

# Preaching a Practical Spirituality—A Sermon by Johannes Tauler (14th century, published in 1515–16)

## Abstract

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Many of the sermons of Johannes Tauler (c. 1300–61), a German Dominican from Strasbourg, were preached to nuns and Beguines in the city of Basel. His teaching is more concrete and practical than that of his teacher, the great Meister Eckhart (Eckhart von Hochheim, c. 1260–c. 1328). Tauler turned Eckhart's principles of negation and his denial of the world into a more positive theology of engagement in the life of the world. He found many followers in the Friends of God lay circles that flourished in the cities of the Rhine Valley, especially Basel, Strasbourg, and Cologne. Tauler's sermons were much admired by Martin Luther, who annotated and published an edition of them in 1515–16. At the time, Luther was an Augustinian friar in Erfurt. Like *The German Theology*, Tauler's sermons belong to a German tradition of spiritual (and often mystical) religious teaching that became relatively popular among both clergy and some laity, chiefly in monasteries and towns. In this Ascension Day sermon, Tauler guides both the religious (monks, friars, nuns, and Beguines) and lay people alike towards a spiritual life founded on faith and obedience.

## Source

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Recumbentibus undecim discipulis.

When the eleven disciples were sitting together... (Mark 16:14)

When the disciples of our Lord were sitting together, our Lord Jesus appeared to them and chastised them for their lack of faith and the hardness of their hearts.

Our Lord rebukes people from places all over the world every day and hour for their lack of faith and the hardness of their hearts. He especially punishes the clerics, whether they be members of long-established orders or more locally formed communities like Beguines and sisters and the like.

Sometimes our Lord disciplines them (externally) via their teachers and sometimes internally, if they are really willing to accept the punishment.

These clerical individuals merit especially severe punishment when they are hard of heart and disbelieving, because it is an extraordinary honor to be selected by God and called into the spiritual nobility of a clerical life. My children, we, the elected, accordingly owe God great love and above all things extreme gratitude.

Thus the Lord punishes these people for their lack of faith and their hardness of heart. If they should desire to admit the hardness of their hearts and their lack of faith, confess to these, and be punished, then they could be helped.

Saint James said: "Faith without works is dead" (James 2:26). Christ said: "Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved" (Mark 16:16). We all confess faith with our mouths. Saint Paul said: "We are all baptized into the death of Jesus Christ" (Romans 6:3). Saint Augustine said: "That is not true faith, which does not hurry to God with active love and good works. That is only a proclamation of the mouth." This lack of faith is evidenced when one longs for that which tastes good or lusts after a thing, when we should be saying: "Lord, you are my God, and nowhere am I better off than with you." These people have

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fallen away from a true living faith entirely, especially those with clerical names, who at some point have been touched by God, whether asleep or awake, and have nevertheless fallen away.

Our Lord punishes them, too, for the hardness of their hearts. My children, it is a truly terrible thing when those whom God has called to him are still hardened so that divine things do not appeal to them, whether it be prayer or other good deeds and exercises. Meanwhile sensual pleasures, frivolous and entertaining, appeal to them whilst their hearts are like stone towards God. Our Lord spoke of such people through the prophet [Ezekiel 36:26]: “I will take out your stony heart and give you a heart of flesh.” What makes one’s heart so hard that one becomes brittle and cold to all the good things that one should do and behaves unreasonably? It must mean that the heart has something that is not from God, be that itself or something else, and this does not want to be punished.

Our Lord spoke through the prophet Jeremiah [2:12–13] about such people: “O heavens, be amazed and troubled; o gates of heaven, be closed before the vice of my people, for they have done two evils: they have abandoned me, the source of living water, and they have dug themselves a well, a well that holds no water of its own,” and that which is in it seeps in from the ground or comes in from above, and the rain and other water is putrid and stinks, but there is no source of water in the well itself. God laments this great vice to heaven and earth, to all his creatures and all his friends. Who are these people about whom God thus complains? They are his folk, the clerics, and they have abandoned the living water completely and have very little true light or life in the ground. Rather, they are occupied with exterior things and busy with outer sensual pleasures and works and rituals. These are all external, carried in by hearing or sensory impulses. Meanwhile, there is too often nothing in the ground from which the water should spring and flow.

Are these not truly the wells in which there is no water that springs from the ground, in which everything flows in from the outside, and perhaps even drains away as quickly as it fills? And precisely that is supposed to be good about these people, their rituals and knowledge, which were conceived with good intentions. But these do not lead them to the ground: they have neither an internal spring nor thirst, they do not look any further. They do their own thing and the impulses of their senses from without convince them that this is enough. They remain at the well which they themselves have dug, and they do not taste God. Neither do they drink from the living water, they leave it alone. And so they lie down and sleep, and in the morning they continue in their old ways; they are entirely satisfied. In a blind, cold, arid, hard manner, they remain by the wells that they have made for themselves, and they leave the living fountain alone.

Our Lord said: “You have behaved unchastely and blemished yourself.” And he said in another chapter: “And this all because you have abandoned me, the living fountain, and dug your own well.”

Everything that enters this well will become stale and stink: these sensory practices dry it up. They remain proud, individualistic, impenitent, harsh in judgment and word. They reprimand their neighbor, not out of love or with gentleness, but at the unfitting place or time. Some try to put out a fire in another’s house and burn down their own. Indeed, if such a man had three houses with his hard, ferocious words, and a beggar [literally, a poor child] came to him, he would say: “No, he is a fraud,” and when another comes, “No, she is a beguine.” Well then, you are truly cisterns: if the true water had ever sprung from your barren land, none of you would make such distinctions among people, for divine love would spring from the ground as from a spring. Then there would be no belittling, no harsh judgment, no hearts of stone. This foulness festers in cisterns.

Rational people [i.e., the educated] with their haughty words and advanced reason are also cisterns. One is satisfied with his seemingly good words and appearance, while the other is satisfied with his intellect. What do you think will happen when the time comes when the strong winds blow everything apart, and the terrible and frightening plagues descend on the earth? Then, in the panic, one will see who is

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disbelieving. Those who seemed to be good with their grand names and great reason and clever words, who displayed false holiness and did not have the living ground—all self-contained, all cisterns: the devil will come to them in the end and fell them with a single blow of his ax. And so everything will be pulverized and banished, so that no ground remains there. It will all be blown away and obliterated, as if nothing had ever been there. It was putrid water in the cisterns. They were interested only in appearance, but there was nothing within.

My children, when do you think that this will all be seen? Remember when you go into the life of the world: I told you that this false appearance and attitude have become common among the religious orders—an outer superficial, sensual manner—and that many married people and widows in the “world” are much more advanced, further, much further [in their spiritual journey]. And if God is merciful to these [corrupted clerics] at the end of time and saves them, they shall suffer long in purgatory, as God has ordered, and after that they shall still remain at a great distance from God, far away from Him.

Children, in the name of God, I ask you to look out for yourselves. Examine yourselves and be careful what you get yourselves into, and be gentle and humble in spirit and a servant to God and all creatures, because God laments your behavior to the heavens, and to the earth, and to all creatures. These heavens, these are the heavenly hearts, for every good person is a divine heaven, and each of them carries heaven within; even if they themselves cannot enter. And this is the biggest torment for those weak in spirit: though they recognize the heaven within, they are never able to enter.

And just now we touched upon what our Lord spoke through the prophet: You have been unchaste and pursued a stranger as your lover; you have scorned me and chased after another. But come to me, and I want to let you repent, and then I will pour living water into you, if you return completely to me.

Don't you see this unbelievable mercy and goodness of God, how much he wants to help us if we too desire it, and speak to us as a friend, if we only come to him? Our Lord said before: “And if you don't do this, then I have to proceed against you at the Judgment.” To proceed against Him is a precarious thing, for He has the upper hand.

Children, protect yourselves, so that He does not say that you are not one of his sheep. For His sheep have heard His voice and did not follow a stranger, as He Himself said. What is this unchasteness of which our Lord says you are guilty? This is to be understood in a spiritual way, if there is no other meaning, because you have at least become bogged down in the sensual [pleasures]. And the stranger whom you pursued, this lover, that refers to all the external images and things which were supposed to lead you to Me: you have been unchaste through them. But come to me now, and I want to receive you and pour the living water into you.

Our Lord spoke of this water in the New Testament in the gospels. “All those,” he said, “who are thirsty, they should come to me and drink, and from those who believe in me, the living water shall flow, and flow into eternal life.” (John 7: 37–38) And he said of this water to the [Samaritan] woman at the well: “Whoever drinks this water becomes thirsty again, but those who drink from the water that I give shall never be thirsty again, and if you ask for it, I will give it to you” (John 4: 13–14).

“O Lord,” she said, “give me this water, so that I no longer have to come here and fetch water.” And our Lord said: “Go first and bring your husband (which means knowledge of yourself) and confess thoroughly that you have been a cistern so long, that you have not drunk of the living water. And then you shall have it. And you have had five husbands (those are the five senses): you lived with them and used them as you wanted and made yourself unworthy of the living well with your sensual amusements, to which you clung: But turn away from there and return to Me, and I want to receive you.”

He also spoke through the same prophet Jeremiah in the fourth [actually, the fifth] chapter, and

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complained about you and spoke: “I made you into my chosen vineyard, and I waited for you to bring me the finest wine from Cyprus, from Engaddi,” and spoke of the great effort he had put into the vineyard: “I tilled the soil, and put a hedge around it and fenced it in and built a press and removed the stones (and though Jeremiah spoke here to the chosen people, God intended the message for all peoples until the end of the world), and you became too bitter for me. You yielded bitter wine, sour wine, and instead of fine wine and grapes you bore sour grapes and evil deeds, and thus I must arraign you at the Judgment. But if you only desire to return to me, I want to infuse you with the living water and true love.”

A master named Richard, a distinguished master of Scripture, spoke of this living water, [explaining] that this love has four degrees:

The first degree of love is “wounded love,” when the soul is wounded by the rays of God’s love, so that the living water may enter. And God is also wounded by this love. And our Lord said of love in the book of love [Song of Solomon]: “My sister, you have injured my heart with one of your eyes and with one hair of your neck.” A single eye, that is a diligent contemplation of the beliefs and the mind that is purely focused on God. And the single hair is the pure and unpolluted love. Thereby God is injured by the soul.

The other degree of true love, this master calls a captive love. It is written: “I should draw you with the bonds of Adam.”

The third love is a torturing love. The bride in the book of love [Song of Solomon] said of this love: “You daughters of Jerusalem, if you find my beloved, tell him that I am tortured by love.”

The fourth love is the consuming love. The prophet spoke it in the Psalm [119:81]: “*Defecit*—my soul is consumed and famished, Lord, in your salvation.”

Let us speak a bit about the first two loves:

For the wounded love we can take a parable: The one who is wounded by love is like a merchant who sails a ship for profit: his heart is wounded by the desire to collect many things; he scratches together something here and collects as much as he can there to fill his ship. This is what the wounded one does: He collects all the images and thoughts and practices that he can to please the one that he loves. And when the ship is laden, he casts off. He is still able to sail the ship against the storm. And so it is with the wounded love: They launch their ship into the storm of divinity and sail along gaily, playing with the storm as they want, until they throw the oars into the bottomless sea, and the more they draw the divine effluence in, the more expansive it becomes, and this greater receptivity is filled, and this completion creates new receptivity and new breadth, and creates new wounds of love.

But then the Lord slashes the rigging of the ship in two, and lets the ship speed into the storm: now there is neither rudder nor oar with which to keep the ship on course. Then one is no longer able to control his own path; that is captive love.

Then he is like a knight gravely wounded in battle. He wants to run away as long as he can, but if he is captured, he loses control over his fate. He can control neither his thoughts nor deeds. He has to abandon himself to this lover and love itself.

Much remains to be said about this love. That will hopefully happen later. May the eternal Love help us to leave behind our cisterns and fill us with the waters of true love. Amen.

Source of original German text: Johannes Tauler, *Die Predigten Taulers*, edited by Ferdinand Vetter. Berlin, 1910, pp. 285–90. Available online at:

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<http://digital.ub.uni-duesseldorf.de/content/pageview/272955>.

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Recommended Citation: Preaching a Practical Spirituality—A Sermon by Johannes Tauler (14th century, published in 1515–16), published in: German History in Documents and Images, <<https://germanhistorydocs.org/en/from-the-reformations-to-the-thirty-years-war-1500-1648/ghdi:document-4189>> [April 03, 2025].