



C.S. LEWIS INSTITUTE



AN ENCOURAGEMENT TO READ THOMAS À KEMPIS'S *THE IMITATION OF CHRIST*

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he idea that thoughts, books, science of an earlier time is inherently inferior to that of the present just because it is “older” was dubbed “chronological snobbery” by C.S. Lewis and Owen Barfield. In fact, when it comes to books, Lewis said that a good rule of thumb was that for every new book we read, we should purposely engage in reading an old book.

I want to encourage you to step back into the early 1400s and consider reading a Christian classic. Before there was Oswald Chambers (*My Utmost for His Highest*) or other noted devotional writers, a disciple longing to follow Jesus would read *The Imitation of Christ* by Thomas à Kempis. Thomas was a German-Dutch monk writing to other monks in pre-Reformation times. He wrote *The Imitation of Christ* between 1420 and 1427 with the first handwritten manuscripts appearing around 1427. By 1779 there were at least 1,800 editions and translations. John Wesley translated a version in the 1700s.

If you like Oswald Chambers's ability to capture profound truths in compact statements, consider these statements by Thomas:

We are all frail, but you should think of no one being frailer than yourself.¹

If you desire to benefit from the Scriptures, read with





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humility, simplicity, and faithfulness – never desire to become known as a Bible scholar.²

True peace of heart, therefore, is gotten by resisting our passions, not by obeying them. There is no peace of heart of a carnal person, nor the person that is addicted to outward things, but there is peace in the heart of a spiritual and devout person.³

Yet we must be watchful, especially in the beginning of temptation, for the enemy is more easily overcome in the beginning if he is not allowed to enter the door or our hearts, but is resisted outside the gate, at his first knock. When he is not resisted, little by little, he gets complete entrance.⁴

The more time you spend in your secret place, the more you will like it, and the less time you spend there the more you will loath it.⁵

And we are still in Book 1 of four!

It has been said that Thomas used or alluded to more than a thousand Scriptures. Often his words read like the Proverbs. His work therefore should not be read like a novel, but in short segments, allowing time for reflection and meditation. I have used *The Imitation of Christ* as a devotional, reading only short passages at each sitting. I've discovered that with every new read, the Spirit brings new things to my mind that I need to consider to be a better follower of Jesus.

For example: Do you remember Satan's question of God concerning Job: "Does Job fear God for nothing?" (Job 1:9). His charge was straightforward: "Look at all the blessings you have given Job, what man or woman would not serve You given this level of rewards?" (my paraphrase).



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Having read this passage many times, I never asked myself the question: “Do I serve God for His blessings?” But then I read Kempis: “Where can one be found who is willing to serve God for nothing?” I had to stop and take stock of my attitude toward God. Do I serve Him and love Him for who He is, or for what He has promised me? I did not like the answer that crawled up from the slimy abyss known as my fallen nature. Thank you, Thomas, for pointing out to me the need to love God for Himself, for who He is, for what He has done, for loving me first, expecting nothing in return.

There are a number of translations available for this classic. I found the Pure Gold Classic version by Harold J. Chadwick (Bridge-Logos Publishers, 1999) to be excellent. This version includes the notes and Scripture references at the end of each chapter. Kempis, being Roman Catholic, occasionally makes reference to doctrines of the Catholic Church that are contrary to Protestant views. But most of the material is about becoming like Christ, and the Pure Gold Classic version focuses on translating these passages so they are relevant to all Christians regardless of specific doctrines. Chadwick says: “It is doubtful if there is any great Christian leader, past or present, Roman Catholic or Protestant, who has not read *The Imitation of Christ*.”

Remember, *The Imitation of Christ* is not Scripture, just as *My Utmost for His Highest* is not. But because of the heart of these writers, and their commitment to be true to Scripture’s teachings, we can benefit from commentary and teaching that reflect the gift of wisdom that was given each for his or her day and time – wisdom that is relevant to all people, for all time, without chronological bias.

Put the new books aside, pick up a classic, and experience the timelessness of Scripture’s wisdom in the writing of Thomas à Kempis, *The Imitation of Christ*. ■





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NOTES

¹ Thomas à Kempis, *The Imitation of Christ*, edited by Harold J. Chadwick (Bridge-Logos Publishers, Pure Gold Classic edition, 1999), Book One, p. 12.

² Ibid., Book One, p. 26.

³ Ibid., Book One, p. 27.

⁴ Ibid., Book One, p. 36.

⁵ Ibid., Book One, p. 51.

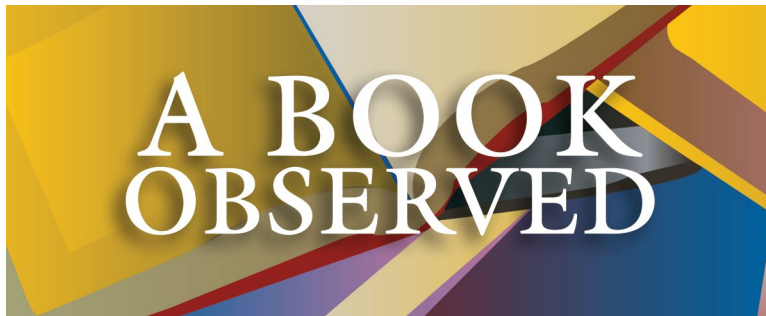
⁶ Ibid., Book One, p. 97.



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For meditative and devotional reading
(a little bit at a time, more like sucking
a lozenge than eating a slice of bread)
I suggest the *Imitation of Christ* ...

— *C.S. Lewis*



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1

Jim Phillips discusses in his article how he was moved by Thomas à Kempis' question, "Where can one be found who is willing to serve God for nothing?" As you think about that question and the several other short passages from Thomas à Kempis quoted in the article by Phillips, is there one that you find especially moving or helpful? Why?

2

What devotional books have you enjoyed reading? Jim Phillips suggests reading *The Imitation of Christ* as a devotional, in short segments and allowing time for reflection and meditation. Would you like to make this book one of your devotional readings?



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A 1975 graduate of the U.S. Naval Academy, Jim flew AV-8A Harriers with the U.S. Marine Corps before entering corporate life in 1981. He retired in 2018 from a 36 year career in information technology and lives in Annapolis, Maryland with his wife of over 40 years, Ann. He is a City Director for the C.S. Lewis Institute – Annapolis and a student at Saint John's College where he is studying the Great Books and their influence on western civilization. Jim and Ann have three children and five grandchildren.



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RECOMMENDED READING

Thomas à Kempis, *The Imitation of Christ*, edited by Harold J. Chadwick (Bridge-Logos Publishers, revised edition, 1999)

For five centuries, it's been one of the best-loved books of Christianity. This updated edition features 1,000 end-of-chapter Scripture references and notes, a section of devotional excerpts, and a topical index. Sensitively updated language makes this spiritual classic even more accessible to contemporary readers. For all seekers desiring an intimate knowledge of Christ.