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John 8:12, ESV.

¹² Again Jesus spoke to them, saying, "I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life.

What would Jesus NOT do?

Some say that the book that has made the biggest impact on Christianity, other than the Bible, is *The Imitation of Christ* by Thomas à Kempis, meaning Thomas from the town of Kempen in Germany. His true surname was Hemerken, and he was born in 1379 and died in 1471. He spent the last 70 years of his life in a monastery in the Netherlands. He wrote, and he also spent countless hours copying the Bible by hand. This was before the printing press was widely available, when monks in monasteries kept the Scriptures alive and spread them throughout the world. *The Imitation of Christ* impacted many well-known clergy members and biblical scholars over the centuries. John Wesley, the founder of the Methodist movement, was so profoundly touched by the book that he wrote his own translation from Thomas' Latin. After reading it for the first time, at the age of twenty-two, Wesley wrote this: *"I began to see, that true religion was seated in the heart, and that God's law extended to all our thoughts as well as words and*

actions.” The book consists of four separate volumes that have been put into one edition. The first two offer spiritual instruction and the second two contain dialogues between Christ and a believer.

Thomas à Kempis begins by paraphrasing the Gospel of John, Chapter 8, verse 12: *He who follows me can never walk in darkness.* Jesus is speaking to the Pharisees, who see him as a threat to their power. Light and darkness were powerful metaphors to the People of God. A pillar of light led the Israelites in the wilderness on their way to the Promised Land. Jesus is saying that he is now that pillar of light. But the Pharisees tell him that you can’t bear witness to yourself, and he cannot proclaim his own powers. Jesus dismisses this, saying that he is above that limitation. Jesus goes on to say: *“You are from below; I am from above. You are of this world; I am not of this world. ²⁴ I told you that you would die in your sins, for unless you believe that I am he you will die in your sins.”* This gets to the heart of what Thomas à Kempis is saying in his book. He believes that the best way to live is with a clean conscience. God does judge. The most joyous way to live is to know that you will be judged – and to make sure that you will not die in your sins.

Thomas à Kempis, in *The Imitation of Christ*, says this about the benefits of having a good conscience versus the liability of having a guilty conscience:

The glory of a good man is the testimony of a good conscience. Therefore, keep your conscience good and you will always enjoy happiness, for a good conscience can bear a great deal and can bring joy even in the midst of adversity. But an evil conscience is ever restive and fearful. Sweet shall be your rest if your heart does not reproach you.

Do not rejoice unless you have done well. Sinners never experience true interior joy or peace, for "there is no peace to the wicked," says the Lord.

There is no peace to the wicked is from Isaiah. Here is the quote, in context, that

Thomas à Kempis is referencing:

- ²⁰ *Go out from Babylon, flee from Chaldea,
declare this with a shout of joy, proclaim it,
send it out to the end of the earth;
say, "The LORD has redeemed his servant Jacob!"*
- ²¹ *They did not thirst when he led them through the deserts;
he made water flow for them from the rock;
he split the rock and the water gushed out.*
- ²² *"There is no peace," says the LORD, "for the wicked."*

This is the prophet Isaiah telling the people that they are free from captivity in Babylon, and that they should shout in joy. It draws a parallel between this and God's protection when the Israelites were in the desert wilderness on the way to the Promised Land. On the contrary, says God through the lips of the prophet Isaiah, if you are wicked then God will not be looking after you. We see in both Thomas à Kempis and in the Hebrew Scriptures that there is a powerful duality about having a clean heart: If you feel guiltless you are free to live in joy. If you

know that you have racked up a net debt with God, then you will lose your sense of peace.

The Imitation of Christ was written during an age when most people could not read. So, the book wasn't written for the average person. Today, believers read the Bible for themselves. People can develop a deep, historically based sense of their Christian faith. But we are so saturated with information we don't know what to focus on. In the Middle Ages, information came from very few sources, and when it came to faith, it was essentially the village priest who told people what to think. *The Imitation of Christ* was written for highly literate people in the 15th century. It was meant for the educated few, those who had the skills to study complex documents that were often written in languages other than the ones they spoke. *The Imitation of Christ* was written largely for clergy members. But today, it's a book that any of us can easily read and deeply appreciate.

As Christians, we believe in total forgiveness. When our kids were little, a couple or so decades ago, "*What would Jesus do?*" bracelets were popular. I have sometimes thought that this catchy sentence misses the real point. We don't need to always do what Jesus would do. We are not as holy as him. We also know that we will frequently do wrong. Our goal is to incrementally move closer

to a life where we do fewer things that are wrong, where we need to rely on God's forgiveness only infrequently. We do this is by identifying what we have done wrong and taking corrective action. We incrementally learn to do the right thing the first time around. So, the relevant question becomes: "*What would Jesus NOT do?*" Here are several things that Thomas à Kempis tells us *not* to do:

One: *It is nonsense to depend for your happiness on your fellow men.* This was written several centuries ago, but it is very good advice today. We live in a society where we can be cancelled if we say the wrong thing, or if we say the right thing, but say it the wrong way. People worship celebrities, not God. Thomas à Kempis tells us that we shouldn't live in fear of what other people think or say, and that in fact, we should depend only on God for our self-esteem and joy.

Two: *Put no confidence in the knowledge you have acquired. Instead, rely on God's grace – he brings aid to the humble, and only humiliation to the self-confident.* Again, it seems like this was written for us, not for people of the late Middle Ages. We are saturated with news, opinion, random facts, entertainment, advertisements, and all of this comes in so many forms, written, audio, video, Web pages, social media, satellite radio, television. Some people still read books. We end up defining ourselves by the stuff we absorb, and that often whatever some wealthy individual or organization pays to push at us on every available

venue – that’s what we believe. Thomas à Kempis, at the dawn of world exploration, at the beginning of the Renaissance, told us that we should rely only on God. He told us that God is who lifts us up, and that the self-confident are the ones who are brought down.

Three: *Do not boast of riches, if you happen to possess them, nor about the important friends you have.* I don’t know really what people did with money during the three quarters of a century when Thomas à Kempis was living in his monastery. But apparently, being wealthy was important, like it is today, and having powerful friends was equally important. We are to care about our connection with God, not about the glitz of the world around us. And God doesn’t care how big of a car we drive. God isn’t impressed with rich or politically connected friends. God cares about what is in our minds and our souls – and that is all God cares about.

Four: *Keep clear, as best you can, from the babel of human voices. Frivolity is infectious and makes easy prisoners of us.* As I read more and more of Thomas à Kempis, I had the same reaction that I have when I read the Bible. It was written for a radically simpler world – but *The Imitation of Christ* seems to have only become more relevant over the centuries. We tend to think of our world today as teeming with the voices of countless people, all yelling at us, making

demands of us, telling us what to think, telling us what is valuable. It was apparently true back then, too. And, today, as during the time of Thomas à Kempis, we become prisoners of meaningless noise. It draws us away from our lives with God, causes us to forget what is truly important – and that is our faith.

Five: Never, as long as he lives, can a person tell himself that he is beyond the reach of temptation. This I can easily see as being an issue in a simpler time. Imagine Thomas à Kempis living in his monastery, surrounded by godly people who spend their days praying, translating the Bible, and writing religious instruction documents. I could see him sensing that some of his fellow monks think that they are beyond temptation, that they are too holy to ever do anything truly wrong. What's interesting, is that we quite literally promote corrupt living today. TV shows tell us that being loud, crass, foul mouthed, corrupt, and sinful – that this is the happiest way to live. We celebrate temptation. Many people reading this piece of advice from Thomas à Kempis today would laugh at it. Of course we shouldn't brag about being beyond temptation, they would say. Who cares about that? But we know that this advice is as valuable today as it was in the 1400's. We should never see ourselves as being beyond temptation. For one thing, we are bound to do wrong: it's part of our nature. And the one thing we

should never get sloppy about is keeping an eye on the morality of our daily actions.

Six: *The person who is content with a mere mechanical avoidance of his faults will make little headway; all at once the temptations will come and make themselves felt more acutely than before.* This is, for me, the most profound statement that I have found in *The Imitation of Christ*. We must avoid becoming legalistic in our faith, avoid living in an Old Testament fashion, where we think that carefully doing certain things and carefully not doing other things will lift us up as high as we can possibly go. A legalistic approach to morality smothers us as people of faith. It takes the innovation, the impromptu nature, the very life out of our faith. It makes us dull and keeps us from responding dynamically to unexpected situations in life. We lose the spark of true faith. Then one day, we realize we are empty, and we have missed so many opportunities to model the life of Christ – and then temptation and failure come roaring back into our lives.

I'll stop there. I read *The Imitation of Christ* for the first time a few decades ago. It was hard for me to make my way through it, largely because I had a dated, very clumsy translation at the time. It was a tedious read. But I did realize just how important it was. I remember imagining Thomas à Kempis living for seventy years in a rural setting, tucked away from the world, part of a mystical order of

priests, and writing devotional material. It is a life so different from mine. Yet I could see the calm, the satisfaction, and the grace of a life like that. When I decided to read the book again, starting a few months ago, I found a very readable translation, and I realized something else about this book. It's basically modern wisdom literature. If we were still in the business of creating Scripture, we might include his writings. It would mesh well with the Proverbs and Ecclesiastes.

Thomas à Kempis entered that monastery when he was 19 years old and he lived to be about 90. When any of us start to feel that our lives have been lacking, that we haven't had the opportunities or advantages or wealth that others around us have collected, that we haven't gotten the recognition we deserve, that our lives have been tedious and boring – we should think about Thomas à Kempis. His life was centered around a small, remote community. He was never made a saint. He certainly never got rich. He lived a humble life, copying the Bible by hand, when this was still a primary way of preserving and spreading the Word of God. It was also a stunning form of art. When you see one of these ancient, hand-copied Bibles, it is a truly uplifting experience. One of his copies of the Bible, bound in five volumes, is preserved in Darmstadt, Germany. If I ever make it to Darmstadt, I would love to stand before that volume, if it is publicly

accessible, and just think about his life, and what he managed to do with only a tiny fraction of the resources that we have today. I would urge you to consider giving *The Imitation of Christ* a read. It's the kind of book you can read little by little, a few paragraphs a day. It's not very long. You'll be amazed at how relevant *The Imitation of Christ* is to your life today. Please pray with me.

God, let us live with a clean conscience. Let us always acknowledge that we will do wrong. We will fail. We will sin. We will return to you over and over and ask for forgiveness, for regeneration, for yet another opportunity to follow in the footsteps of your son. Help us to live in the imitation of Christ. Help us to push aside all the complexities, noise, temptations, corruptions, and distractions of this world and focus on the pure and simple truth – and that is to have faith in you is all we truly need. Amen.