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THE BOOKS OF HOMILIES: Book 1—II. Of the Misery of All Mankind

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For the Easter season, I am reading the Books of Homilies, using John Griffiths' 1859 edition (https://prydain.files.wordpress.com/2012/09/the_two_books_of_homilies.pdf).

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Transcript

A sermon of the misery of all mankind and of his condemnation to death everlasting by his own sin. The Holy Ghost, in writing the Holy Scripture, is in nothing more diligent than to pull down man's vainglory and pride, which of all vices is most universally grafted in all mankind, even from the first infection of our first father Adam. And therefore we read in many places of Scripture many notable lessons against this old root advice to teach us the most commendable virtue of humility, how to know ourselves, and to remember what we be of ourselves.

In the book of Genesis, Almighty God giveth us all a title and name in our great grandfather Adam, which ought to warn us all to consider what we be, whereof we be, from whence we came, and whither we shall, saying thus, In the sweat of thy face shalt thou eat thy bread, till thou be turned again into the ground. For out of it wast thou taken, inasmuch as thou art dust, and into dust shalt thou be turned again. Here, as it were in a glass, we may learn to know ourselves to be but ground, earth, and ashes, and

that to earth and ashes we shall return.

Also the holy patriarch Abraham did well remember this name and title, dust, earth, and ashes, appointed and assigned by God to all mankind, and therefore he calleth himself by that name, when he maketh his earnest prayer for Sodom and Gomorrah. And we read that Judith, Hester, Job, Hiram, with other holy men and women in the Old Testament, did use sackcloth, and to cast dust and ashes upon their heads, when they bewailed their sinful living. They called and cried to God for help and mercy with such a ceremony of sackcloth, dust, and ashes, that thereby they might declare to the whole world what an humble and lowly estimation they had of themselves, and how well they remembered their name and title aforesaid, their vile, corrupt, frail nature, dust, earth, and ashes.

The book of wisdom also, willing to pull down our proud stomachs, moveth us diligently to remember our mortal and earthly generation, which we have all of him that was first made, and that all men, as well kings as subjects, come into this world and go out of the same in like sort, that is, as of ourselves, full miserable, as we may daily see. And almighty God commanded his prophet Esai to make a proclamation, and cried to the whole world, and Esai asking, What shall I cry? The Lord answered, Cry that all flesh is grass, and that all the glory thereof is but as the flower of the field. When the grass is withered, the flower falleth away, when the wind of the Lord bloweth upon it.

The people surely is grass, the witch dryeth up, and the flower fadeth away. And the holy prophet Job, having in himself great experience of the miserable and sinful estate of man, doth open the same to the world in these words, Man, saith he, that is born of a woman, living but a short time, is full of manifold miseries. He springeth up like a flower, and fadeth again, vanishing away as it were a shadow, and never continueth in one state.

And dost thou judge it meet, O Lord, to open thine eyes upon such a one, and to bring him to judgment with thee? Who can make him clean that is conceived of an unclean seed? And all men of their evilness and natural proneness were so universally given to sin, that, as the scripture saith, God repented that ever he made man, and by sin his indignation was so much provoked against the world, that he drowned all the world with Noah's flood, except Noah himself and his little household. It is not without great cause that the scripture of God doth so many times call all men here in this world by this word, Earth. O thou, Earth, Earth, Earth, saith Jeremy, hear the word of the Lord, this our right name, calling, and title, Earth, Earth, Earth, pronounced by the prophet, showeth what we be indeed, by whatsoever other style, title, or dignity men do call us.

Thus he plainly nameth us, who knoweth best both what we be, and what we ought of right to be called. And thus he setteth us forth, speaking by his faithful apostle St. Paul, All men, Jews and Gentiles, are under sin. There is none righteous, no, not one.

There is none that understandeth, there is none that seeketh after God. They are all gone out of the way, they are all unprofitable, there is none that doeth good, no, not one. Their throat is an open sepulcher, with their tongues they have used craft and deceit, the poison of serpents is under their lips, their mouth is full of cursing and bitterness, their feet are swift to shed blood, destruction and wretchedness are in their ways, and the way of peace have they not known.

There is no fear of God before their eyes. And in another place St. Paul writeth thus, God hath wrapped all nations in unbelief, that he might have mercy on all. The scripture shutteth up all under sin, that the promise by faith of Jesus Christ should be given unto them that believe.

St. Paul in many places painteth us out in our colours, calling us the children of the wrath of God, when we be born, saying also that we cannot think a good thought of ourselves, much less we can say well or do well of ourselves. And the wise man saith in the book of Proverbs, The just man falleth seven times a day. The most tried and approved man Job feared all his works, St. John the Baptist being sanctified in his mother's womb, and praised before he was born, called an angel, and great before the Lord, filled even from his birth with the Holy Ghost, the preparer of the way for our Saviour Christ, and commended of our Saviour Christ to be more than a prophet, and the greatest that ever was born of a woman.

Yet he plainly granteth that he had need to be washed of Christ. He worthily extolleth and glorifyeth his Lord and Master Christ, and humbleth himself as unworthy to unbuckle his shoes, and giveth all honour and glory to God. So doth St. Paul both oft and evidently confess himself what he was of himself, ever giving, as a most faithful servant, all praise to his Master and Saviour.

So doth blessed St. John the Evangelist, in the name of himself and of all other holy men, be they never so just, make this open confession, if we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we knowledge our sins, God is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. If we say we have not sinned, we make him a liar, and his word is not in us.

Wherefore the wise man, in the book called Ecclesiastes, maketh this true and general confession, there is not one just man upon the earth that doeth good and sinneth not. And St. David is ashamed of his sin, but not to confess his sin. And oft how earnestly and lamentably doth he desire God's great mercy for his great offences, and that God should not enter into judgment with him.

And again, how well weighteth this holy man his sins, when he confesseth that they be so many in number, and so hid, and hard to understand, that it is in manner impossible to know, utter, or number them. Wherefore he having a true earnest and deep contemplation and consideration of his sins, and yet not coming to the bottom of them,

he maketh supplication to God to forgive him his privy, secret, hid sins, to the knowledge of the which he cannot attain. He weighteth rightly his sins from the original root and springhead, perceiving inclinations, provocations, stirrings, stings, buds, branches, dregs, infections, tastes, feelings, and scents of them to continue in him still.

Wherefore he saith, Mark and behold, I was conceived in sins. He saith not sin, but in the plural number sins, for as much as out of one, as fountains springeth all the rest. And our Saviour Christ saith, There is none good but God, and that we can do nothing that is good without him, nor no man can come to the Father but by him.

He commandeth us all to say that we be unprofitable servants, when we have done all that we can do. He prefereth the penitent publican before the proud, holy, and glorious Pharisee. He calleth himself a physician, but not to them that be whole, but to them that be sick, and have need of his salve for their sore.

He teacheth us in our prayers to re-knowlege ourselves sinners, and to ask forgiveness and deliverance from all evils at our heavenly Father's hand. He declareth that the sins of our own hearts do defile our own selves. He teacheth that an evil word or thought deserveth condemnation, affirming that we shall give an account for every idle word.

He saith, He came not to save but the sheep that were utterly lost and cast away. Therefore few of the proud, just, learned, wise, perfect, and holy Pharisees were saved by him, because they justified themselves by their counterfeit holiness before men. Wherefore, good people, let us beware of such hypocrisy, vainglory, and justifying of ourselves.

Let us look upon our feet, and then down peacock's feathers, down proud heart, down vile clay, frail and brittle vessels. Forasmuch as the true knowledge of ourselves is very necessary to come to the right knowledge of God, ye have heard in the last reading how humbly all godly men always have thought of themselves, and so to think and judge of themselves are taught of God their Creator by His holy word. For of ourselves we be crab-trees that can bring forth no apples.

We be of ourselves of such earth as can bring forth but weeds, nettles, brambles, briars, cockle, and darnel. Our fruits be declared in the fifth chapter to the Galatians. We have neither faith, charity, hope, patience, chastity, nor anything else that good is but of God, and therefore these virtues be called there the fruits of the Holy Ghost and not the fruits of man.

Let us therefore acknowledge ourselves before God as we be indeed miserable and wretched sinners, and let us earnestly repent and humble ourselves heartily and cry to God for mercy. Let us all confess with mouth and heart that we be full of imperfections. Let us know our own works of what imperfection they be, and then we shall not stand foolishly and arrogantly in our own conceits, nor challenge any part of justification by our

merits or works.

For truly there be imperfections in our best works. We do not love God so much as we are bound to do, with all our heart, mind, and power. We do not fear God so much as we ought to do.

We do not pray to God, but with great and many imperfections. We give, forgive, believe, love, and hope unperfectly. We speak, think, and do unperfectly.

We fight against the devil, the world, and the flesh unperfectly. Let us therefore not be ashamed to confess plainly our state of imperfection. Yea, let us not be ashamed to confess imperfection even in all our own best works.

Let none of us be ashamed to say with holy St. Peter, I am a sinful man. Let us all say with the holy prophet David, we have sinned with our fathers, we have done amiss, and dealt wickedly. Let us all make open confession with the prodigal son to our father, and say with him, we have sinned against heaven and before thee, O father.

We are not worthy to be called thy sons. Let us all say with holy Beruk, O Lord our God, to us is worthily ascribed shame and confusion, and to thee righteousness. We have sinned, we have done wickedly, we have behaved ourselves ungodly in all thy righteousness.

Let us all say with the holy prophet Daniel, O Lord, righteousness belongeth to thee, and to us belongeth confusion. We have sinned, we have been naughty, we have offended, we have fled from thee, we have gone back from all thy precepts and judgments. So we learn of all good men in holy scripture to humble ourselves, and to exalt, extol, praise, magnify, and glorify God.

Thus we have heard how evil we be of ourselves, how of ourselves and by ourselves we have no goodness, help, nor salvation, but contrarywise sin, damnation, and death everlasting, which if we deeply weigh and consider, we shall the better understand the great mercy of God, and how our salvation cometh only by the grace of Christ. For in ourselves, as of ourselves, we find nothing whereby we may be delivered from this miserable captivity into the which we were cast through the envy of the devil, by breaking of God's commandment in our first parent Adam. We are all become unclean, but we all are not able to cleanse ourselves, nor to make one another of us clean.

We are by nature the children of God's wrath, but we are not able to make ourselves the children and inheritors of God's glory. We are sheep that run astray, but we cannot of our own power come back to the sheepfold, so great is our imperfection and weakness. In ourselves, therefore, may not we glory, which of ourselves are nothing but sinful, neither we may rejoice in any works that we do, which all be so imperfect and impure, that they are not able to stand before the righteous judgment seat of God, as the holy

prophet David saith, Enter not into judgment with thy servant, O Lord, for no man that liveth shall be found righteous in thy sight.

To God, therefore, must we flee, or else shall we never find peace, rest, and quietness of conscience in our hearts. For He is the Father of mercies, and God of all consolation. He is the Lord with whom is plenteous redemption.

He is the God which of His own mercy saveth us, and setteth out His charity and exceeding love toward us, in that of His voluntary goodness, when we were perished, He saved us, and provided an everlasting kingdom for us. And all these heavenly treasures are given us, not for our own deserts, merits, or good deeds, which of ourselves we have none, but of His mere mercy freely. And for whose sake? Truly for Jesus Christ's sake, that pure and undefiled Lamb of God.

He is that dearly beloved Son, for whose sake God is fully pacified, satisfied, and set at one with man. He is the Lamb of God, which taketh away the sins of the world, of whom only it may truly be spoken, that He did all things well, and in His mouth was found no craft nor subtlety. None but He alone may say, The Prince of the world came, and in me He hath nothing.

And He alone may say also, Which of you shall reprove me of any fault? He is that high and everlasting Priest, which hath offered Himself once for all upon the altar of the cross, and with that one oblation hath made perfect for evermore them that are sanctified. He is the alone Mediator between God and man, which paid our ransom to God with His own blood, and with that hath He cleansed us all from sin. He is the Physician which healeth all our diseases.

He is that Saviour which saveth His people from all their sins. To be short, He is that flowing and most plenteous fountain, of whose fullness all we have received. For in Him alone are all the treasures of the wisdom and knowledge of God hidden, and in Him and by Him have we from God the Father all good things pertaining either to the body or to the soul.

O how much are we bound to this our Heavenly Father for His great mercies, which He hath so plenteously declared unto us in Christ Jesus our Lord and Saviour! What thanks worthy and sufficient can we give to Him? Let us all with one accord burst out with joyful voices, ever praising and magnifying this Lord of mercy, for His tender kindness showed to us in His dearly beloved Son, Jesus Christ our Lord. Hitherto have we heard what we are of ourselves, verily sinful, wretched, and damnable. Again we have heard how that of ourselves and by ourselves we are not able either to think a good thought or work a good deed, so that we can find in ourselves no hope of salvation, but rather whatsoever maketh unto our destruction.

Again we have heard the tender kindness and great mercy of God the Father toward us,

and how beneficial He is to us for Christ's sake, without our merits or deserts, even of His own mere mercy and tender goodness. Now how these exceeding great mercies of God, set abroad in Christ Jesus for us, be obtained, and how we be delivered from the captivity of sin, death, and hell, it shall more at large with God's help be declared in the next sermon. In the mean season, yea, and at all times, let us learn to know ourselves, our frailty and weakness, without any cracking or boasting of our own good deeds and merits.

Let us also knowledge the exceeding mercy of God toward us, and confess that, as of ourselves cometh all evil and damnation, so likewise of Him cometh all goodness and salvation. As God Himself saith by the prophet Ose, O Israel, thy destruction cometh of thyself, but in me only is thy help and comfort. If we thus humbly submit ourselves in the sight of God, we may be sure that in the time of His visitation, He will lift us up unto the kingdom of His dearly beloved Son, Christ Jesus our Lord, to whom with the Father and the Holy Ghost be all honour and glory for ever.

Amen.