

THE BOOKS OF HOMILIES: Book 2—IV. Of good works. And first of Fasting

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Date: 22 April 2021

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[0 : 00] An homily of good works and first of fasting. The life which we live in this world, good Christian people, is of the free benefit of God lent us, yet not to use it at our pleasure after our own fleshly will, but to trade over the same in those works which are befitting them that are become new creatures in Christ.

These works the apostle calleth good works, saying, We are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to good works, which God hath ordained that we should walk in them, and yet his meaning is not by these words to induce us to have any affiance or to put any confidence in our works, as by the merit and deserving of them to purchase to ourselves and others remission of sin, and so consequently everlasting life.

For that were mere blasphemy against God's mercy and great derogation to the bloodshedding of our Saviour Jesus Christ, for it is of the free grace and mercy of God by the mediation of the blood of his Son Jesus Christ, without merit or deserving on our part, that our sins are forgiven us, that we are reconciled and brought again into his favour, and are made heirs of his heavenly kingdom.

Grace, saith St. Augustine, belongeth to God who doth call us, and then hath he good works whosoever received grace. Good works, then, bring not forth grace, but are brought forth by grace.

The wheels, saith he, turneth round, not to the end that it may be made round, but because it is first made round, therefore it turneth round. So no man doeth good works to receive grace by his good works, but because he hath first received grace, therefore consequently he doeth good works.

[1 : 36] And in another place he saith, Good works go not before in him which shall afterward be justified, but good works do follow after, when a man is first justified. St. Paul therefore teacheth that we must do good works for diverse respects, first to show ourselves obedient children unto our heavenly Father, who hath ordained them that we should walk in them, secondly for that they are good declarations and testimonies of our justification, thirdly that others, seeing our good works, may the rather by them be stirred up and excited to glorify our Father which is in heaven.

Let us not therefore be slack to do good works, seeing it is the will of God that we should walk in them, assuring ourselves that at the last day every man shall receive of God, for his labour done in true faith, a greater reward than his works have deserved.

And because somewhat shall now be spoken of one particular good work, whose commendation is both in the law and in the gospel, thus much is said in the beginning generally of all good works, first to remove out of the way of the simple and unlearned this dangerous stumbling block, that any man should go about to purchase or buy heaven with his works, secondly to take away, so high as may be, from envious minds and slanderous tongues, all just occasion of slanderous speaking, as though good works were rejected.

This good work which shall now be entreated of is fasting, which is found in the scriptures to be of two sorts, the one outward, pertaining to the body, the other inward, in the heart and mind.

This outward fast is an abstinence from meat, drink, and all natural food, yea, from all delicious pleasures and delectations worldly. When this outward fast pertaineth to one particular man or to a few, and not to the whole number of the people, for causes which hereafter shall be declared, then it is called a private fast.

[3 : 24] But when the whole multitude of men, women, and children in a township or city, yea, through a whole country, do fast, it is called a public fast. Such was that fast which the whole multitude of the children of Israel were commanded to keep the tenth day of the seventh month, because Almighty God appointed that day to be a cleansing day, a day of an atonement, a time of reconciliation, a day wherein the people were cleansed from their sins.

The order and manner how it was done is written in the 16th and 23rd chapter of Leviticus. That day the people did lament, mourn, weep, and bewail their former sins.

And whosoever upon that day did not humble his soul, bewailing his sins, as is said, abstaining from all bodily food until the evening, that soul, saith Almighty God, should be destroyed from among his people.

We do not read that Moses ordained by order of law any days of public fast throughout the whole year, more than that one day. The Jews notwithstanding had more times of common fasting, which the prophet Zachary reciteth to be the fast of the fourth, the fast of the fifth, the fast of the seventh, and the fast of the tenth month.

But for that it appeareth not in the Levitical law when they were instituted, it is to be judged that those other times of fasting, more than the fast of the seventh month, were ordained among the Jews by the appointment of their governors, rather of devotion than by any open commandment given from God.

[4 : 50] Upon the ordinance of this general fast, good men took occasion to appoint to themselves private fasts, at such times as they did either earnestly lament and bewail their sinful lives, or did addict themselves to more fervent prayer, that it might please God to turn his wrath from them, when either they were admonished and brought to the consideration thereof by the preaching of the prophets, or otherwise when they saw present danger to hang over their heads.

This sorrowfulness of heart, joined with fasting, they uttered some time by their outward behaviour and gesture of body, putting on sackcloth, sprinkling themselves with ashes and dust, and sitting or lying upon the earth.

For when good men feel in themselves the heavy burden of sin, see damnation to be the reward of it, and behold with the eye of their mind the horror of hell, they tremble, they quake, and are inwardly touched with sorrowfulness of heart for their offences, and cannot but accuse themselves, and open this their grief unto Almighty God, and call unto him for mercy.

This being done seriously, their mind is so occupied, partly with sorrow and heaviness, partly with an earnest desire to be delivered from this danger of hell and damnation, that all lust of meat and drink is laid apart, and loathsomeness of all worldly things and pleasures cometh in place, so that nothing then liketh them more than to weep, to lament, to mourn, and both with words and behavioural body, to show themselves weary of this life.

Thus did David fast, when he made intercession to Almighty God for the child's life, begotten in adultery of Bethsabe, Uri's wife. King Achab fasted after this sort, when it repented him of murdering of Naboth, and bewailed his own sinful doings.

[6 : 32] Such was the Ninevites' fast, brought to repentance by Jonas' preaching, When forty thousand of the Israelites were slain in battle against the Benjamites, the scripture saith, All the children of Israel and the whole multitude of people went out to Bethel, and sat there weeping before the Lord, and fasted all that day until night.

So did Daniel, Hester, Nehemiah, And many others in the Old Testament fast. But if any man will say, It is true, so they fasted indeed, but we are not now under that yoke of the law, we are set at liberty by the freedom of the gospel, therefore those rights and customs of the old law bind not us, except it can be showed by the scriptures of the New Testament, or by examples out of the same, that fasting now under the gospel is a restraint of meat, drink, and all bodily food and pleasures from the body, as before.

First, that we ought to fast is a truth more manifest than that it should here need to be proved. The scriptures which teach the same are evident. The doubt, therefore, that is, is whether, when we fast, we ought to withhold from our bodies all meat and drink during the time of our fast, or no.

That we ought so to do may be well gathered upon a question moved by the Pharisees to Christ, and by his answer again to the same. Wise, say they, do John's disciples fast often and pray, and we likewise, but thy disciples eat and drink, and fast not at all.

In this smooth question they couch up subtly this argument or reason, Whoso fasteth not, that man is not of God. For fasting and prayer are works both commended and commanded of God in his scriptures, and all good men from Moses till this time, as well the prophets as others, have exercised themselves in these works.

[8 : 17] John also and his disciples at this day do fast oft, and pray much, and so do we, the Pharisees, in like manner. But thy disciples fast not at all, which, if thou wilt deny, we can easily prove it.

For whosoever eateth and drinketh fasteth not. Thy disciples eat and drink, therefore they fast not. Of this we conclude, say they, necessarily, that neither art thou, nor yet thy disciples, of God.

Christ maketh answer, saying, Can you make that the children of the wedding shall fast while the bridegroom is with them? The days shall come when the bridegroom shall be taken from them. In those days shall they fast.

Our Saviour Christ, like a good master, defendeth the innocency of his disciples against the malice of the arrogant Pharisees, and proveth that his disciples are not guilty of transgressing any jot of God's law, although as then they fasted not.

And in his answer reproveth the Pharisees of superstition and ignorance. Superstition because they put a religion in their doings, and ascribed holiness to the outward work wrought, not regarding to what end fasting is ordained.

[9 : 21] Of ignorance, for that they could not discern between time and time, they knew not that there is a time of rejoicing and mirth, and a time again of lamentation and mourning, which both he teacheth in his answer, as shall be touched more largely hereafter, when we shall show what time is most fit to fast in.

But here, beloved, let us know that our Saviour Christ, in making his answer to their question, denied not, but confessed, that his disciples fasted not, and therefore agreeeth to the Pharisees in this, as unto a manifest truth, that whoso eateth and drinketh fasteth not.

Fasting then, even by Christ's assent, is a withholding of meat, drink, and all natural food from the body for the determined time of fasting, and that it was used in the primitive church, appeareth most evidently by the Chalcedon Council, one of the four first general councils.

The fathers assembled there, to the number of 630, considering with themselves how acceptable a thing fasting is to God, when it is used according to his word. Again, having before their eyes also the great abuses of the same crept into the church at those days, through the negligence of them which should have taught the people the right use thereof, and by vain glosses devised of men, to reform the said abuses, and to restore this so good and godly a work, to the true use thereof, decreed in that council, that every person, as well in his private as public fast, should continue all the day without meat and drink till after the evening prayer, and whosoever did eat or drink before the evening prayer was ended, should be accounted and reputed not to consider the purity of his fast.

This canon teacheth so evidently how fasting was used in the primitive church, as by words it cannot be more plainly expressed. Fasting then, by the decree of those six hundred and thirty fathers, grounding their determination in this matter upon the sacred scriptures, a long-continued usage or practice, both of the prophets and other godly persons before the coming of Christ, and also of the apostles and other devout men in the New Testament, is a withholding of meat, drink, and all natural food from the body for the determined time of fasting.

[11 : 32] Thus much is spoken hitherto to make plain unto you what fasting is. Now hereafter shall be showed the true and right use of fasting. Good works are not all of one sort, for some are of themselves and of their own proper nature always good, as to love God above all things, to love my neighbour as myself, to honour father and mother, to honour the higher powers, to give to every man that which is his due, and such like.

Other works there be, which considered in themselves without further respect, are of their own nature mere indifferent, that is, neither good nor evil, but take their denomination of the use or end whereunto they serve.

Which works, having a good end, are called good works, and are so indeed, but yet that cometh not of themselves, but of the good end whereunto they are referred? On the other side, if the end that they serve unto be evil, it cannot then otherwise be, but that they must needs be evil also.

Of this sort of works is fasting, which of itself is a thing merely indifferent, but is made better or worse by the end that it serveth unto. For when it respecteth a good end, it is a good work, but the end being evil, the work itself is also evil.

To fast then with this persuasion of mind, that our fasting and other good works can make us good, perfect and just men, and finally bring us to heaven, this is a devilish persuasion, and that fast so far off from pleasing God, that it refuseth his mercy, and is altogether derogatory to the merits of Christ's death and his precious bloodshedding.

[13 : 05] Thus doth the parable of the Pharisee and the publican teach. Two men, saith Christ, went up together to the temple to pray, the one a Pharisee, the other a publican. The Pharisee stood and prayed thus within himself, I thank thee, O God, that I am not as other men are, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, and as this publican is.

I fast twice in the week, I give tithes of all that I possess. The publican stood afar off, and would not lift up his eyes to heaven, but smote his breast and said, God, be merciful to me, a sinner.

In the person of this Pharisee, our Saviour Christ setteth out to the eye and to the judgment of the world, a perfect, just, and righteous man, such one as is not spotted with those vices that men commonly are infected with, extortion, bribery, pulling and pilling their neighbours, robbers and spoilers of commonwealths, crafty and subtle in chopping and changing, using false weights and detestable perjury in their buying and selling, fornicators, adulterers, and vicious livers.

This Pharisee was no such man, neither faulty in any such like notorious crime, but where other transgressed by leaving things undone which yet the law required, this man did more than was requisite by law, for he fasted twice in the week and gave tithes of all that he had.

What could the world then justly blame in this man? Yea, what outward thing more could be desired in him to make him a more perfect and a more just man? Truly nothing by man's judgment, and yet our Saviour Christ prefereth the poor publican without fasting before him with his fast.

[14 : 39] The cause why he doth so is manifest, for the publican, having no good works at all to trust unto, yielded up himself unto God, confessing his sins, and hoped certainly to be saved by God's free mercy only.

The Pharisee gloried and trusted so much to his works that he thought himself sure enough without mercy, and that he should come to heaven by his fasting and other deeds. To this end serveth that parable, for it is spoken to them that trusted in themselves that they were righteous and despised other.

Now because the Pharisee directed his works to an evil end, seeking by them justification, which indeed is the proper work of God without our merits, his fasting twice in the week and all his other works, though they were never so many and seemed to the world never so good and holy, yet in very deed before God they are altogether evil and abominable.

The mark also that the hypocrites shoot at with their fast is to appear holy in the eye of the world, and so to win commendation and praise of men. But our Saviour Christ saith of them, They have their reward, that is, they have praise and commendation of men, but of God they have none at all.

For whatsoever tendeth to an evil end is itself by that evil end made evil also. Again, so long as we keep ungodliness in our hearts and suffer wicked thoughts to tarry there, though we fast as oft as did either St. Paul or John Baptist, and keep it as straightly as did the Ninevites, yet shall it be not only unprofitable to us, but also a thing that greatly displeaseth Almighty God.

[16 : 10] For he saith that his soul abhorreth and hateth such fastings, yea, they are a burden unto him, and he is weary of bearing them, and therefore he inveigheth most sharply against them, saying by the mouth of the prophet Esau, Behold, when ye fast, your lust remaineth still, for ye do no less violence to your debtors.

Lo, ye fast to strife and debate, and to smite with the fist of wickedness. Now ye shall not fast thus, that you may make your voice to be heard above. Think ye this fast pleaseth me, that a man should chasten himself for a day?

Should that be called a fasting, or a day that pleaseth the Lord? Now, dearly beloved, seeing that Almighty God alloweth not our fast for the work's sake, but chiefly respecteth our heart, how it is effected, and then esteemeth our fast, either good or evil, by the end that it serveth for, it is our part to rent our hearts and not our garments, as we are advertised by the prophet Joel.

That is, our sorrow and mourning must be inward in the heart, and not in outward show only. Yea, it is requisite that first, before all things, we cleanse our hearts from sin, and then to direct our fast to such an end as God will allow to be good.

There be three ends, whereunto if our fast be directed, it is then a work profitable to us, and accepted of God. The first is, to chastise the flesh, that it be not too wanton, but tamed and brought in subjection to the spirit.

[17 : 35] This respect had St. Paul in his fast when he said, I chastise my body, and bring it into subjection, lest by any means it cometh to pass that, when I have preached to other, I myself be found a castaway.

The second, that the spirit may be more fervent and earnest in prayer. To this end fasted the prophets and teachers that were at Antioch, before they sent forth Paul and Barnabas to preach the gospel.

The same two apostles fasted for the like purpose, when they commended to God by their earnest prayers the congregations that were at Antioch, Pisidia, Iconium, and Lystra, as we read in the Acts of the Apostles.

The third, that our fast be a testimony and witness with us before God, of our humble submission to his high majesty, when we confess and acknowledge our sins unto him, and are inwardly touched with sorrowfulness of heart, bewailing the same in the affliction of our bodies.

These are the three ends or right uses of fasting. The first belongeth most properly to private fast, the other two are common as well to public fast as to private, and thus much for the use of fasting.

[18 : 39] Lord, have mercy upon us, and give us grace, that while we live in this miserable world, we may through thy help bring forth this and such other fruits of the Spirit, commended and commanded in thy holy word, to the glory of thy name, and to our comforts, that after the race of this wretched life, we may live everlastingly with thee in thy heavenly kingdom, not for the merits and worthiness of our works, but for thy mercy's sake, and the merits of thy dear Son, Jesus Christ, to whom with thee and the Holy Ghost be all Lord, honour and glory, for ever and ever.

Amen. In the former homily, beloved, was showed that, among the people of the Jews, fasting as it was commanded them from God by Moses, was to abstain the whole day from morrow till night, from meat, drink, and all manner of food that nourisheth the body, and that whoso tasted ought before the evening on the day appointed to fasting, was accounted among them a breaker of his fast.

Which order, though it seemeth strange to some in these our days, because it hath not been so used generally in this realm of many years past, yet that it was so among God's people, I mean the Jews, whom before the coming of our Saviour Christ, God did vouchsafe to choose unto himself a peculiar people above all other nations of the earth, and that our Saviour Christ so understood it, and the apostles after Christ's ascension did so use it, was there sufficiently proved by the testimonies and examples of the Holy Scriptures, as well of the New Testament as of the Old.

The true use of fasting was there also showed. In the second part of this homily shall be showed that no constitution or law made by man for things which of their own proper nature be mere indifferent can bind the conscience of Christian men to a perpetual observation and keeping thereof, but that the higher powers hath full liberty to alter and change every such law and ordinance, either ecclesiastical or political, when time and place shall require.

But first an answer shall be made to a question that some may make, demanding what judgment we ought to have of such abstinences as are appointed by public order and laws made by princes and by the authority of the magistrates, upon policy, not respecting any religion at all in the same, as when any realm, in consideration of the maintaining of fisher towns bordering upon the seas, and for the increase of fishermen, of whom do spring mariners to go upon the sea, to the furnishing of the navy of the realm, whereby not only the commodities of other countries may be transported, but also may be a necessary defence to resist the invasion of the adversary.

[21 : 15] For the better understanding of this question, it is necessary that we make a difference between the policies of princes made for the ordering of their commonweals in provision of things serving to the more sure defence of their subjects and countries, and between ecclesiastical policies in prescribing such works by which, as by secondary means, God's wrath may be pacified and his mercy purchased.

Positive laws made by princes for conservation of their policy, not repugnant unto God's law, ought of all Christian subjects with reverence of the magistrate to be obeyed, not only for fear of punishment, but also, as the apostle saith, for conscience sake.

Conscience, I say, not of the thing, which of the own nature is indifferent, but of our obedience, which by the law of God we owe unto the magistrate, as unto God's minister. By which positive laws, though we subjects, for certain times and days appointed, be restrained from some kinds of meats and drink, which God by his holy word hath left free to be taken and used of all men with thanksgiving in all places and at all times.

Yet, for that such laws of princes and other magistrates are not made to put holiness in one kind of meat and drink more than another, to make one day more holy than another, but are grounded merely upon policy, all subjects are bound in conscience to keep them by God's commandment, who by the apostle willeth all, without exception, to submit themselves unto the authority of the higher powers.

And in this point concerning our duties, which be here dwelling in England, environed with the sea as we be, we have great occasion in reason to take the commodities of the water, which Almighty God by his divine providence hath laid so nigh unto us, whereby the increase of victuals upon the land may the better be spared and cherished, to the sooner reducing of victuals to a more moderate price, to the better sustenance of the poor.

[23 : 04] And doubtless he seemeth to be too dainty an Englishman, which, considering the great commodities which may ensue, will not forbear some piece of his licentious appetite upon the ordinance of his prince with the consent of the wise of the realm.

What good English heart would not wish the old ancient glory should return to the realm, wherein it hath with great commendations excelled before our days, in the furniture of the navy of the same?

What will more daunt the hearts of the adversary than to see us well fenced and armed on the sea as we be reported to be on the land? If the prince requested our obedience to forbear one day from flesh more than we do, and to be contented with one meal in the same day, should not our own commodity thereby persuade us to subjection?

But now that two meals be permitted on that day to be used, which sometime our elders in very great numbers in the realm did use with one only spare meal, and that in fish only, shall we think it so great a burden that it is prescribed?

Furthermore, consider the decay of the towns nigh the seas, which should be most ready by the number of the people there to repulse the enemy, and we which dwell further off upon the land, having them as our buckler to defend us, should be the more insurty.

[24 : 16] If they be our neighbours, why should we not wish them to prosper? If they be our defence, as nighest at hand to repel the enemy, to keep out the rage of the seas, which else would break upon our fair pastures, why should we not cherish them?

Neither do we urge that in the ecclesiastical policy prescribing a form of fasting to humble ourselves in the sight of Almighty God, that that order which was used among the Jews, and practised by Christ's apostles after his ascension, is of such force and necessity, that that only ought to be used among Christians and none other.

For that were to bind God's people unto the yoke and burden of Moses' policy, yea, it were the very way to bring us, which are set at liberty by the freedom of Christ's gospel, into the bondage of the law again, which God forbid that any man should attempt or purpose.

But to this end it serveth, to show how far the order of fasting now used in the church at this day differeth from that which then was used. God's church ought not, neither may it be so tied to that or any other order now made or hereafter to be made and devised by the authority of man, but that it may lawfully for just causes alter, change, or mitigate those ecclesiastical decrees and orders, yea, recede wholly from them and break them, when they tend either to superstition or to impiety, when they draw the people from God, rather than work any edification in them.

This authority Christ himself used and left it unto his church. He used it, I say, for the order or decree made by the elders for washing off times, which was diligently observed of the Jews, yet, tending to superstition, our Saviour Christ altered and changed the same in his church into a profitable sacrament, the sacrament of our regeneration or new birth.

[25 : 58] This authority to mitigate laws and decrees ecclesiastical, the apostles practiced, when they, writing from Jerusalem unto the congregation that was Tantioch, signified unto them that they would not lay any further burden upon them, but these necessities, that is, that they should abstain from things offered unto idols, from blood, from that which is strangled, and from fornication, notwithstanding that Moses' law required many other observances.

This authority to change the orders, decrees, and constitutions of the church was after the apostles' time used of the fathers about the manner of fasting, as it appeareth in the Tripartite History, where it is thus written, Touching fasting, we find that it was diversely used in diverse places by diverse men, for they at Rome fast three weeks together before Easter, saving upon the Saturdays and Sundays, which fast they call Lent, and after a few lines in the same place it followeth, they have not all one uniform order in fasting, for some do fast and abstain both from fish and flesh, some when they fast eat nothing but fish, others there are which, when they fast, eat of all waterfowls as well as of fish, grounding themselves upon Moses, that such fowls have their substance of the water, as the fishes have, some others, when they fast, will neither eat herbs nor eggs, some fasters there are that eat nothing but dry bread, others, when they fast, eat nothing at all, no, not so much as dry bread, some fast from all manner of food till night, and then eat without making any choice or difference of meats, and a thousand such like diverse kinds of fasting may be found in diverse places of the world, of diverse men diversely used, and for all this great diversity in fasting, yet charity, the very true bond of Christian peace, was not broken, neither did the diversity of fasting break at any time their agreement and concord in faith, to abstain sometime from certain meats, not because the meats are evil, but because they are not necessary, this abstinence, saith St. Augustine, is not evil, and to restrain the use of meats which necessity and time shall require, this, saith he, doth properly pertain to Christian men.

Thus ye have heard, good people, first that Christian subjects are bound even in conscience to obey princes' laws, which are not repugnant to the laws of God. Ye have also heard that Christ's church is not so bound to observe any order, law, or decree made by man to prescribe a form in religion, but that the church hath full power and authority from God to change and alter the same, when need shall require, which hath been showed you by the example of our Saviour Christ, by the practice of the apostles and of the fathers since that time.

Now shall be showed briefly what time is meat for fasting, for all times serve not for all things, but as the wise man saith, all things have their times, there is a time to weep and a time again to laugh, a time to mourn and a time to rejoice, etc.

Our Saviour Christ excused his disciples and reproved the Pharisees because they neither regarded the use of fasting nor considered what time was meat for the same, which both he teacher in his answer, saying, The children of the marriage cannot mourn while the bridegroom is with them.

[29 : 10] Their question was of fasting. His answer is of mourning, signifying unto them plainly that the outward fast of the body is no fast before God, except it be accompanied with the inward fast, which is a mourning and a lamentation in the heart, as is before declared.

Concerning the time of fasting, he saith, The days will come when the bridegroom shall be taken from them, in those days they shall fast. By this it is manifest that it is no time of fasting while the marriage lasteth, and the bridegroom is there present.

But when the marriage is ended and the bridegroom gone, then is it a meek time to fast. Now to make plain unto you what is the sense and meaning of these words, we are at the marriage and again the bridegroom is taken from us.

Ye shall note that so long as God revealeth his mercy unto us and giveth us of his benefits, either spiritual or corporal, we are said to be with the bridegroom at the marriage. So was that good old father Jacob at the marriage when he understood that his son Joseph was alive and ruled all Egypt under king Pharaoh.

So was David in the marriage with the bridegroom when he had gotten the victory of great Goliath and had smitten off his head. Judith and all the people of Bethulia were the children of the wedding and had the bridegroom with them when God had by the hand of a woman slain Holofernes, the grand captain of the Assyrians' host and discomfited all their enemies.

[30 : 30] Thus were the apostles the children of the marriage while Christ was corporally present with them and defended them from all dangers both spiritual and corporal. But the marriage is said then to be ended and the bridegroom to be gone when almighty God smiteth us with affliction and seemeth to leave us in the midst of a number of adversities.

So God sometimes striketh private men privately with sundry adversities as trouble of mind, loss of friends, loss of goods, long and dangerous sicknesses, etc. Then is it a fit time for that man to humble himself to almighty God by fasting and to mourn and bewail his sins with a sorrowful heart and to pray unfaintedly saying with the prophet David Turn away thy face O Lord from my sins and blot out of thy remembrance all mine offences.

Again when God shall afflict a whole region or country with wars with famine with pestilence with strange diseases and unknown sicknesses and other such like calamities then is it time for all states and sorts of people high and low men, women and children to humble themselves by fasting and bewail their sinful living before God and pray with one common voice saying thus or some other such like prayer Be favourable O Lord be favourable unto thy people which turneth unto thee in weeping fasting and praying Spare thy people whom thou hast redeemed with thy precious blood and suffer not thine inheritance to be destroyed and brought to confusion Fasting thus used with prayer is of great efficacy and weith much with God so the angel Raphael told Tobias It also appeareth by that which our saviour Christ answered to his disciples demanding of him why they could not cast forth the evil spirit out of him that was brought unto them This kind saith he is not cast out but by fasting and prayer

How available fast is how much it weith with God and what it is able to obtain at his hand cannot better be set forth than by opening unto you and laying before you some of those notable things that have been brought to pass by it Fasting was one of the means whereby almighty God was occasioned to alter the thing which he had purposed concerning Ahab for murdering the innocent man Naboth to possess his vineyard God spake unto Elias saying Go thy way and say unto Ahab Hast thou killed and also gotten possession?

Thus saith the Lord In the place where dogs lick the blood of Naboth shall dogs even lick thy blood also Behold I will bring evil upon thee and will take away thy posterity Yea the dogs shall eat him of Ahab's stock that dieth in the city and him that dieth in the fields shall the fowls of the air eat This punishment had almighty God determined for Ahab in this world and to destroy all the male kind that was begotten of Ahab's body besides that punishment which should have happened unto him in the world to come When Ahab heard this he rent his clothes and put sackcloth upon him and fasted and lay in sackcloth and went barefooted Then the word of the Lord came unto Elias saying Seest thou how Ahab is humbled before me because he submiteth himself before me I will not bring that evil in his days but in his son's days will I bring it upon his house Although Ahab through the wicked counsel of Jezebel his wife had committed shameful murder and against all right disinherited and dispossessed forever Naboth's stock of that vineyard yet upon his humble submission in heart unto God which he declared outwardly by putting on sackcloth and fasting

[34 : 01] God changed his sentence so that the punishment which he had determined fell not upon Ahab's house in his time but was differed unto the days of Joram his son Here we may see of what force our outward fast is when it is accompanied with the inward fast of the mind which is as is said a sorrowfulness of heart detesting and bewailing our sinful doings The like is to be seen in the Ninevites for when God had determined to destroy the whole city of Nineveh and the time which he had appointed was even now at hand he sent the prophet Jonas to say unto them Yet forty days a Nineveh shall be overthrown The people by and by believed God and gave themselves to fasting Yea the king by the advice of his counsel caused to be proclaimed saying Let neither man nor beast bullock nor sheep taste anything neither feed nor drink water but let man and beast put on sackcloth and cry mightily unto God Yea let every man turn from his evil way and from the wickedness that is in their hands

Who can tell if God will turn and repent and turn away from his fierce wrath that we perish not And upon this their hearty repentance thus declared outwardly with fasting renting of their clothes putting on sackcloth and sprinkling themselves with dust and ashes The scripture saith God saw their works that they turned from their evil ways and God repented of the evil that he had said that he would do unto them and he did it not Now beloved ye have heard first what fasting is as well that which is outward in the body as that which is inward in the heart Ye have heard also that there are three ends or purposes where unto if our outward fast be directed it is a good work that God is pleased with Thirdly hath been declared what time is most meet for to fast either privately or publicly Last of all what things fasting hath obtained of God by the examples of Ahab and the Ninevites Let us therefore dearly beloved seeing there are many more causes of fasting and mourning in these our days than hath been of many years heretofore in any one age endeavour ourselves both inwardly in our hearts and also outwardly with our bodies diligently to exercise this godly exercise of fasting in such sort and manner as the holy prophets the apostles and diverse other devout persons for their time used the same

God is now the same God that was then God that loveth righteousness and that hateth iniquity God which willeth not the death of a sinner but rather that he turn from his wickedness and live God that hath promised to turn to us if we refuse not to turn unto him Yea if we turn our evil works from before his eyes cease to do evil learn to do well seek to do right relieve the oppressed be a right judge to the fatherless defend the widow break our bread to the hungry bring the poor that wander into our house clothe the naked and despise not our brother which is our own flesh then shalt thou call saith the prophet and the lord shall answer thou shalt cry and he shall say here I am Yea God which heard Ahab and the Ninevites and spared them will also hear our prayers and spare us so that we after their example will unfeignedly turn unto him Yea he will bless us with his heavenly benedictions the time that we have to tarry in this world and after the race of this mortal life he will bring us to his heavenly kingdom where we shall reign in everlasting blessedness with our Saviour Christ to whom with the Father and the Holy Ghost be all honour and glory for ever and ever

Amen