

THE BOOKS OF HOMILIES: Book 1—XII. Against strife and contention

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[0 : 00] A Sermon Against Contention and Brawling This day, good Christian people, shall be declared unto you the unprofitableness and shameful dishonesty of contention, strife and debate, to the intent that, when you shall see, as it were, in a table painted before your eyes, the evil favouredness and deformity of this most detestable vice, your stomachs may be moved to rise against it, and to detest and abhor that sin, which is so much to be hated, and so pernicious and hurtful to all men.

But among all kinds of contention, none is more hurtful than is contention in matters of religion. Eschew, saith St. Paul, foolish and unlearned questions, knowing that they breed strife.

It becometh not the servant of God to fight or strive, but to be meek toward all men. This contention and strife was in St. Paul's time among the Corinthians, and is at this time among us Englishmen.

For too many there be which, upon the ale-benches or other places, delight to set forth certain questions, not so much pertaining to edification, as to vain glory in showing forth of their cunning, and so unsoberly to reason and dispute, that, when neither party will give place to other, they fall to chiding and contention, and sometime from hot words to further inconvenience.

St. Paul could not abide to hear among the Corinthians these words of discord or dissension. I hold of Paul, I of Cephas, and I of Apollo. What would he then say, if he heard these words of contention, which be now almost in every man's mouth?

[1 : 35] He is a Pharisee. He is a gospeler. He is of the new sort. He is of the old faith. He is a new broached brother. He is a good Catholic father. He is a papist.

He is an heretic. O how the church is divided! O how the cities be cut and mangled! O how the coat of Christ, that was without seam, is all to rent and torn!

O body mystical of Christ! Where is that holy and happy unity, out of the which whosoever is, he is not in Christ? If one member be pulled from another, where is the body?

If the body be drawn from the head, where is the life of the body? We cannot be jointed to Christ our head, except we be glued with concord and charity one to another.

For he that is not in this unity is not of the church of Christ, which is a congregation or unity together, and not a division. St. Paul saith that, as long as emulation, or envying, contention and factions, or sects, be among us, we be carnal, and walk according to the fleshly man.

[2 : 39] And St. James saith, If you have bitter emulation, or envying, and contention in your hearts, glory not of it. For whereas contention is, there is unsteadfastness, and all evil deeds.

And why do we not hear St. Paul, which prayeth us, whereas he might command us, saying, I beseech you, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you will speak all one thing, and that there be no dissension among you, but that you will be one whole body, of one mind, and of one opinion in the truth.

If his desire be reasonable and honest, why do we not grant it? If his request be for our profit, why do we refuse it? And if we list not to hear his petitionary prayer, yet let us hear his exhortation, where he saith, I exhort you that you walk as it becometh the vocation in the which you be called, with all submission and meekness, with lenity and softness of mind, bearing one another by charity, studying to keep the unity of the Spirit by the bond of peace.

For there is one body, one Spirit, one faith, one baptism. There is, he saith, but one body, of the which he can be no lively member that is at variance with the other members.

There is one Spirit, which joineth and kniteth all things in one. And how can this one Spirit reign in us, when we among ourselves be divided? There is but one faith.

[4 : 04] And how can we then say, he is of the old faith, and he is of the new faith? There is but one baptism. And then shall not all they which be baptised be one?

Contention causeth division. Wherefore it ought not to be among Christians, whom one faith and baptism joineth in ununity. But if we contemn St. Paul's request and exhortation, yet at the least let us regard his earnest entreating, in the which he doth very earnestly charge us, and, as I may so speak, conjure us in this form and manner.

If there be any consolation in Christ, if there be any comfort of love, if you have any fellowship of the Spirit, if you have any bowels of pity and compassion, fulfil my joy, being all like affected, having one charity, being of one mind, of one opinion, that nothing be done by contention or vainglory.

Who is he that hath any bowels of pity, that will not be moved with these words so pithy, whose heart is so stony that the sword of these words, which be more sharp than any two-edged sword, may not cut and break asunder?

Wherefore let us endeavour ourselves to fulfil St. Paul's joy here in this place, which shall be at length to our great joy in another place. Let us so read the Scripture that by reading thereof we may be made the better livers, rather than the more contentious disputers.

[5 : 31] If anything is necessary to be taught, reasoned or disputed, let us do it with all meekness, softness and lenity. If any things shall chance to be spoken uncomely, let one bear another's frailty.

He that is faulty, let him rather amend than defend that which he hath spoken amiss, lest he fall by contention from a foolish error into an obstinate heresy.

For it is better to give place meekly than to win the victory with the breach of charity, which chanceth where every man will defend his opinion obstinately. If we be Christian men, why do we not follow Christ, which saith, Learn of me, for I am meek and lowly in heart?

A disciple must learn the lesson of his schoolmaster, and a servant must obey the commandment of his master. He that is wise and learned, saith St. James, let him show his goodness by his good conversation and soberness of his wisdom.

For where there is envy and contention, that wisdom cometh not from God, but his worldly wisdom, man's wisdom, and devilish wisdom. For the wisdom that cometh from above, from the Spirit of God, is chaste and pure, corrupted with no evil affections.

[6 : 43] It is quiet, meek, and peaceable, abhorring all desire of contention. It is tractable, obedient, not grudging to learn, and to give place to them that teach better for their reformation.

For there shall never be an end of striving and contention. If we contend who in contention shall be master, and have the overhand, we shall heap error upon error.

If we continue to defend that obstinately which was spoken unadvisedly. For truth it is that stiffness in maintaining an opinion breedeth contention, brawling and chiding, which is a vice, among all other, most pernicious and pestilent to common peace and quietness.

And, as it standeth betwixt two persons and parties, for no man commonly doth chide with himself, so it comprehendeth two most detestable vices. The one is picking of quarrels with sharp and contentious words.

The other standeth in froward answering and multiplying evil words again. The first is so abominable that St. Paul saith, If any that is called a brother, be a worshipper of idols, a brawler or picker of quarrels, a thief or an extortioner, with him that is such a man, see that you eat not.

[7 : 54] Now here consider that St. Paul numbereth a scolder, a brawler or a picker of quarrels among thieves and idolaters. And many times cometh less hurt of a thief than of a railing tongue.

For the one taketh away a man's good name, the other taketh but his riches, which is of much less value and estimation than is his good name. And a thief hurteth but him from whom he stealeth.

But he that hath an evil tongue troubleth all the town where he dwelleth, and sometime the whole country. And a railing tongue is a pestilence so full of contagiousness, that St. Paul willeth Christian men to forbear the company of such, and neither to eat nor drink with them.

And whereas he will not that a Christian woman should forsake her husband, although he be an infidel, nor that a Christian servant should depart from his master, which is an infidel and heathen.

And so suffereth a Christian man to keep company with an infidel, yet he forbiddeth us to eat or drink with a scolder and a quarrel picker. And also in the sixth chapter to the Corinthians he saith thus, Be not deceived, for neither fornicators, neither worshippers of idols, neither thieves nor drunkards, neither cursed speakers, shall dwell in the kingdom of heaven.

[9 : 06] It must needs be a great fault that doth move and cause the Father to disherit his natural Son. And how can it otherwise be but that this cursed speaking must needs be a most damnable sin, the which doth cause God, our most merciful and loving Father, to deprive us of his most blessed kingdom of heaven.

Against the other sin that standeth in requiting taunt for taunt, speaketh Christ himself. I say unto you, saith our Saviour Christ, Resist not evil, but love your enemies.

And say well by them that say evil by you. Do well unto them that do evil to you. And pray for them that do hurt and persecute you, that you may be the children of your Father which is in heaven, who suffereth his Son to rise both upon good and evil, and sendeth his rain both to the just and unjust.

To this doctrine of Christ agreeeth very well the teaching of St. Paul, that chosen vessel of God, who ceaseth not to exhort and call upon us, saying, Bless them that curse you.

Bless, I say, and curse not. Recompence to no man evil for evil. If it be possible, as much as lieth in you, live peaceably with all men. It hath been declared unto you in this sermon against strife and brawling, what great inconvenience cometh thereby, and specially of such contention as groweth in matters of religion, and how, when as no man will give place to another, there is none end of contention and discord, and that unity which God requireth of Christians is utterly thereby neglected and broken, and that this contention standeth chiefly in two points, as in picking of quarrels and making froward answers.

[10 : 49] Now you shall hear St. Paul's words, saying, Dearly beloved, avenge not yourselves, but rather give place unto wrath. For it is written, Vengeance is mine, I will revenge, saith the Lord.

Therefore, if thine enemy hunger, feed him. If he thirst, give him drink. Be not overcome with evil, but overcome evil with goodness. All these be the words of St. Paul.

But they that be so full of stomach, and set so much by themselves, that they may not abide so much as one evil word to be spoken of them, peradventure will say, If I be evil reviled, shall I stand still, like a goose or a fool, with my finger in my mouth?

Shall I be such an idiot and dizzard, to suffer every man to speak upon me what they list, to rail what they list, to spew out all their venom against me at their pleasures? Is it not convenient that he that speaketh evil should be answered accordingly?

If I shall use this lenity and softness, I shall both increase mine enemy's frowardness, and provoke other to do like. Such reasons make they that can suffer nothing for the defence of their impatience.

[11 : 56] And yet, if by froward answering to a froward person there were hope to remedy his frowardness, he should less offend that should so answer, doing the same not of ire or malice, but only of that intent, that he that is so froward or malicious may be reformed, but that he cannot amend another man's fault, or cannot amend it without his own fault, better it were that one should perish than two.

Then, if he cannot quiet him with gentle words, at the least let him not follow him in wicked and uncharitable words. If he can pacify him with suffering, let him suffer, and if not, it is better to suffer evil than to do evil, to say well than to say evil.

For to speak well against evil cometh of the Spirit of God, but to render evil for evil cometh of the contrary Spirit. And he that cannot temper, nay rule, his own anger is but weak and feeble, and rather more like a woman or a child than a strong man.

For the true strength in manliness is to overcome wrath, and to despise injury and other men's foolishness. And besides this, he that shall despise the wrong done unto him by his enemy, every man shall perceive that it was spoken or done without cause.

Whereas contrary, he that doth fume and chaffer at it shall help the cause of his adversary, giving suspicion that the thing is true. And so, in going about to revenge evil, we show ourselves to be evil.

[13 : 19] And while we will punish and revenge another man's folly, we double and augment our own folly. But many pretenses find they that be willful to colour their impatience. Mine enemies, say they, is not worthy to have gentle words or deeds, being so full of malice or frowardness.

The less he is worthy, the more art thou allowed of God, the more art thou commended of Christ, for whose sake thou shouldst render good for evil, because he hath commanded thee, and also deserved that thou shouldst do so.

Thy neighbour hath peradventure with a word offended thee. Call thou to thy remembrance with how many words and deeds, how grievously thou hast offended thy Lord God. What was man when Christ died for him?

Was he not his enemy, and unworthy to have his favour and mercy? Even so, with what gentleness and patience doth he forbear and tolerate and suffer thee, although he is daily offended by thee?

Forgive therefore a light trespass to thy neighbour, that Christ may forgive thee many thousands of trespassers, which art every day an offender. For if thou forgive thy brother, being to thee a trespasser, then hast thou a sure sign and token that God will forgive thee, to whom all men be debtors or trespassers.

[14 : 33] How wouldst thou have God merciful to thee, if thou wilt be cruel unto thy brother? Canst thou not find in thine heart to do that toward another, that is thy fellow, which God hath done to thee, that art but his servant?

Ought not one sinner to forgive another, seeing that Christ, which was no sinner, did pray to his Father for them that without mercy and despitefully put him to death? Who, when he was reviled, did not use reviling words again?

And when he suffered wrongfully, he did not threaten, but gave all vengeance to the judgment of his Father, which judgeth rightfully. And what crackest thou of thy head, if thou labour not to be in the body?

Thou canst be no member of Christ, if thou follow not the steps of Christ, who, as the prophet saith, was led to death like a lamb? Not opening his mouth to reviling, but opening his mouth to praying for them that crucified him, saying, Father, forgive them, for they cannot tell what they do.

The which example, anon after Christ, Saint Stephen did follow. And after Saint Paul, we be evil spoken of, saith he, and we speak well. We suffer persecution and take it patiently.

[15 : 45] Men curse us, and we gently entreat. Thus Saint Paul taught that he did, and he did that he taught. Bless you, saith he, them that persecute you. Bless you, and curse not.

Is it a great thing to speak well to thine adversary, to whom Christ doth commend thee to do well? David, when Semiah did call him all to naught, did not chide again, but said patiently, Suffer him to speak evil, if perchance the Lord will have mercy on me.

Histories be full of examples of heathen men that took very meekly both appropriate and reproachful words, and injurious or wrongful deeds. And shall those heathen men excel in patience us, that profess Christ, the teacher and example of all patience?

Lysander, when one did rage against him in reviling of him, he was nothing moved, but said, Go to, go to, speak against me as much and as oft as thou wilt, and leave out nothing, if perchance by this means thou mayest discharge thee of those naughty things, with the which it seemeth that thou art full laden.

Many men speak evil of all men, because they can speak well of no man. After this sort, this wise man avoided from him the reproachful words spoken unto him, imputing and laying them to the natural sickness of his adversary.

[17 : 03] Pericles, when a certain scolder or a railing fellow did revile him, he answered not a word again, but went into a gallery. And after, toward night, when he went home, this scolder followed him, raging still more and more because he saw the other to set nothing by him.

And after that he came to his gate, being dark night, Pericles commanded one of his servants to light a torch and to bring the scolder home to his own house. He did not only with quietness suffer this brawler patiently, but also recompensed an evil turn with a good turn, and that to his enemy.

Is it not a shame for us that profess Christ to be worse than heathen people in a thing chiefly pertaining to Christ's religion? Shall philosophy persuade them more than God's word shall persuade us?

Shall natural reason prevail more with them than religion shall do with us? Shall man's wisdom lead them to that thing whereunto the heavenly doctrine cannot lead us? What blindness, willfulness, or rather madness is this?

Pericles, being provoked to anger with many villainous words, answered not a word. But we, stirred but with one little word, what foul work do we make? How do we fume, rage, stamp, and stare like madmen?

[18 : 16] Many men of every trifle will make a great matter, and of the spark of a little word will kindle a great fire, taking all things in the worst part. But how much better is it, and more like to the example and doctrine of Christ, to make rather of a great fault in our neighbour, a small fault, reasoning with ourselves after this sort?

He spake these words, but it was in a sudden heat. Or the drink spake them, and not he. Or he spake them at the motion of some other. Or he spake them being ignorant of the truth.

He spake them not against me, but against him whom he thought me to be. But as touching evil speaking, he that is ready to speak evil against other men, first let him examine himself, whether he be faultless and clear of the fault which he findeth in another.

For it is a shame when he that blameth another for any fault is guilty himself, either in the same fault, either in a greater. It is a shame for him that is blind to call another man blind.

It is more shame for him that is whole blind to call him blinkard that is but poor blind, for this is to see a straw in another man's eye, when a man hath a block in his own eye.

[19 : 25] Then let him consider that he that useth to speak evil shall commonly be evil spoken of again, and he that speaketh what he will for his pleasure shall be compelled to hear that he would not to his displeasure.

Moreover, let him remember that saying, that we shall give an account for every idle word. How much more, then, shall we make a reckoning for our sharp, bitter, brawling and chiding words, which provoke our brother to be angry, and so to the breach of his charity?

And as touching evil answering, although we be never so much provoked by other men's evil speaking, yet we shall not follow their frowardness by evil answering, if we consider that anger is a kind of madness, and that he which is angry is, as it were, for the time in a frenzy.

Wherefore, let him beware, lest in his fury he speak anything whereof afterward he may have just cause to be sorry. And he that will defend that anger is no fury, but that he hath reason even when he is most angry, then let him reason thus with himself when he is angry.

Now I am so moved and chafed, that within a little while after I shall be otherwise minded. Wherefore, then, should I now speak anything in mine anger, which hereafter, when I would faintest, cannot be changed?

[20 : 39] Wherefore, shall I do anything now, being as it were out of my wit, for the which, when I shall come to myself again, I shall be very sad? Why doth not reason? Why doth not godliness?

Yea, why doth not Christ obtain that thing now of me, which hereafter time shall obtain of me? If a man be called an adulterer, usurer, drunkard, or by any other shameful name, let him consider earnestly whether he be called so truly or falsely.

If truly, let him amend his fault, that his adversary may not after worthily charge him with such offences. If these things be laid against him falsely, yet let him consider whether he hath given any occasion to be suspected of such things.

And so he may both cut off that suspicion whereof this slander did arise, and in other things shall live more warily. And thus using ourselves, we may take no hurt, but rather much good, by the rebukes and slanders of our enemy.

For the reproach of an enemy may be to many men a quicker spur to the amendment of their life than the gentle munition of a friend. Philippus, the king of Macedonia, when he was evil spoken of by the chief rulers of the city of Athens, he did thank them heartily, because by them he was made better both in his words and deeds.

[21 : 56] For I study, said he, both by my sayings and doings to prove them liars. Ye heard in the last lesson of the sermon against strife and brawling, how we may answer them which maintain their forward sayings in contention, and that will revenge with words such evil as other men do to them.

And finally, how we may, according to God's will, order ourselves, and what to consider towards them, when we are provoked to contention and strife with railing words. Now, to proceed in the same matter, you shall know the right way how to disprove and overcome your adversary and enemy.

This is the best way to improve a man's adversary, so to live, that all which shall know his honesty may bear witness that he is slandered unworthily. If the fault whereof he is slandered be such that for the defence of his honesty he must needs make answer, yet let him answer quietly and softly on this fashion, that those faults be laid against him falsely.

For it is truth that the wise man saith, A soft answer assuageth anger, and a hard and sharp answer doth stir up rage and fury. The sharp answer of Nabal did provoke David to cruel vengeance, but the gentle words of Abigail quenched the fire again that was all in a flame.

And a special remedy against malicious tongues is to arm ourselves with patience, meekness and silence, lest with multiplying words with the enemy we be made as evil as he.

[23 : 23] But they that cannot bear one evil word, peradventure, for their own excuse will allege that which is written, He that despiseth his good name is cruel. Also we read, Answer a fool according to his foolishness.

And our Lord Jesus did hold his peace at certain evil sayings, but to some he answered diligently. He heard men call him a Samaritan, a carpenter's son, a wine drinker, and he held his peace.

But when he heard them say, Thou hast a devil within thee, he answered to that earnestly. Truth it is indeed, that there is a time when it is convenient to answer a fool according to his foolishness, lest he should seem in his own conceit to be wise.

And sometime it is not profitable to answer a fool according to his foolishness, lest the wise man be made like to the fool. When our infamy, or the reproach that is done unto us, is joined with the peril of many, then it is necessary in answering to be quick and ready.

For we read that many holy men of good zeals have sharply and fiercely both spoken and answered tyrants and evil men, which sharp words came not of anger, rancor or malice, or desire of vengeance, but of a fervent desire to bring them to the true knowledge of God, and from ungodly living by an earnest and sharp rebuke and chiding.

[24 : 39] In this zeal St. John Baptist called the Pharisees Adder's brood, and St. Paul called the Galatians fools, and the men of Crete he called liars, evil beasts, and sluggish bellies, and the false apostles he called dogs, and crafty workmen.

And this zeal is godly and to be allowed, as it is plainly proved by the example of Christ, who although he were the fountain and spring of all meekness, gentleness and softness, yet he calleth the obstinate scribes and Pharisees blind guides, fools, painted graves, hypocrites, serpents, adders brood, a corrupt and wicked generation. Also he rebuketh Peter eagerly, saying, Go behind me, Satan. Likewise St. Paul reproveth Elymas, saying, O thou full of all craft and guile, enemy to all justice, thou ceasest not to destroy the right ways of God. And now, lo, the hand of the Lord is upon thee, and thou shalt be blind, and not see for a time. Also St. Peter reprehendeth Ananias very sharply, saying, Ananias, how is it that Satan hath filled thy heart, that thou shouldest lie unto the Holy Ghost? This zeal hath been so fervent in many good men, that it hath stirred them not only to speak bitter and eager words, but also to do things which might seem to some to be cruel, but indeed they be very just, charitable, and godly, because they were not done of ire, malice, or contentious mind, but of a fervent mind to the glory of God, and the correction of sin, executed by men called to that office. For in this zeal our Lord Jesus Christ did drive with a whip the buyers and sellers out of the temple. In this zeal Moses break the two tables which he had received at God's hand, when he saw the Israelites dancing about a calf, and caused to be killed twenty and three thousand of his own people. In this zeal

Phineas, the son of Eliezer, did thrust through with his sword Zambri and Cosbi, whom he found together joined in the act of lechery. Wherefore now to return again to contentious words, and specially in matters of religion and God's word, which would be used with all modesty, soberness, and charity. The words of St. James ought to be well marked and borne in memory, where he saith that of contention riseth all evil. And the wise king Solomon saith, Honour is due to a man that keepeth himself from contention, and all that mingle themselves therewith be fools. And because this vice is so much hurtful to the society of a commonwealth, in all well-ordered cities these common brawlers and scolders be punished with a notable kind of pain, as to be set on the cucking-stool, pillory, or such like. And they be unworthy to live in a commonwealth, the which do as much as lieth in them with brawling and scolding, to disturb the quietness and peace of the same. And whereof cometh this contention, strife and variance, but of pride and vainglory? Let us therefore humble ourselves under the mighty hand of God, which hath promised to rest upon them that be humble and low in spirit. If we be good and quiet Christian men, let it appear in our speech and tongues. If we have forsaken the devil, let us use no more devilish tongues.

He that hath been a railing scolder, now let him be a sober counsellor. He that hath been a malicious slanderer, now let him be a loving comforter. He that hath been a vain railer, now let him be a ghostly teacher. He that hath abused his tongue in cursing, now let him use it in blessing. He that hath abused his tongue in evil speaking, now let him use it in speaking well. All bitterness, anger, railing and blasphemy, let it be avoided from you. If you may, and it be possible, in no wise be angry.

But if you may not be clean void of this passion, then yet so temper and bridle it, let it stir you not to contention and brawling. If you be provoked with evil speaking, arm yourself with patience, lenity and silence, either speaking nothing, or else being very soft, meek and gentle in answering.

[28 : 45] Overcome thine adversaries with benefits and gentleness, and above all things keep peace and unity. Be no peacebreakers, but peacemakers. And then there is no doubt but that God, the author of comfort and peace, will grant us peace of conscience, and such concord and agreement, that with one mouth and mind we may glorify God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, to whom be all glory now and forever. Amen.

Amen.