

THE BOOKS OF HOMILIES: Book 2—II. Against peril of Idolatry: Part 1

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[0 : 0 0] An homily against peril of idolatry and superfluous decking of churches. In what points the true ornaments of the church or temple of God do consist and stand, hath been declared in the two last homilies, in treating of the right use of the temple or house of God, and of the due reverence that all true Christian people are bound to give unto the same.

The sum whereof is, that the church or house of God is a place appointed by the holy scriptures, where the lively word of God ought to be read, taught and heard, the Lord's holy name called upon by public prayer, hearty thanks given to his majesty for his infinite and unspeakable benefits bestowed upon us, his holy sacraments duly and reverently ministered, and that therefore all that be godly indeed ought both with diligence at times appointed to repair together to the said church, and there with all reverence to use and behave themselves before the Lord, and that the said church, thus godly used by the servants of the Lord in the Lord's true service, for the effectuous presence of God's grace, wherewith he doth by his holy word and promises in due his people there present and assembled, to the attainment as well of commodities worldly, necessary for us, as also of all heavenly gifts and life everlasting, is called by the word of God, as it is indeed, the temple of the Lord and the house of God, and that therefore the due reverence thereof is stirred up in the hearts of the godly by the consideration of these true ornaments of the said house of God, and not by any outward ceremonies or costly and glorious decking of the said house or temple of the Lord, contrary to the which most manifest doctrine of the scriptures, and contrary to the usage of the primitive church, which was most pure and uncorrupt, and contrary to the sentences and judgments of the most ancient, learned, and godly doctors of the church, as hereafter shall appear, the corruption of these latter days hath brought into the church infinite multitudes of images, and the same with other parts of the temple also, have decked with gold and silver, painted with colours, set them with stone and pearl, clothed them with silks and precious vestures, fantasising untruly that to be the chief decking and adorning of the temple or house of God, and that all people should be the more moved to the due reverence of the same, if all corners thereof were glorious and glistening with gold and precious stones, whereas indeed they by the said images, and such glorious decking of the temple, have nothing at all profited such as were wise and of understanding, but have thereby greatly hurt the simple and unwise, occasioning them thereby to commit most horrible idolatry, and the covetous persons by the same occasion, seeming to worship and peradventure worshipping indeed, not only the images, but also the matter of them, gold and silver, as that vice is of all others in the scriptures, peculiarly called idolatry or worshipping of images, against the which foul abuses and great enormities shall be alleged unto you, first the authority of God's holy word, as well out of the Old Testament as of the New, and secondly, the testimonies of the holy and ancient learned fathers and doctors, out of their own works and ancient histories ecclesiastical, both that you may at once know their judgments, and withal understand what manner of ornaments were in the temples in the primitive church in those times, which were most pure and sincere, thirdly, the reasons and arguments made for the defence of images or idols, and the outrageous decking of temples and churches with gold, silver, pearl, and precious stone shall be confuted, and so this whole matter concluded.

But, lest any should take occasion by the way of doubting by words or names, it is thought good here to note, first of all, that although in common speech we used to call the likeness or similitudes of men or other things images, and not idols, yet the scriptures used the said two words, idols and images, indifferently for one thing all way.

They be words of diverse tongues and sounds, but one in sense and signification in the scriptures. The one is taken of the Greek word eidolon, an idol, and the other of the Latin word imago, an image, and so both used as English terms in the translating of the scriptures indifferently, according as the Septuaginta have in their translation in Greek, idola, and Saint Jerome in his translation of the same places in Latin, hath simulacra, in English, images, and in the New Testament, that which Saint John calleth eidolon, Saint Jerome likewise translateth simulacrum, as in all other like places of scripture usually he doth so translate.

And Tertullian, a most ancient doctor, and well-learned in both the tongues, Greek and Latin, interpreting this place of Saint John, beware of idols, that is to say, saith Tertullian, of the images themselves, the Latin words which he useth, be effigies, and imago, to say, an image.

[4 : 57] And therefore it forceth not, whether in this process we use the one term or the other, or both together, seeing they both, though not in common English speech, yet in scripture, signify one thing.

And though some, to blind men's eyes, have heretofore craftily gone about to make them to be taken for words of diverse signification in matters of religion, and have therefore usually named the likeness or similitude of a thing set up amongst the heathen in their temples or other places to be worshipped and idol, but the like similitude with us set up in the church, the place of worshipping, they call an image, as though these two words, idol and image, in scripture did differ in propriety and sense, which, as is aforesaid, differ only in sound and language, and in meaning be indeed all one, especially in the scriptures and matters of religion.

And our images also have been, and be, and, if they be publicly suffered in churches and temples, ever will be also worshipped, and so idolatry committed to them, as in the last part of this homily shall at large be declared and proved.

Wherefore our images in temples and churches be indeed none other but idols, as unto the which idolatry hath been, is, and ever will be committed. And first of all, the scriptures of the Old Testament, condemning and abhorring as well all idolatry or worshipping of images, as also the very idols or images themselves, especially in temples, are so many and plentiful, that it were almost an infinite work, and to be contained in no small volume, to record all the places concerning the same.

For when God had chosen to himself a peculiar and special people from amongst all other nations, that knew not God but worshipped idols and false gods, he gave unto them certain ordinances and laws to be kept and observed of his said people.

[6 : 46] But concerning none other matter did he give either more, or more earnest and express laws to his said people, than those that concern the true worshipping of him, and the avoiding and fleeing of idols and images and idolatry.

For that, that both the said idolatry is most repugnant to the right worshipping of him, and his true glory above all other vices, and that he knew the proneness and inclination of man's corrupt kind and nature to that most odious and abominable vice.

Of the which ordinances and laws, so given by the Lord to his people concerning that matter, I will rehearse and allege some that be most special for this purpose, that you by them may judge of the rest.

In the fourth chapter in the book named Deuteronomy, is a notable place, and most worthy with all diligence to be marked, which beginneth thus, And now, Israel, hear the commandments and judgments which I teach thee, saith the Lord, that thou doing them mayest live, and enter and possess the land which the Lord God of your fathers will give you.

Ye shall put nothing to the word which I speak to you, neither shall ye take anything from it. Keep ye the commandments of the Lord your God, which I command you. And by and by after he repeateth the same sentence three or four times, before he come to the matter that he would specially warn them of, as it were for a preface, to make them to take the better heed unto it.

[8 : 10] Take heed to thyself, saith he, and to thy soul with all carefulness, lest thou forgettest the things which thine eyes have seen, and that they go not out of thy heart all the days of thy life.

Thou shalt teach them to thy children and nephews or posterity. And shortly after the Lord spake unto you out of the middle of fire. You heard the voice or sound of his words, but you did see no form or shape at all, and by and by followeth.

Take heed therefore diligently unto your souls. You saw no manner of image in the day in the which the Lord spake unto you in Horeb out of the midst of the fire, lest peradventure you being deceived should make to yourselves any graven image or likeness of man or woman, or the likeness of any beast which is upon the earth, or of the birds that fly under heaven, or of any creeping thing that is moved on the earth, or of the fishes that do continue in the waters, lest peradventure thou, lifting up thine eyes to heaven, do see the sun and the moon and the stars of heaven.

And so thou, being deceived by error, shouldest honour and worship them, which the Lord thy God hath created to serve all nations that be under heaven. And again, beware that thou forget not the covenant of the Lord thy God, which he made with thee, and so make to thyself any carved image of them which the Lord hath forbidden to be made.

For the Lord thy God is a consuming fire and a jealous God. If thou have children and nephews, and do tarry in the land, and being deceived, do make to yourselves any similitude, doing evil before the Lord your God, and provoke him to anger, I do this day call upon heaven and earth to witness, that ye shall quickly perish out of the land which you shall possess.

[9 : 54] You shall not dwell in it any long time, but the Lord will destroy you, and will scatter you amongst all nations, and ye shall remain but a very few amongst the nations with the Lord will lead you away.

And then shall you serve gods which are made with man's hands, of wood and stone, which see not, nor hear not, neither eat nor smell, and so forth. This is a notable chapter, and entreateth almost altogether of this matter.

But because it is too long to write out the whole, I have noted you certain principal points out of it. First, how earnestly and aft he calleth upon them to mark and to take heed, and that upon the peril of their souls, to the charge which he giveth them.

Then, how he forbiddeth, by a solemn and long rehearsal of all things in heaven, in earth, and in the water, any image or likeness of any thing at all to be made.

Thirdly, what penalty and horrible destruction he solemnly, with invocation of heaven and earth for record, denounceth and threateneth to them, their children and posterity, if they, contrary to this commandment, do make or worship any image or similitude, which he so straightly hath forbidden.

[11 : 06] And when they, this notwithstanding, partly by inclination of man's corrupt nature, most prone to idolatry, and partly occasioned by the Gentiles and heathen people dwelling about them, who were idolaters, did fall to the making and worshipping of images, God, according to his word, brought upon them all those plagues which he threatened them with, as appeareth in the books of the kings and the chronicles, in sundry places at large.

And agreeable hereunto are many other notable places in the Old Testament. Deuteronomy chapter 27 Cursed be he that maketh a carved image, or a cast or molten image, which is abomination before the Lord, the work of the artificer's hand, and setteth it up in a secret corner, and all the people shall say, Amen.

Read the thirteenth and fourteenth chapters of the Book of Wisdom, concerning idols or images, how they be made, set up, called upon, and offered unto, and how he praiseth the tree whereof the gibbet is made, as happy in comparison to the tree that an image or idol is made of, even by these very words.

Happy is the tree where through righteousness cometh, meaning the gibbet, but cursed is the idol that is made with hands, yea, both it, and he that made it, and so forth.

And by and by he showeth how that the things which were the good creatures of God before, as trees or stones, when they be once altered and fashioned into images to be worshipped, become abomination, a temptation unto the souls of men, and a snare for the feet of the unwise.

[12 : 39] And why? The seeking out of images is the beginning of whoredom, saith he, and the bringing up of them is the destruction of life. For they were not from the beginning, neither shall they continue for ever.

The wealthy idleness of men hath found them out upon earth, therefore shall they come shortly to an end, and so forth to the end of the chapter containing these points. How idols or images were first invented and offered unto, how by an ungracious custom they were established, how tyrants compel men to worship them, how the ignorant and the common people are deceived by the cunning of the workmen and the beauty of the image to do honour unto it, and so to err from the knowledge of God, and of other great and many mischiefs that come by images.

And for a conclusion, he saith, that the honouring of abominable images is the cause, the beginning, and end of all evil, and that the worshippers of them be either mad or most wicked.

See and view the whole chapter with diligence, for it is worthy to be well considered, specially that it is written of the deceiving of the simple and unwise common people by idols and images, and repeated twice or thrice, lest it should be forgotten.

And in the chapter following be these words, In the book of Psalms, the prophet curseth the image honourers in diverse places, confounded be all they that worship carven images, and that delight or glory in them, like be they unto the images that make them, and all they that put their trust in them.

[14 : 29] And in the prophet essay saith the Lord, Even I am the Lord, and this is my name, and my glory will I give to none other, neither my honour to graven images. And by and by, let them be confounded with shame that trust in idols or images, or say to them, You are our gods.

And in the fortieth chapter, after he hath set forth the incomprehensible majesty of God, he asketh, To whom then will you make God like? Or what similitude will you set up unto him?

Shall the carver make him a carved image? And shall the goldsmith cover him with gold, and cast him into a form of silver plates? And for the poor man shall the image maker frame an image of timber, that he may have somewhat to set up also?

And after this he crieth out, O wretches, heard ye never of this? Hath it not been preached unto you since the beginning? And so forth, how by the creation of the world and the greatness of the work they might understand the majesty of God, the creator and maker of all, to be greater than that it could be expressed or set forth in any image or bodily similitude.

And besides this preaching, even in the law of God, written with his own finger, as the scripture speaketh, and that in the first table and the beginning thereof is this doctrine aforesaid against images, not briefly touched, but at large set forth and preached, and that with denunciation of destruction to the contemners and breakers of this law and their posterity after them, lest it should yet not be marked or not remembered, the same is written and reported, not in one, but in sundry places of the word of God, that by after reading and hearing of it we might once learn and remember it.

[16 : 11] As you also hear daily read in the church, God spake these words and said, I am the Lord thy God, thou shalt have none other gods but me. Thou shalt not make to thyself any graven image, nor the likeness of anything that is in heaven above or in the earth beneath, nor in the water under the earth.

Thou shalt not bow down to them nor worship them, for I, the Lord thy God, am a jealous God, and visit the sin of the fathers upon the children and to the third and fourth generation of them that hate me, and show mercy unto thousands in them that love me and keep my commandments.

All this notwithstanding, neither could the notableness of the place, being the very beginning of the living Lord's law, make us to mark it, nor the plain declaration by recounting of all kind of similitudes cause us to understand it, nor the aft repeating and reporting of it in diverse and sundry places, the aft reading and hearing of it, could cause us to remember it, nor the dread of the horrible penalty to ourselves and our children and posterity after us, fear us from transgressing of it, nor the greatness of the reward to us and our children after us, move us anything to obedience and the observing of this the Lord's great law, but, as though it had been written in some corner and not at large expressed, but briefly and obscurely touched, as though no penalty to the transgressors, nor reward the obedient had been adjoined unto it, like blind men without all knowledge and understanding, like unreasonable beasts without dread of punishment or respect of reward, have diminished and dishonoured the high majesty of the living God by the baseness and vileness of sundry and diverse images of dead stocks, stones, and metals, and as the majesty of God whom we have left forsaken and dishonoured, and therefore the greatness of our sin and offence against his majesty cannot be expressed, so is the weakness, vileness, and foolishness in device of the images whereby we have dishonoured him expressed at large in the scriptures, namely the Psalms, the Book of Wisdom, the Prophet Essay,

Ezekiel, and Baruch, especially in these places and chapters of them, Psalm 115 and 134, Essay chapter 40 and chapter 44, Ezekiel chapter 6, Wisdom chapters 13, 14, and 15, Beirut chapter 6, the which places, as I exhort you often and diligently to read, so are they too long at this present to be rehearsed in an homily.

Notwithstanding, I will make you certain brief or short notes out of them, what they say of these idols or images, first that they be made but of small pieces of wood, stone or metal, and therefore they cannot be any similitudes of the great majesty of God, whose seat is heaven and the earth his footstool, secondarily, that they be dead, have eyes and see not, hands and feel not, feet and cannot go, etc., and therefore they cannot be fit similitudes of the living God, thirdly, that they have no power to do good nor harm to others, though some of them have an axe, some a sword, some a spear in their hands, yet do thieves come into their temples and rob them, and they cannot once stir to defend themselves from the thieves, nay, if the temple or church be set afire, that their priests can run away and save themselves, but they cannot once move, like blocks as they are, and be burnt, and therefore there can be no meet figures of the puissant and mighty God, who alone is able both to save his servants and to destroy his enemies everlastingly, they be trimly decked in gold, silver, and stone, as well the images of men as of women, like wanton wenches, saith the prophet

[19 : 53] Baruch, that love paramours, and therefore can they not teach us, nor our wives and daughters, any soberness, modesty, and chastity, and therefore, although it is now commonly said that they be the layman's books, yet we see they teach no good lesson, neither of God nor godliness, but all error and wickedness.

Therefore God by his word, as he forbiddeth any idols or images to be made or set up, so doth he command such as we find made and set up to be pulled down, broken and destroyed.

And it is written in the book of Numbers, the twenty-third chapter, that there was no idol in Jacob, nor was there no image seen in Israel, and that the Lord God was with that people.

Where note that the true Israelites, that is the people of God, have no images among them, but that God was with them, and that therefore their enemies cannot hurt them, as appeareth in the process of that chapter.

And as concerning images already set up, thus saith the Lord in Deuteronomy, overturn their altars, and break them to pieces, cut down their groves, burn their images, for thou art an holy people unto the Lord.

[21 : 01] And the same is repeated more vehemently again in the twelfth chapter of the same book. Here note what the people of God ought to do to the images where they find them. But lest any private persons, upon colour of destroying of images, should make any stir or disturbance in the commonwealth, it must always be remembered that the redress of such public enormities appertaineth to the magistrates, and such as be in authority only, and not to private persons.

And therefore, the good kings of Judah, Asa, Ezekiah, Josaphat, and Josias, are highly commended for the breaking down and destroying of the altars, idols, and images.

And the scriptures declare that they specially in that point did that which was right before the Lord. And contrarywise, Heroboam, Achab, Joas, and other princes, which either set up or suffered such idols or images undestroyed, are by the word of God reported to have done evil before the Lord.

And if any, contrary to the commandment of the Lord, will need set up such altars or images, or suffer them undestroyed amongst them, the Lord himself threateneth in the first chapter of the book of Numbers, and by his holy prophets, Ezekiel, Micchaeus, and Abacuc, that he will come himself and pull them down.

And how he will handle, punish, and destroy the people that so set up, or suffer such altars, images or idols undestroyed, he denounceth by his prophet Ezekiel on this manner.

[22 : 27] I myself, saith the Lord, will bring a sword over you to destroy your high places. I will cast down your altars and break down your images. Your slain men will I lay before your guards, and the dead carcasses of the children of Israel will I cast before their idols.

Your bones will I sto round about your altars and dwelling places. Your cities shall be desolate, the hill chapels laid waste, your altars destroyed and broken, your guards cast down and taken away, your temples laid even with the ground, your own works clean-rooted out, your slain men shall lie amongst you, that ye may learn to know how that I am the Lord.

And so forth to the chapter's end, worthy with diligence to be read, that they that be near shall perish with the sword, they that be far off with the pestilence, they that flee into holes or wilderness with hunger, and if any be yet left, that they shall be carried away prisoners to servitude and bondage, so that, if either the multitude or plainness of the places might make us to understand, or the earnest charge that God giveth in the said places move us to regard, or the horrible plagues, punishments, and dreadful destruction threatened to such worshippers of images or idols, set us up, or maintain us of them, might engender any fear in our hearts, we would once leave and forsake this wickedness, being in the Lord's sight, so great an offence and abomination.

Infinite places almost might be brought out of the scriptures of the Old Testament concerning this matter, but these few at this time shall serve for all. You will say, poor adventure, these things pertain to the Jews, what have we to do with them?

Indeed, they pertain no less to us Christians than to them, for if we be the people of God, how can the word and law of God not appertain to us? St. Paul, alleging one text out of the Old Testament, concludeth generally for other scriptures of the Old Testament as well as that, saying, Whatsoever is written before, meaning in the Old Testament, is written for our instruction, which sentence is most specially true of such writings of the Old Testament as contain the immutable law and ordinances of God, in no age or time to be altered, nor of any persons of any nations or age to be disobeyed, such as the above rehearsed places be, notwithstanding, for your further satisfying herein, according to my promise, I will out of the scriptures of the New Testament or gospel of our Saviour Christ likewise, make a confirmation of the said doctrine against idols or images, and of our duty concerning the same.

[25 : 00] First, the scriptures of the New Testament do in sundry places make mention with rejoicing, as for a most excellent benefit and gift of God, that they which received the faith of Christ were turned from their dumb and dead images, unto the true and living God, who is to be blessed forever, namely in these places, the 14th and 17th of the Acts of the Apostles, the 11th to the Romans, the 1st Epistle to the Corinthians, the 12th chapter, to the Galatians, the 4th, and the 1st to the Thessalonians, the 1st chapter, and in likewise, the said idols or images, and worshipping of them, are in the scriptures of the New Testament by the Spirit of God most abhorred and detested, and earnestly forbidden, as appeareth both in the four named places, and also many others besides, as in the 7th and 15th of the Acts of the Apostles, the 1st to the Romans, where is set forth the horrible plague of idolaters, given over by God into a reprobate sense, to work all wickedness, and abominations not to be spoken of, as usually spiritual and carnal fornication go together.

In the 1st Epistle to the Corinthians, the 5th chapter, we are forbidden once to keep company, or to eat and drink, with such as be called brethren or Christians that do worship images. In the 5th to the Galatians, the worshipping of images is numbered amongst the works of the flesh.

And the 1st to the Corinthians, the 10th, it is called the service of devils, and that such as use it shall be destroyed. And in the 6th chapter of the said Epistles, and the 5th to the Galatians, is denounced that such image worshippers shall never come into the inheritance of the kingdom of heaven.

And in sundry other places is threatened that the wrath of God shall come upon all such. And therefore, St. John in his epistle exhorteth us, as his dear children, to beware of images.

And St. Paul warneth us to flee from the worshipping of them, if we be wise, that is to say, if we care for health and fear destruction, if we regard the kingdom of God and life everlasting, and dread the wrath of God and everlasting damnation.

[27 : 04] For it is not possible that we should be worshippers of images, and the true servants of God also. As St. Paul teacheth, the 2nd to the Corinthians, the 6th chapter, affirming expressly that there can be no more consent or agreement between the temple of God, which all true Christians be, and images, than between righteousness and unrighteousness, between light and darkness, between the faithful and the unfaithful, or between Christ and the devil, which place enforceth, both that we should not worship images, and that we should not have images in the temple, for fear and occasion of worshipping them, though they be of themselves things indifferent.

For the Christian is the holy temple and lively image of God, as the place well declareth to such as will read and weigh it. And whereas all godly men did ever abhor that any kneeling and worshipping or offering should be used to themselves when they were alive, for that it was the honour due to God only, as appeareth in the Acts of the Apostles, by St. Peter forbidding it to Cornelius, and by St. Paul and Barnabas forbidding the same to the citizens in Lystra.

Yet we, like madmen, fall down before the dead idols or images of Peter and Paul, and give that honour to stocks and stones, which they thought abominable to be given to themselves being alive.

And the good angel of God, as appeareth in the book of St. John's Revelation, refused to be kneeled unto, when that honour was offered him of John. Beware, saith the angel, that thou do it not, for I am thy fellow servant.

But the evil angel Satan desireth nothing so much as to be kneeled unto, and thereby at once both to rob God of his due honour, and work the damnation of such as make him so low courtesy, as in the story of the gospel appeareth in sundry places.

[28 : 46] Yea, and he offered our Saviour Christ all earthly goods on the condition that he would kneel down and worship him. But our Saviour repelleth Satan by the Scriptures, saying, It is written, Thou shalt worship thy Lord God, and him alone shalt thou serve.

But we, by not worshipping and serving God alone, as the Scriptures teacheth us, and by worshipping of images contrary to the Scriptures, pluck Satan to us, and are ready without reward to follow his desire.

Yea, rather than fail, we will offer him gifts and oblations to receive our service. But let us, brethren, rather follow the counsel of the good angel of God than the suggestion of subtle Satan, that wicked angel and old serpent, who, according to the pride whereby he first fell, attempteth always by such sacrilege to deprive God, whom he envieth of his due honour, and because his own face is horrible and ugly, to convey it to himself by the mediation of guilt, stocks, and stones, and withal to make us the enemies of God and his own suppliants and slaves, and, in the end, to procure us for a reward, everlasting destruction and damnation.

Therefore, above all things, if we take ourselves to be Christians indeed, as we be named, let us credit the word, obey the law, and follow the doctrine and example of our Saviour and Master Christ, repelling Satan's suggestion to our idolatry and worshipping of images, according to the truth alleged and taught out of the Testament and Gospel of our said Heavenly Doctor and Schoolmaster, Jesus Christ, who is God, to be blessed forever.

Amen.