

A FRUITFUL EXHORTATION TO THE READING AND KNOWLEDGE OF HOLY SCRIPTURE

Part I

To a Christian, nothing is either more necessary or more profitable than the knowledge of Holy Scripture, for it is God's true Word, setting forth both his glory and man's duty. Every truth and doctrine necessary for our justification and everlasting salvation can be drawn out of that fountain and well of truth. Therefore, all who desire to enter the right and perfect way unto God must apply their minds to know Holy Scripture. Without it they cannot adequately know God and his will, nor can they know their office and duty. As drink is pleasant to the thirsty and food to the hungry, so is the reading, hearing, searching, and studying of Holy Scripture to those who desire to know God and do his will, or to know themselves. By contrast, those who despise the heavenly knowledge and spiritual food of God's Word show themselves to be so drowned in worldly vanities that they cannot savor God or godliness. It is for that very reason that they desire vanities rather than the true knowledge of God.

People who are sick with malaria find that whatever they eat or drink, no matter how good it may be, tastes as bitter as wormwood, not because the food is bitter, but because of their illness causes a corrupt and bitter disposition in their own tongue. In the same way, the sweetness of God's word bitter, not of itself, but only unto those who have their minds corrupted with long custom of sin and love of this world. Therefore, let us forsake the company of those who follow after the flesh and instead reverently hear and read Holy Scripture, which is the food of the soul.¹ Let us diligently search for the well of life in the books of the New and Old Testament, and not run to the stinking puddles of men's traditions, devised by man's imagination, for our justification and salvation. For in Holy Scripture is fully contained what we ought to do and what to avoid, what to believe, what to love, and what to expect at God's hands. In those books we find the Father *from* whom, the Son *by* whom, and the Holy Ghost *in* whom all things have their being and are maintained.

In these books we also find these three Persons to be but one God and one substance. In these books we may learn to know ourselves, how vile and miserable we are, and also to know how good God is and how he makes us and all creatures to be partakers of his goodness. We may also learn in these books to know as much of God's will and pleasure as is suitable for us to know at present. And, as the great cleric and godly preacher St. John Chrysostom says, "Whatsoever is required to salvation of man is fully contained in the Scripture of God. He that is ignorant may there learn and have knowledge. He that is hardhearted and an obstinate sinner shall there find everlasting torments prepared of God's justice, to make him afraid, and to soften him. He that is oppressed with misery in this world shall there find relief in the promises of everlasting life, to his great consolation and comfort. He that is wounded by the devil unto death shall find there

¹ Matthew 4:4

medicine, whereby he may be restored again unto health.” he further states that if there is need “to teach any truth or reprove false doctrine, to rebuke any vice, to commend any virtue, to give good counsel, to comfort, or to exhort, or to do any other thing requisite for our salvation; all those things,” says St. Chrysostom, “we may learn plentifully of the Scripture.” Similarly, “There is,” says Fulgentius, “abundantly enough both for men to eat and children to suck. There is whatsoever is suitable for all ages and for all degrees and sorts of men.”

Therefore, these books ought to be much in our hands, in our eyes, in our ears, in our mouths, but most of all in our hearts. For the Scripture of God is heavenly meat for our souls², the hearing and keeping of it makes us blessed,³ sanctifies us,⁴ and makes us holy. It converts our souls.⁵ It is a lantern to our feet.⁶ It is a sure, steadfast, and everlasting instrument of salvation. It gives wisdom to the humble and meek. It comforts, makes glad, cheers, and strengthens our consciences. It is a more excellent jewel or treasure than any gold or precious stone. It is sweeter than honey or honeycomb.⁷ It is called the best part, which Mary chose,⁸ for it has in it everlasting comfort. The words of Holy Scripture are called words of everlasting life,⁹ for they are God’s instrument, ordained for the same purpose. They have power to convert through God’s promise, and they are effectual through God’s assistance;¹⁰ and being received in a faithful heart, they continue to perform a heavenly spiritual work. They are living and powerful, and sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing even to the division of soul and spirit, and of joints and marrow.¹¹ Christ calls him a wise builder who builds upon his Word, upon his sure and substantial foundation.¹² By the Word of God we shall be judged, as Christ says: “he who rejects Me, and does not receive My words, has that which judges him—the word that I have spoken will judge him in the last day.”¹³ he who keeps the Word of Christ is promised the love and favor of God, and that he shall be the dwelling place or temple of the blessed Trinity.¹⁴ Whoever is diligent to read the Word and to imprint upon his heart what he reads will have his affections for the transitory things of this world diminished and his great desire of heavenly things, which are therein promised of God, increased. There is nothing that so strengthens our faith and trust in God, that so supports innocence and purity of heart and also of outward godly life and conversation, as continual reading and understanding of God’s Word. For the message which by continual reading and diligent searching of Holy Scripture is deeply printed and engraved in the heart, will eventually seem to be a part of his own nature. Furthermore, the effect and benefit of God’s Word is to illuminate the ignorant and to give more light unto those who faithfully

² Matthew 4:4

³ Luke 11:28

⁴ John 17:17

⁵ Psalms 19:7-10

⁶ Psalms 119:105, 130

⁷ Psalm 19:10

⁸ Luke 10:39, 42

⁹ John 6:68

¹⁰ Colossians 1:5, 6, 25-28

¹¹ Hebrews 4:12

¹² Matthew 7:24

¹³ John 12:48

¹⁴ John 14:23

and diligently read it; to comfort their hearts, and to encourage them to do what God commands. It teaches patience in adversity and humility in prosperity. It teaches what honor is due unto God and what mercy and charity to our neighbor. It gives good counsel in uncertain matters. It shows to whom we should look for aid and help in all perils, and that God is the only Giver of victory in all battles and temptations of our enemies, both physical and spiritual.¹⁵

In the reading of God's Word, the one who profits most is not the one who can quickly locate passages or the one who can recite many passages by rote. Instead, the one who profits most is he who is most attuned to its message, who is most inspired with the Holy Ghost, whose heart and life are changed by what he reads in the Word. It is he who is daily less proud, less wrathful, less covetous, and less desirous of worldly and vain pleasures. It is he who daily, forsaking his old sinful life, increases in virtue more and more. In sum, there is nothing that more maintains godliness of the mind and drives away ungodliness than the continual reading or hearing of God's Word, if it is accompanied by a godly mind and a desire to know and follow God's will. For without a single eye, undivided in devotion to God, a pure intent, and a good mind, nothing is allowed for good before God. Conversely, nothing more darkens Christ and the glory of God, nor brings in more blindness and all kinds of vices, than ignorance of God's Word.¹⁶

Part II

In the first part of this Sermon, which is an exhortation to the knowledge of Holy Scripture, it was declared that the knowledge of the same is necessary and profitable to all men, and that by the true knowledge and understanding of Scripture the most necessary points of our duty towards God and our neighbors are also known. This matter will now be developed further.

If we profess Christ, why are we not ashamed to be ignorant of his doctrine? A man would be ashamed to be called a philosopher if he does not read the philosophy books; or to be called a lawyer, an astronomer, or a physician, who is ignorant in the books of those professions. How can any man then say that he professes Christ and his religion, if he will not apply himself, as much as he is able, to read and hear, and so to know, the books of Christ's Gospel and doctrine? Although other sciences are good and should be learned, no man can deny that this is the chief of all learning, and incomparably passes all other knowledge. What excuse shall we therefore make at the last day before Christ, if we delight to read or hear men's fantasies and inventions more than his most holy Gospel? What excuse shall we make if we will find no time to do that which chiefly, above all things, we should do; if we would rather read other things instead of the one thing for which we ought to lay aside reading of all other things? Let us therefore apply ourselves, as often have time and leisure, to know God's Word by diligent hearing and reading thereof; as many as profess God, and have faith and trust in him.

¹⁵ 1 Samuel 14:4-23; 2 Chronicles 20:7, 17, 29; 1 Corinthians 15:57; 1 John 5:4

¹⁶ Isaiah 5:13, 24; Matthew 22, 29; 1 Corinthians 14

But those who show no affection for God's Word commonly give one of two empty excuses. Some excuse themselves by their own frailty and fearfulness, saying that they dare not read Holy Scripture lest through their ignorance they should fall into any error. Others pretend that the difficulty of understanding it is so great that it is suitable to be read only by clergymen and scholars.

Regarding the first excuse, ignorance of God's Word is actually the cause of all error, as Christ himself affirmed to the Sadducees, saying that they erred because they did not know the Scripture.¹⁷ How then can those who choose to be ignorant avoid error? And how will they come out of ignorance if they will neither read nor hear the very thing that will give them knowledge? he who now has the most knowledge was ignorant at first: yet he did not refrain from reading for fear he should fall into error; but he diligently read, lest he should remain in ignorance, and through ignorance in error. And, if you refuse to know the truth of God (a thing most necessary for you), lest you fall into error, by the same reasoning you must then lie still and never leave your house, for by going, you may fall in the mire. Similarly, you must not eat any good meat because you might overeat; nor will you sow your corn, nor labor in your occupation, nor use your merchandise, for fear you will lose your seed, your labor, your stock. By that line of reasoning, it would be best for you to live idly and never do any manner of good thing, because if you do, something bad might happen. But if you are still afraid that you will fall into error by reading of Holy Scripture, I will tell you how you may read it without danger of error. Read it humbly with a meek and lowly heart and for the purpose of glorifying God and not yourself with the knowledge of it. Daily pray to God that he would direct your reading to good effect; and do not try to expound it any further than you can plainly understand it. For, as St. Augustine says, the knowledge of Holy Scripture is a great, large, and a high palace, but the door is very low; so that the high and arrogant man cannot run in, but he must stoop low and humble himself that shall enter into it. Presumptuous arrogance is the mother of all error; humility needs fear no error. For humility will only search to know the truth; it will search and will bring together one passage with another; and, where it cannot find out the meaning, it will pray, it will ask of others who may know, and will not presumptuously and rashly define anything that it does not know. Therefore the humble man may search any truth boldly in the Scripture without any danger of error. And, if he is ignorant, he ought to read and to search Holy Scripture even more, to bring him out of ignorance. A man may prosper with only hearing the Word, but he will much more prosper with both hearing and reading.

Concerning the second excuse, the difficulty in understanding Scripture, he who is so weak that he is unable to bear strong meat may still consume the sweet and tender milk, and defer the rest until he grows stronger and more knowledgeable. For God receives the learned and unlearned, and casts away none, but is impartial unto all. And the Scripture contains enough low valleys, plain ways, and easy paths for every man to walk in, as well as high hills and mountains that few men can climb. St. John Chrysostom says that whoever gives his mind to Holy Scriptures with diligent study and burning desire will not be left without help. For either God Almighty will send him some godly doctor to teach him, as he sent the Apostle Philip to instruct Eunuchus, a nobleman of Ethiopia and

¹⁷ Matthew 22:29

treasurer unto queen Candace, who had a great desire to read the Scripture, although he understood it not; or else, if we lack a learned man to instruct and teach us, yet God himself from above will give light unto our minds, and teach us those things which are necessary for us, and of which we are ignorant.

Chrysostom also says that man's human and worldly wisdom or science is not what is needed for the understanding of Scripture, but the revelation of the Holy Spirit, who inspires the true meaning to those who with humility and diligence seek it. He who asks shall have, and he who seeks shall find, and he who knocks shall have the door open.¹⁸ If we read once, twice, or thrice, and do not understand, let us not cease, but continue reading, praying, asking of others; and so, by still knocking, the door will finally be opened, as St. Augustine says. Although many things in Scripture are spoken in obscure mysteries, nothing is obscure in one place that is not in other places spoken more familiarly and plainly so as to be understood by both the educated and uneducated.

Regarding those things in the Scripture that are plain to understand and necessary for salvation, every man's duty is to learn them, to print them in memory, and effectually to exercise them. As for the dark mysteries, every man's duty is to be contented to be ignorant in them until it pleases God to open those things unto him. In the meantime, if he lacks either the capacity or opportunity to learn these difficult matters, God will not consider him foolish. And those who are able to learn should not set aside reading, just because some others are not. Nevertheless, the reading of Scriptures ought not to be set aside simply because some passages are difficult. As St. Augustine says, by the Scripture all men be amended, weak men be strengthened, and strong men be comforted. So those who are enemies of the reading of God's Word are either so ignorant that they do not know how wholesome it is, or else so sick that they hate the very medicine that would heal them, or so ungodly that they wish all people to continue in blindness and ignorance of God.

Thus we have briefly touched upon some of the products of God's Holy Word, which is one of God's principal benefits given and declared to mankind here on earth. Let us thank God heartily for this his great and special gift, beneficial favor, and fatherly providence. Let us be glad to stir up this precious gift¹⁹ of our heavenly Father. Let us hear, read, and know these holy rules, injunctions, and statutes of our Christian religion, upon which we made profession to God at our baptism. Let us with fear and reverence lay up in the treasure chest of our hearts these necessary and fruitful lessons. Let us night and day muse, meditate on, and contemplate them.²⁰ Let us ruminare and as it were, chew the cud, that we may have the sweet juice, spiritual effect, marrow, honey, kernel, taste, comfort, and consolation of them.²¹ Let us calm, quiet, and certify our consciences with the most infallible certainty, truth, and perpetual assurance of them. Let us pray to God, the only Author of these heavenly studies, that we may speak, think, believe, live, and depart from here according to the wholesome doctrine and verities of them.

¹⁸ Matthew 7:7-8

¹⁹ II Timothy 1:6

²⁰ Psalm 1:2

²¹ Psalm 56:4

And by that means in this world we shall have God's defense, favor, and grace, with the unspeakable solace of peace and quietness of conscience, and after this life of misery we shall enjoy the endless bliss and glory of heaven, which is granted to us all by him who died for us all, Jesus Christ, to whom with the Father and Holy Ghost be all honor and glory both now and forever. Amen.