

Book 1

USEFUL REMINDERS FOR THE
SPIRITUAL LIFE

Chapter 1

OF THE IMITATION OF CHRIST

“Anyone who follows me shall not walk in darkness,” says the Lord. These are the words of Christ, and by them we are reminded that we must imitate his life and his ways if we are to be truly enlightened and set free from the darkness of our own hearts. Let it be the most important thing we do, then, to reflect on the life of Jesus Christ.

Christ’s teaching surpasses all the teachings of the saints, and the person who has his spirit will find hidden nourishment in his words. Yet many people, even after hearing scripture read so often, lack a deep longing for it, for they do not have the spirit of Christ. Anyone who wishes to understand Christ’s words and to savor them fully should strive to become like him in every way.

What good does it do, then, to debate about the Trinity, if by a lack of humility you are displeasing to the Trinity? In truth, lofty words do not make a person holy and just, but a virtuous life makes one dear to God. I would much rather feel profound sorrow for my sins than be able to define the theological term for it. If you knew the whole Bible by heart and the sayings of all the philosophers, what good would it all be without God’s love and grace? Vanity of vanities and all is vanity, except to love God and to serve only him. This is the highest wisdom: to see the world as it truly is, fallen and fleeting; to love the world not for its own sake, but for God’s; and to direct all your effort toward achieving the kingdom of heaven.

So, it is vanity to seek material wealth that cannot last and to place your trust in it. It is also vanity to seek recognition and status. It is vanity to chase after what the world says you should want and to long for things you should not have, things that you will pay a high price for later on if you get them. It is vanity to

wish for a long life and to care little about a good life. It is vanity to focus only on your present life and not to look ahead to your future life. It is vanity to live for the joys of the moment and not to seek eagerly the lasting joys that await you.

Often remember that saying: “The eye is not satisfied with seeing, nor is the ear filled with hearing.” Make every effort, then, to shift your affections from the things that you can see to the things you cannot see, for people who live in the world on its terms instead of on God’s stain their conscience and lose God’s grace.

Chapter 2

OF HAVING A HUMBLE OPINION ABOUT YOURSELF

Everyone naturally wishes to have knowledge, but what good is great learning unless it is accompanied by a feeling of deep awe and profound reverence toward God? Indeed, a humble farmer who serves God is better than a proud philosopher, who, neglecting himself, contemplates the course of the heavens. The person who truly knows himself seems common in his own eyes, and the good things that others may say about him do not change the way he thinks about himself. If I knew everything in the world and did not have love, what good would it do me before God, who will judge me by what I have done?

Calm that excessive thirst for knowledge, for there is great discord and deception in it. People who have great learning are often eager to appear wise, and they often wish others to recognize them as wise people. There are many things that you can know about, though, that are of little or no use to the soul, and a person is exceedingly foolish who reaches for anything that

does not lead toward salvation. Endless reading and talk do not satisfy the soul, but a good life puts the mind at rest, and a clean conscience brings great confidence in God. The more you know and the better you know it, the greater is your responsibility for using your knowledge wisely.

So, do not think highly of yourself because of what you know about any art or science, but rather respect the knowledge that has been entrusted to you. If it seems to you that you know many things and that you are an expert in them, recognize nevertheless that there are many things that you do not know. Do not be high-minded, but admit your great ignorance. Why do you wish to think yourself better than others when you discover many people more learned and more practiced in God's ways than you are? If you want to learn something that will really help you, learn to see yourself as God sees you and not as you see yourself in the distorted mirror of your own self-importance. This is the greatest and most useful lesson we can learn: to know ourselves for what we truly are, to admit freely our weaknesses and failings, and to hold a humble opinion of ourselves because of them. Not to dwell on ourselves and always to think well and highly of others is great wisdom and perfection.

If you should see another person sin openly or commit some grave wrong, still you should not think yourself a better person by comparison, for you do not know how long you may remain in a good state. We are all frail, but think no one more frail than yourself.

Chapter 3

OF THE TEACHING OF TRUTH

Happy is that person whom Truth itself teaches, not by figures of speech and eloquent language, but as it is itself. Our opinions and our understanding often lead us astray and offer us very little insight. What good is a brilliant argument about hidden and obscure matters when God does not judge us by our knowledge of such things? It is a great mistake for us to neglect useful and necessary things and to direct our thoughts to curious and harmful ones. Having eyes, we do not see. Why should we bother about clever arguments and subtle reasoning?

When the eternal Word speaks we are set free from countless theories and conjectures. All things spring from this one Word and all things speak of one Word, and this Word is the beginning, which also speaks to us. Without the Word, no one understands correctly or draws the right conclusions about anything. That person to whom all things are One and who draws all things to One and who sees all things in One may be steadfast in heart and rest peacefully in God.

O God, the Truth, make me one with you in endless love! I am often worn out by all that I read and hear; you are all that I want or desire. Let all teachers hold their peace. Let all creation be silent in your sight. You alone speak to me.

The more a person is at one with himself and inwardly undivided, the more varied and profound things does he understand without effort, for he receives the light of understanding from above. A pure, simple, and steady spirit is not distracted by flitting about from one thing to another, for he does all things to the honor of God and tries in his heart to be free from all selfishness. What gets in your way and troubles you more than the undisciplined passions of your own heart? A good, devout

person first arranges inwardly the things to be done outwardly. He does not let his passions get the best of him, but he subjects them to the ruling of sound judgment. Who has a more fierce struggle than the person who strives to master himself? And this must be our occupation: to strive to master ourselves and daily to grow stronger and to advance from good to better.

All perfection in this life has some accompanying imperfection, and all our speculation is not without some darkening mist. A humble understanding of yourself is a surer way to God than a profound searching after knowledge. Knowledge is not to be blamed, nor is the simple understanding of anything which is good in itself and which is made to be so by God, but a good conscience and a virtuous life are always to be put first. Nevertheless, many people have chosen to seek knowledge rather than to live well, and they are often led astray and their lives come to very little—or nothing at all. Oh, if they would apply such diligence in rooting out vices and implanting virtues as they do in posing questions, there would not be so many evils and scandals among people, nor so much laxity in religious communities!

Surely, when the day of judgment comes we shall not be asked what we have read but what we have done, not how well we have spoken but how devoutly we have lived. Tell me, where are those professors and teachers today whom you knew so well while they were living and flourishing in their learning? Now other people hold their positions, and I do not know whether they ever think of them. While they lived they seemed to be important, and now no one mentions them. Oh, how swiftly the glory of the world passes away! If only their lives had been in harmony with their learning, then all their studying and reading would have been worthwhile. How many people perish in a generation through empty learning, caring little for the service of God? And because they prefer to be famous rather than humble, they perish with their own thoughts.

That person is truly great who has great love. He is truly great who is small in his own eyes and who regards every pinnacle of honor as nothing in itself. He is truly wise who regards all earthly ambitions as supremely unimportant if they stand in the way of gaining Christ. And he is very learned indeed who knows God's will and who makes it his own.

Chapter 4

OF THINKING BEFORE YOU ACT

We should not trust every word that we hear or every feeling in our hearts; rather, we should bring such matters before God and carefully ponder them at our leisure. It is sad to say, but we are so weak that we are more ready to believe bad things about another person—and to spread them around—than we are to believe or to say something good about them. Those who strive to be perfect, though, are not so quick to believe everything that is said, because they understand human weakness, which is prone to evil and is slippery enough in words.

It is great wisdom not to be rash in our actions nor to persist stubbornly in our own opinions. What is more, it is wise not to believe everything you hear nor to be so eager to pass on rumors. Instead of following your own notions, consult someone who is wise and conscientious, and seek to be guided by one who is better than yourself. A good life makes a person wise in God's eyes and experienced in many things. The more humble and obedient one is to God, the greater will be his wisdom and peace.

Chapter 5

OF READING HOLY WRITINGS

Search for truth in holy writings, not eloquence. All holy writing should be read in the same spirit with which it was written. We should look for profit in the writings rather than for subtle expression. We should read devout and simple books as willingly as we read those that are lofty and profound. Do not let the writer's authority or learning influence you, be it little or great, but let the love of pure truth attract you to read. Do not ask, "Who said this?" but pay attention to what is said. People pass away, but the truth of the Lord endures forever. God speaks to us in many ways without considering a person's status.

Our curiosity often gets in our way when we try to study and understand those passages that are too difficult for us. We should simply pass over them. If you wish to profit from your reading, read with humility, simplicity, and faith, and do not try to impress others with your great learning. Feel free to question, listen in silence to the words of the saints, and do not scoff at what the ancient writers have to say, for it is not offered without cause.

Chapter 6

OF CONFUSED FEELINGS

Whenever a person becomes obsessed with success and material things, he quickly becomes restless. The proud and greedy never rest; the poor and humble in spirit rest in great peace. Anyone who is not completely free from the grip of his own vanity is easily tempted and is toppled by small, trifling things.

A person who is weak in spirit and who is still controlled by his need to be important has great trouble dragging himself away from the things that most attract him in this world. Such a person is unhappy when he does restrain himself, yet his anger flares up if anyone stands in his way. What is more, if he does get what he wants, he is at once stricken by a heavy conscience because he has given in to his weakness. In no way does this lead to peace!

In resisting such temptations, then, does one find true peace of heart, not in being a slave to them. There is no peace in the heart of a slave, nor in someone who is driven to continually bustling about in the world. Only a spiritual person—a person aglow with God’s love—finds true peace.

Chapter 7

OF AVOIDING EMPTY HOPE AND SELF-PRAISE

Anyone who places all his trust in people or in other created things is foolish. Do not be ashamed to serve others for the love of Jesus Christ and to appear poor in this world. Do not rely on yourself, but place all your trust in God. Do what you can, and God will bless your good intentions. Do not trust in your own knowledge nor in anyone else’s cleverness; rather, trust in the grace of God, who helps the humble and humbles the proud.

Do not take pride in your possessions, if you have any, nor in your friends because they are powerful and influential; instead, take pride in God, who gives all things and who wishes to give himself above all. Do not brag about the size or beauty of your body, which a little sickness can spoil and disfigure. Do not be pleased with yourself about your ability or talent, lest you displease God, from whom comes the sum of whatever natural

good you have. Do not think that you are better than others, lest you appear worse in God's eyes; God knows what we are. Do not be proud of your good deeds, for God's judgments differ from ours, and he is often displeased by what pleases us.

If you have any good qualities, believe that other people have better ones; by doing so you will retain your humility. It does you no harm if you place yourself beneath everyone else; it does you great harm, though, if you place yourself above even one other person. A person who is humble is always at peace, but a proud person carries a heart filled with envy and resentment.

Chapter 8

OF AVOIDING INAPPROPRIATE INTIMACY

Do not open your heart to everyone, but discuss your private concerns with a person who is wise and who reveres God. Do not spend much time with young people or strangers; instead, develop the friendships you have, especially with those who are older and wiser than you are. Do not flatter the rich, and do not be eager to be seen with important people. Rather, be with the humble and the simple, with the devout and the obedient, and talk about those things which help you to become more holy. If you are a man under religious vows, do not be intimate with any woman, but commend all good women in general to God; if you are a woman under religious vows, do likewise with men. Seek, instead, a more intimate friendship with God and his angels, and avoid becoming emotionally or spiritually dependent on other people.

We should have great love toward everyone, but intimacy often gets in the way of our spiritual development. Sometimes it happens that a stranger shines from a good reputation, but when