

A Short Rule of Life

John Wycliffe

Roman Catholic · Late Medieval · Rule

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INTRODUCTION

This is a short piece by the English Proto-Reformer John Wycliffe from the 14th century. Wycliffe was a priest, professor, scholastic philosopher, theologian, and bible translator. He is best known as the leader of a Reform movement within the Church known as Wycliffites or Lollards which was denounced by ecclesiastical authorities for its critique of caesaropapism, monasticism and mendicancy, clerical abuse, image worship, not having worship in the vernacular tongue and a range of objections regarding the definition and theology of the sacraments. Wycliffe and many of his followers were martyred for their beliefs following their censure by ecclesiastical authorities but famously inspired the Czech Reformer Jan Hus and the Hussites who made similar demands for Reform before suffering a similar fate. Both men, whilst each different given their context, are generally seen as antecedents to Luther, Calvin, and the Evangelical Reformation a century later in the light of the continuation of the abuses they spoke up against in the Church.

This entry is Wycliffe's brief treatise on how each man, whether he be Priest, Lord, or Labourer should conduct themselves according to their station. It begins with a general rule concerning what we should be mindful of, from our waking to our sleeping, before delving into the specifics of each station. From this we see the outcome of Wycliffe's deep devotion and the outworking of his desire for each man to place God's will above his own. For man to encourage one another in their devotion to God by the employment of faith, virtue, and humility represented by each station he mentions. This, Wycliffe encourages us, is the means by which man might 'save himself, and to help others' by the edification of Christian man, the conversion of the Heathen, and the glory of God amongst all the people of the Earth.

First, when thou risest, or fully wakest, think upon the goodness of thy God; how for his own goodness, and not for any need, he made all things out of nothing, both angels and men, and all other creatures, good in their kind.

The second time, think on the great sufferings, and willing death that Christ suffered for mankind. When no man might make satisfaction for the guilt of Adam and Eve, and others more, neither any angel might make satisfaction therefore, then Christ, of his endless charity, suffered such great passion and painful death, that no creature could suffer so much.

Think the third time, how God hath saved thee from death and other mischief, and suffered many thousands to be lost that night, some in water, some in fire, and some by sudden death; and some to be damned without end. And for this goodness and mercy thank thy God with all thine heart. And pray him to give thee grace to spend in that day, and evermore, all the powers of thy soul, as mind, understanding, reason, and will; and all the powers of thy body, as strength, beauty, and thy five senses, in his service and worship, and in nothing against his commandments; but in ready performance of his works of mercy, and to give good example of holy life, both in word and deed, to all men about thee.

Look afterward that thou be well occupied, and no time idle, for the danger of temptation. Take meat and drink in measure, not too costly nor too liquorous, and be not too curious thereabout. But such as God sendeth thee with health, take it in such measure that thou be fresher in mind and understanding to serve God. And always thank him for such gifts. Besides this, look thou do right and equity to all men, thy superiors, equals, and subjects or servants; and stir all to love truth, and mercy, and true peace, and charity; and suffer no man to be at dissension, but accord them if thou canst in any good manner.

Also, most of all fear God and his wrath; and most of all love God and his law, and his worship; and ask not principally for worldly reward, but in all thine heart desire the bliss of heaven in the mercy of God, and thine own good life; and think much of the dreadful doom of pains of hell, to keep thee out of sin; and on the endless great joys of heaven, to keep thee in virtuous life; and according to thy skill teach others the same doing.

At the end of the day think wherein thou hast offended God, and how much and how oft, and therefore have entire sorrow, and amend it while thou mayest. And think how many God hath suffered to perish that day, many ways, and to be damned everlastingly, and how graciously he hath saved thee; not for thy desert, but for his own mercy and goodness, and therefore thank him with all thine heart. And pray to him for grace that thou mayest dwell and end in his true and holy service and real love, and to teach other men the same doing.

If Thou Art a Priest

If thou art a priest, and especially a curate, live thou holily, surpassing other men in holy prayer, desire, and thinking, in holy speaking, counselling, and true teaching. And that God's commands, his gospel, and virtues, be ever in thy mouth; and ever despise sin to draw men therefrom; and that thy deeds be so rightful that no man shall blame them with reason, but that thy open deeds be a true book to all subjects and unlearned men, to serve God and do his commands thereby. For example of good life, open and lasting, more stirreth rude men than true preaching by word only. And waste not thy goods in great feasts of rich men, but live a humble life, of poor men's alms and goods, both in meat, and drink, and

clothes; and the remainder give truly to poor men that have not of their own, and may not labour for feebleness or sickness, and thus thou shalt be a true priest both to God and man.

If Thou Art a Lord

If thou art a lord, look that thou live a rightful life in thine own person, both in respect to God and man, keeping the commands of God, doing the works of mercy, ruling well thy five senses, and doing reason, and equity, and good conscience to all men. In the second place, govern well thy wife, thy children, and thy household attendants, in God's law, and suffer no sin among them, neither in word or in deed, that they may be examples of holiness and righteousness to all others; for thou shalt be condemned for their evil life and their evil example, unless thou amend it according to thy might. In the third place, govern well thy tenants, and maintain them in right and reason, and be merciful to them in their rents and worldly payments, and suffer not thine officers to do them wrong nor be extortionate to them. And chastise in good manner them that are rebels against God's commands and virtuous life, more than for rebellion against thine own cause; or else for that thou lovest more thine own cause than God's, and thyself more than God Almighty, thou wert then a false traitor to God. And love, reward, praise, and cherish the true and virtuous of life more than if thou sought only thine own profit. And reverence and maintain truly, according to thy skill and might, God's law and true preachers thereof, and God's servants, in rest and peace. For thereby thou boldest the lordship of God, and if thou fails of this thou fails God, and all thy lordship, in body and in soul. And principally if thou maintainest antichrist's disciples in their errors against Christ's life and his teaching, for blindness, covetousness, and worldly friendship; and helpst to slander and pursue true men that teach Christ's gospel and his life, and warn the people of their great sins, and of false prophets and hypocrites that deceive Christian men in faith, virtuous life, and worldly goods.

If Thou Art a Labourer

If thou art a labourer, live in meekness, and truly and willingly do thy labour, that thy lord or thy master if he be a heathen man, by thy meekness, willing and true service, may not have to grudge against thee, nor slander thy God, nor thy Christian profession; but rather be stirred to come to Christianity. And serve not Christian lords with grudgings; not only in their presence, but truly and willingly, and in absence. Not only for worldly dread, or worldly reward, but for dread of God and conscience, and for reward in heaven. For God that putteth thee in such service knoweth what state is best for thee, and will reward thee more than all earthly lords may, if thou dost it truly and willingly for his ordinance. And in all things beware of grudging against God and his visitation, in great labour, and long or great sickness, and other adversities. And beware of wrath, of cursing, of speaking evil, of banning man or beast; and ever keep patience, meekness, and charity, both to God and man.

Conclusion

And thus each man in the three states ought to live, to save himself, and to help others; and thus should good life, rest, peace, and love, be among Christian men, and they be saved, and heathen men soon

converted, and God magnified greatly in all nations and sects that now despise him and his law, for the false living of wicked Christian men.

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This text is taken from *Select English Works of John Wyclif*, Vol. III, edited by Thomas Arnold and published by the Clarendon Press, Oxford, in 1869. Arnold transcribed it from a manuscript held in the library of Corpus Christi College, Cambridge. Both Wycliffe's original (d. 1384) and Arnold's edition are out of copyright. The text is freely available via the Internet Archive.

Wycliffe occupies an unusual position in Christian history: a fourteenth-century Oxford theologian and priest whose attacks on clerical corruption, insistence on scriptural authority, and translation work anticipate the Reformation by more than a century. He was condemned posthumously by the Council of Constance in 1415. His tradition assignment here — Reformed — reflects his historical reception and theological trajectory rather than his institutional context, which was Roman Catholic. Readers should be aware of this ambiguity.

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