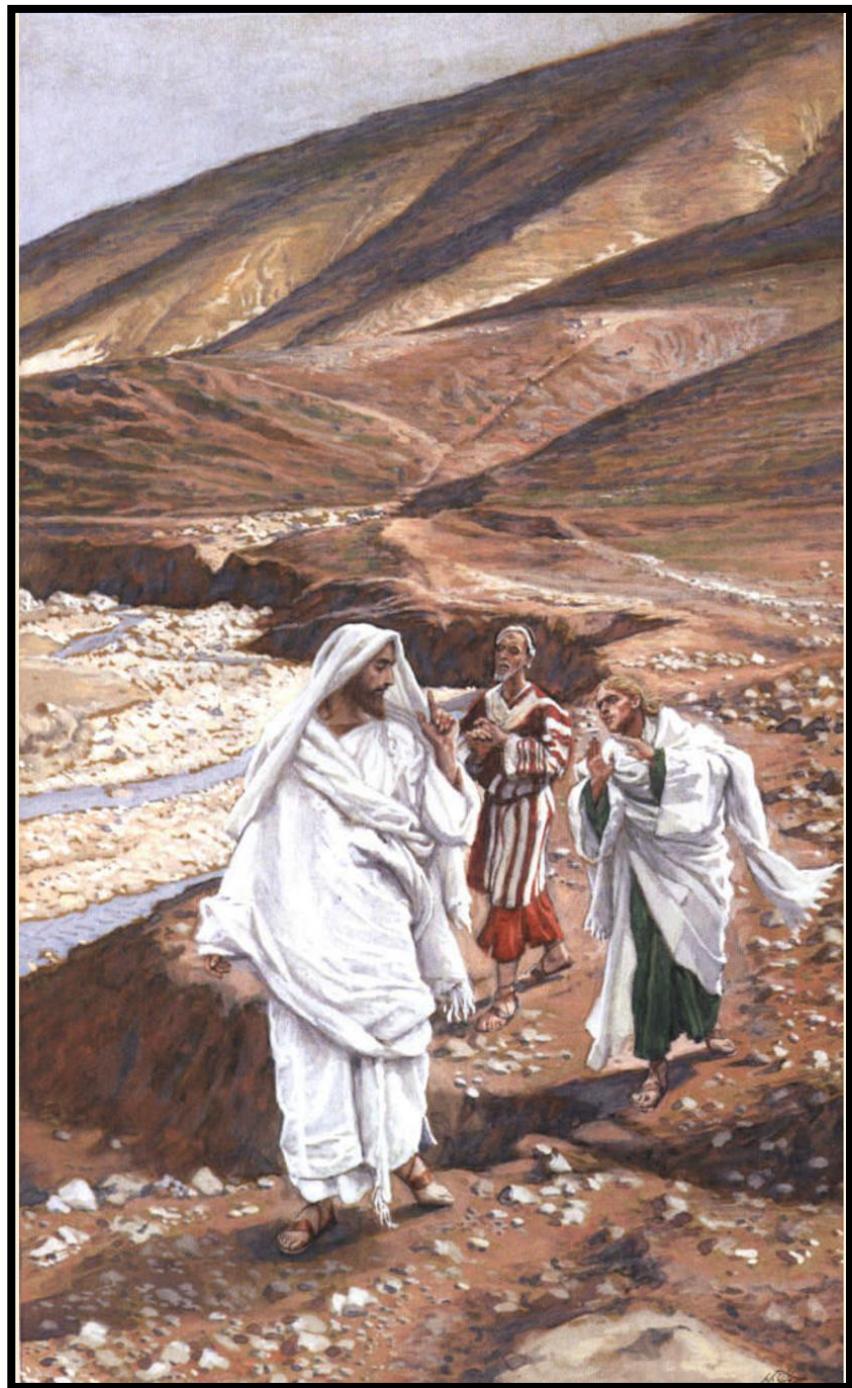

#1 - CONVERSATIONS



The Calling of John and Andrew (1886-1894) by James Tissot. John 1:35-41.

PAINTING

John 1:35-41. The painting/illustration by James Tissot remembers *the call before the call* of Jesus' first disciples. What do we mean? Unlike other "callings" of disciples, these first two were *not* called by Jesus. Instead, *they pursued Jesus* as Jesus walked again along the bank of the Jordan River (see it there in the painting?), walking by the spot where on the previous day John had baptized Him. (Notice that there is no Temptation in the Wilderness story in John's Gospel.) So, we might consider that **it was the Holy Spirit who called and sent to Jesus those two men**, who were then to become Jesus's first disciples. We might consider this a divine "prompting", showing Jesus how to begin the work of his public life. "Look behind you, Jesus. I have sent them to you." But Jesus, already wise in discernment, first "tested" this divine prompting, asking these men (one of the most important questions in the Gospels), "**What do you want?**"

TEXT (CREASY)

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.

The *Oxford English Dictionary* at the adjective “**vain**” – **1.a. - a1300** – Devoid of real value, worth, or significance; idle, unprofitable, useless, worthless; of no effect, force, or power; fruitless, futile, unavailing.

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.¹

CONVERSATION

Point One:

How does one read a text like *The Imitation of Christ*, which is another way of asking how does one practice a habit of *spiritual reading*?

Let me begin with an analogy to something that married couples may notice in their relationship. When a spouse has become familiar with one’s close (-est) friend it becomes possible to have become *too* familiar. He or she *hears* the other, but he or she no longer *listens*, they *already know* what the other is going to say. Of course, a spouse who misuses his or her power of speech might earn the right not to be listened to. Responsibility for language and how we use it is a shared responsibility.

In an analogous way, we churchgoers or hearers or readers of spiritual texts, who over the years have grown familiar with religious language, might, without noticing it, have

¹ Dennis J. Billy with Thomas à Kempis, *[The Imitation of Christ: A Spiritual Commentary and Reader's Guide](#)*, trans. William C. Creasy (Notre Dame, IN: Christian Classics, 2005), 20–21.

ceased to pay attention to what we read or hear, assuming that it is going to be the same old stuff, though “wrapped” for us in slightly different ways.

To read successfully a spiritual book, such as the Bible or *The Imitation of Christ*, we must learn to read “freshly”, *expecting* that God intends to meet us in its words and in how its *atmosphere* affects us.² But it takes a deliberate effort to overcome a familiarity that blinds us, dulls us. *It takes work to pay attention*, to stay fully alert, to let a spiritual text reveal its meaning, being patient and allowing it to do its work in us. Recall the famous lines from a poem by Mary Oliver: “I don’t know exactly what prayer is / I do know how to pay attention.”

Point Two:

The biblical text above has Jesus posing this question – **“What do you want?”** In John’s Gospel, this question is the first time we hear His voice! This alone is worth wondering about.

This first chapter of *The Imitation* is about this question. The author insists, always gently and wanting our involvement, that we answer this question. To show us what a good answer is, the author answers Jesus’ question this way:

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.³

Consider slowing down Jesus’ question by asking it with three different emphases.

First, **WHAT do you want?** This gets us to think of a *thing* that we want, *a want above all other wants*. (Did you notice that the most important element here is the vigor of our wanting and not nearly as much the thing that we are wanting?) If you could state your want clearly to God, and having been assured that Jesus would give you what you wanted, *what is it* that you really want, if you could ask for only one thing? (I’ll bet that you don’t know.) Or what if you ended up disliking the question that Jesus asked, because the question that you had wished that He had asked was *Who is it* that you want above all others, not as a possession but as a relationship? This change of question would reveal the Holy Spirit already at work in you.

² The “**atmosphere**” of a book. Go to last week’s *Conversations* (4 June 2025) where this important idea is explained.

³ Dennis J. Billy with Thomas à Kempis, *[The Imitation of Christ: A Spiritual Commentary and Reader's Guide](#)*, trans. William C. Creasy (Notre Dame, IN: Christian Classics, 2005), 20.

Second, **What do YOU want?** Have you noticed, especially in American culture, how we are constantly manipulated to want something because we are told that *everyone else* wants it, or at least the people who “really matter” want it (notice that we are not one of them)? It really is not what *you* want – it is a *memetic* desire (we are infected by the desire that someone else has – we mimic their desire). How do we discover that this is true? Well, if you do end up getting something that you want, then have you noticed how often you feel an emptiness inside, even as you hold the very thing in your hand. Where is the fullness that you had expected? The thing that you wanted, or thought that you did, was not what *you* wanted. American households are crammed with things that we were manipulated to want. Our houses are filled with clutter; closets stuffed; garages crammed; storage units rented.⁴ What, then, is a desire that *you* authentically have; that proceeds from your truest self? Bartimaeus knew exactly what he wanted.

Mark 10 (NJB): ⁵⁰ So throwing off his cloak, he [Bartimaeus, the blind man] jumped up and went to Jesus. ⁵¹ Then Jesus spoke, ‘**What do you want me to do for you?**’ The blind man said to him, ‘Rabbuni, let me see again.’⁵

Third, **What do you WANT?** One way that I have learned to track the effect of sin in a person (by which I mean, a taste for unreality) is by noticing his or her loss of ability to distinguish between a *want* and a *need*. Our culture saturates our consciousness so many times each day with images of what we ought to want. But our compromised culture⁶ (C.S. Lewis liked to speak of us all living in “occupied territory”) does not stop there.

⁴ See: <https://www.governing.com/context/too-much-stuff-americans-and-their-storage-units> - Storage facilities are a \$38 billion industry, one of the surest business investments in America, with an annual growth rate of over seven percent. In 1984, there were about 6,600 self-storage buildings in the nation. Now there are approximately 50,000 such facilities in the U.S. (900 per state), with a combined storage capacity of 2.3 billion square feet. In other words, every one of the 340 million Americans could simultaneously find a place to stand inside one of the nation’s storage facilities – and wouldn’t that be an addition to the *Guinness World Records*? According to 2018 statistics, there are more than 23 million individual storage units in the United States. That’s one for every 14 Americans. Self-storage facilities employ more than 170,000 people in the United States. The existing infrastructure is at 90 percent capacity. Americans apparently cannot get enough external storage space.

⁵ [The New Jerusalem Bible](#) (New York; London; Toronto; Sydney; Auckland: Doubleday, 1990), Mk 10:50-51.

⁶ “**culture**” – A famous definition of this term is “the *meanings* [i.e., what we understand and affirm is real] and *values* [i.e., what we feel is valuable or more valuable than other things] that inform a way of life.” To speak in very general terms, St. Augustine posited the root of human sinfulness in fundamental damage, a distortion in our **Will**; i.e., in our capacity to have affection for what is truly valuable; St. Thomas Aquinas posited the root of human sinfulness in a fundamental damage, a distortion in our **Intellect**; i.e., either we are ignorant of our Intellectual powers and fail to use them, or we replace our power to think clearly and with carefulness with our ungoverned passions – our lack of Temperance skews our thinking.

What our culture wants is for us to turn our wants into needs. We no longer just want things; we *must* have these things. Perhaps we could fruitfully ask ourselves: **What, really, do I need?**

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.⁷

We will be surprised to discover how very little we need to possess in order to live: to contribute to society, to be happy, to love, to read, to choose our friends, to love justice, to serve the common good, to forgive our enemies, and to be able to pursue our dreams, etc.

Point Three:

The author urges:

Make every effort, then, to shift your affections from the things that you can see to the things you cannot see,⁸

The only successful way to “shift one’s affections” is not by fighting those affections that fail to satisfy your deepest longings. Rather, it is by staying close to Christ, especially by seeking knowledge of Him in the Scriptures. Slowly but surely, through the work of the Holy Spirit, your affection for material things (more, more, more; enough is never enough) grows less and your affection grows for spiritual things (for real friendships; for a more fearless openness, for a more penetrating understanding, for an ability to distinguish what is real from what only appears to be real, and for wisdom, etc.). The Holy Spirit persuades your affections to want these unseen things.

Isaiah 55 (NJB)

¹ Oh, come to the water all you who are thirsty;
though you have no money, come!

Buy and eat; come, buy wine and milk
without money, free!

² Why spend money on what cannot nourish
and your wages on what fails to satisfy?

Listen carefully to me, and you will have good things to eat

⁷ Dennis J. Billy with Thomas à Kempis, [*The Imitation of Christ: A Spiritual Commentary and Reader's Guide*](#), trans. William C. Creasy (Notre Dame, IN: Christian Classics, 2005), 20.

⁸ Dennis J. Billy with Thomas à Kempis, [*The Imitation of Christ: A Spiritual Commentary and Reader's Guide*](#), trans. William C. Creasy (Notre Dame, IN: Christian Classics, 2005), 21.

and rich food to enjoy.

³ Pay attention, come to me;
listen, and you will live. ⁹

So, then, the very center of Chapter One is opened for us in Jesus' question – **What do you want?** (John 1:38)

⁹ *The New Jerusalem Bible* (New York; London; Toronto; Sydney; Auckland: Doubleday, 1990), Is 55:1-3.