

THE BOOKS OF HOMILIES: Book 1—VI. Of Christian love and charity

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[0 : 00] A Sermon of Christian Love and Charity Of all things that be good to be taught unto Christian people, there is nothing more necessary to be spoken of and daily called upon than charity, as well that for all manner of works of righteousness be contained in it, as also that the decay thereof is the ruin or fall of the world, the banishment of virtue, and the cause of all vice.

And for so much as almost every man maketh and frameth to himself charity after his own appetite, and how detestable soever his life be both unto God and man, yet he persuadeth himself still that he hath charity, therefore you shall hear now a true and plain description or setting forth of charity, not of man's imagination, but of the very words and example of our Saviour Jesus Christ, in which description or setting forth every man, as it were in a glass, may consider himself, and see plainly without error whether he be in the true charity or not.

Charity is to love God with all our heart, all our life, and all our powers and strength. With all our heart, that is to say, that our heart's mind and study be set to believe his word, to trust in him, and to love him above all other things that we love best in heaven or in earth.

With all our life, that is to say, that our chief joy and delight be set upon him and his honour, and our whole life given unto the service of him above all things, with him to live and die, and to forsake all other things rather than him.

For he that loveth his father or mother, son or daughter, house or land, more than me, saith Christ, is not worthy to have me. With all our powers, that is to say, that with our hands and feet, with our eyes and ears, our mouths and tongues, and with all other parts and powers, both of body and soul, we should be given to the keeping and fulfilling of his commandments.

[1 : 54] This is the first and principal part of charity, but it is not the whole. For charity is also to love every man, good and evil, friend and foe, and whatsoever cause be given to the contrary, yet nevertheless to bear good will and heart unto every man, to use ourselves well unto them, as well in words and countenance, as in all our outward acts and deeds.

For so Christ himself taught, and so also he performed indeed. Of the love of God he taught in this wise unto a doctor of the law, that asked him which was the great and chief commandment in the law.

Love thy Lord God, said Christ, with all thy heart, with all thy life, and with all thy mind. And of the love that we ought to have among ourselves, each to other, he teacheth us thus.

You have heard it taught in times past, thou shalt love thy friend, and hate thy foe. But I tell you, love your enemies, speak well of them that defame you, and speak evil of you.

Do well to them that hate you, pray for them that vex and persecute you, that you may be the children of your Father that is in heaven. For he maketh his Son to rise both upon the evil and good, and sendeth rain to just and unjust.

[3 : 05] For if you love them that love you, what reward shall you have? Do not the publicans likewise. And if you speak well only of them that be your brethren, and dear beloved friends, what great matter is that?

Do not the heathen the same also? These be the very words of our Saviour Christ himself, touching the love of our neighbour. And forasmuch as the Pharisees, with their most pestilent traditions, false interpretations, and glosses, had corrupted and almost clearly stopped up this pure well of God's lively word, teaching that this love and charity pertained only to a man's friends, and that it was sufficient for a man to love them which do love him, and to hate his foes, therefore Christ opened this well again, purged it, and scoured it, by giving unto his godly law of charity a true and clear

interpretation, which is this, that we ought to love every man, both friend and foe, adding thereto what commodity we shall have thereby, and what incommodity by doing the contrary.

What thing can we wish so good for us, as the eternal heavenly Father to reckon and take us for his children? And this shall we be sure of, saith Christ, if we love every man without exception.

And if we do otherwise, saith he, we be no better than the Pharisees, publicans, and heathen, and shall have our reward with them, that is, to be shut out from the number of God's chosen children, and from his everlasting inheritance in heaven.

Thus of true charity Christ taught, that every man is bound to love God above all things, and to love every man, friend and foe. And thus likewise he did use himself, exhorting his adversaries, rebuking the faults of his adversaries, when he could not amend them, yet he prayed for them.

[4 : 47] First he loved God his Father above all things, so much that he sought not his own glory and will, but the glory and will of his Father. I seek not, said he, mine own will, but the will of him that sent me.

Nor he refused not to die, to satisfy his Father's will, saying, If it may be, let this cup of death go from me. If not, thy will be done, and not mine.

He loved also not only his friends, but also his enemies, which in their hearts bare exceeding great hatred against him, and in their tongues spake all evil of him, and in their acts and deeds pursued him with all their might and power even unto death.

Yet all this notwithstanding, he withdrew not his favour from them, but still loved them, preached unto them, of love rebuked their false doctrine, their wicked living, and did good unto them, patiently taking whatsoever they spoke or did against him.

When they gave him evil words, he gave none evil again. When they did strike him, he did not smite again, and when he suffered death, he did not slay them, nor threaten them, but prayed for them, and did put all things to his father's will.

[5 : 56] And as a sheep that is led unto the shambles to be slain, and as a lamb that is shorn of his fleece make no noise nor resistance, even so went he unto his death without any repugnance or opening of his mouth to say any evil.

Thus have I set forth unto you what charity is, as well by the doctrine, as by the example of Christ himself, whereby also every man may without error know himself, what state and condition he standeth in, whether he be in charity, and so the child of the Father in heaven, or not.

For although almost every man persuadeth himself to be in charity, yet let him examine none other man but his own heart, his life, and conversation, and he shall not be deceived, but truly discern and judge whether he be in perfect charity or not.

For he that followeth not his own appetite and will, but giveth himself earnestly to God, to do all his will and commandments, he may be sure that he loveth God above all things, and else surely he loveth him not, whatsoever he pretend.

As Christ said, If ye love me, keep my commandments. For he that knoweth my commandments and keepeth them, he it is, saith Christ, that loveth me. And again he saith, He that loveth me will keep my word, and my Father will love him, and we will both come to him and dwell with him.

[7 : 15] And he that loveth me not will not keep my words. And likewise he that beareth good heart and mind, and useth well his tongue and deeds unto every man, friend and foe, he may know thereby that he hath charity.

And then he is sure also that Almighty God taketh him for his dear beloved Son, as St. John saith, Hereby manifestly are known the children of God from the children of the devil.

For whosoever doth not love his brother belongeth not unto God. You have heard a plain and fruitful setting forth of charity, and how profitable and necessary a thing charity is, how charity stretcheth itself both to God and man, friend and foe, and that by the doctrine and example of Christ, and also who may certify himself whether he be in perfect charity or not, now as concerning the same matter it followeth.

The perverse nature of man, corrupt with sin and destitute of God's word and grace, thinketh it against all reason that a man should love his enemy, and hath many persuasions which bring him to the contrary.

Against all which reasons we ought as well to set the teaching as the living of our Saviour Christ, who loving us when we were his enemies, doth teach us to love our enemies. He did patiently take for us many reproaches, suffered beating, and most cruel death.

[8 : 38] Therefore we be no members of him if we will not follow him. Christ, saith St. Peter, suffered for us, leaving an example that we should follow him. Furthermore, we must consider that to love our friends is no more but that which thieves, adulterers, homicides, and all wicked persons do, insomuch that Jews, Turks, infidels, and all brute beasts do love them that be their friends, of whom they have their living or any other benefits.

But to love enemies is the proper condition only of them that be the children of God, the disciples and followers of Christ. Notwithstanding, man's froward and corrupt nature weigheth over deeply many times the offence and displeasure done unto him by enemies, and thinketh it a burden intolerable to be bound to love them that hate him.

But the burden should be easy enough if on the other side every man would consider what displeasure he hath done to his enemy again, and what pleasure he hath received of his enemy. And if we find no equal or even recompense neither in receiving pleasures of our enemy nor in requiting displeasures unto him again, then let us ponder the displeasures which we have done against almighty God, how often and how grievously we have offended him, whereof if we will have of God forgiveness, there is none other remedy but to forgive the offences done unto us, which be very small in comparison of our offences done against God.

And if we consider that he which hath offended us deserveth not to be forgiven of us, let us consider again that we much less deserve to be forgiven of God. And although our enemy deserve not to be forgiven for his own sake, yet we ought to forgive him for God's love, considering how great and many benefits we have received of him without our deserts, and that Christ hath deserved of us that for his sake we should forgive them their trespasses committed against us.

But here may rise a necessary question to be dissolved. If charity required to think, speak, and do well unto every man, both good and evil, how can magistrates execute justice upon malefactors or evildoers with charity?

[10 : 43] How can they cast evil men in prison, take away their goods, and sometime their lives according to laws, if charity will not suffer them so to do? Hereunto is a plain and a brief answer, that plagues and punishments be not evil of themselves, if they be well taken of the harmless, and to an evil man they are both good and necessary, and may be executed according to charity, or with charity should be executed.

For declaration whereof you shall understand that charity hath two offices, the one contrary to the other, and yet both necessary to be used upon men of contrary sort and disposition.

The one office of charity is to cherish good and harmless men, not to oppress them with false accusations, but to encourage them with rewards to do well and to continue in well-doing, defending them with the sword from their adversaries.

And the office of bishops and pastors is to praise good men for well-doing, that they may continue therein, and to rebuke and correct by the word of God the offences and crimes of all evil disposed persons.

The other office of charity is to rebuke, correct, and punish vice without regard of persons, and this is to be used against them, only that be evil men and malefactors or evildoers.

[11 : 57] And that it is as well the office of charity to rebuke, punish, and correct them that be evil, as it is to cherish and reward them that be good and harmless, St. Paul declareth, writing to the Romans, saying that the high powers are ordained of God, not to be dreadful to them that do well, but unto malefactors, to draw the sword to take vengeance of him that committeth the sin.

And St. Paul biddeth Timothy stoutly and earnestly to rebuke sin by the word of God, so that both offices should be diligently executed to fight against the kingdom of the devil, the preacher with the word, and the governor with the sword, else they love neither God nor them whom they govern, if, for lack of correction, they willfully suffer God to be offended, and them whom they govern to perish. For as every loving father correcteth his natural son when he doeth amiss, or else he loveth him not, so all governors of realms, countries, towns, and houses should lovingly correct them which be offenders under their governance, and cherish them which live innocently, if they have any respect either unto God and their office, or love unto them of whom they have governance.

And such rebukes and punishments of them that offend must be done in due time, lest by delay the offenders fall headlings into all manner of mischief, and not only be evil themselves, but also do hurt unto many men, drawing other by their evil example to sin and outrage after them, as one thief may both rob many men, and also make many thieves, and one seditious person may allure many, annoy a whole town or country.

And such evil persons that be so great offenders of God and the commonweal, charity requireth to be cut off from the body of the commonweal, lest they corrupt other good and honest persons, like as a good surgeon cutteth away a rotten and festered member for love he hath to the whole body, lest it infect other members adjoining to it.

[13 : 51] Thus it is declared unto you what true charity or Christian love is, so plainly that no man need to be deceived, which love whosoever keepeth, not only toward God, whom he is bound to love above all things, but also toward his neighbour, as well friend as foe, it shall surely keep him from all offence of God and just offence of man.

Therefore bear well away this one short lesson, that by true Christian charity God ought to be loved above all things, and all men ought to be loved, good and evil, friend and foe, and to all such we ought as we may to do good, those that be good of love to encourage and cherish, because they be good, and those that be evil of love to procure and seek their correction and due punishment, that they may thereby either be brought to goodness, or at the least that God and the commonwealth may be the less hurt and offended.

And if we thus direct our life by Christian love and charity, then Christ doth promise and assure us that he loveth us, that we be the children of our heavenly Father, reconciled to his favour, very members of Christ, and that, after this short time of this present and mortal life, we shall have with him everlasting life in his everlasting kingdom of heaven.

Therefore to him would the Father and the Holy Ghost be all honour and glory now and ever. Amen. Amen.