

THE BOOKS OF HOMILIES: Book 1—IV. Of the true and lively faith

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- [0 : 00] A short declaration of the true, lively, and Christian faith. The first coming unto God, good Christian people, is through faith, whereby, as it is declared in the last sermon, we be justified before God.
- And, lest any man should be deceived for lack of right understanding hereof, it is diligently to be noted that faith is taken in the scripture two manner of ways. There is one faith which in scripture is called a dead faith, which bringeth forth no good works, but is idle, barren, and unfruitful.
- And this faith by the holy apostle St. James is compared to the faith of devils, which believe God to be true and just, and tremble for fear, yet they do nothing well, but all evil.
- And such a manner of faith have the wicked and naughty Christian people, which confess God, as St. Paul saith, in their mouth, but deny him in their deeds, being abominable, and without the right faith, and to all good works, reprovablen.
- And this faith is a persuasion and belief in man's heart, whereby he knoweth that there is a God, and agreeeth upon all truth of God's most holy word contained in holy scripture, so that it consisteth only in believing of the word of God, that it is true.
- [1 : 14] And this is not properly called faith, but, as he that readeth Caesar's commentaries, believing the same to be true, hath thereby a knowledge of Caesar's life and notable acts, because he believeth the history of Caesar, yet it is not properly said that he believeth in Caesar, of whom he looketh for no help nor benefit.
- Even so, he that believeth that all that is spoken of God in the Bible is true, and yet liveth so ungodly that he cannot look to enjoy the promises and benefits of God, although it may be said that such a man hath a faith and belief to the words of God, yet it is not properly said that he believeth in God, or hath such a faith and trust in God, whereby he may surely look for grace, mercy, and everlasting life at God's hand, but rather for indignation and punishment, according to the merits of his wicked life.
- For, as it is written in a book, intituled to be of Didymus Alexandrinus, Forasmuch as faith without works is dead, it is not now faith, as a dead man is not a man.
- This dead faith, therefore, is not that sure and substantial faith which saveth sinners. Another faith there is in scripture, which is not, as the foresaid faith, idle, unfruitful, and dead, but worketh by charity.
- As St. Paul declareth, in Galatians chapter 5, Which, as the other vain faith is called a dead faith, so may this be called a quick or lively faith. And this is not only the common belief of the articles of our faith, but it is also a sure trust and confidence of the mercy of God, through our Lord Jesus Christ, and a steadfast hope of all good things to be received at God's hand.
- [2 : 52] And that, although we through infirmity or temptation of our ghostly enemy do fall from him by sin, yet, if we return again unto him by true repentance, that he will forgive and forget our offences for his Son's sake, our Saviour Jesus Christ, and will make us inheritors with him of his everlasting kingdom.

And that, in the meantime, until that kingdom come, he will be our protector and defender in all perils and dangers, whatsoever due chance. And that, though sometime he doth send us sharp adversity, yet that evermore he will be a loving Father unto us, correcting us for our sin, but not withdrawing his mercy finally from us, if we trust in him, and commit ourselves wholly unto him, hang only upon him, and call upon him, ready to obey and serve him.

This is the true, lively and unfeigned Christian faith, and is not in the mouth and outward profession only, but it liveth and stirreth inwardly in the heart. And this faith is not without hope and trust in God, nor without the love of God and of our neighbours, nor without the fear of God, nor without the desire to hear God's word, and to follow the same in eschewing evil and doing gladly all good works.

This faith, as St. Paul describeth it, is the sure ground and foundation of the benefits which we ought to look for and trust to receive of God, a certificate and sure looking for them, although they yet sensibly appear not unto us.

And after he saith, He that cometh to God must believe both that he is, and that he is a merciful rewarder of well-doers. And nothing commendeth good men unto God so much as this assured faith and trust in him.

[4 : 33] Of this faith, three things are specially to be noted. First, that this faith doth not lie dead in the heart, but is lively and fruitful in bringing forth good works. Second, that without it can no good works be done that shall be acceptable and pleasant to God.

Third, what manner of good works they be that this faith doth bring forth. For the first, as the light cannot be hid, but will show forth itself at one place or other, so a true faith cannot be kept secret, but when occasion is offered, it will break out and show itself by good works.

And as the living body of a man ever exercitheth such things as belongeth to a natural and living body for nourishment and preservation of the same, as it hath need, opportunity, and occasion, even so the soul that hath a lively faith in it will be doing always some good work, which shall declare that it is living, and will not be unoccupied.

Therefore, when men hear in the scriptures so high commendations of faith that it maketh us to please God, to live with God, and to be the children of God, if then they fantasy that they be set at liberty from doing all good works, and may live as they list, they trifle with God, and deceive themselves.

And it is a manifest token that they be far from having the true and lively faith, and also far from knowledge what true faith meaneth. For the very sure and lively Christian faith is not only to believe all things of God which are contained in Holy Scripture, but also is an earnest trust and confidence in God, that he doth regard us, and that he is careful over us, as the Father is over the child whom he doth love, and that he will be merciful unto us for his only Son's sake, and that we have our Saviour Christ, our perpetual advocate and priest, in whose only merits, oblation, and suffering we do trust that our offences be continually washed and purged, whensoever we, repenting truly, do return to him with our whole heart, steadfastly determining with ourselves, through his grace, to obey and serve him in keeping his commandments, and never to turn back again to sin.

[6 : 39] Such is the true faith that the Scripture doth so much commend. The which, when it seeth and considereth what God hath done for us, is also moved through continual assistance of the Spirit of God, to serve and please him, to keep his favour, to fear his displeasure, to continue his obedient children, showing thankfulness again by observing or keeping his commandments, and that freely, for true love chiefly, and not for dread of punishment or love of temporal reward, considering how clearly, without our deservings, we have received his mercy and pardon freely.

This true faith will show forth itself, and cannot long be idle, for as it is written, the just man doth live by his faith. He neither sleepeth, nor is idle, when he should wake and be well occupied.

And God by his prophet Jeremy saith, that he is a happy and blessed man, which hath faith and confidence in God. For he is like a tree, set by the water side, that spreadeth his roots abroad toward the moisture, and feareth not heat when it cometh.

His leaf will be green, and will not cease to bring forth his fruit. Even so faithful men, putting away all fear of adversity, will show forth the fruit of their good works, as occasion is offered to do them.

Ye have heard in the first part of this sermon, that there be two kinds of faith, a dead and an unfruitful faith, and a faith lively that worketh by charity, the first to be unprofitable, the second necessary for the obtaining of our salvation, the which faith hath charity always joined unto it, and is fruitful, bringing forth all good works.

[8 : 19] Now as concerning the same matter, you shall hear what followeth. The wise man saith, He that believeth in God will hearken unto his commandments. For, if we do not show ourselves faithful in our conversation, the faith which we pretend to have is but a feigned faith, because the true Christian faith is manifestly showed by good living, and not by words only.

As St. Augustine saith, Good living cannot be separated from true faith, which worketh by love. And St. Chrysostom saith, Faith of itself is full of good works.

As soon as a man doth believe, he shall be garnished with them. How plentiful this faith is of good works, and how it maketh the work of one man more acceptable to God than of another, St. Paul teacheth at large in the eleventh chapter to the Hebrews, saying that faith made the oblation of Abel better than the oblation of Cain.

This made Noah to build the ark, this made Abraham to forsake his country, and all his friends, and to go into a far country, there to dwell among strangers. So did also Isaac and Jacob, depending or hanging only of the help and trust that they had in God.

And when they came to the country which God promised them, they would build no cities, towns, nor houses, but live like strangers in tents, that might every day be removed.

[9 : 39] Their trust was so much in God, that they set but little by any worldly thing, for that God had prepared for them better dwelling places in heaven of his own foundation and building.

This faith made Abraham ready at God's commandment to offer his own son and heir Isaac, whom he loved so well, and by whom he was promised to have innumerable issue, among the which one should be born in whom all nations should be blessed, trusting so much in God, that though he were slain, yet that God was able by his omnipotent power to raise him from death and perform his promise.

He mistrusted not the promise of God, although unto his reason everything seemed contrary. He believed verily that God would not forsake him in dearth and famine that was in the country. And in all other dangers that he was brought unto, he trusted ever that God would be his God and his protector and defender, whatsoever he saw to the contrary.

This faith wrought so in the heart of Moses that he refused to be taken for King Pharaoh, his daughter's son, and to have great inheritance in Egypt, thinking it better with the people of God to have affliction and sorrow than with naughty men in sin to live pleasantly for a time.

By faith he cared not for the threatening of King Pharaoh, for his trust was so in God that he passed not of the felicity of this world, but looked for the reward to come in heaven, setting his heart upon the invisible God, as if he had seen him ever present before his eyes.

[11 : 07] By faith the children of Israel passed through the Red Sea, by faith the walls of Jericho fell down without stroke, and many other wonderful miracles have been wrought. In all good men that heretofore have been, faith hath brought forth their good works and obtained the promises of God.

Faith hath stopped the lions' mouths, faith hath quenched the force of fire, faith hath escaped the sword's edges, faith hath given weak men strength, victory in battle, overthrown the armies of infidels, raised the dead to life, faith hath made good men to take adversity and good part.

Some have been mocked and whipped, bound and cast in prison. Some have lost all their goods and lived in great poverty. Some have wandered in mountains, hills and wilderness. Some have been racked, some slain, some stoned, some sawn, some rent in pieces, some headed, some brent without mercy, and would not be delivered, because they looked to rise again to a better state.

All these fathers, martyrs, and other holy men whom St. Paul spake of, had their faith surely fixed in God when all the world was against them. They did not only know God to be the Lord, maker and governor of all men in the world, but also they had a special confidence and trust that he was and would be their God, their comforter, aider, helper, maintainer and defender.

This is the Christian faith which these holy men had and we also ought to have. And although they were not named Christian men, yet was it a Christian faith that they had, for they looked for all benefits of God the Father through the merits of his Son, Jesus Christ, as we now do.

[12 : 46] This difference is between them and us, for they looked when Christ should come, and we be in the time when he is come. Therefore saith St. Augustine, the time is altered and changed, but not the faith, for we both have one faith in one Christ.

The same Holy Ghost also that we have, had they, saith St. Paul. For as the Holy Ghost doth teach us to trust in God and to call upon him as our Father, so did he teach them to say, as it is written, Thou, Lord, art our Father and Redeemer, and thy name is without beginning and everlasting.

God gave them grace to be his children, as he doth us now. But now, by the coming of our Saviour Christ, we have received more abundantly the Spirit of God in our hearts, whereby we may conceive a greater faith and a surer trust than many of them had.

But in effect, they and we be all one. We have the same faith that they had in God, and they the same that we have. And St. Paul so much extolleth their faith, because we should no less, but rather more, give ourselves wholly unto Christ, both in profession and living.

Now when Christ has come, than the old fathers did before his coming. And by all the declaration of St. Paul, it is evident that the true, lively and Christian faith is no dead, vain or unfruitful thing, but a thing of perfect virtue, of wonderful operation or working, and strength, bringing forth all good motions and good works.

[14 : 14] All Holy Scripture agreeably beareth witness that a true, lively faith in Christ doth bring forth good works, and therefore every man must examine and try himself diligently, to know whether he have the same true, lively faith in his heart unfeignedly or not, which he shall know by the fruits thereof.

Many that professed the faith of Christ were in this error, that they thought they knew God and believed in him, when in their life they declared the contrary, which error St. John in his first epistle confuting writeth in this wise, Hereby we are certified that we know God, if we observe his commandments.

He that saith he knoweth God, and observeth not his commandments, is a liar, and the truth is not in him. And again he saith, Whosoever sinneth doth not see God, nor know him.

Let no man deceive you, well-beloved children. And moreover he saith, Hereby we know that we be of the truth, and so we shall persuade our hearts before him. For if our own hearts reprove us, God is above our hearts, and knoweth all things.

Well-beloved, if our hearts reprove us not, then we have confidence in God, and shall have of him whatsoever we ask, because we keep his commandments, and do those things that please him.

[15 : 29] And yet further he saith, Every man that believeth that Jesus is Christ is born of God, and we know that whosoever is born of God doth not sin, but the generation of God purgeth him, and the devil doth not touch him.

And finally he concludeth, and showing the cause why he wrote this epistle, saith, For this cause have I thus written unto you, that you may know that you have everlasting life, which do believe in the Son of God.

And in his third epistle he confirmeth the whole matter of faith and works in few words, saying, He that doeth well is of God, and he that doeth evil knoweth not God.

And as St. John saith that the lively knowledge and faith of God bringeth forth good works, so saith he likewise of hope and charity, that they cannot stand with evil living. Of hope he writeth thus, we know that when God shall appear we shall be like unto him, for we shall see him even as he is.

And whosoever hath this hope in him doth purify himself like as God is pure. And of charity he saith these words, He that doth keep God's word or commandment, in him is truly the perfect love of God.

[16 : 38] And again he saith, This is the love of God, that we should keep his commandments. And St. John wrote not this as a subtle saying devised of his own fantasy, but as a most certain and necessary truth taught unto him by Christ himself, the eternal and infallible Verity, who in many places doth most clearly affirm that faith, hope and charity cannot consist or stand without good and godly works.

Of faith he saith, He that believeth in the Son hath everlasting life, but he that believeth not in the Son shall not see that life, but the wrath of God remaineth upon him.

And the same he confirmeth with a double oath, saying, Forsooth and forsooth I say unto you, He that believeth in me hath everlasting life. Now forasmuch as he that believeth in Christ hath everlasting life, it must needs consequently follow that he that hath this faith must have also good works and be studious to observe God's commandments obediently.

For to them that have evil works and lead their life in disobedience and transgression or breaking of God's commandments without repentance pertaineth not everlasting life, but everlasting death, as Christ himself saith, They that do well shall go into life eternal, but they that do evil shall go into the everlasting fire.

And again he saith, I am the first letter and the last, the beginning and the ending. To him that is a thirst I will give of the well of the water of life freely. He that hath the victory shall have all things, and I will be his God, and he shall be my son.

[18 : 12] But they that be fearful, mistrusting God and lacking faith, they that be cursed people and murderers and fornicators and sorcerers and idolaters and all liars shall have their portion in the lake that burneth with fire and brimstone, which is the second death.

And as Christ undoubtedly affirmeth that true faith bringeth forth good works, so doth he say likewise of charity, Whosoever hath my commandments and keepeth them, that is he that loveth me.

And after he saith, He that loveth me will keep my word, and he that loveth me not keepeth not my words. And as the love of God is tried by good works, so is the fear of God also, as the wise man saith, The dread of God putteth away sin.

And also he saith, He that feareth God will do good works. You have heard in the second part of this sermon that no man should think that he hath that lively faith which Scripture commandeth, when he liveth not obediently to God's laws.

For all good works spring out of that faith. And also it hath been declared unto you by examples that faith maketh men steadfast, quiet, and patient in all afflictions.

[19 : 24] Now as concerning the same matter, you shall hear what followeth. A man may soon deceive himself, and think in his own fantasy that he by faith knoweth God, loveth him, feareth him, and belongeth to him, when in very deed he doeth nothing less.

For the trial of all these things is a very godly and Christian life. He that feeleth his heart set to seek God's honour, and studieth to know the will and commandments of God, and to frame himself thereunto, and leadeth not his life after the desire of his own flesh to serve the devil by sin, but setteth his mind to serve God for God's own sake, and for his sake also to love all his neighbours, whether they be friends or adversaries, doing good to every man as opportunity serveth, and willingly hurting no man, such a man may well rejoice in God, perceiving by the trade of his life that he unfeignedly hath the right knowledge of God, a lively faith, a steadfast hope, a true and unfeigned love and fear of God.

But he that casteth away the yoke of God's commandments from his neck, and giveth himself to live without true repentance, after his own sensual mind and pleasure, not regarding to know God's word, and much less to live according thereunto, such a man clearly deceiveth himself, and seeth not his own heart, if he thinketh that he either knoweth God, loveth him, feareth him, or trusteth in him.

Some peradventure fantasy in themselves that they belong to God, although they live in sin, and so they come to the church and show themselves as God's dear children. But St. John saith plainly, If we say that we have any company with God and walk in darkness, we do lie.

Other do vainly think that they know and love God, although they pass not of his commandments. But St. John saith clearly, He that saith, I know God and keepeth not his commandments, he is a liar.

[21 : 17] Some falsely persuade themselves that they love God when they hate their neighbours. But St. John saith manifestly, If any man say, I love God and yet hateth his brother, he is a liar.

He that saith that he is in the light and hateth his brother, he is still in darkness. He that loveth his brother dwelleth in the light, but he that hateth his brother is in darkness and walketh in darkness and knoweth not whither he goeth, for darkness hath blinded his eyes.

And moreover he saith, Hereby we manifestly know the children of God from the children of the devil. He that doeth not righteously is not the child of God, nor he that hateth his brother.

Deceive not yourselves, therefore, thinking that you have faith in God or that you love God or do trust in him or do fear him when you live in sin. For then your ungodly and sinful life declareth the contrary, whatsoever ye say or think.

It pertaineth to a Christian man to have this true Christian faith and to try himself whether he hath it or no, and to know what belongeth to it and how it doth work in him.

[22 : 22] It is not the world that we can trust to. The world, and all that is therein, is but vanity. It is God that must be our defence and protection against all temptation of wickedness and sin, errors, superstition, idolatry, and all evil.

If all the world were on our side and God against us, what could the world avail us? Therefore let us set our whole faith and trust in God, and neither the world, the devil, nor all the power of them shall prevail against us.

Let us therefore, good Christian people, try and examine our faith what it is. Let us not flatter ourselves, but look upon our works and so judge of our faith what it is.

Christ himself speaketh of this matter and saith, the tree is known by the fruit. Therefore let us do good works, and thereby declare our faith to be the lively Christian faith.

Let us, by such virtues as ought to spring out of faith, show our election to be sure and stable, as St. Peter teacheth. Endeavour yourselves to make your calling and choosing certain by good works.

[23 : 26] And also, he saith, minister or declare in your faith virtue, in virtue knowledge, in knowledge temperance, in temperance patience, again in patience godliness, in godliness brotherly charity, in brotherly charity love.

So shall we show indeed that we have the very lively Christian faith, and may so both certify our conscience the better that we be in the right faith, and also by these means confirm other men.

If these fruits do not follow, we do but mock with God, deceive ourselves and also other men. Well may we bear the name of Christian men, but we do lack the true faith that doth belong thereunto.

For true faith doth ever bring forth good works, as St. James saith, show me thy faith by thy deeds. Thy deeds and works must be an open testimonial of thy faith.

Otherwise thy faith, being without good works, is but the devil's faith, the faith of the wicked, a fantasy of faith, and not a true Christian faith. Alike as the devils and evil people, be nothing the better for their counterfeit faith, but it is unto them the more cause of damnation.

[24 : 32] So they that be christened, and have received knowledge of God, and of Christ's merits, and yet of a set purpose do live idly, without good works, thinking the name of a naked faith to be either sufficient for them, or else setting their minds upon vain pleasures of this world, do live in sin without repentance, not uttering the fruits that do belong to such an high profession, upon such presumptuous persons and willful sinners, must needs remain the great vengeance of God, and eternal punishment in hell, prepared for the devil and wicked livers.

Therefore, as you profess the name of Christ, good Christian people, let no such fantasy and imagination of faith at any time beguile you, but be sure of your faith, try it by your living, look upon the fruits that cometh of it, mark the increase of love and charity by it toward God and your neighbour, and so shall you perceive it to be a true lively faith.

If you feel and perceive such a faith in you, rejoice in it and be diligent to maintain it and keep it still in you. Let it be daily increasing and more and more by well working and so shall ye be sure that you shall please God by this faith and at the length as other faithful men have done before, so shall you when his will is come to him and receive the end and final reward of your faith as Saint Peter nameth it, the salvation of your souls, the which God grant us that hath promised the same unto his faithful, to whom be all honour and glory world without end.

Amen.