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THE BOOKS OF HOMILIES: Book 1—V. Of good works

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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 good works annexed unto faith. In the last sermon was declared unto you what the lively and true faith of a Christian man is, that it causeth not a man to be idle, but to be occupied in bringing forth good works, as occasion serveth. Now, by God's grace, shall be declared the second thing that before was noted of faith, that without it can no good work be done, acceptable and pleasant unto God.

For as a branch cannot bear fruit of itself, saith our Saviour Christ, except it abide in the vine, so cannot you, except you abide in me. I am the vine, and you be the branches. He that abideth in me, and I in him, he bringeth forth much fruit.

For without me you can do nothing. And St. Paul proveth that Enoch had faith, because he pleased God. For without faith, saith he, it is not possible to please God.

And again to the Romans he saith, Whatsoever work is done without faith, it is sin. Faith giveth life to the soul, and they be as much dead to God that lack faith, as they be to the world whose bodies lack souls. Without faith all that is done of us is but dead before God,

although the works seem never so gay and glorious before man.

Even as the picture graven or painted is but a dead representation of the thing itself, and is without life for any manner of moving, so be the works of all unfaithful persons before God. They do appear to be lively works, and indeed they be but dead, not availing to the everlasting life. They be but shadows and shows of lively and good things, and not good and lively things indeed.

For true faith doth give life to the works, and out of such faith come good works, that be very good works indeed, and without it no work is good before God. As saith St. Augustine, We must set no good works before faith, nor think that before faith a man may do any good work. For such works, although they seem unto men to be praiseworthy, yet indeed they be but vain, and not allowed before God.

They be as the course of a horse that runneth out of the way, which taketh great labour, but to no purpose. Let no man therefore, saith he, reckon upon his good works before his faith, where his faith was not, good works were not. The intent, saith he, maketh the good works, but faith must guide and order the intent of man.

And Christ saith, If thine eye be not, thy whole body is full of darkness, the eye doth signify the intent, saith St. Augustine, wherewith a man doeth the thing. So that he which doeth not his good works with a godly intent, and a true faith that worketh by love, the whole body beside, that is to say, all the whole number of his works, is dark, and there is no light in it. For good deeds be not measured by the facts themselves, and so severed from vices, but by the ends and intents for the which they be done.

If a heathen man clothe the naked, feed the hungry, and do such other like works, yet because he doeth them not in faith, for the honour and love of God, they be but dead, vain, and fruitless works to him. Faith is it that doth commend the work to God. For, as St. Augustine saith, Whether thou wilt or know, that work that cometh not of faith is naught.

Where the faith of Christ is not the foundation, there is no good work, what building soever we make. There is one work in the which be all good works, that is, faith which worketh by charity. If thou have it, thou hast the ground of all good works.

For the virtues of strength, wisdom, temperance, and justice, be all referred unto this same faith. Without this faith we have not them, but only the names and shadows of them, as St. Augustine saith. All the life of them that lack the true faith is sin, and nothing is good without him that is the author of goodness.

Where he is not, there is but feigned virtue, although it be in the best works. And St. Augustine, declaring this verse of the psalm, The turtle hath found a nest where she may keep her young birds, saith that the Jews, heretics, and pagans do good works, they

clothe the naked, feed the poor, and do other works of mercy. But because they be not done in the true faith, therefore the birds be lost.

But if they remain in faith, then faith is the nest and safeguard of their birds, that is to say, safeguard of their good works, that the reward of them be not utterly lost. And this matter which St. Augustine at large in many books disputeth, St. Ambrose concludeth in few words, saying, He that by nature would withstand vice, either by natural will or reason, he doth in vain garnish the time of this life, and attaineth not the very true virtues. For without the worshipping of the true God, that which seemeth to be virtue is vice.

And yet most plainly to this purpose, writeth St. John Chrysostom in this wise, You shall find many which have not the true faith, and be not of the flock of Christ, and yet, as it appeareth, they flourish in good works of mercy. You shall find them full of pity, compassion, and given to justice, and yet for all that, they have no fruit of their works, because the chief work lacketh. For when the Jews asked of Christ what they should do to work good works, he answered, This is the work of God, to believe in him whom he sent, so that he called faith the work of God.

And as soon as a man hath faith, and none he shall flourish in good works, for faith of itself is full of good works, and nothing is good without faith. And for a similitude he saith that, They which glitter and shine in good works without faith in God, be like dead men, which have goodly and precious tombs, and yet it availeth them nothing. Faith may not be naked without works, for then it is no true faith, and when it is adjoined to works, yet it is above the works.

For as men, that be very men indeed, first have life, and after be nourished, so must our faith in Christ go before, and after be nourished with good works. A life may be without nourishment, but nourishment cannot be without life. A man must needs be nourished by good works, but first he must have faith.

He that doeth good deeds, yet without faith, he hath not life. I can show a man that by faith without works lived, and came to heaven, but without faith never man had life. The thief that was hanged when Christ suffered did believe only, and the most merciful God did justify him.

And because no man shall say again that he lacked time to do good works, for else he would have done them, truth it is, and I will not contend therein. But this I will surely affirm, that faith only saved him. If he had lived, and not regarded faith in the works thereof, he should have lost his salvation again.

But this is the effect that I say, that faith by itself saved him. But works by themselves never justified any man. Here ye have heard the mind of St. Chrysostom, whereby you may perceive, that neither faith is without works, having opportunity thereto, nor works

can avail to everlasting life without faith.

Of the three things which were in the former sermon specially noted of lively faith, two be declared unto you. The first was, that faith is never idle, without good works, when occasion serveth. The second, that good works acceptable to God cannot be done without faith.

Now to go forth to the third part, that is, what manner of works they be which spring out of true faith, and lead faithful men unto everlasting life. This cannot be known so well as by our Saviour Christ himself, who was asked of a certain great man the same question. What works shall I do, said a prince, to come to everlasting life? To whom Jesus answered, If thou wilt come to everlasting life, keep the commandments.

But the prince, not satisfied herewith, asked further, Which commandments? The scribes and Pharisees had made so many of their own laws and traditions to bring men to heaven beside God's commandments, that this man was in doubt whether he should come to heaven by those laws and traditions, or by the laws of God. And therefore he asked Christ which commandments he meant. Where unto Christ made him a plain answer, rehearsing the commandments of God, saying, Thou shalt not kill, thou shalt not commit adultery, thou shalt not steal, thou shalt not bear false witness, honour thy father and mother, and love thy neighbour as thyself? By which words Christ declared that the laws of God be the very way that doth lead to everlasting life, and not the traditions and laws of men.

So that this is to be taken for a most true lesson taught by Christ's own mouth, that the works of the moral commandments of God be the very true works of faith which lead to the blessed life to come. But the blindness and malice of man, even from the beginning, hath ever been ready to fall from God's commandments, as Adam the first man, having but one commandment, that he should not eat of the fruit forbidden, notwithstanding God's commandment, he gave credit unto the woman seduced by the subtle persuasion of the serpent, and so followed his own will, and left God's commandment. And ever since that time, all that came of him hath been so blinded through original sin, that they have been ever ready to fall from God and his law, and to invent a new way unto salvation by works of their own device.

So much that almost all the world, forsaking the true honour of the only eternal living God, wandered about in their own fantasies, worshipping some the sun, the moon, the stars, some Jupiter, Juno, Diana, Saturnus, Apollo, Neptunus, Ceres, Bacchus, and other dead men and women. Some therewith not satisfied, worshipped diverse kinds of beasts, birds, fish, fowl, and serpents, every country, town, and house, in a manner being divided, and setting up images of such things as they liked, and worshipping the same. Such was the rudeness of the people after they fell to their own fantasies, and left the eternal living God and His commandments, that they devised innumerable images and

gods.

In which error and blindness they did remain, until such time as Almighty God, pitying the blindness of man, sent his true prophet Moses into the world, to reprove and rebuke this extreme madness, and to teach the people to know the only living God, and His true honour and worship. But the corrupt inclination of man was so much given to follow his own fantasies, and, as you would say, to favour his own birth that he brought up himself, that all the admonitions, exhortations, benefits and threatenings of God, could not keep him from such his inventions. For, notwithstanding all the benefits of God showed unto the people of Israel, yet when Moses went up into the mountain to speak with Almighty God, he had tarried there but a few days, when the people began to invent new gods, and, as it came into their heads, they made a calf of gold, and kneeled down and worshipped it.

And after that they followed the Moabites, and worshipped Beelphigel, the Moabites' god. Read the book of Judges, the books of the kings, and the prophets, and there you shall find how unsteadfast the people were, how full of inventions, and more ready to run after their own fantasies than God's most holy commandments. There you shall read of Baal, Moloch, Chemosh, Melchim, Baalpeor, Ashtaroth, Bel, the dragon, Priapus, the brazen serpent, the twelve signs, and many other, unto whose images the people with great devotion invented pilgrimages, preciousy decking and censing them, kneeling down and offering to them, thinking that an high merit before God, and to be esteemed above the precepts and commandments of God.

And where at that time God commanded no sacrifice to be made but in Jerusalem only, they did clean contrary, making altars and sacrifices everywhere, in hills, in woods, and in houses, not regarding God's commandments, but esteeming their own fantasies and devotion to be better than them. And the error hereof was so spread abroad, that not only the unlearned people, but also the priests and teachers of the people, partly by glory and covetousness, were corrupted, and partly by ignorance, blindly deceived with the same abominations. So much that, King Ahab having only Helias a true teacher and minister of God, there were eight hundred and fifty priests that persuaded him to honour Baal, and to do sacrifice in the woods or groves, and so continued that horrible error, until the three noble kings, as Josaphat, Hezekiahs, and Josiahs, God's chosen ministers, destroyed the same clearly, and brought again the people from such their feigned inventions unto the very commandments of God.

For the witched thing their immortal reward and glory doth, and shall remain with God for ever. And beside the foresaid inventions, the inclination of man to have his own holy devotions, devise new sects and religions, called Pharisees, Sadducees, and Scribes, with many holy and godly traditions and ordinances, as it seemed by the outward appearance and goodly glittering of the works, but in very deed all tending to idolatry, superstition, and hypocrisy, their hearts within being full of malice, pride, covetousness, and all

wickedness, against which sects, and their pretended holiness, Christ cried out more vehemently than he did against any other persons, saying, and often rehearsing these words, Woe be to you, Scribes and Pharisees, ye hypocrites! for you may clean the vessel without, but within you be full of ravine and filthiness, thou blind Pharisee and hypocrite! First make the inward part clean. For notwithstanding all the goodly traditions, and outward show of good works, devised of their own imagination, whereby they appeared to the world most religious and holy of all men, yet Christ, who saw their hearts, knew that they were inwardly in the sight of God, most unholy, most abominable, and furthest from God of all men.

Therefore said he unto them, Hypocrites! the prophet Esaias spoke full truly of you, when he said, This people honour me with their lips, but their heart is far from me. They worship me in vain, that teach doctrines and commandments of men. For you leave the commandments of God, to keep your own traditions.

And though Christ said, They worship God in vain, that teach doctrines and commandments of men, yet he meant not thereby to overthrow all men's commandments. For he himself was ever obedient to the princes in their laws, made for good order and governance of the people. But he reprov'd the laws and traditions made by the Scribes and Pharisees, which were not made only for good order of the people, as the civil laws were, but they were set up so high, that they were made to be a right and pure worshipping of God, as they had been equal with God's laws, or above them.

For many of God's laws could not be kept, but were feigned to give place unto them. This arrogancy God detested, that man should so advance his laws, to make them equal with God's laws, wherein the true honouring and right worshipping of God standeth, and to make his laws for them to be left off. God hath appointed his laws, whereby his pleasure is to be honoured.

His pleasure is also, that all man's laws, being not contrary to his laws, shall be obeyed and kept, as good and necessary for every common will, but not as things wherein principally his honour resteth. And all civil and man's laws either be or should be made, to bring in men the better to keep God's laws, that consequently, or followingly, God should be the better honoured by them. Howbeit the Scribes and Pharisees were not content that their laws should be no higher esteem than other positive and civil laws, nor would not have them called by the name of other temporal laws, but called them holy and godly traditions, and would have them esteemed, not only for a right and true worshipping of God, as God's laws be indeed, but also to be the most high honouring of God, to the which the commandments of God should give place.

And for this cause did Christ so vehemently speak against them, saying, Your traditions, which men esteem so high, be abomination before God. For commonly of such traditions followeth the transgression or breaking of God's commandments, and a more devotion in

the keeping of such things, and a greater conscience in breaking of them, than of the commandments of God. As the Scribes and Pharisees so superstitiously and scrupulously kept the Sabbath, that they were offended with Christ because he healed sick men, and with his apostles because they, being sore hungry, gathered the ears of corn to eat upon that day.

And because his disciples washed not their hands so often as the traditions required, the Scribes and Pharisees quarrelled with Christ, saying, Why did our disciples break the traditions of the seniors? But Christ laid to their charge that they, for to keep their own traditions, did teach men to break the very commandments of God. For they taught the people such a devotion, that they offered their goods into the treasure-house of the temple, under the pretense of God's honour, leaving their fathers and mothers, to whom they were chiefly bound, unhelpen. And so they break the commandments of God to keep their own traditions.

They esteem more an oath made by the gold or oblation in the temple, than an oath made in the name of God himself or of the temple. They were more studious to pay their tithes of small things, than to do the greater things commanded of God, as works of mercy, or to do justice, or to deal sincerely, uprightly, and faithfully with God and man. These, saith Christ, ought to be done, and the other not left undone.

And to be short, they were of so blind judgment, that they stumbled at a straw, and leaped over a block. They would, as it were, nicely take a fly out of their cup, and drink down a whole camel. And therefore Christ called them blind guides, warning his disciples from time to time to eschew their doctrine.

For although they seemed to the world to be most perfect men, both in living and teaching, yet was their life but hypocrisy, and their doctrine but sour leaven, mingled with superstition, idolatry, and overthought judgment, setting up the traditions and ordinances of man in the stead of God's commandments. That all men might rightly judge of good works, it hath been declared in the second part of this sermon what kind of good works they be that God would have his people to walk in, namely, such as he hath commanded in his holy scripture, and not such works as men have studied out of their own brain, of a blind zeal and devotion, without the word of God. And by mistaking the nature of good works, man hath most highly displeased God, and hath gone from his will and commandment.

So that thus you have heard how much the world, from the beginning until Christ's time, was ever ready to fall from the commandments of God, and to seek other means to honour and serve him, after a devotion found out of their own heads, and how they did set up their own traditions as high or above God's commandments, which hath happened also in our times, the more it is to be lamented, no less than it did among the Jews, and that by the corruption, or at the least by the negligence of them that chiefly ought to

have preferred God's commandments, and to have preserved the pure and heavenly doctrine left by Christ. What man, having any judgment or learning joined with the true zeal unto God, doth not see and lament to have entered into Christ's religion such false doctrine, superstition, idolatry, hypocrisy, and other enormities and abuses, so as by little and little, through the sour leaven thereof, the sweet bread of God's holy word, hath been much hindered and laid apart. Never had the Jews in their most blindness so many pilgrimages unto images, nor used so much kneeling, kissing, and sensing of them, as hath been used in our time.

Sects and feigned religions were neither the forty part so many among the Jews, nor more superstitiously and ungodly abused than of late days they have been among us. Which sects and religions had so many hypocritical and feigned works in their state of religion, as they arrogantly named it, that their lamps, as they said, ran always over, able to satisfy not only for their own sins, but also for all other their benefactors, brothers and sisters of their religion, as most ungodly and craftily they had persuaded the multitude of ignorant people, keeping in diverse places, as it were marts or markets of merits, being full of their holy relics, images, shrines, and works of overflowing abundance ready to be sold? And all things which they had were called holy, holy cowls, holy girdles, holy pardon beads, holy shoes, holy rules, and all full of holiness. And what thing can be more foolish, more superstitious or ungodly, than that men, women, and children should wear a friar's coat, to deliver them from agues or pestilence, or when they die, or when they be buried, cause it to be cast upon them in hope thereby to be saved? Which superstition, although, thanks be to God, it hath been little used in this realm, yet in diverse other realms it hath been, and yet is, used among many, both learned and unlearned.

But to pass over the innumerable superstitiousness that hath been in strange apparel, in silence, in dormitory, in cloister, in chapter, in choice of meats and drinks, and in such like things, let us consider what enormities and abuses have been in the three chief principal points, which they call the three essentials, or three chief foundations of religion, that is to say, obedience, chastity, and willful poverty. First under pretense or colour of obedience to their father in religion, which obedience they made themselves, they were made free by their rules and canons, from the obedience of their natural father and mother, and from the obedience of emperor and king, and all temporal power, whom of the very duty by God's laws they were bound to obey. And so the profession of their obedience, not due, was a forsaking of their due obedience.

And how their profession of chastity was kept, it is more honesty to pass over in silence, and let the world judge of that which is well known, than with unchaste words, by expressing of their unchaste life, to offend chaste and godly ears. And as for their willful poverty, it was such that, when in possessions, jewels, plate, and riches, they were equal, or above merchants, gentlemen, barons, earls, and dukes, yet by this subtle, sophisticated term, *proprium in communi*, that is to say, proper and common, they marked

the world, persuading that, notwithstanding all their possessions and riches, yet they kept their vow, and were in willful poverty. But for all their riches, they might neither help father nor mother, nor other that were indeed very needy and poor, without the license of their father abbot, prior, or warden.

And yet they might take of every man, but they might not give ought to any man, no, not to them whom the laws of God bound them to help. And so through their traditions and rules, the laws of God could bear no rule with them, and therefore of them might be most truly said, that which Christ spake unto the Pharisees, You break the commandments of God by your traditions, you honour God with your lips, but your hearts be far from him. And the longer prayers they used by day and by night, under pretense or colour of such holiness, to get the favour of widows, and other simple folks, that they might sing trentles and services for their husbands and friends, and admit or receive them into their prayers, the more truly is verified of them the saying of Christ, Woe be to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites, for you devour widows' houses, under colour of long prayers, therefore your damnation shall be the greater.

Woe be to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites, for you go about by sea and by land to make monophyses, and you brethren, and when they be let in or received of your sect, you make them the children of hell worse than yourselves be. Honour be to God, who did put light in the heart of his faithful and true minister of most famous memory, King Henry VIII, and gave him the knowledge of his word, and an earnest affection to seek his glory, and to put away all such superstitious and pharisaical sects by Antichrist invented, and set up against the true word of God and glory of his most blessed name, as he gave the light spirit unto the most noble and famous princes, Josaphat, Josias, and Ezechias. God grant us all the Queen's Highness' faithful and true subjects, to feed of the sweet and savoury bread of God's own word, and, as Christ commanded, to eschew all our pharisaical and papistical leaven of man's feigned religion, which, although it were before God most abominable and contrary to God's commandments and Christ's pure religion, yet it was praised to be a most godly life and highest state of perfection, as though a man might be more godly and more perfect by keeping the rules, traditions, and professions of man, than by keeping the holy commandments of God.

And briefly to pass over the ungodly and counterfeit religions, let us rehearse some other kinds of papistical superstitions and abuses, as of beads, of lady-salters, and rosaries, of fifteen-o's, of St. Bernard's verses, of St. Agatha's letters, of purgatory, of masses satisfactory, of stations and jubilees, of feigned relics, of hallowed beads, bells, bread, water, palms, candles, fire, and such other, of superstitious fastings, of fraternities, or brotherheads, of pardons, with such like merchandise, which were so esteemed and abused by the great prejudice of God's glory and commandments, that they were made most high and most holy things, whereby to attain to the everlasting life or remission of sin. Yea, also vain inventions, unfruitful ceremonies, and ungodly laws, decrees, and councils of Rome, were in such wise advance, that nothing was thought comparable in

authority, wisdom, learning, and godliness unto them, so that the laws of Rome, as they said, were to be received of all men as the four evangelists, to the which all laws of princes must give place, and the laws of God also partly were left off, unless esteemed, that the said laws, decrees, and councils, with their traditions and ceremonies, might be more duly kept, and had in greater reverence. Thus was the people through ignorance so blinded with the goodly show and appearance of those things, that they thought the keeping of them to be a more holiness, a more perfect service and honouring of God, and more pleasing to God, than the keeping of God's commandments.

Such hath been the corrupt inclination of man, ever superstitiously given to make new honouring of God, of his own head, and then to have more affection and devotion to keep that, than to search out God's holy commandments, and to keep them, and furthermore to take God's commandments for men's commandments, and men's commandments for God's commandments, yea, and for the highest and most perfect and holy of all God's commandments. And so was all confused, that scant well-learned men, and but a small number of them, knew, or at the least would know, and durst affirm the truth, to separate or sever God's commandments from the commandments of men, whereupon did grow much error, superstition, idolatry, vain religion, overthwought judgment, great contention, with all ungodly living. Wherefore, as you have any zeal to the right and pure honouring of God, as you have any regard to your own souls, and to the life that is to come, which is both without pain and without end, apply yourselves chiefly above all things to read and to hear God's word.

Mark diligently therein what his will is you shall do, and with all your endeavour apply yourselves to follow the same. First you must have an assured faith in God, and give yourselves wholly unto him, love him in prosperity and adversity, and dread to offend him evermore. Then, for his sake, love all men, friends and foes, because they be his creation and image, and redeemed by Christ as ye are.

Cast in your minds how you may do good unto all men, unto your powers, and hurt no man. Obey all your superiors and governors, serve your masters faithfully and diligently, as well in their absence as in their presence, not for dread or punishment only, but for conscience' sake, knowing that you are bound so to do by God's commandments. Disobey not your fathers and mothers, but honour them, help them, and please them to your power.

Oppress not, kill not, beat not, neither slander nor hate any man, but love all men, speak well of all men, help and succour every man as you may, yea, even your enemies that hate you, that speak evil of you, and that do hurt you. Take no man's goods, nor covet your neighbour's goods wrongfully, but content yourselves with that which ye get truly, and also bestow your own goods charitably, as need and case requireth. Flee all idolatry, witchcraft, and perjury.

Commit no manner of adultery, fornication, nor other unchasteness, in will nor in deed, with any other man's wife, widow, maid, or otherwise, and prevailing continually during your life thus in the keeping of the commandments of God, wherein standeth the pure principle and right honour of God, and which wrought in faith God hath ordained to be the right trade and pathway unto heaven. You shall not fail, as Christ hath promised, to come to that blessed and everlasting life, where ye shall live in glory and joy with God for ever. To whom be praise, honour, and glory for ever and ever.

Amen.