

# Following Christ's Example in the World—Thomas à Kempis, *The Imitation of Christ* (c. 1418)

## Abstract

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Thomas à Kempis (c. 1380–1471), a native of the Lower Rhenish region, was the author of *The Imitation of Christ*, a uniquely popular book that codified the ideals of the movement called “the Modern Devotion” [*Devotio Moderna*]. Although many who followed Thomas' principles were laypersons, he himself was part of a community that lived under Augustinian rule. While ascetic and monastic in origin, the piety Thomas taught is adapted for a variety of ways of life. He emphasized a literate, individual spirituality, self-discipline, and, above all, the practice of charity, which he viewed as the highest virtue and the best way to follow the example of God's son. Translated from the Latin, *The Imitation of Christ* is probably the most popular book of Christian devotion ever written. Like Eckhart and Tauler before him, Thomas taught that love, not faith, was the highest expression of Christian virtue.

## Source

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### Book I

[...]

#### Chapter 24

##### ABOUT THE JUDGEMENT, AND HOW SINNERS ARE PUNISHED

At every turn of your life, keep the end in view; remember that you will have to stand before a strict Judge, who knows everything, who cannot be won over by gifts or talked round by excuses, who will give you your deserts. What sort of defense will you make before One who knows the worst that can be said against you—poor, sinful fool, so often panic-stricken when you meet with human disapproval! Strange, that you should look forward so little to the Day of Judgment, when there will be no counsel to plead for you, because everyone will be hard put to it to maintain his own cause! Now is the time to work, while there is a harvest to be reaped, now is the time when tears and sighs and lamenting of yours will be taken into account, and listened to, and can make satisfaction for the debt you owe.

2. Nothing so important, nothing so useful, if you want to clear your soul of that debt, as to be a man who can put up with a great deal. Such a man, if he is wronged, is more distressed over the sin committed than over the wrong done him; he is always ready to say a prayer for his enemies, forgives an injury with all his heart, and is quick to ask forgiveness of others, and you will find him more easily moved to pity than to anger. And all the while he is putting constraint upon himself, doing all he can to make corrupt nature the servant of the spirit.

Much better to get rid of your sins now, prune away your bad habits here, than keep them to be paid for hereafter; it's only our preposterous attachment to creature comforts that blinds us.

[...]

7. And now, suppose you had lived all your life, and were still living today, surrounded with honors and pleasures, what use would it all be, if you were to fall down dead this instant? Everything, you see, is just meaningless, except loving God and giving all our loyalty to him.

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Love God with all your heart, and you've nothing to fear; death or punishment, judgment or hell; love, when it reaches its full growth, is an unfailing passport to God's presence. If we are still hankering after our sinful habits, of course we are afraid of death and judgment. Just as well, all the same, that if love can't succeed in beckoning us away from evil courses, we should be scared away by the fear of hell. Only, if a man doesn't make the fear of God his first consideration, his good resolutions won't last; he will walk into some trap of the devil's before long.

## Chapter 25

### ABOUT THE ZEAL WE OUGHT TO SHEW IN AMENDING THE WHOLE COURSE OF OUR LIVES

[...]

6. Remind yourself of the undertaking to which you are committed, and then go and look at your Crucifix. You've good reason to be ashamed, haven't you, when you think of the life Jesus Christ lived—all these years in religion, and so little attempt, even now, to make him your model! If he meditates on the holy life and Passion of our Lord, any religious can find there all that he needs, and more than he needs, for his soul's profit; he won't want to look for better subjects elsewhere. Jesus crucified! If only we could get that into our hearts, all the learning we need would be ours in no time.

[...]

10. It's not till a man reaches the stage of refusing consolation from any created thing, that he gets his first real taste of God. By that time, he has learned to be content, however things fall out; he won't be elated by big results, or disappointed with small ones. In utter confidence he takes his stand upon God, who is everything to him in every connection; the God for whom nothing is ever lost, nothing ever perishes—to whom everything is alive, obeying, instantly, the least expression of his will.

11. Keep on reminding yourself that life comes to an end, and lost time never returns to us. You aren't going to form any good habits without taking trouble over it, working hard for it. The moment you begin to cool off, trouble starts. You must throw yourself into it whole-heartedly; then you will experience great peace of mind, and all your labor will seem light; God's grace and the love of holy living will carry you along. Meanwhile, there's more hard work in it, this fight against your bad habits and your passions, than in the sweat of bodily exertion. The man who doesn't keep clear of petty faults will gradually slip into graver ones. A day spent profitably means an evening spent cheerfully. Watch yourself, spur yourself on, check yourself with a warning now and again; whatever claims other people have on you, don't let your own soul suffer from neglect. The more constraint you put on yourself, the more progress you will make; that is certain.

## **BOOK II**

### Chapter 1

#### ABOUT LIVING AN INTERIOR LIFE

*God's kingdom lies within you*, the Lord says.<sup>[1]</sup> You must turn to him, the Lord, with all your heart, and leave this wretched world behind you, if your soul is to find rest. Learn to despise this world of outward things, and devote yourself to what lies within; there, within you, you will see the coming of God's kingdom. That's what "God's kingdom" means—peacefulness and rejoicing in the Holy Spirit; something denied to the irreligious. Christ is ready to come to you, with what kindness in his glance! But you must make room, deep in your heart, to entertain him as he deserves; it is for the inward eye, all the splendor and beauty of him; deep in your heart is where he likes to be. Where he finds a man whose thoughts go deep, he is a frequent visitor; such pleasant converse, such welcome words of comfort, such deep repose, such intimate friendship, are well-nigh past belief.

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2. Up with you, then, faithful soul, get your heart ready for the coming of this true Lover, or he will never consent to come and make his dwelling in you; that is his own way of putting it, *If a man has any love for me, he will be true to my word; and we will come to him, and make our abode with him.*<sup>[2]</sup> You must make room for Christ, then, and shut the door upon all intruders.

If Christ is yours, then wealth is yours; he satisfies all your wants. He will look after you, manage all your affairs for you most dutifully; you will need no human support to rely on. Our human friends change so easily, fail us after such a short time! Whereas Christ abides for ever, and stands loyally, to the last, at our side.

[...]

## Chapter 5

### ON SELF-CRITICISM

We aren't in a position to count on ourselves much, because apart from a rare grace, we haven't enough perception; our faculty of insight is a very limited one, and is easily lost if we once get careless about it. Quite often we're unaware of our own blindness, and make a bad action worse by the dishonest excuses we offer for it—we lose our tempers, for example, and put it down to zeal, or we pounce on slight faults in our neighbors so as to have an excuse for ignoring more serious faults of our own. How quick we are to reckon up our grievances against other people, how slow to notice what a lot they have to put up with from us! And yet a man who sees himself as he really is hasn't the heart to criticize the next man.

2. It's a sure sign that you're living an interior life, if in your own view you are Problem number One; something which has to be tackled seriously, so that you don't feel inclined to discuss other people. Don't gossip about their affairs, be content to watch yourself, or you'll never be a man of prayer and recollection.

God and yourself—that's the subject to keep in view; mere outward happenings oughtn't to make much impression on you. How your thoughts roam about when you're not recollected; how little ground they've covered when you haven't kept yourself in view! No, if you really want peace, really want to be integrated, you must leave everything else on one side, and keep one thing under observation—yourself.

3. The passing shows of time, how you grow in stature if you can banish these from your thoughts, how they belittle you if you pay attention to them! Let nothing impress or overawe you, nothing charm or captivate you, except God and what comes straight from God; the satisfaction you get out of creatures must count for nothing. The soul that loves God despises everything else, as being less than God; he only, the Eternal, the Infinite, can fulfill every desire, can bring balm to the soul's wounds, and true joy to man's heart.

## Chapter 12

### ON THE ROYAL ROAD OF THE HOLY CROSS

[...]

10. Set out, then, as a good and faithful servant of Christ, to bear like a man the cross of your Lord, that cross to which he was nailed for love of you. Be prepared to endure much thwarting and many a difficulty in this life of sadness; because that's how things are going to be for you, wherever you are, that's how you're sure to find things, wherever you look for shelter from them. That's the way it's got to be; there's no cure, no getting round the fact of trouble and sorrow; you just have to put up with them. If you long to be the Lord's friend, to share what is his, you must drink his cup and like it. As for consolations, let God see about that; he will arrange about that kind of thing as he sees best. Your job must be to be ready to

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endure troubles and to reckon them the greatest of comforts; for what we suffer in this present life is nothing when we compare it with the glory to be won in the life to come, even though you alone were able to endure it all.

11. When you have reached such a point that trouble is sweet to you, something to be relished for Christ's sake, you may reckon that all is well with you; you have found heaven on earth. But so long as suffering irks you, so long as you try to avoid it, things will go ill with you; everywhere you will be pursued by the pain you try to escape.

12. If you resolve, as you ought, to suffer and to die, things will at once go better with you and you will find peace. Even if, like St Paul, you were to be caught up to the third heaven, that would be no guarantee of your suffering no further affliction. *I have yet to tell him, says Jesus, how much suffering he will have to undergo for my name's sake.*<sup>[3]</sup> You have still to suffer, then, if you wish to love Jesus and serve him forever.

13. If only you were worthy to suffer in some way for the name of Jesus! What great glory you would have awaiting you! How all the Saints of God would rejoice! And think how you would strengthen the spiritual life of your neighbor! All men agree in applauding patience in suffering; few are willing to suffer. You ought gladly to suffer a little for Christ's sake; there are many who suffer far worse for worldly interests.

14. Make no mistake about it; the life you are to lead must be one of death-in-life. The more a man dies to himself, the more he begins to live to God. No one is fit to grasp heavenly things unless he resigns himself to bearing affliction for Christ's sake. There is nothing more acceptable to God, nothing so conducive to your soul's health in this world, than willingly to suffer for Christ's sake. If you had the choice, you ought to choose rather to suffer affliction for Christ's sake than to be refreshed by much comfort; that would make you resemble Christ more nearly, make you follow more closely the pattern of all the Saints. Our merit, you see, our progress in virtue, doesn't consist of enjoying much heavenly sweetness and consolation; no, it lies in bearing heavy affliction and trouble.

15. If there had been anything better for men, more profitable for their salvation, than suffering, you may be sure that Christ, by his teaching and by his own example, would have pointed it out. But no; addressing the disciples who were following him, and all those who wish to follow him, he clearly urges them to carry the cross, when he says: *If any man has a mind to come my way, let him renounce self, and take up his cross, and follow me.*<sup>[4]</sup> So then, when we have made an end of reading and studying, this is the conclusion we should reach at last: *that we cannot enter the kingdom of heaven without many trials.*<sup>[5]</sup>

## NOTES

[1] <sup>1</sup> Luke 17. 21.

[2] <sup>2</sup> John 14. 23.

[3] <sup>1</sup> Acts 9. 16.

[4] Luke 9. 23

[5] Acts 14. 21.

Source of English translation (from the Latin original): Thomas à Kempis, *The Imitation of Christ*, translated by Ronald Knox and Michael Oakley. New York: Ignatius Press, 1959, pp. 53, 55, 56–57, 58–59, 60, 66–67, 78, 81–83.

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Recommended Citation: Following Christ's Example in the World—Thomas à Kempis, The Imitation of Christ (c. 1418), published in: German History in Documents and Images, <<https://germanhistorydocs.org/en/from-the-reformations-to-the-thirty-years-war-1500-1648/ghdi:document-4202>> [April 04, 2025].