

Session 16

Thomas a' Kempis and the Imitation of Christ

The Imitation of Christ is one of the most influential books in my life and in the lives of many Christians throughout the centuries since the book was first written by the monk Thomas a' Kempis in the 15th century. In fact, next to the Bible, The Imitation of Christ is the second most widely read book in Christendom, and is readily available in any number of editions even today. It presents the fundamental principles of the spiritual life.

The Christian soul is invited to follow Christ who is the Way, the Truth and the Life. As one goes deeper into its contents, one becomes convinced that without that Way there is no going, without that Truth there is no knowing, without that Life there is no living.

About Thomas a' Kempis

Thomas Hemerken was born in Kempton, near Dusseldorf, Germany at the end of 1379 or early 1380. As a youth he studied at the school operated by his mother. In 1392 Thomas goes to Deventer, then the headquarters of the Brethren of the Common Life (a new kind of religious order) and continues his studies. In 1399 he requests admission in the Canons Regular of St. Augustine where his brother had become the religious superior. He officially receives the white habit in 1406 and pronounces his religious vows in 1408. In 1413 he is ordained to the priesthood. Somewhere between 1420 and 1427 he writes The Imitation of Christ.

Thomas would remain in the Augustinian Order for the rest of his life, undergoing severe trials and turmoil. In 1428 Pope Martin V places the diocese in which Thomas' monastery is located under interdict. As a result, the community is forced into exile. Eventually the community would return Zwolle in 1432 where Thomas would remain. In 1448 he is elected sub-prior of the community and dies in 1471.

About The Imitation of Christ

The Imitation of Christ is the most famous and most beloved Christian devotional book ever written. Even in Thomas' own day, the book was printed and disseminated in 750 editions. The book has been the favorite reading of philosophers, poets, saints and statesmen. St. Thomas More (1478-1535) listed it as one of three books that every Christian should read. St. Ignatius Loyola (1491-1556), the founder of the Jesuits, read a chapter each day. The German philosopher Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz (1646-1716) considered it the most excellent treatise ever written. John Wesley (1703-1791), founder of Methodism, judged it the best summary of the Christian life, and gave copies to many of his followers. Irish patriot Daniel O'Connell (1775-1847) used it for daily meditation. Thomas Merton (1915-1968), a well-known monk and spiritual writer, considered the book instrumental in his conversion, and Pope John Paul I was reading the book when he died on September 28, 1978.

Despite the popularity of *The Imitation of Christ*, the book was written by a monk for monks. The theology behind the book is that of the New Devotion as practiced in the Low Countries of northern Europe. The book is popular because it is not speculative or academic theology but practical and designed to assist serious Christians grow in the spiritual life.

The Imitation of Christ is composed of four distinct and independent treatises, written at different times, between 1420 and 1427. The work seems to have been composed for young monks in formation as a means of giving them a series of reflections on the Christian life, pointing out how they could effectively pursue virtue, advance in the interior life, and attain union with Christ. The appeal is to the heart rather than reason, beckoning the monk to desire to follow Christ fully and faithfully.

What Thomas offers us are the spiritual truths he has learned from the New Devotion, praying over the Scriptures, reading the Church Fathers and the lives of the saints, especially St. Augustine and St. Bernard. The book is filled with insights on human nature and human psychology.

The Imitation of Christ cannot be read as any normal book. You have to read one chapter at a time, and then ponder it, pray on it and ruminate on the implication of what is being said for your own life. The truths of this book must penetrate your heart and not just your mind. Only slow, repeated reading and response can attune us to this highly personal style of interior communication.

Many Protestants think that the Bible was never utilized until the 16th century Reformation. This is flatly wrong. Thomas' love for Scripture is reflected throughout the book. He quotes the Bible, paraphrases it and uses it to shape his thinking. This is one reason that Protestants and Anglicans find the book so appealing – it is not dry scholasticism but the heartfelt relationship of the soul to God.

Book I: Helpful Counsels for the Spiritual Life

Book I has as its purpose the development of the interior person by renouncing all that is vain and illusory in this world, by disavowing all that delights the senses, and by advocating humility and the desire to be unknown. Thomas thus invites us to seek what is true, interior and eternal. Although the first book has several specific counsels addressed to monks, it still has value for anyone seeking perfection in the religious life.

1. “Whoever follows me will not walk in darkness,” says the Lord. These are Christ’s own words by which he exhorts us to imitate his life and his ways, if we truly desire to be enlightened and free of all blindness of heart. Let it then be our main concern to meditate on the life of Jesus Christ.

It is vanity to seek riches that are sure to perish and to put your hope in them. It is vanity to pursue honours and to set yourself up on a pedestal. It is vanity to follow the

desires of the flesh and to crave the things which will eventually bring you heavy punishment. It is vanity to wish for a long life and to care little about leading a good life. It is vanity to give thought only to this present life and not to think of the one that is to come. It is vanity to love what is transitory and not to hasten to where everlasting joy abides. Therefore, withdraw your heart from the love of things visible and turn yourself to things invisible.

2. Everyone has a natural desire for knowledge but what good is knowledge without the fear of God? If I knew everything in the world and were still without charity, what advantage would I have in the eyes of God who is to judge me according to my deeds?
3. All perfection in this life has some imperfection mixed with it, and all speculative thought involves a certain amount of fuzziness. A humble knowledge of yourself is a surer way to God than any deep scientific inquiry. Certainly when Judgement Day comes we shall not be asked what books we have read, but what deeds we have done; we shall not be asked how well we have debated, but how devoutly we have lived.
4. Whenever you desire anything inordinately, you immediately find that you grow dissatisfied with yourself. Those who are proud and avaricious never arrive at contentment; it is the poor and the humble in spirit who live in great peace. Whoever is weak in spirit, given to the flesh, and inclined to sensual things can, but only with great difficulty, drag himself away from his earthly desires. Therefore, he is often gloomy and sad when he is trying to pull himself from them and easily gives in to anger should someone attempt to oppose him. There is no peace, therefore, in the heart of the man who is given to the flesh, nor to the man who is attached to worldly things. Peace is found only in one who is fervent and spiritual.
5. Do not open your heart to everyone, but discuss your affairs with one who is wise and fears God. We must have charity toward all but familiarity is not necessary.
6. Much peace could be ours if we did not occupy ourselves with what others say and do, for such things are of no concern to us. How can we long remain in peace if we involve ourselves in other people's business, if we seek outside distractions, and if we are rarely, or only to a small degree, interiorly recollected? Blessed are they who keep to themselves, for they shall enjoy much peace.
7. As long as we live in this world, it is impossible for us to be without trials and temptations, No one is perfect or so holy as to be without some temptation; nor can we ever be totally free of them. Conflicts are not won by running away; rather it is by humbly and patiently standing up to them that we gain strength against all our enemies. There is nothing remarkable in a devout and fervent man being without trials, but if he suffers patiently in time of adversity, then, there is hope for great spiritual advancement.

8. Keep your eyes on yourself and avoid judging the actions of others. In judging others we accomplish nothing, are often in error, and readily fall into sin; but we always gain by self-examination and self-criticism. Our judgments frequently depend on our likes and dislikes and thus are far from true because we make them conform to our own personal prejudices.
9. Be patient in bearing the imperfections and weaknesses of others, no matter what they be, just as others have to put up with your faults.
10. A short time is all that you have here. What is in store for you afterwards? Here today, gone tomorrow! When out of sight, you are soon out of mind. Your every thought and action should be that of a man who is to die this day. If you are not prepared to die today, will you be prepared tomorrow? Tomorrow is still uncertain, and how do you know you will see tomorrow? Do not postpone your soul's salvation to a later date, nor depend on your friends and neighbours, for they will forget you sooner than you think. The time will come when you will wish you had a single day, or even an hour, to put yourself in order, but I honestly cannot say whether that day or hour will be given to you. You fool! Why count on living a long time when you have no guarantee that you will live a single day more? Many presumed they would have a long life, but how deceived they were, for how abruptly they were taken from this earth. Everyone meets death. In the end, every man's life vanishes as quickly as does a shadow. Who will remember you when you are dead, and who will pray for you? Hence, do now all that you can, for you know not when you will die, nor what your eternal lot will be.

Book II: Directive for the Interior Life

Book II continues and advances the theme of Book I. We are told that the kingdom of God is found within us, and since that kingdom is internal it cannot be perceived by the external senses, or can it be attained by any natural affection, but only by a union with God through Christ. In order to respond to God's call, we need humility, inner peace, purity of intention, vigilance over our natural inclinations, and a good conscience.

1. "The kingdom of God is within you," says the Lord. If you turn to the Lord with your whole heart and forsake this wretched world, your soul will find rest. Learn to despise everything outside you and give yourself to the inner life, and you will see the kingdom of God coming within you.
2. Today our friends, tomorrow our enemies; and vice versa. Men are changeable as the wind! Put your whole trust in God and let him be your only love and fear only him. Why look about you? This place is not the place of your rest. Your dwelling place is to be in heaven, and you should view all earthly things as passing shadows. Everything is transitory and so are you.

3. Christ chose to suffer, and you dare to complain if someone insults you? Christ had his enemies and his slanderers, and you want everyone to be your friend and benefactor? How will your patience receive the crown if no trial comes your way?
4. Have peace within yourself; then you will be able to bring peace to others. All our peace in this wretched world comes from our humble endurance of suffering and not from living a life without it. He who best knows how to suffer enjoys the greatest peace, and such a man is victor over himself, master of the world, friend of Christ, and heir of heaven.
5. If our heart is right, then every creature is a mirror of life to you and a book of holy learning, for there is no creature – no matter how tiny or how lowly – that does not reveal God’s goodness. As a man is within, so he judges what is outside of him.
6. We ought not place too much trust in ourselves because we are often without grace and understanding, and whatever little glimmer of understanding we do have we quickly extinguish by our own negligence. We are so full of blindness that many times we are unaware of it. If a man justly and properly weighed his own actions he would never render a harsh judgment against another man. You will only arrive at a devout inner life by watching over yourself and by being silent with regard to others.
7. A clear conscience can bear a great deal... The good man’s glory comes from his conscience and not from men’s lips.
8. Blessed is he who understands what it is to love Jesus and to despise himself for Jesus’ sake. He who clings to a creature will fall when that creature fades away, but he who embraces Jesus shall stand forever. Whether you like it or not the day will come when you will find yourself separated from everyone and from everything. If you seek Jesus in everything you will certainly find him, and if you seek yourself you will surely find yourself but to your own disaster. You do yourself great harm by not seeking Jesus than if the whole world and all your enemies were against you.
9. When Jesus is present all is well and nothing seems arduous, but when he is absent everything becomes difficult. How dry and listless you are when Jesus is not with you! It is vain and foolish for you to desire anything other than Jesus. To lose him is to suffer a greater loss than to lose the whole world. What has the world to offer you without Jesus? To be without Jesus is a painful hell, but to be with him is a sweet paradise. You should be willing to have the whole world against you rather than offend Jesus. Of all those whom you hold dear, let Jesus alone be your special friend.
10. Why do you seek rest when you were born to work? Prepare yourself for patient suffering rather than for consolation, for bearing the cross rather than for rejoicing. Grace will always be granted the man who gives worthy thanks for graces received.

11. Jesus today has many lovers of his heavenly kingdom, but few of them carry his cross. Many love Jesus as long as adversity does not touch them and many praise and bless him as long as they receive consolation from him. But if he should hide himself and leave them for even a brief period they begin to complain and fall into severe depression. Powerful is that love for Jesus that is not tainted by self-love and has no admixture of self-interest. Those who are always looking for consolation are no better than mercenaries! Where will we find a man willing to serve God without receiving something in return?

12. Why do you fear to carry the cross? Everything is founded on the cross and everything depends on our dying on the cross. There is no other way to life and interior peace except the holy way of the cross and our daily dying to self. Plan as you will and arrange everything as seems best to you; still you will find some suffering in your life. Whether you wish it or not, you will always find the cross... God wants you to learn to endure affliction without relief, wholly to submit yourself to him and to become more humble by passing through adversity. If you carry your cross willingly. It will carry you and lead you to your desired goal, where suffering will be no more; but that will not be while you are here. Christ's entire life was a cross and martyrdom, and you look for rest and pleasure? You are mistaken, for our whole mortal life is full of misery and surrounded by crosses.

Book III: On Interior Consolation

Book III is the longest of the books but treats themes that already have been mentioned. However, there is greater emphasis on love and grace. The book is in the form of a dialogue between Jesus and the disciple, and the contents focus on the disciple's desire to ascend to God and to enjoy the divine delights.

1. Jesus: Keep close to me and you shall find peace. Do not waste your time on temporal things but seek those that are eternal.

2. Jesus: Most men are more eager to listen to the world than to God, and many are more inclined to follow the desires of their flesh than God's good pleasure. The world promises things that are passing and of little value and it is served with great enthusiasm; I promise things that are more excellent and eternal and men's hearts remain indifferent. Men find greater joy in chasing after empty dreams than you have in pursuing the truth.

3. If the truth sets you free, then you are truly free and you need not concern yourself about other men's empty words.

4. Progress in the spiritual life does not consist so much in the possession of the grace of consolation as it does in the following: being able, with humility and patient resignation, to live without it, not becoming lazy with regard to your prayers, nor giving up the

devotional exercises you are accustomed to perform. Continue in these exercises and prayers as seems best to you and as best you can, and never neglect your spiritual progress because of any dryness of soul or any anxiety of mind you may feel. It belongs to God to give comfort, when he wills, to whom he wills, and as much as he wills – all according to his good pleasure and not more.

5. Are not all arduous labours to be endured to gain eternal life? Losing or gaining the kingdom of God is no small matter.
6. Jesus: Son, always bring your problems to me and I will solve them at their proper time. Wait for my answer and you will find that everything will work for your benefit.
7. We devote much of our time to what is inconsequential and insignificant and neglect that which is of the greatest importance to us. Unless the man, who gives himself entirely to external affairs, returns to his senses, and quickly too, he will soon find himself snugly settled in the web of earthly affairs.

Book IV: On the Blessed Sacrament

The final book is much different from the other three. It is presented as the pinnacle of the doctrine contained in *The Imitation*. The Christian is now aware that the union he desires with God is sacramentally achieved on earth whenever he or she partakes of Christ's gift of his Body and Blood in the Eucharist. This book, like Book III, also is in the form of a dialogue between Jesus and his disciple. The emphasis here is on the Catholic view that the spiritual life is furthered and enhanced by reverence and love for the Blessed Sacrament.

1. Disciple: Many people travel to different places to pay homage to the relics of the saints, and they stand in amazement when they see the splendid shrines, and are in awe when they hear narrated the story of the saints' lives and their remarkable deeds, or again, when they kiss the bones wrapped in silk and encased in gold. But you, my God, the Holy of Holies, the Creator of all things and Lord of angels, are here present before me on this altar! In the Sacrament of the altar, you, my God, the man Christ Jesus, are fully present, and as often as we worthily and devoutly receive you, we enjoy the abundant fruits of eternal salvation. O admirable and hidden grace of the Sacrament, you are known only to Christ's faithful followers! Those who lack faith and are slaves to sin are incapable of recognizing this grace and sharing in it.
2. Disciple: O most sweet and gentle Jesus, what reverence, thanksgiving, and praise unending I owe you when I receive your sacred Body. There is no man on earth who can adequately extol the excellence of this Sacrament. What thought should be mine when I approach you, my Lord, in Holy Communion? I can never honour you as you deserve, nevertheless I am filled with the longing to receive you.

3. Disciple: Because I so often fall and commit sin, and because I so quickly grow lukewarm and am neglectful, it is most necessary that by frequent prayer, confession, and the devout reception of your Body, I be renewed, cleansed, and have my soul enkindled lest, perhaps, by abstaining from your Body for too long a time, I fall away from my holy resolve.
4. Disciple: I truly believe that you, God and man, are here present in this Sacrament. There is no one to help me, no one to free me, no one to save me, but you, Lord God my Saviour. To you I commit myself and all that I have, and I ask you to protect me and to lead me to eternal life. You who have provided your Body and Blood as my food and drink, receive me for the praise and glory of your name.
5. Noble is the ministry of the priest and exalted his dignity. To him has been granted what has not been granted to the angels. Only a priest, duly ordained in the Church, has the power to celebrate Mass and consecrate the Body of Christ. The priest is God's instrument and by God's institution and command he speaks God's word, but God always remains the chief author and the invisible worker, to whom all things are subject and to whose command everything is obedient. Therefore you should approach this Sacrament with reverent awe. Take a look at yourself and consider the office entrusted to you by the bishop's hands. You were made a priest and were consecrated to celebrate Mass. See that you faithfully, devoutly and at the appointed time offer this sacrifice to God and see that your life is above reproach. By becoming a priest you have not diminished your burden, but taken on a stricter discipline, and are now obliged to strive for greater perfection and holiness. A priest should be adorned with every virtue and be a model of good deeds to others. His time should be spent not as the common man spends his, but with the angels in heaven, or with men who are considered perfect on earth. When clad in sacred vestments the priest takes the place of Christ and humbly and suppliantly intercedes before God for himself and all people. The priest remembers that he has been appointed mediator between God and sinners. When the priest offers Mass he gives honour to God, grants joy to the angels, builds up the Church, helps the living, obtains rest for the dead, and himself becomes a partaker in all good things.
6. There is not any offering more worthy, nor any sacrifice more efficacious for the washing away of sins than for a man to offer himself purely and entirely, to God at the time that he offers my Body in the Mass or in Communion.
7. Jesus: With my hands outstretched on the cross and my body naked, I willingly offered myself to God the Father for your sins. Everything in me was taken up in that sacrifice of divine propitiation. In like manner, you must willingly offer yourself to me as a pure and holy oblation, with your whole heart and soul, and as lovingly as you can. Whatever else you offer me besides yourself does not interest me: I do not seek your gifts; what I seek is you.

