



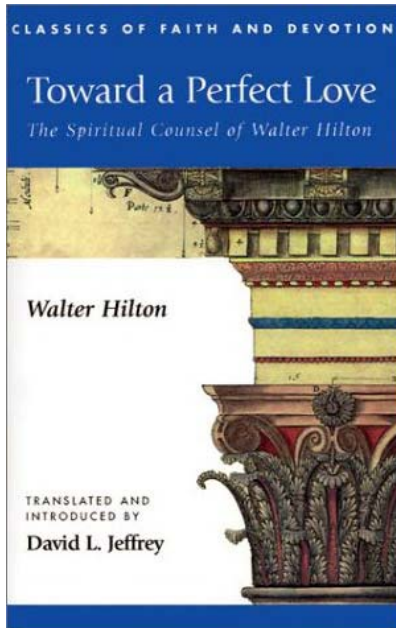
Christian Book Summaries

CLASSICS

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Toward a Perfect Love



The Spiritual Counsel of Walter Hilton
by **Walter Hilton**
Regent College Publishing
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From the Classics Collection

A Quick Focus

The Book's Purpose

- Introduce readers to the insights of a spiritual leader from the 1300s
- Offer help and guidance on various subjects, such as prayer, contemplation, and sanctification
- Lead Christians to progress consistently on their journey through a deeper understanding of God's Word, a reliance on the source of all love, and an uncompromising focus on Jesus.

The Book's Message

Providing spiritual guidance for both lay folk and clergy during the 1300s, Walter Hilton was an ordinary man in north-country England whose writings became popular as a source of gentle, kindly wisdom. His insight into human nature, and his biblical advice on day-to-day spiritual growth is timeless.

Eight Main Points:

- Letters to One New in the Faith 2
- Coming to Perfection Through Contemplation and Prayer 2
- The Gift of Meditation and the Examination of Conscience 3
- Self-Discovery and the Measure of Love 3
- Restoring the Image of God as a Spiritual Pilgrimage . . . 4
- Trusting God in the Darkness 5
- Spiritual Self-Understanding 5
- The Gift of Love and Beholding Jesus 5

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Letters to One New in the Faith

As members living in Christian community, dear friend, there are two ways in which our souls can work toward pleasing God and obtaining the joy of eternal life: through our physical bodies, and in our spiritual natures. The work of the body is primarily for the common person involved in the regular business of the world, and is an especially appropriate focus for those who are young and new to the faith.

By disciplining our physical nature, we are better enabled to progress in our spiritual natures. We must first grow healthy in our bodies and release the burden of our sinfulness so that we can be cleansed of most obvious sins and give better attention to our spiritual lives. The bodily works that are good for the soul include fasting, disciplining physical appetites, doing deeds of mercy, having a willingness to suffer, being willing to experience discomfort, and performing charitable actions.


I encourage you also to break down pride, selfishness, vanity, envy, anger, and greediness for worldly possessions. Make every effort to get rid of worldly desires that creep into your life, especially when it is tempting to indulge in self-pity and be overly concerned with your own comfort and desire for pleasure. When you have made much progress in all these kinds of bodily works, you may by God's grace begin more spiritual endeavors.

I know that you may be desiring to serve God entirely and to take on His service as your entire occupation and to leave behind all worldly business so that you can develop a deeper knowledge of God and spiritual things. This is commendable; however, this wonderful desire must be guided by discretion and wisdom regarding your current situation. Following your instinct to leave all worldly concerns behind may not be appropriate, because of the family and business obligations God has already given you. Ignoring the needs of those who have been entrusted to you would not be living out God's charitable love. As a layperson, you will need to attend to both your spiritual development and your earthly responsibilities, both in their proper time.

Mingling the active life and the contemplative life will be best for you, I believe. At times you must be like Martha, caring for your family, household, employees and neighbors, and showing them the love of Christ, and discipling and encouraging them in their spiritual journeys. At other times, you will need to leave the bodily work behind and sit in the presence of Jesus with Mary, and spend time in prayer, rest, and contemplation. In doing so you are building up both areas of your Christian life.

Three lifestyles can be chosen: the active life of worldly business, the contemplative life of complete spiritual service, or the mixed life, which employs both earthly and heavenly business. Those persons, like you, who desire spiritual perfection but also have leadership over various organizations or communities or families, are well suited for the mixed life in which spiritual life fulfills itself in works of worldly charity. If we only serve God in our hearts without outward charitable works, it is like we are worshiping the head of Christ, but ignoring His ragged and wounded body. Do not pre-occupy yourself with thoughts of His holiness all day. ***“Stoop down a little to other works and wash His feet, and be busy both in thought and deed about the help of your fellow Christians here and now.”***

“Know that the love-service you offer to your Lord, or to any member of His Body as need and righteousness require it, when you do it with a glad yet meek heart, pleases Him truly.”

These loving and necessary duties will kindle a greater spiritual fire within you and nourish more of God's love in your heart. 

Coming to Perfection Through Contemplation and Prayer

All spiritual maturity is founded on increasing desire and devotion for Jesus. ***“What you should always be seeking with great diligence in your prayer is that you might come to a true spiritual consciousness of God ... the breadth of His wonderful love and goodness, the height of His almighty majesty, and the fathomless depths of His wisdom.”***

By means of reading Scripture and the works of spiritual writers, meditating, and fervent praying, we enter into the contemplative life. Continually behold the life of Christ against your own sinful ways, and seek to be cleansed from all sin in order to know God ever

continued on page 3

Coming to Perfection Through Contemplation and Prayer

continued from page 2

more perfectly. By meditation on His perfect life and study of the Scriptures, you will begin to understand and acquire all spiritual virtues, such as gentleness, patience, self-control, purity, peacefulness, and compassion.

The foundation for your spiritual house must be built upon three things: a teachable attitude, an unshakable belief in the truth, and a heart that seeks God with undivided fervor. All other virtues build upon these. If you desire above all else to know Jesus and be like Him, you will never be overwhelmed by Satan.



The Gift of Meditation and the Examination of Conscience

When we begin our walk with the Savior, we are still greatly sullied by our lifestyle of sin. We have much need of repentance and cleansing and relief from the suffering sin causes, so we can be prepared for greater spiritual things. ***“We see that if God chooses to prepare someone to receive any special gift of His love, He first scours and cleanses that person by fires of compunction for all of his great sins previously committed.”***

After we have wrestled with the effects of sin, God may then grant us a clearer vision of some aspect of His love, or mercy, or grace. Our hearts may be stirred by a sudden understanding and identification with our Lord Jesus and all He suffered. In your meditating and pondering of God's grace, you may experience a ***“profound fullness of the goodness and mercy of our Lord welling up in your heart, in love and joyful gratitude to Him with many sweet tears, and you find yourself in deep trust ... you are indeed being blessed.”***

An important exercise that is essential that all Christians engage in is the practice of inward evaluation. We must enter into a deep awareness of our own soul and its weaknesses, its strengths, its sinfulness, its virtues. You will see both the wretchedness and the beauty of your soul. You will long to recover the fairness and glory of its original creation. You will come to abhor any sin that sullies your soul and ask God to weed out, break up, plow under, and deeply cultivate the soil of your soul so that you can experience the pure, strong growth of all that is good.

“This is the proper work to which all of us are called, to draw our hearts and minds away from fleshly love and worldly appetites, away from vain thought and carnal imagination, and out from self-love and every destructive preoccupation with the self.”

Though we are sinful wretches, our Lord is full of endless mercy, and He bends toward us in His love and forgiveness. Whoever calls on His name in true repentance will be saved. Jesus is the healer of all who are spiritually sick with sin, which is every soul on earth. Just as a person who is bodily sick has no desire for any earthly wealth or power or pleasures, except that which will bring back his health, so a person who is suffering the disease of sin deeply desires only the relief he can obtain through the healing forgiveness of Jesus. Nothing else will satisfy our longings.



Self-Discovery and the Measure of Love

Although God's mercy is unfading and boundless, we should in no way become careless in our manner of living; we must be all the more careful to please our Lord. We have been given the gift of hope through His great suffering; in this we rejoice and should desire to be like Him. A truly contemplative life begins with a deep awareness of God's unfathomable love and an opening of our spiritual eyes.

We will never have complete holiness or complete vision of God in this earthly life, nor will we escape the misery of sin. But we can continually grow in purity of our souls, and we can journey onward ever closer to Jesus, ***“He who is all goodness, boundless wisdom, love and sweetness, He who is your joy, your honor, and your everlasting happiness, He who is your God, your Lord, and your Salvation.”***

A great desire for Jesus will push out all other desires of the world and the flesh, and we will grow in our ability to seek Him still more. Our hearts do not truly rest anywhere but in Him. Seeking

continued on page 4

Self-Discovery And The Measure of Love

continued from page 3

Him is our hard life's work, but in finding Him we find complete happiness. Let us then sweep our lives clean, so we can find Him where He is hidden, in our very own souls.

“When you feel yourself entirely enclosed, rested, softened, and anointed in Jesus, then you will have begun indeed to find Him.”

When we find Jesus, we begin then to be awakened to His voice stirring gently in our hearts, urging us to leave behind all worldly desires and pride. When our hearts are full of vanity and sinful thoughts, we cannot listen or give attention to His loving words. Pray for meekness and love to fill you so that you resemble your Lord Jesus.

Any person can do good works, serve the church, lead an honorable life, but only a person who does such things in love is pleasing to God. God alone knows our hearts, so we must not judge others' intentions, but make every effort to live a life of true love ourselves. ***“I say it is a great victory for a person just to be able to love his fellow Christian in charity.”*** As you know, the greatest commandment is to love our Lord and others as we love ourselves. Anything we do without love is worthless.

Within ourselves, we have no power to actually live in love toward our neighbor. But God gives no gift more willingly than His love so that we can be filled with love toward others. In meekness we ask, and He abundantly gives. Even facing our enemies, God willingly gives us love with which to love them, as Stephen loved those who stoned him, as Jesus loved Judas. With His boundless love spurring us on, we can be like Him.



Restoring the Image of God as a Spiritual Pilgrimage

Every person is made in the image of God, not in physical likeness, but in the inner being, which originally burned bright with charity and spiritual glory. But through the sin of our race, the image is now misshapen and twisted, and can only be reformed and remade by God Himself. Someday in heaven our souls will be completely restored, but on this earth we may achieve by God's grace a partial redemption of the image in which we were created. When we accept the salvation of God it begins, and through long experience and spiritual growth, our souls may achieve a degree of reformation as our sins are continually burned away and our souls grow purer in righteousness.

You may long to know what will speed the progress of your soul's reformation, and for this I will use the image of a pilgrimage. If you can imagine your life as a journey and your goal as the New Jerusalem, you

can with every step, focus on your destination. If you set your eyes on Jesus, then you will let nothing bar your way. During temptations, trials, and hardships, you can shake off the effects of those struggles, leave all behind, and move forward on your journey. Desire one thing only—Jesus. Set your heart entirely on loving Jesus; He is all your joy and happiness.

“If you want to speed your passage and make a good journey of it, you will need to have two things often in your mind: meekness and love...you ought to have the meaning of these words in your intention and soul's habit always.”

No matter what your work or your calling, do whatever strengthens your love and effectively draws your heart away from worldly things. Just as we feed a fire to keep it burning brightly, feed your spiritual fire and love of Jesus. ***“The more avenues of spiritual endeavor a person has in his thought to sustain his desire, the mightier and more brightly burning shall be his desire toward God. Therefore look wisely to the work you can do best, since that most aids you in sustaining a fullness of desire toward Jesus.”***



Trusting God in the Darkness

At times you will face a darkness and a night of the soul when you are longing for a vision of Jesus and have none. It is painful, and yet it draws us so deeply into our soul and makes our desire for Jesus so strong, that we love Him all the more when we find Him. Grow accustomed to this occasional darkness, and even find rest there, because you know the Light is always coming. To those walking in the darkness, a light has dawned.

Beware of the counterfeit light of Satan, and run away from it at all costs. The noonday demon loves to promote pride, impatience, indignation, judgment and other sins among spiritual people. True spiritual light always dwells in humility and a soul that is fully aware of its own weakness. ***“I believe that a soul that has truly recognized its own murkiness is not vulnerable to a counterfeit light ... for the grace which a soul experiences in coming to terms with its own darkness in meekness shall teach it truthfulness and reveal to it thereby which profferings come from the enemy.”***

CBS

Spiritual Self-Understanding

“A soul that desires spiritual knowledge needs first to have self-knowledge.”

One cannot understand things above the self until there is a measure of understanding of the self, and when it has achieved some distance and peace from the distraction of worldly things. Your soul gives life to your body and is much greater and more powerful than your body. So to discover more of the depths of your soul, all external distractions must be set aside. The soul lives its own life, immortal, invisible, discerning of the truth and love of God. When you begin to understand this, you are on your way to understanding the nature of your soul, and then you can take steps pursuing the higher knowledge of the nature of God. Your soul is like a mirror in which you can see God, but your mirror must first be clean and clear, free of worldly grime in order to begin to see spiritual things.

As you grow in your ability to discern spiritual things, be careful not to confuse emotions with spiritual feelings. When we hear beautiful music or taste a sweetness, or feel a sense of well-being, these are not spiritual feelings, but these can lead us toward worship experiences and spiritual experiences. ***“They are outward tokens of an inward grace which is experienced in the recesses of the soul.”***

Above all, seek to be transformed in your thinking by the renewing of your mind. The reformation of the soul is the nature and goal of our journey. Let your soul be shaped and formed by God’s righteousness, purity, and truth. Little by little, God will open the eyes of your soul with His light, and enable you to see Him and know Him. When we have this kind of vision of Jesus, it is like heaven is opening before us.

CBS

The Gift of Love and Beholding Jesus

Seeing Jesus is the greatest happiness for a soul. The more we know Him, the more we will love Him, because we understand and experience His great love for us. It is His love that gives us any knowledge or vision that we possess. Steeped in sin, we can never grasp the enormity of God’s love for us, but in His great mercy, His Holy Spirit enables us to both know and love Him. Desire His love deeply and ask Jesus for only this gift of love, and He will grant it to you, the object of His unbounded love.

“When He gives Himself in His divine fullness spiritually to our souls for the effecting of our own personal salvation, enabling us to know Him and to love Him, then He is loving us without measure, for in this He gives Himself to us.”

It is this kind of love that convicts us of our sins and enables us to love Him and long for heavenly things. Everything good comes from Him, and so any good thing is truly done in the strength of Jesus and accomplished by Him alone. He creates the good virtues within us, and enables us to please God. ***“Whoever has this love most in his life most pleases God, and shall in turn have the clearest vision of Him in the bliss of heaven.”*** And yet, this gift is purely the gift of Jesus, we cannot manufacture it ourselves. Jesus Himself enables us to love Him. And as such, love should be sought after more than

continued on page 6

The Gift of Love and Beholding Jesus

continued from page 5

all the other gifts. There is none that is so valuable as we walk this journey toward God. When we set our hearts only on loving Jesus, then all the other virtues naturally unfold. ***“Love slays sin generally, reforming the soul in a new experience of virtue ... love combats sin and restores virtue in the soul.”***

A vision of Jesus and intimate relationship with Him naturally leads to a life of meekness. We are able to entirely forget ourselves as we keep our eyes focused on Jesus and give ourselves completely to doing His will. In doing so, we find our hearts full of joy.

“The heart of a true lover of Jesus is so full, grown larger through even a little vision of Him and even a little experience of His spiritual love, that all the pleasures and joys of earth are not enough now to fill up even a corner of it.”

When we are resting in the love of Jesus, we have no fear of or concern about what others think of us, and we are free from the dangers of pride and fear. Love works in powerful ways in our hearts to banish anger, discontent, self-absorption, lust, greed, laziness, and despair, and replenishes them with the fruit of the Holy Spirit—love, tenderness, peacefulness, and kindness toward all. The love of Jesus fights the battles of the soul and accomplishes the work of reforming it for good.

When our souls have not yet received the touch of God's grace and love, they are rough and slow to accomplish any spiritual work. By ourselves we are virtually helpless. But when God's love and grace touch our lives, our souls grow strong and discerning, and able to freely do the work the Holy Spirit prompts us to do.

Many times the Spirit will prompt a soul to pray a prayer such as the Lord's Prayer or the Shepherd's prayer. Prayer is food for the soul, transforming it through the warm fire of the Spirit's love. It helps the soul rise above all earthly pain and sorrow and difficulty, so it is steadily kept in the warmth of God's love, just as wood added to the stove keeps a kitchen warm. Prayer releases all frustrations and sadness, helping us handle our struggles with lightness and joy. Though our lives are divided between physical and spiritual things, prayer joins all our concerns in praise and love.

“Truly, the thing that Jesus most desires for any soul is that it be made more godly and spiritual in its vision and in love more like unto Him in grace and in harmony with His nature.”

As Jesus cleanses a soul little by little, He pours in His wisdom, and enables that soul to grasp Scriptures in greater and greater capacity. Grace opens our minds and clarifies our understanding as we draw closer to Jesus. The Holy Writ is but love letters from Jesus to those He loves, and through it He comforts and encourages them and banishes fear and doubt. He brings them joy and peace because of His loving presence. In His Word He continually reveals more of Himself to the hungry soul.

When we hear the voice of Jesus through His loving words, we experience a vision of Him that brings supreme joy. ***“For we experience such a sense of security and restedness in Jesus, knowing His sustaining favor and goodness, that we would like to live always in this pure moment and not have to do anything else.”***



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The author: Walter Hilton (1340-1396) was an English Augustinian mystic. The most famous of his writings is the *Scala Perfectionis*, or *The Scale of Perfection*, in two books, first printed in 1494. This work may be described as a guide book for the journey to the spiritual Jerusalem, which is “contemplation in perfect love of God.” Because of its sober and methodical character, *The Scale* became and remained a popular devotional classic through the 15th and early 16th centuries and is regarded as the finest treatise on contemplation written in the late European Middle Ages.

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