

THE BOOKS OF HOMILIES: Book 2—XIX. Against Idleness

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[0 : 00] An homily against idleness. For as much as man, being not born to ease and rest, but to labour and travail, is by corruption of nature through sin so far degenerated, and grown out of kind, that he taketh idleness to be no evil at all, but rather a commendable thing, seemly for those that be wealthy, and therefore is greedily embraced of most part of men, as agreeable to their sensual affection, and all labour and travail is diligently avoided, as a thing painful and repugnant to the pleasure of the flesh, it is necessary to be declared unto you, that by the ordinance of God which he hath set in the nature of man, everyone ought, in his lawful vocation and calling, to give himself to labour, and that idleness, being repugnant to the same ordinance, is a grievous sin, and also, for the great inconveniences and mischiefs which spring thereof, an intolerable evil, to the intent that, when you understand the same, you may diligently flee from it, and on the other part, earnestly apply yourselves, every man in his vocation, to honest labour and business, which, as it is enjoined unto man by God's appointment, so it wanteth not his manifold blessings and sundry benefits. Almighty God, after that he had created man, put him into paradise, that he might dress and keep it, but when he had transgressed God's commandment, eating the fruit of the tree which was forbidden him, Almighty God forthwith did cast him out of paradise, into this woeful veil of misery, enjoining him to labour the ground that he was taken out of, and to eat his bread in the sweat of his face all the days of his life. It is the appointment and will of God that every man, during the time of this mortal and transitory life, should give himself to some honest and godly exercise and labour, and every one to do his own business and to walk uprightly in his own calling. Man, saith Job, is born to labour, and we are commanded by Jesus Sirach not to hate painful works, neither husbandry, or other such mysteries of travail, which the highest hath created. The wise man also exhorteth us to drink the waters of our own cistern, and of the rivers that run out of the midst of our own well, meaning thereby that we should live of our own labours, and not devour the labours of others. St. Paul, hearing that among the Thessalonians there were certain that lived dissolutely and out of order, that is to say which did not work but were busybodies, not getting their own living with their own travail, but eating other men's bread of free cost, did command the said Thessalonians not only to withdraw themselves and abstain from the familiar company of such inordinate persons, but also that, if there were any such amongst them that would not labour, the same should not eat, nor have any living at other men's hands.

Which doctrine of St. Paul, no doubt, is grounded upon the general ordinance of God, which is, that every man should labour, and therefore it is to be obeyed of all men, and no man can justly exempt himself from the same. But when it is said all men should labour, it is not so straightly meant that all men should use handy labour, but as there be diverse sorts of labour, some of the mind and some of the body, and some of both, so everyone, except by reason of age, debility of body, or want of health he be unapt to labour at all, ought both for the getting of his own living honestly, and for to profit others, in some kind of labour to exercise himself, according as the vocation where unto God hath called him shall require, so that whosoever doeth good to the commonweal and society of men with his industry and labour, whether it be by governing the commonweal publicly, or by bearing public office or ministry, or by doing any common necessary affairs of his country, or by giving counsel, or by teaching and instructing others, or by what other means soever he be occupied, so that a profit and benefit redound thereof unto others. The same person is not to be accounted idle, though he work no bodily labour, nor is to be denied his living, if he attend his vocation, though he work not with his hands. Bodily labour is not required of them which by reason of their vocation and office are occupied in the labour of the mind to the profit and help of others.

St. Paul exhorted Timothy to eschew and refuse idle widows, which go about from house to house, because they are not only idle, but prattlers also and busybodies, speaking things which are not cumulatory. The prophet Ezekiel, declaring what the sins of the city of Sodom were, reckoneth idleness to be one of the principle. The sins, saith he, of Sodom were these, pride, fullness of meat, abundance and idleness. These things had Sodom and her daughters, meaning the city subject to her. The horrible and strange kind of destruction of that city, and all the country about the same, which was fire and brimstone raining from heaven, most manifestly declareth what a grievous sin idleness is, and ought to admonish us to flee from the same, and embrace honest and godly labour. But if we give ourselves to idleness and sloth, to lurking and loitering, to willful wandering and wasteful spending, never settling ourselves to honest labour, but living like drone bees by the labours of other men, then do we break the Lord's commandment? We go astray from our vocation, and incur the danger of God's wrath and heavy displeasure, to our endless destruction, except by repentance we turn again unfeignedly unto God.

The inconveniences and mischiefs that come of idleness, as well to man's body as to his soul, are more than can in short time be well rehearsed. Some we shall declare and open unto you, that by considering them you may the better with yourselves gather the rest. An idle hand, saith Solomon, maketh poor, but a quick labouring hand maketh rich. Again, he that tilleth his land shall have plenteousness of bread, but he that floweth in idleness is a very fool, and shall have poverty enough. Again, a slothful body will not go to plough for cold of the winter, therefore shall he go a-begging in summer, and have nothing. But what shall we need to stand much about the proving of this, that poverty followeth idleness? We have too much experience thereof, the thing is the more to be lamented in this realm, for a great part of the beggary that is among the poor can be imputed to nothing so much as to idleness, and to the negligence of parents, which do not bring up their children, either in good learning, honest labour, or some commendable occupation or trade, whereby, when they come to age, they might get their living. Daily experience also teacheth that nothing is more enemy or pernicious to the health of man's body than is idleness, too much ease in sleep, and want of exercise. But these and such like in commodities, albeit they be great and noisome, yet because they concern chiefly the body and external goods, they are not to be compared with the mischiefs and inconveniences which through idleness happen to the soul, whereof we will recite some. Idleness is never alone, but hath always a long tail of other vices hanging on, which corrupt and infect the whole man after such sort, that he is made at length nothing else but a lump of sin. Idleness, saith Jesus Sirach, bringeth much evil and mischief. Saint Bernard calleth it the mother of all evils, and stepdame of all virtues, adding moreover that it doth prepare and, as it were, tread the way to hellfire. Where idleness is once received, there the devil is always ready to set in his foot, and to plant all kinds of wickedness sin, to the everlasting destruction of man's soul. Which thing, to be most true, we are plainly taught in the thirteenth of Matthew, where it is said that the enemy came while men were asleep, and sowed naughty tares among the good wheat. In very deed, the best time that the devil can have to work his feet is when men be asleep, that is to say, idle. Then he is most busy in his work. Then doth he soonest catch men in the snare of perdition. Then doth he fill them with all iniquity, to bring them, without God's special favour, unto utter destruction. Hereof we have two notable examples most lively set before our eyes. The one in King David, who, towering at home idly as the scripture saith, at such times as other kings go forth to battle, was quickly seduced of Satan to forsake the Lord his God, and to commit two grievous and abominable sins in his sight, adultery and murder. The plagues that ensued these offences were horrible and grievous, as it may easily appear to them that we'll read the story.

Another example of Samson, who so long as he warred with the Philistines, enemies to the people of God, could never be taken or overcome, but, after that he gave himself to ease and idleness, he not only committed fornication with the strumpet Delilah, but also was taken of his enemies, and had his eyes miserably put out, was put in prison and compelled to grind in a mill, and at length was made the laughingstock of his enemies. If these two, who were so excellent men, so well beloved of God, so endued with singular and divine gifts, the one namely of prophecy, and the other of strength, and such men as never could by vexation, labour or trouble be overcome, were overthrown and fell into grievous sins by giving themselves for a short time to ease and idleness, and so consequently incurred miserable plagues at the hands of God. What sin, what mischief, what inconvenience and plague is not to be feared of them which all their life long give themselves wholly to idleness and ease?

[9 : 06] Let us not deceive ourselves, thinking little hurt to come of doing nothing, for it is a true saying, when one doeth nothing, he learneth to do evil. Let us therefore always be doing of some honest work, that the devil may find us occupied. He himself is ever occupied, never idle, but walketh continually, seeking to devour us. Let us resist him, with our diligent watching and labour and in well-doing, for he that diligently exerciseth himself in honest business is not easily caught in the devil's snare.

When man through idleness, or for default of some honest occupation or trade to live upon, is brought to poverty and want of things necessary, we see how easily such a man is induced for his gain to lie, to practice how he may deceive his neighbour, to forswear himself, to bear false witness, and oftentimes to steal and murder, or to use some other ungodly mean to live withal, whereby not only his good name, honest reputation, and a good conscience, yea, his life is utterly lost, but also the great displeasure and wrath of God, with diverse and sundry grievous plagues, are procured.

Lo, here the end of the idle and sluggish bodies whose hands cannot away with honest labour, loss of name, fame, reputation and life here in this world, and without the great mercy of God, the purchasing of everlasting destruction in the world to come.

Have not all men then good cause to beware and take heed of idleness, seeing they that embrace and follow it have commonly of their pleasant idleness sharp and sour displeasures? Doubtless good and godly men, weighing the great and manifold harms that come by idleness to a common wheel, have from time to time provided with all diligence that sharp and severe laws might be made for the correction and amendment of this evil. The Egyptians had a law that every man should weakly bring his name to the chief rulers of the province, and therewithal declare what trade of life he occupied, to the intent that idleness might be worthily punished, and diligent labour duly rewarded. The Athenians did chastise sluggish and slothful people, no less than they did heinous and grievous offenders, considering, as the truth is, that idleness causeth much mischief. The Areopagites called every man to a straight account how he lived, and if they found any loiterers that did not profit the common wheel by one means or other, they were driven out and banished, as unprofitable members that did only hurt and corrupt the body.

And in this realm of England good and godly laws have been diverse times made, that no idle vagabonds and loitering renegades should be suffered to go from town to town, from place to place, without punishment, which neither serve God nor their prince, but devour the sweet fruits of other men's labour, being common liars, drunkards, swearers, thieves, hallmasters and murderers, refusing all honest labour, and give themselves to nothing else but to invent and do mischief, whereof they are more desirous and greedy than is any lion of his prey.

[11 : 57] To remedy this inconvenience, let all parents and others which have the care and governance of youth, so bring them up either in good learning, labour, or some honest occupation or trade, whereby they may be able in time to come, not only to sustain themselves competently, but also to relieve and supply the necessity and want of others.

And St. Paul saith, Let him that hath stolen steal no more, and he that hath deceived others, or used unlawful ways to get his living, leave off the same, and labour rather, working with his hands that thing which is good, that he may have that which is necessary for himself, and also be able to give unto others that stand in need of his help.

The prophet David thinketh him happy that liveth upon his labour, saying, When thou eatest the labours of thine hands, happy art thou, and well is thee. This happiness or blessing consisteth in these and such like points.

First, it is the gift of God, as Solomon saith, when one eateth and drinketh and receiveth good of his labour. Secondly, when one liveth of his own labour, so it be honest and good, he liveth of it with a good conscience, and an upright conscience is a treasure inestimable.

Thirdly, he eateth his bread not with brawling and chiding, but with peace and quietness, when he quietly laboureth for the same according to St. Paul's admonition. Fourthly, he is no man's barnman for his meat's sake, nor needeth not for that to hang upon the goodwill of other men, but so liveth of his own, that he is able to give part to others.

[13 : 25] And, to conclude, The labouring man and his family, whilst they are busily occupied in their labour, be free from many temptations and occasions of sin, which they that live in idleness are subject unto.

And here ought artificers and labouring men, who be at wages for their work and labour, to consider their conscience to God and their duty to their neighbour, lest they abuse their time in idleness, so defrauding them which be at charge both with great wages and dear commons.

They be worse than idle men indeed, for that they seek to have wages for their loitering. It is less danger to God to be idle for no gain, than by idleness to win out of their neighbours' purses wages for that which is not deserved.

It is true that Almighty God is angry with such as do defraud the hired man of his wages. The cry of that injury ascendeth up to God's ear for vengeance. And as true it is, that the hired man who useth deceit in his labour is a thief before God.

Let no man, saith St. Paul to the Thessalonians, subtly beguile his brother. Let him not defraud him in his business, for the Lord is revenger of such deceits. Whereupon he that will have a good conscience to God, that labouring man I say, which dependeth wholly upon God's benediction, ministering all things sufficient for his living, let him use his time in faithful labour.

[14 : 42] And when his labour by sickness or other misfortune doth cease, yet let him think, for that in his health he served God and his neighbour truly, he shall not want in time of necessity. God, upon respect of his fidelity and health, will recompense his indigence to move the hearts of good men to relieve such decayed men in sickness.

Where otherwise whatsoever is gotten by idleness shall have no poison to help in time of need. Let the labouring man therefore eschew for his part this vice of idleness and deceit, remembering that St. Paul exhorteth every man to lay away deceit, dissimulation and lying, and to use truth and plainness to his neighbour, because, saith he, we be members together in one body, under one head Christ our Saviour.

And here might be charged the serving men of this realm, who spend their time in much idleness of life, nothing regarding the opportunity of their time, forgetting how service is no heritage, how age will creep upon them, where wisdom were they should expend their idle time in some good business, whereby they might increase in knowledge, and so the more worthy to be ready for every man's service.

It is a great rebuke to them, that they study not either to write fair, to keep a book of account, to study the tongues, and so to get wisdom and knowledge in such books and works as be now plentifully set out in print of all manner languages.

Let young men consider the precious value of their time, and waste it not in idleness, in jollity, in gaming, in banqueting, in ruffian's company. Youth is but vanity, and must be accounted for before God.

[16 : 13] How merry and glad soever thou be in thy youth, O young man, saith the preacher! How glad soever thy heart be in thy young days! How fast and freely soever thou follow the ways of thine own heart, and the lust of thine own eyes!

Yet be thou sure that God shall bring thee into judgment for all these things. God of his mercy put it into the hearts and minds of all them that have the sword of punishment in their hands, or have families under their governance, to labour to redress this great enormity of all such as live idly and unprofitably in the commonweal, to the great dishonour of God and the grievous plague of his seely people.

To leave sin unpunished, and to neglect the good bringing up of youth, is nothing else but to kindle the Lord's wrath against us, and to heap plagues upon our own heads. As long as the adulterous people were suffered to live licentious without reformation, so long did the plague continue and increase in Israel, as you may see in the book of Numbers.

But when due correction was done upon them, the Lord's anger was straightway pacified, and the plague ceased. Let all officers therefore look straightly to their charge. Let all masters of households reform this abuse in their families.

Let them use the authority that God hath given them. Let them not maintain vagabonds and idle persons, but deliver the realm and their households from such noisome loiterers, that idleness, the mother of all mischief, being clean taken away, Almighty God may turn his dreadful anger away from us, and confirm the covenant of peace upon us for ever, through the merits of Jesus Christ, our only Lord and Saviour, to whom with the Father and the Holy Ghost be all honour and glory, world without end.

[17 : 50] Amen. Amen.