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THE BOOKS OF HOMILIES: Book 1—VII. Against swearing and perjury

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Alastair Roberts

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

Against swearing and perjury. Almighty God, to the intent his most holy name should be had in honour and evermore be magnified of the people, commandeth that no man should take his name vainly in his mouth, threatening punishment unto him that unreverently abuseth it, by swearing, forswearing, and blasphemy. To the intent, therefore, that this commandment may be the better known and kept, it shall be declared unto you, both how it is lawful for Christian people to swear, and also what peril and danger it is vainly to swear or to be forsworn.

First, when judges require oaths of the people for declaration or opening of the truth or for execution of justice, this manner of swearing is lawful. Also, when men make faithful promises, with calling to witness of the name of God to keep covenants, honest promises, statutes, laws, and good customs, as Christian princes do in their conclusions of peace for conservation of commonwealths, and private persons promise their fidelity in matrimony, or one to another in honest and true friendship, and all men, when they do

swear to keep common laws or local statutes and good customs, for due order to be had and continued among man, when subjects do swear to be true and faithful to their king and sovereign lord, and when judges, magistrates, and officers swear truly to execute their offices, and when a man would affirm the truth to the setting forth of God's glory, for the salvation of the people in open preaching of the gospel, or in giving of good counsel privately for their soul's health, all these manner of swearings for causes necessary and honest be lawful. But when men do swear of custom, in reasoning, buying, and selling, or other daily communication, as many be common and great swearers, such kinds of swearing is ungodly, unlawful, and forbidden by the commandment of God, for such swearing is nothing else but taking of God's holy name in vain.

And here is to be noted that lawful swearing is not forbidden, but commanded of almighty God. For we have examples of Christ and godly men in holy scripture that did swear themselves, and required oaths of others likewise, and God's commandment is, Thou shalt dread thy lord God, and shalt swear by his name. And almighty God by his prophet David saith, All men shall be praised that swear by him.

Thus did our Saviour Christ swear diverse times, saying, Verily, verily. And St. Paul sweareth thus, I call God to witness. And Abraham, waxing old, required an oath of his servant, that he should procure a wife for his son Isaac, which should come of his own kinred.

And the servant did swear that he would perform his master's will. Abraham also, being required, did swear unto Abimelech the king of Gerarus, that he should not hurt him nor his posterity. And so likewise did Abimelech swear unto Abraham.

And David did swear to be and continue a faithful friend to Jonathas, and Jonathas did swear to become a faithful friend unto David. Also God once commanded that if a thing were laid to pledge to any man, or left with him to keep, if the same thing were stolen or lost, that the keeper thereof should be sworn before judges, that he did not convey it away, nor used any deceit in causing the same to be conveyed away by his consent or knowledge. And St. Paul saith that in all matters of controversy between two persons, where is one saith yea, and the other nay, so as no due proof can be had of the truth, the end of every such controversy must be an oath ministered by a judge.

And moreover God by the prophet Jeremy saith, Thou shalt swear, the Lord liveth, in truth, in judgment, in righteousness. So that whosoever sweareth when he is required of a judge, let him be sure in his conscience that his oath have these three conditions, and he shall never need to be afraid of perjury. First, he that sweareth must swear truly, that is, he must, setting apart all favour and affection to the parties, have the truth only before his eyes, and for love thereof say and speak that which he knoweth to be truth, and no further.

The second is, he that taketh an oath must do it with judgment, not rashly and unadvisedly, but soberly, considering what an oath is. The third is, he that sweareth must swear in righteousness, that is, for the very zeal and love which he beareth to the defence of innocency, to the maintenance of the truth, and to the righteousness of the matter or cause, all profit, disprofit, all love and favour unto the person for friendship or kinned, lay depart. Thus an oath, if it have with it these three conditions, is a part of God's glory, which we are bound by his commandment to give unto him, for he willeth that we shall swear only by his name.

Not that he hath pleasure in our oaths, but like as he commanded the Jews to offer sacrifices unto him, not for any delight that he had in them, but to keep the Jews from committing of idolatry. So he, commanding us to swear by his holy name, doth not teach us that he delighteth in swearing, but he thereby forbideth all men to give his glory to any creature in heaven, earth, or water. Hitherto you see that oaths lawful are commanded of God, used of patriarchs and prophets, of Christ himself, and of his apostle Paul.

Therefore Christian people must think lawful oaths both godly and necessary, for by lawful promises and covenants, confirmed by oaths, princes and their countries are confirmed in common tranquillity and peace. By holy promises, with calling the name of God to witness, we be made lively members of Christ, when we profess his religion, receiving the sacrament of baptism. By like holy promise, the sacrament of matrimony, knitteth man and wife in perpetual love, that they desire not to be separated for any displeasure or adversity that shall after happen.

By lawful oaths, which kings, princes, judges, and magistrates do swear, common laws are kept inviolate, justice is indifferently ministered, harmless persons, fatherless children, widows, and poor men are defended from murderers, oppressors, and thieves, that they suffer no wrong, nor take any harm. By lawful oaths, mutual society, amity, and good order is kept continually in all commonalities, as boroughs, cities, towns, and villages. And by lawful oaths, malefactors are searched out, wrongdoers are punished, and they which sustain wrong are restored to their right.

Therefore, lawful swearing cannot be evil, which bringeth unto us so many godly, good, and necessary commodities. Wherefore, when Christ so earnestly forbade swearing, it may not be so understood as though he did forbid all manner of oaths, but he forbiddeth all vain swearing and forswearing, both by God and by his creatures, as the common use of swearing in buying, selling, and in our daily communication, to the intent every Christian man's word should be as well regarded in such matters as if he should confirm his communication with an oath. For every Christian man's word, saith St. Jerome, should be so true that it should be regarded as an oath.

And Chrysostom, witnessing the same, saith, It is not convenient to swear. For what

needeth us to swear, when it is not lawful for one of us to make a lie unto another? Peradventure some will say, I am compelled to swear, for else men that do common with me, or do buy and sell with me, will not believe me. To this answereth St. Chrysostom, that he that thus saith, showeth himself to be an unjust and a deceitful person.

For if he were a trusty man, and his deeds taken to agree with his words, he should not need to swear at all. For he that useth truth and plainness in his bargaining and communication, he shall have no need by such vain swearing to bring himself in credence with his neighbours, nor his neighbours will not mistrust his sayings. And if his credence be so much lost indeed, that he thinketh no man will believe him without he swear, then he may well think his credence is clean gone.

For truth it is, as Theophilactus writeth, that no man is less trusted than he that useth much to swear. And almighty God by wise man saith, That man which sweareth much shall be full of sin, and the scourge of God shall not depart from his house. But here some men will say, for excusing of their many oaths in their daily talk, Why should I not swear, when I swear truly? To such men it may be said that, though they swear truly, yet in swearing often, unadvisedly, for trifles, without necessity, and when they should not swear, they be not without fault, but do take God's most holy name in vain.

Much more ungodly and unwise men are they that abuse God's most holy name, not only in buying and selling of small things daily in all places, but also in eating, drinking, playing, commoning, and reasoning, as if none of these things might be done, except in doing of them the most holy name of God be commonly used and abused, vainly and unreverently talked of, sworn by, and foresworn, to the breaking of God's commandment, and the procurement of His indignation. You have been taught in the first part of this sermon against swearing and perjury, what great danger it is to use the name of God in vain, and that all kind of swearing is not unlawful, neither against God's commandment, and that there be three things required in a lawful oath, first that it be made for the maintenance of the truth, second that it be made with judgment, not rashly and unadvisedly, thirdly for the zeal and love of justice. Ye heard also what commodities cometh of lawful oaths, or what danger cometh of rash and unlawful oaths.

Now, as concerning the rest of the same matter, ye shall understand that as well they use the name of God in vain, that by an oath make lawful promises of good and honest things, and perform them not, as they which do promise evil and unlawful things, and do perform the same. Of such men that regard not their godly promises bound by an oath, but wittingly and willfully breaketh them, we do read in Holy Scripture two notable punishments. First, Joshua and the people of Israel made a league and faithful promise of perpetual amity and friendship with the Gabionites.

Notwithstanding, afterward in the days of wicked Saul, many of these Gabionites were murdered, contrary to the said faithful promise made. Wherewith almighty God was so

sore displeased that he sent an universal hunger upon the whole country, which continued by the space of three years. And God would not withdraw his punishment, until the said offence was revenged by the death of seven sons, or next kinsmen of King Saul.

Also, whereas Sedachias king of Jerusalem had promised fidelity to the king of Afterward, when Sedachias, contrary to his oath and allegiance, did rebel against King Nabuchadnezzar, this heathen king, by God's permission and sufferance invading the land of Jure and besieging the city of Jerusalem, compelled the said king Sedachias to flee, and in fleeing took him prisoner, slew his sons before his face, and put out both his eyes, and binding him with chains, led him prisoner miserably into Babylon. Thus doth God show plainly how much he abhorreth breakers of honest promises bound by an oath made in his name. And of them that make wicked promises by an oath, and will perform the same, we have example in the scripture, chiefly of Herod, of the wicked Jews, and of Jephthah.

Herod promised by an oath unto the damsel which danced before him, to give unto her whatsoever she would ask, when she was instructed before of her wicked mother to ask the head of St. John Baptist. Herod, as he took a wicked oath, so he more wickedly performed the same, and cruelly slew the most holy prophet. Likewise did the malicious Jews make an oath, cursing themselves if they did either eat or drink, until they had slain St. Paul.

And Jephthah, when God had given to him victory of the children of Ammon, promised of a foolish devotion unto God, to offer for a sacrifice unto him that person which of his own house should first meet with him after his return home. By force of which fond and unadvised oath, he did slay his own and only daughter, which came out of his house with mirth and joy to welcome him home. Thus the promise, which he had made most foolishly to God, against God's everlasting will, and the law of nature most cruelly he performed, so committing against God double offence.

Therefore, whosoever maketh any promise binding himself thereunto by an oath, let him foresee that the thing which he promiseth be good, honest, and not against the commandment of God, and that it be in his own power to perform it justly. And such good promises must all men keep ever more assuredly. But if a man at any time shall, either of ignorance or of malice, promise and swear to do anything which is either against the law of almighty God, or not in his power to perform, let him take it for an unlawful and ungodly oath.

Now something to speak of perjury. To the intent you should know how great and grievous an offence against God this willful perjury is, I will show you what it is to take an oath before a judge upon a book. First, when they, laying their hands upon the gospel book, do swear truly to inquire and to make a true presentment of things wherewith they

be charged, and not to let from saying the truth and doing truly for favour, love, dread, or malice of any person, as God may help them, and the holy contents of that book, they must consider that in that book is contained God's everlasting truth, his most holy and eternal word, whereby we have forgiveness of our sins, and be made inheritors of heaven, to live forever with God's angels and his saints in joy and gladness.

In the gospel book is contained also God's terrible threats to obstinate sinners, that will not amend their lives, nor believe the truth of God, his holy word, and the everlasting pain prepared in hell for idolaters, hypocrites, for false and vain swearers, for perjured men, for false witness-bearers, for false condemners of innocent and guiltless men, and for them which for favour hide the crimes of evil-doers, that they should not be punished. So that, whosoever willfully forswearth himself upon Christ's holy evangely, they utterly forsake God's mercy, goodness and truth, the merits of our Saviour Christ's nativity, life, passion, death, resurrection and ascension, they refuse the forgiveness of sins promised to all penitent sinners, the joys of heaven, the company with angels and saints forever, all which benefits and comforts are promised unto true Christian persons in the gospel, and they, so being forsworn upon the gospel, do partake themselves to the devil's service, the master of all lies, falsehood, deceit and perjury, provoking the great indignation and curse of God against them in this life, and the terrible wrath and judgment of our Saviour Christ at the great day of the last judgment, when he shall justly judge both the quick and the dead according to their works. For whosoever forsaketh the truth for love or displeasure of any man, or for lucre and profit to himself, doth forsake Christ, and with Judas betrayeth him.

And although such perjured men's falsehood be now kept secret, yet it shall be opened at the last day, when the secrets of all men's hearts shall be manifest to all the world. And then the truth shall appear, and accuse them, and their own conscience, with all the blessed company of heaven, shall bear witness truly against them, and Christ the righteous judge shall then justly condemn them to everlasting shame and death. This sin of perjury, almighty God, by the prophet Malachi, doth threaten to punish Saul, saying unto the Jews, I will come to you in judgment, and I will be a swift witness, and a sharp judge upon sorcerers, adulterers, and perjured persons.

Which thing to the prophet Zachary God declareth in a vision, wherein the prophet saw a book flying, which was twenty cubits long, and ten cubits broad, God saying then unto him, This is the curse that shall go forth upon the face of the earth for falsehood, false swearing, and perjury, and this curse shall enter into the house of the false man, and into the house of the perjured man, and it shall remain in the midst of his house, and consume him, the timber and stones of his house. Thus you see how much God doth hate perjury, and what punishment God hath prepared for false swearers and perjured persons. Thus you have heard how and in what cases it is lawful for a Christian man to swear.

You have heard what properties and conditions a lawful oath must have, and also how such lawful oaths are both godly and necessary to be observed. You have heard that it is not lawful to swear vainly, that is, other ways than in such cases, and after such sort as is declared. And finally you have heard how damnable a thing it is either to forswear ourselves, or to keep an unlawful and unadvised oath.

Wherefore let us earnestly call for grace, that, all vain swearing and perjury set apart, we may only use such oaths as be lawful and godly, and that we may truly, without all fraud, keep the same, according to God's will and pleasure, to whom with the Son and Holy Ghost be all honour and glory. Amen.