hindrance which God hath ordained for our comfort and furtherance towards his kingdom. The third is, that we take in good part our estate and condition, and content ourselves with that which God sendeth, whether it be much or little. He that is ashamed of base and simple attire will be proud of gorgeous apparel, if he may get it. We must learn, therefore, of the Apostle St. Paul both to use plenty and also to suffer penury, remembering that we must yield accounts of those things which we have received unto him who abhorreth all excess, pride, ostentation, and vanity, who also utterly condemneth and disalloweth whatsoever draweth us from our duty towards God, or diminisheth our charity towards our neighbours and brethren, whom we ought to love as ourselves. The fourth and last rule is, that every man behold and consider his own vocation, inasmuch as God hath appointed every man his degree in office, within the limits whereof it behoveth him to keep himself. Therefore all may not look to wear like apparel, but every one according to his degree, as God hath placed him, which, if it were observed, many one doubtless should be compelled to wear a russet coat, which now ruffleth in silks and velvets, spending more by the year in sumptuous apparel than their fathers receive for the whole revenue of their lands. But alas, nowadays how many may we behold, occupied wholly in pampering the flesh, taking no care at all, but only how to deck themselves, setting their affection altogether on worldly bravery, abusing God's goodness, when he sendeth plenty to satisfy their wanton lusts, having no regard to the degree wherein God hath placed them. The Israelites were contented with such apparel as God gave them, although it were base and simple, and God so blessed them that their shoes and clothes lasted them forty years. Yea, in those clothes which their fathers had worn, the children were content to use afterward. But we are never contented, and therefore we prosper not, so that most commonly he that ruffleth in his sables, in his fine furred gown, corked slippers, trim buskins, and warm mittens, is more ready to chill for cold than the poor labouring man, which can abide in the field all the day long, when the north wind blows with a few beggarly clouts about him. We are loth to wear such as our fathers hath left us. We think not that sufficient or good enough for us. We must have one gown for the day, another for the night, one long, another short, one for winter, another for summer, one through furred, another but faced, one for the working day, another for the holy day, one of this colour, another of that colour, one of cloth, another of silk or damask. We must have change of apparel, one of for dinner, another after, one of the Spanish fashion, another turkey, and to be brief, never content was sufficient. Our Saviour Christ bade his disciples they should not have two coats, but the most men, far unlike to his scholars, have their presses so full of apparel, that many knoweth not how many sorts they have, which thing caused St. James to pronounce this terrible curse against such wealthy worldlings. Go to, ye rich men, weep and howl on your wretchedness that shall come upon you. Your riches are corrupt, and your garments are moth-eaten. Ye have lived in pleasure on the earth, and in wantonness. Ye have nourished your hearts as in the day of slaughter. Mark,

I beseech you, St. James calleth them miserable, notwithstanding their riches and plenty of apparel, forasmuch as they pamper their bodies to their own destruction. What was the rich glutton the better for his fine, fair, and costly apparel? Did not he nourish himself to be tormented in hellfire?

[7 : 51] Let us learn, therefore, to content ourselves, having food and raiment, as St. Paul teacheth, lest desiring to be enriched with abundance, we fall into temptations, snares, and many noisome lusts, which drown men in perdition and destruction. Certainly such as delight in gorgeous apparel are commonly puffed up with pride and filled with diverse vanities. So were the daughters of Sion, and people of Jerusalem, whom ye say the prophet threateneth, because they walked with stretched out necks and wandering eyes, mincing as they went, and nicely treading with their feet, that Almighty God should make their heads bald, and discover their secret shame. In that day, saith he, shall the Lord take away the ornament of the slippers, and the calls, and the round attires, and the sweet balls, and the bracelets, and the attires of the head, and the slops, and the headbands, and the tablets, and the earrings, the rings, and the mufflers, the costly apparel, and the veils, and wimples, and the cringing pin, and the glasses, and the fine linen, and the hoods, and the lawns, so that Almighty God would not suffer his benefits to be vainly and wantonly abused.

No, not of that people whom he most tenderly loved, and had chosen to himself before all other. No less truly is the vanity that is used amongst us in these days. For the proud and haughty stomachs of the daughters of England are so maintained with diverse disguised sorts of costly apparel, that, as Tertullian and ancient father saith, there is left no difference in apparel between an honest matron and a common strumpet. Yea, many men are become so effeminate, that they care not what they spend in disguising themselves, even desiring new toys and inventing new fashions. Therefore, a certain man that would picture every countryman in his accustomed apparel, when he had painted other nations, he pictured the Englishman, all naked, and gave him cloth under his arm, and bade him make it himself as he thought best, for he changed his fashion so often that he knew not how to make it. Thus, with our fantastical devices, we make ourselves laughing stocks to other nations, while one spendeth his patrimony upon pounces and cuts, and other bestoweth more on a dancing shirt than might suffice to buy him honest and comely apparel for his whole body. Some hang their revenues about their necks, ruffling in their roughs, and many a one jeopardeth his best joint, to maintain himself in sumptuous raiment. And every man, nothing considering his estate and condition, seeketh to excel other in costly attire, whereby it cometh to pass that, in abundance and plenty of all we yet complain of want and penury, while one man spendeth that which might serve a multitude, and no man distributeth of the abundance which he hath received, and all men excessively waste that which should serve to supply the necessities of other. There hath been very good provision made against such abuses by diverse good and wholesome laws, which, if they were practised as they ought to be of all true subjects, they might in some part serve to diminish this raging and riotous excess in apparel. But, alas, there appeareth amongst us little fear and obedience, either of God or man.

Therefore must we needs look for God's fearful vengeance from heaven, to overthrow our presumption and pride, as he overthrew Herod, who in his royal apparel, forgetting God, was smitten of an angel, and eaten up of worms. By which terrible example God hath taught us that we are but worms' meat, although we pamper ourselves never so much in gorgeous apparel, here we may learn that which Jesus the son of Sirach teacheth, not to be proud of clothing and raiment, neither to exalt ourselves in the day of honour, because the works of the Lord are wonderful and glorious, secret and unknown, teaching us with humbleness of mind everyone to be mindful of the vocation whereunto God hath called him. Let Christians therefore endeavour themselves to quench the care of pleasing the flesh.

Let us use the benefits of God in this world in such wise that we be not too much occupied in providing for the body. Let us content ourselves quietly with that which God sendeth, be it never so little. And, if it please him to send plenty, let us not wax proud thereof, but let us use it moderately, as well to our own comfort, as to the relief of such as stand in necessity. He that in abundance and plenty of apparel hideth his face from him that is naked, despiseth his own flesh, as he say the prophet saith. Let us learn to know ourselves, and not to despise other.

Let us remember that we stand all before the majesty of Almighty God, who shall judge us by his holy word, wherein he forbiddeth access, not only to men, but also to women, so that none can excuse themselves of what estate or condition soever they be. Let us therefore present ourselves before his throne, as Tertullian exhorteth, with the ornaments which the apostle speaketh of, Ephesians the sixth chapter, having our loins girt about with the verity, having the breastplate of righteousness, and shod with shoes prepared by the gospel of peace. Let us take unto us simplicity, chastity, and comeliness, submitting our necks to the sweet yoke of Christ. Let women be subject to their husbands, and they are sufficiently attired, saith Tertullian, the wife of one Philo, an heathen philosopher, being demanded why she wear no gold. She answered that she thought her husband's virtues sufficient ornaments. How much more ought Christian women, instructed by the word of God, content themselves in their husbands? Yea, how much more ought every Christian content himself in our Saviour Christ, thinking himself sufficiently garnished with his heavenly virtues? But it will be here objected and said of some nice and vain women, that all which we do in painting our faces, in dyeing our hair, in embalming our bodies, in decking us with gay apparel, is to please our husbands, to delight his eyes, and to retain his love toward us. O vain excuse and most shameful answer to the reproach of thy husband! What couldst thou more say to set out his foolishness, than to charge him to be pleased and delighted with the devil's tyre? Who can paint her face and curl her hair, and change it into an unnatural colour? But therein doth work reproof to her maker, who made her, as though she could make herself more comely than God hath appointed the measure of her beauty? What do these women but go about to reform that which God hath made, not knowing that all things natural is the work of God, and things disguised and unnatural be the works of the devil? And as though a wise and a Christian husband should delight to see his wife in such painted and flourished visions, which common harlots mostly do use, to train therewith their lovers to naughtiness, or as though an honest woman could delight to be like an harlot for pleasing of her husband? Nay, nay, these be but the vain excuses of such as go about to please rather others than their husbands, and such attires be but to provoke her to show herself abroad to entice others, a worthy matter. She must keep debate with her husband to maintain such apparel, whereby she is the worst housewife, the seldomer at home to see her charge, and so to neglect his thrift by giving great provocation to her household to waste and wantonness, while she must wander abroad to show her own vanity and her husband's foolishness. By which her pride she stirreth up much envy of others, which be so vainly delighted as she is. She doth but deserve mocks and scorns, to set out all her commendation in Jewish and ethnic apparel, and yet brag of her Christianity. She doth but waste superfluously her husband's stock by such sumptuousness, and sometime is the cause of much bribery, extortion, and deceit in her husband's occupying, that she may be the more gorgeously set out to the sight of the vain world, to please the devil's eyes, and not God's, who giveth to every creature sufficient and moderate comeliness, wherewith we should be contented, if it were of God. What other thing doest thou by those means, but provokest others to tempt thee, to deceive thy soul, by the bait of thy pomp and pride? What else doest thou but settest out thy pride, and makest of thy undecent apparel of thy body the devil's net, to catch the souls of them which behold thee? O thou woman, not a Christian, but worse than a painem, thou minister of the devil, why pamperest thou that carrion flesh so high, which sometime doth stink and rot on the ground as thou goest? Howsoever thou

[16 : 21] perfumest thyself, yet cannot thy beastliness be hidden or overcome with thy smells and savours, which do rather deform and misshape thee than beautify thee? What meant Salomon to say of such trimming of vain women, when he said, A fair woman without good manners and conditions is like a sow which hath a ring of gold upon her snout? But that the more thou garnished thyself with these outward blazings, the less thou carest for the inward garnishing of thy mind, and so dost but befoul thyself by such array, and not beautify thyself? Hear, hear what Christ's holy apostles do write.

Let not the outward apparel of women, saith St. Peter, be decked with the braiding of hair, with wrapping on of gold, or goodly clothing. But let the mind and the conscience, which is not seen with the eyes, be pure and clean, that is, saith he, an acceptable and an excellent thing before God.

For so the old ancient holy women attired themselves, and were obedient to their husbands. And St. Paul saith that women should apparel themselves with shamefastness and soberness, and not with braids of their hair, or gold, or pearl, or precious clothes, but as women should do, which will express godliness by their good outward works. If we will not keep the apostles' precepts, at the least let us hear what pagans, which were ignorant of Christ, have said in this matter.

Democrates saith, The ornament of a woman standeth in scarcity of speech and apparel. Sophocles saith of such apparel thus, It is not an ornament, O thou fool, but a shame, and a manifest show of thy folly. Socrates saith that, That is a garnishing to a woman, which declareth out her honesty. The Grecians use it in a proverb, It is not gold or pearl, which is a beauty to a woman, but good conditions. And Aristotle biddeth that a woman should use less apparel than the law doth suffer, for it is not the goodness of apparel, nor the excellency of beauty, nor the abundance of gold, that maketh a woman to be esteemed, but modesty and diligence to live honestly in all things. This outrageous vanity is now grown so far, that there is no shame taken of it. We read in the histories that when King Dionysius sent the women of Lacedaemon rich robes, they answered and said that, They shall do us more shame than honour, and therefore refuse them.

The women in Rome in old time abhorred that gay apparel which King Pyrrhus sent to them, and none were so greedy and vain to accept them. And a law was openly made of the Senate, and a long time observed, that no woman should wear over half an ounce of gold, nor should wear clothes of diverse colours. But perchance some dainty dame will say and answer me, that they must do something to show their birth and blood, to show their husband's riches, as though nobility were chiefly seen by these things, which be common to those which be most vile, as though thy husband's riches were not better bestowed than in such superfluities, as though, when thou were christened, thou didst not renounce the pride of the world and the pomp of the flesh. I speak not against convenient apparel for every state agreeable, but against the superfluity, against the vain delight to covet such vanities, to devise new fashions to feed thy pride with, to spend so much upon thy carcass, that thou and thy husband are compelled to rob the poor to maintain thy costliness. Hear how that noble holy woman, Queen Hester, setteth out these goodly ornaments, as they be called, when in respect of saving God's people she was compelled to put on such glorious apparel, knowing that it was a fit snare to blind the eyes of carnal fools.

[19 : 53] Thus she prayed, Thou knowest, O Lord, the necessity which I am driven to, to put on this apparel, and that I abhor this sign of pride, and of this glory which I bear on my head, and that I defy it as a filthy cloth, and that I wear it not when I am alone. Again, by what means was Holofernes deceived but by the glittering show of apparel, which that woman Judith did put on her, not as delighting in them, nor seeking vain voluptuous pleasure by them, but she wear it of pure necessity by God's dispensation, using this vanity to overcome the vain eyes of God's enemy. Such desire was in those holy noble women, being very laugh and unwilling otherwise to wear such sumptuous apparel, by the which others should be caused to forget themselves. These be commended in scripture for abhorring such vanities, which by constraint and great necessity, against their heart's desire, were compelled to wear them for a time. And shall such women be worthy commendations, which neither be comparable with these women of foresaid nobility, nor comparable to them in their godly zeals to God and his people, whose daily delight and seeking is to flourish in such gay shifts and changes, never satisfied, nor regarding who smarteth their apparel, so they may come by it. O vain men which be subjects to their wives in these inordinate affections! O vain women, to procure so much hurt to themselves, by the which they come the sooner to misery in this world, and in the meantime be abhorred of God, hated and scorned of wise men, and in the end like to be joined with such who in hell, too late repenting themselves, shall openly complain with these words. What hath our pride profited us? What profit hath the pump of riches brought us? All those things are passed away like a shadow. As for virtue, we did never show any sign thereof, and thus are we consumed in our wickedness.

If thou sayest that the custom is to be followed, and the use of the world doth compel thee to such curiosity, then I ask of thee, whose custom should be followed? Wise folks' manners, or fools? If thou sayest the wise, then I say, follow them. For fools' customs, who should follow but fools?

Consider that the consent of wise men ought to be alleged for a custom. Now if any lewd custom be used, be thou the first to break it, labour to diminish it, and lay it down. And more lord of full God, and more commendation shalt thou win by it, than by all the glory of such superfluity. Thus ye have heard declared unto you what God requireth by his word concerning the moderate use of his creatures.

Let us learn to use them moderately, as he hath appointed. Almighty God hath taught us to what end in purpose we should use our apparel. Let us therefore learn so to behave ourselves in the use thereof, as it becometh Christians, always showing ourselves thankful to our Heavenly Father for his great and merciful benefits, who giveth unto us our daily bread, that is to say, all things necessary for this our needy life, and to whom we shall render accounts for all his benefits at the glorious appearing of our Saviour Christ, to whom with the Father and the Holy Ghost be all honour, praise and glory for ever and ever. Amen.