

THE BOOKS OF HOMILIES: Book 1—I. A Fruitful Exhortation to the Reading of Holy Scripture

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Preacher: Alastair Roberts

[0 : 00] The Two Books of Homilies, from John Griffiths, 1859 edition. A fruitful exhortation to the reading and knowledge of Holy Scripture. Unto a Christian man there can be nothing either more necessary or profitable than the knowledge of Holy Scripture, forasmuch as in it is contained God's true word, setting forth his glory, and also man's duty, and there is no truth nor doctrine necessary for our justification and everlasting salvation, but that it is, or may be drawn out of, that fountain and well of truth.

Therefore as many as be desirous to enter into the right and perfect way unto God, must apply their minds to know Holy Scripture, without the which they can neither sufficiently know God and his will, neither their office and duty.

And as drink is pleasant to them that be dry, and meat to them that be hungry, so is the reading, hearing, searching, and studying of Holy Scripture, to them that are desirous to know God or themselves, and to do his will.

And their stomachs only do loathe and abhor the heavenly knowledge and food of God's word, that be so drowned in worldly vanities, that they neither savour God nor any godliness, for that is the cause why they desire such vanities, rather than the true knowledge of God.

As they that are sick of an ague, whatsoever they eat or drink, though it be never so pleasant, yet it is as bitter to them as wormwood, not for the bitterness of the meat, but for the corrupt and bitter humour that is in their own tongue and mouth.

[1 : 32] Even so is the sweetness of God's word bitter, not of itself, but only unto them that have their minds corrupted with long custom of sin and love of this world. Therefore, forsaking the corrupt judgment of fleshly men, which care not but for their carcass, let us reverently hear and read Holy Scriptures, which is the food of the soul.

Let us diligently search for the well of life in the books of the New and Old Testament, and not run to the stinking puddles of men's traditions, devised by man's imagination, for our justification and salvation.

For an Holy Scripture is fully contained what we ought to do, and what to eschew, what to believe, what to love, and what to look for at God's hands at length. In those books we shall find the Father from whom, the Son by whom, and the Holy Spirit in whom, all things have their being, and keeping up, and these three persons to be but one God and one substance.

In these books we may learn to know ourselves, how vile and miserable we be, and also to know God, how good he is of himself, and how he maketh us and all creatures partakers of his goodness. We may learn also in these books to know God's will and pleasure, as much as for this present time is convenient for us to know. And as the great clerk and godly preacher John Chrysostom says, whatsoever is required to salvation of man is fully contained in the Scripture of God.

[3 : 01] He that is ignorant may there learn and have knowledge. He that is hard-hearted and an obstinate sinner shall there find everlasting torments prepared of God's justice to make him afraid, and to mollify or soften him.

He that is oppressed with misery in this world shall there find relief in the promises of everlasting life, to his great consolation and comfort. He that is wounded by the devil unto death shall find there medicine, whereby he may be restored again unto health.

If it shall require to teach any truth or approve false doctrine, to rebuke any vice, to commend any virtue, to give good counsel, to comfort, or to exhort, or to do any such thing requisite for our salvation, all these things, saith St. Chrysostom, we may learn plentifully of the Scripture.

There is, saith Fulgentius, abundantly enough both for man to eat and children to suck. There is whatsoever is meat for all ages and for all degrees and sorts of men.

These books therefore ought to be much in our hands, in our eyes, in our ears, in our mouths, but most of all in our hearts. For the Scripture of God is the heavenly meat of our souls.

[4 : 14] The hearing and keeping of it maketh us blessed, sanctifieth us, and maketh us holy. It turneth our souls. It is a light lantern to our feet. It is a sure, steadfast, and everlasting instrument of salvation.

It giveth wisdom to the humble and lowly-hearted. It comforteth, maketh glad, cheereth, and cherisheth our consciences. It is a more excellent jewel or treasure than any gold or precious stone. It is more sweet than honey or honeycomb. It is called the best part, which Mary did choose, for it hath in it everlasting comfort. The words of Holy Scripture be called Words of Everlasting Life, for they be God's instrument, ordained for the same purpose.

They have power to turn through God's promise, and they be effectual through God's assistance, and being received in a faithful heart. They have ever and heavenly spiritual working in them.

They are lively, quick, and mighty in operation, and sharper than any two-edged sword, and entereth through even unto the dividing asunder of the soul and the spirit, of the joints and the marrow.

[5 : 22] Christ calleth him a wise builder that buildeth upon his word, upon his sure and substantial foundation. By this word of God we shall be judged. For the words that I speak, saith Christ, is it that shall judge in the last day.

He that keepeth the word of Christ is promised the love and favour of God, and that he shall be the dwelling place or temple of the blessed Trinity. This word whosoever is diligent to read, and in his heart to print that he readeth, the great affection to the transitory things of this world shall be minished in him, and the great desire of heavenly things, that be therein promised of God, shall increase in him.

And there is nothing that so much strengtheneth our faith and trust in God, that so much keepeth up innocency and pureness of the heart, and also of outward godly life and conversation, as continual reading and recording of God's word.

For that thing which, by continual use of reading of Holy Scripture and diligent searching of the same, is deeply printed and graven in the heart, at length turneth almost into nature.

And moreover the effect and virtue of God's word is to illuminate the ignorant, and to give more light unto them that faithfully and diligently read it, to comfort their hearts, and to encourage them to perform that which of God is commanded.

[6 : 42] It teacheth patience in all adversity, in prosperity humbleness, what honour is due unto God, what mercy and charity to our neighbour. It giveth good counsel in all doubtful things.

It sheweth of whom we shall look for aid and help in all perils, and that God is the only giver of victory in all battles and temptations of our enemies, bodily and ghostly.

And in reading of God's word, he most profiteth, not always that is most ready in turning of the book, or in saying of it without the book, but he that is most turned into it, that is, most inspired with the Holy Ghost, most in his heart and life, altered and changed into that thing which he readeth.

He that is daily less and less proud, less wrathful, less covetous, and less desirous of worldly and vain pleasures. He that daily forsaking his old vicious life increaseth in virtue more and more.

And to be short, there is nothing that more maintaineth godliness of the mind and driveth away ungodliness than doth the continual reading or hearing of God's word, if it be joined with a godly mind and good affection to know and follow God's will.

[7 : 55] For without a single eye, pure intent and good mind, nothing is allowed for good before God. And on the other side, nothing more darkeneth Christ and the glory of God, nor bringeth in more blindness and all kinds of vices than doth the ignorance of God's word.

In the first part of this sermon, which exhorteth to the knowledge of Holy Scripture, was declared, wherefore the knowledge of the same is necessary and profitable to all men, and that by the true knowledge and understanding of Scripture, the most necessary points of our duty towards God and our neighbours are also known.

Now as concerning the same matter, you shall hear what followeth. If we profess Christ, why be we not ashamed to be ignorant in his doctrine, seeing that every man is ashamed to be ignorant in that learning which he professeth?

That man is ashamed to be called a philosopher which readeth not the books of philosophy, and to be called a lawyer, an astronomer, or a physician that is ignorant in the books of law, astronomy and physic?

How can any man then say that he professeth Christ and his religion, if he will not apply himself, as far forth as he can or may conveniently, to read and hear, and so to know the books of Christ's gospel and doctrine?

[9 : 13] Although other sciences be good and to be learned, yet no man can deny but this is the chief, and passeth all other incomparably. What excuse shall we therefore make the last day before Christ that delight to read or hear men's fantasies and inventions more than his most holy gospel, and will find no time to do that which chiefly, above all things, we should do, and will rather read other things than that for the which we ought rather to leave reading of all other things?

Let us therefore apply ourselves, as far forth as we can have time and leisure, to know God's word by diligent hearing and reading thereof, as many as profess God and have faith and trust in him. But they that have no good affection to God's word, to colour this their fault, allege commonly two vain and feigned excuses. Some go about to excuse themselves by their own frailness and fearfulness, saying that they dare not read holy scripture, lest through their ignorance they should fall into any error.

Other pretend that the difficulty to understand it and the hardness thereof is so great that it is meet to be read only of clerks and learned men. As touching the first, ignorance of God's word is the cause of all error, as Christ himself affirmed to the Sadducees, saying that they erred because they knew not the scripture.

How should they then eschew error that will still be ignorant? And how should they come out of ignorance that will not read nor hear that thing which should give them knowledge? He that now hath most knowledge was at the first ignorant.

[10 : 51] Yet he forbear not to read for fear that he should fall into error, but he diligently read, lest he should remain in ignorance and through ignorance in error. And if you will not know the truth of God, a thing most necessary for you, lest you fall into error, by the same reason you may then lie still and never go, lest if you go you fall in the mire, nor eat any good meat, lest you take a surfeit, nor sow your corn, nor labour in your occupation, nor use your merchandise, for fear you lose your seed, your labour, your stock.

And so by that reason it should be best for you to live idly and never to take in hand to do any manner of good thing, lest peradventure some evil thing may chance thereof.

And if you be afraid to fall into error by reading of Holy Scripture, I shall show you how you may read it without danger of error. Read it humbly with a meek and a lowly heart, to the intent you may glorify God and not yourself with the knowledge of it.

And read it not without daily praying to God that he would direct your reading to good effect, and take upon you to expound it no further than you can plainly understand it. For as St. Augustine saith, the knowledge of Holy Scripture is a great, large, and a high palace, but the door is very low, so that the high and arrogant man cannot run in, but he must stoop low and humble himself that shall enter into it.

Presumption and arrogancy is the mother of all error, and humility needeth to fear no error. For humility will only search to know the truth, it will search and will bring together one place with another, and where it cannot find out the meaning, it will pray, it will ask of other that know, and it will not presumptuously and rashly define anything which it knoweth not.

[12 : 41] Therefore the humble man may search any truth boldly in the Scripture without any danger of error, and if he be ignorant, he ought the more to read and to search Holy Scripture, to bring him out of ignorance.

I say not nay, but a man may prosper with only hearing, but he may much more prosper with both hearing and reading. This have I said as touching the fear to read through ignorance of the person, and concerning the hardness of Scripture, he that is so weak that he is not able to brook strong meat, yet he may suck the sweet and tender milk, and defer the rest until he waxes stronger and come to more knowledge.

For God receiveth the learned and unlearned, and casteth away none, but is indifferent unto all. And the Scripture is full, as well of low valleys, plain ways, and easy, for every man to use and to walk in, as also of high hills and mountains, which few men can climb unto.

And whosoever giveth his mind to holy Scriptures with diligent study and burning desire, it cannot be, saith St. John Chrysostom, that he should be left without help.

For either God Almighty will send him some godly doctor to teach him, as he did to instruct Eutychus, a noble man of Ethiopia, and treasurer unto Queen Candace, who, having a great affection to read the Scripture, although he understood it not yet, for the desire that he had unto God's Word, God sent his apostle Philip to declare unto him the true sense of the Scripture that he read.

[14 : 10] Or else, if we lack a learned man to instruct and teach us, yet God himself from above will give light unto our minds, and teach us those things which are necessary for us, and wherein we be ignorant.

And in another place, Chrysostom saith, that, man's human and worldly wisdom or science needeth not to the understanding of Scripture, but the revelation of the Holy Ghost, who inspireth the true meaning unto them that with humility and diligence do search therefore.

He that asketh shall have, and he that seeketh shall find, and he that knocketh shall have the door open. If we read once, twice, or thrice, and understand not, let us not cease so, but still continue reading, praying, asking of other, and so by still knocking, at the last the door shall be opened, as Saint Augustine saith.

Although many things in the Scripture be spoken in obscure mysteries, yet there is nothing spoken under dark mysteries in one place, but the self-same thing in other places is spoken more familiarly and plainly to the capacity both of learned and unlearned.

And those things in the Scripture that be plain to understand and necessary for salvation, every man's duty is to learn them, to print them in memory, and effectually to exercise them, and, as for the dark mysteries, to be contented to be ignorant in them until such time as it shall please God to open those things unto him.

[15 : 37] In the mean season, if he lack either aptness or opportunity, God will not impute it to his folly, but yet it behoveth not that such as be apt should set aside reading, because some other be unapt to read.

Nevertheless, for the hardness of such places, the reading of the whole ought not to be set apart. And briefly to conclude, as St. Augustine saith, By the Scripture all men be amended, weak men be strengthened, and strong men be comforted, so that surely none be enemies to the reading of God's word, but such as either be so ignorant that they know not how wholesome a thing it is, or else be so sick that they hate the most comfortable medicine that should heal them, or so ungodly that they would wish the people still to continue in blindness and ignorance of God.

Thus we have briefly touched some part of the commodities of God's holy word, which is one of God's chief and principal benefits given and declared to mankind here on earth. Let us thank God heartily for this his great and special gift, beneficial favour, and fatherly providence.

Let us be glad to revive this precious gift of our Heavenly Father. Let us hear, read, and know these holy rules, injunctions, and statutes of our Christian religion, and upon that we have made profession to God at our baptism.

Let us with fear and reverence lay up in the chest of our hearts these necessary and fruitful lessons. Let us night and day muse and have meditation and contemplation in them.

[17 : 08] Let us ruminare, and as it were, chew the cud, that we may have the sweet juice, spiritual effect, marrow, honey, kernel, taste, comfort, and consolation of them.

Let us stay quiet and certify our consciences with the most infallible certainty, truth, and perpetual assurance of them. Let us pray to God, the only author of these heavenly studies, that we may speak, think, believe, live, and depart hence according to the wholesome doctrine and verities of them.

And by that means, in this world, we shall have God's defence, favour, and grace. With the unspeakable solace of peace and quietness of conscience, and after this miserable life, we shall enjoy the endless bliss and glory of heaven, which, he grant us all that died for us all, Jesus Christ, to whom, with the Father and Holy Ghost, be all honour and glory, both now and everlastingly. Amen.