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978-1-107-65275-0 - The Imitation of Christ or the Ecclesiastical Music

Thomas á Kempis

Excerpt

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## THE FIRST BOOK.

### ADMONITIONS USEFUL FOR THE SPIRITUAL LIFE.

#### CHAPTER I.

##### OF THE IMITATION OF CHRIST, AND CONTEMPT OF ALL THE VANITIES OF THE WORLD.

I. He that followeth Me, walketh not in darkness<sup>1</sup>, saith the Lord. These are the words of Christ, by which we are admonished how we are to imitate His life and manners, if we will be truly enlightened, and be delivered from all blindness of heart.

Let it therefore be our chief endeavour to meditate upon the life of Jesus Christ.

The doctrine of Christ excelleth all the doctrines of the saints; and he that had the Spirit, would discover therein the hidden manna<sup>2</sup>.

<sup>1</sup> John viii. 12.

<sup>2</sup> Rev. ii. 17.

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But it falleth out that many from often hearing feel but slender desire for the Gospel because they are void of the spirit of Christ.

But whosoever will fully and feelingly understand the words of Christ, must endeavour to conform his life wholly to Him.

II. What does it avail thee to dispute profoundly of the Trinity, if thou be void of humility, and thereby displeasing to the Trinity?

High words, surely, do not make a man holy and just; but a virtuous life maketh him dear to God.

I had rather feel compunction, than understand the definition thereof.

If thou didst know the whole Bible in the outward letter, and the sayings of all the philosophers, what would all that profit thee without the love of God and grace?

Vanity of vanities, and all is vanity<sup>1</sup>, save only to love God and serve Him alone<sup>2</sup>.

This is the highest wisdom, by contempt of the world to tend towards the kingdom of Heaven.

It is therefore vanity to seek after perishing riches, and to repose trust in them.

It is also vanity to court honours, and to climb to high degree.

<sup>1</sup> Eccl. i. 2.

<sup>2</sup> Deut. vi. 13.

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 CH. 2 THE IMITATION OF CHRIST
 

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It is vanity to follow the appetites of the flesh, and to long for that, for which thou must afterwards suffer grievous punishment.

Vanity it is to wish to live long, and to be careless to live well.

It is vanity to mind only this present life, and not to foresee those things which are to come.

It is vanity to set thy love on that which speedily passeth away, and not to hasten thither where everlasting joy abideth.

Call often to mind that proverb, The eye is not satisfied with seeing, nor the ear filled with hearing<sup>1</sup>.

Endeavour therefore to withdraw thy heart from the love of visible things, and to turn thyself to the invisible.

For they that follow their sensuality stain their consciences, and lose the grace of God.

## CHAPTER II.

## OF THE HUMBLE CONCEIT OF OURSELVES.

I. Every man naturally desireth to know ; but what availeth knowledge without the fear of God?

<sup>1</sup> Eccl. i. 8.

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Surely a humble husbandman that serveth God is better than a proud philosopher that, neglecting himself, considereth the course of the heavens.

Whoso knoweth himself well groweth more contemptible in his own conceit, and delighteth not in the praises of men.

If I understood all that is in the world, and were not in charity<sup>1</sup>, what would that help me in the sight of God, who will judge me according to my deeds?

Cease from inordinate desire of knowledge, for therein is found much distraction and deceit.

They who are learned are eager to seem so to others, and to be accounted wise.

There be many things, which to know doth little or nothing profit the soul.

And he is very unwise that bestoweth his labour upon other things than those that avail him for his salvation.

Many words do not satisfy the soul; but a good life refresheth the mind, and a pure conscience giveth great assurance in the sight of God.

The more and the better thou knowest, the more grievously shalt thou therefore be judged, unless thy life be also more holy.

Be not therefore puffed up for any art or

<sup>1</sup> 1 Cor. xiii. 2.

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science, but rather fear for the knowledge given thee.

II. If thou thinkest that thou knowest much and understandest very well ; know yet that there be many things more which thou knowest not.

Be not high minded<sup>1</sup>, but rather confess thine ignorance.

Why wilt thou prefer thyself before anyone, since there be many more learned, and more skilful in the Law than thou?

If thou wilt know and learn any thing profitably, desire to be unknown and to be held in no esteem.

The highest and most profitable reading is the true knowledge and despising of ourselves.

It is great wisdom and perfection to think nothing of ourselves, and to think always well and highly of others.

If thou shouldst see another openly sin, or commit some heinous offence, yet oughtest thou not to esteem thyself better ; for thou knowest not how long thou shalt be able to stand in good.

We are all frail, but thou shalt esteem none more frail than thyself.

<sup>1</sup> Rom. xii. 16.

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## CHAPTER III.

## OF THE DOCTRINE OF TRUTH.

I. Happy is he whom the Truth by itself doth teach, not by figures and words that pass away; but as it is in itself.

Our opinion and sense often deceive us, and they discern little.

What availeth it to dispute much about dark and hidden things, whereas for being ignorant of them we shall not be reprehended at the Day of Judgment?

It is a great folly that we neglect the things that are profitable and necessary, and of our own accord give our minds to that which is curious and hurtful.

We have eyes, and see not<sup>1</sup>.

And what have we to do with *genus* and *species*?

He to whom the Eternal Word speaketh, is delivered from many opinions.

From one Word are all things, and all speak that one; and this is the Beginning, which also speaketh unto us<sup>2</sup>.

No man without that Word understandeth or judgeth rightly.

<sup>1</sup> Jer. v. 21; Mark viii. 18.      <sup>2</sup> John i. 1; viii. 25.

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 CH. 3 THE IMITATION OF CHRIST
 

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He to whom all things are one, who draweth all things to one, and seeth all things in one, may be steadfast in heart, and remain peaceable in God.

O God, who art the truth, make me one with Thee in everlasting charity.

It is tedious to me often to read and hear many things ; in Thee is all that I wish for and desire.

Let all doctors hold their peace ; let all creatures be silent in Thy sight ; speak Thou alone unto me.

II. The more a man is made at one with himself, and becometh inwardly simple, the more and higher mysteries doth he understand without labour, for that he receiveth the light of understanding from above.

A pure, sincere, and stable spirit is not distracted in many works ; for that he worketh all to the honour of God, and laboureth to be inwardly at rest from all self-seeking.

Who hinders and troubles thee more than the unmortified affection of thine own heart ?

A good and devout man first of all disposeth within himself those works which he must outwardly perform.

Neither do they draw him according to the desires of an inordinate inclination, but he him-

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self bendeth them according to the judgment of right reason.

Who hath a stouter combat than he that laboureth to overcome himself?

This ought to be our concern, to conquer ourselves, and daily to wax stronger, and to make some progress in goodness.

III. All perfection in this life hath some imperfection attached to it; and no speculation of ours is without some darkness.

A humble knowledge of thyself is a surer way to God than a deep search after learning.

Yet learning is not to be blamed, nor any simple knowledge of a thing, for it is good, considered in itself, and is ordained by God; but a good conscience and a virtuous life is always to be preferred before it.

But because many endeavour rather to get knowledge than to live well; therefore they are often deceived, and reap scarce any, or very little fruit.

O if men bestowed as much labour in the rooting out of vices and planting of virtues as they do in raising questions, there would not so much hurt be done, nor so great scandal be given in the world, nor so much looseness be practised in religious houses.

Truly at the day of judgment we shall not be



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asked what we have read, but what we have done ;  
nor how well we have spoken, but how religiously  
we have lived.

Tell me now where are all those Doctors and  
Masters, with whom thou wast well acquainted,  
whilst they still lived and flourished in learning ?

Now others possess their livings and perhaps  
scarce ever think of them. In their lifetime they  
seemed something, and now they are not spoken of.

O how quickly doth the glory of the world  
pass away ! Would God their life had been  
answerable to their learning ! then had their  
study and reading been to good purpose.

How many perish by reason of vain learning  
in this world, who take little care of the service  
of God.

And because they rather choose to be great  
than humble, therefore they become vain in their  
imaginations<sup>1</sup>.

He is truly great that hath great charity.

He is truly great that is little in himself,  
and that holdeth of no account every height of  
honour.

He is truly wise that accounteth all earthly  
things as dung, that he may gain Christ<sup>2</sup>.

And he is truly learned that doeth the will of  
God, and forsaketh his own will.

<sup>1</sup> Rom. i. 21.

<sup>2</sup> Phil. iii. 8.

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CHAPTER IV.

OF FORESIGHT IN OUR ACTIONS.

I. We must not give ear to every saying or suggestion<sup>1</sup>, but ought warily and leisurely to ponder things according to the will of God.

But, alas ! such is our weakness, that we often rather believe and speak evil of another than good.

But those that are perfectly virtuous do not easily give credit to every thing that is told them ; for they know that human frailty is prone to evil, and very subject to fall in words.

II. It is great wisdom not to be rash in thy proceedings, nor to stand stiffly in thine own conceits ;

As also not to believe every thing which thou hearest, nor presently to relate again to others what thou hast heard or dost believe.

Consult with him that is wise and of a good conscience, and seek to be instructed by a better than thyself, rather than to follow thine own inventions.

A good life maketh a man wise according to God, and giveth him experience in many things.

<sup>1</sup> Ecclus. xix. 16.