

Sayings of Walter Hilton

There are two ways of knowing God—one chiefly by the imagination, the other by the understanding. The understanding is the mistress, and the imagination is the maid.

Ask of God nothing but this gift of love, which is the Holy Ghost. For there is no gift of God that is both the giver and the gift, but this gift of love.

Prayer is nothing else but an ascending or getting up of the desire of the heart into God, by withdrawing of it from all earthly thoughts...

What is heaven to a reasonable soul? Nought else but Jesus, God. For if that only is heaven which is above everything, then God alone is heaven to the soul ... for [God] alone is above the nature of a soul.

Therefore, desire of God as much as you will, or can, without measure or moderation at all concerning anything that belongs to His love or Heaven's bliss, for he that can desire most of God shall feel and receive most; but work as you may, and cry God mercy for that you can not do.

Now if you desire to prosecute spiritual works and exercises wisely, and to labour seriously in them, it behoves you to begin right now; three things need you first to have, upon which on a firm ground you shall set all your work, namely, Humility, a firm Faith, and resolute Will and purpose to seek after God.

As much as you have of Humility, so much have you of Charity, of Patience, and of other virtues; though they be not shown or appear outwardly. Be therefore busy to get Humility, and hold it fast, for it is the first and the last of all other virtues.

When you go about to pray, first make and frame between you and God in your mind, a full purpose and intention in the beginning to serve Him then, with all the powers of your soul by your present prayer, and then begin and do as well as you can. Though you be never so much hindered contrary to your former purpose, be not afraid, neither be angry at yourself, nor impatient against God, because He gives you not the savour, and spiritual sweetness in devotion, as you think He gives to others. But see therein your own feebleness, and bear it patiently, deeming it to be (as it is) feeble, and of no worth in your own sight, with humility of spirit; trusting also firmly in the mercy of our Lord, that He will make it good and profitable to you, more than you imagine or feel.

As long as Jesus finds not His image reformed in you, He is strange, and the farther from you; therefore frame and shape yourself to be arrayed in His likeness, that is in humility and charity, which are His liveries, and then will He know you, and familiarly come to you, and acquaint you with His secrets. Thus says He to His disciples: Whoso loves Me, he shall be loved of My Father, and I will manifest Myself unto him. There is not any virtue nor any good work that can make you like to our Lord, without Humility and Charity, for these two above all others are most acceptable to Him, which appears plainly in the Gospel, where our Lord speaks of Humility thus: Learn of Me, for I am meek and humble in heart. He saith not, learn of Me to go barefoot, or to go into the desert, and there to fast forty days; nor yet to choose to yourselves disciples (as I did) but learn of Me meekness, for I am meek and lowly in heart. Also of Charity He says thus: This is My commandment, that you love one another, as I loved you, for by that shall men know you for My disciples. Not that you work miracles, or cast out devils, or preach, or teach, but that each one of you love one another in charity. If therefore you will be like Him, have humility and charity. Now you know what charity is, viz., To love your neighbour as yourself.

‘Our Lord God is an endless being without changing, almighty without failing, supreme wisdom, light, truth without error or darkness, supreme goodness, love, peace, and sweetness. Therefore the more that a soul is united, fastened, conformed, and joined to our Lord, the more stable and strong it is, the more wise and clear, good and peaceable, loving and virtuous it is, and so it is more perfect. For a soul that has by the grace of Jesus and long, hard work of bodily and spiritual exercise, overcome and destroyed lusts, passions, and unreasonable impulses within itself, and without in the sensuality, and is clothed all in virtues, as in meekness and mildness, in patience and softness, in spiritual strength and righteousness, in continence, in wisdom, in truth, hope and charity—then it is made as perfect as it may be in this life.’

From *Angel's Song* (from ccel/wheaton)

Your name Jesus is oil poured out for me; since by the effort of your gracious visiting I well feel the true interpretation of your name, you who are Jesus, Healing; for it is only your gracious presence that heals me from sorrow and from sin.

Walter Hilton

He is remembered in the C of E on 24th March.

Walter Hilton was born sometime between 1330 and 1343 AD. At Cambridge University he studied both civil and Canon (i.e. Church) law. He is recorded as working in the consistory court of Ely diocese in 1375. Hilton tried the life of a hermit, but moved to live instead at the Augustinian Order of monks at Thurgarton, 10 miles north-east of Nottingham around the year 1386. He died in Thurgarton on the Eve of the Feast of the Annunciation, on the 24th March, 1396.

The 14th Century was the time of the Peasant's Revolt and the Black Death, which came to Britain in 1348-9. Chaucer wrote *The Canterbury Tales*, in English. It was also the century that saw *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* and William Langland's *Piers Ploughman*. These together with Walter Hilton's *The Scale of Perfection* were the first great English classics.

The Scale of Perfection is in two parts. The first is an essay written for a solitary nun, an anchoress, on living a life of contemplation. The second, and larger, part is held by many to be a helpful unpacking of that essay. It is from this second part that extracts are usually chosen by editors. One may also look to Hilton's *A Mixed Life* for clear exposition.

Hilton's genius is that he writes only of what he has seen and then reflected upon. He is not greatly speculative as much theological writing, then and now, is. He was influenced by the PseudoDionysius and Richard of St Victor, but shows little appreciation of that state of dim contemplation so fully explored in the writings of Ruysbroeck and St John of the Cross. His expertise is in spiritual direction, in encouraging people to rely upon God to provide for all our needs as we sincerely and courageously seek to do his will. He tells us that God, our heavenly Father, will do everything in and through and for us – if only we will let him.

This is where the difficulties lie: having committed our life to Christ and signed up as Christians we are, to use Walter Hilton's terminology, 'reformed in faith', i.e. we have made an existential choice.

This does not mean from now on everything is sorted or that we are immediately perfected. We have only to experience upset of any kind and notice our emotional response to it to see that we are not yet 'reformed in feeling'. The deepening of our relationship with God may continue for ever and is based on prayer. Here the serious work must continue throughout our lives.

We are to learn that our relationship with God does not depend on how we feel but the will to pray. Sometimes our prayerful participation will be a passive 'letting be'; at other times active. The fact that our thoughts wander sometimes during prayer does not thereby make such devotions worthless.

Hilton considered the birth of a more serious 'desire for Jesus' a sign of spiritual deepening and growth. He would have us appreciate that we are not helpless souls tossed about in a stormy sea of life. Rather we are responsible participants in God's work of grace. Our spiritual life is to become more clearly focused on the 'here and now', on the sacrament of the present moment and on how we choose to respond to today's events.

Memory, understanding and will are traditionally held to be aspects of the soul at work. This *will* is not an assertion of one's own ego because such is usually done to the disadvantage of another person and therefore is a sin. Our will is to be constantly choosing to accept for ourselves all the events of today as part of the permitted will of God: liking or disliking it is not the point. True prayer prays that God's will be done in us as it is in heaven and (sometimes) on earth.

In other words, we can want to want what the good Lord wishes for us in our lives but the transformation is a work of God. A lifelong work of cleansing (purgation) of our desires, delusions, memories, prejudices and such like lies ahead of us and is the more thorough for not depending on the strength of one's feelings. Our part is to hold ourselves open and available to God's healing work. 'Jesus Who is both love and light is in this darkness. . . . He is in the soul as its labouring for light in desire and longing, but He is not yet in it as its resting in love' (II, 24). These words describe precisely the position of most of Jesus' followers today. Hilton writes for our time.

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