

The Seven Deadly Sins

By John Wycliffe

It should come as no surprise that Wycliffe, the first to challenge the authority of the corrupted church in a meaningful way, the first to translate the entire Bible into the language of the common man, the “[Morning Star of the Reformation](#)¹,” would conclude that the Gospel teaches peace and condemns any killing of one’s fellow man. The fact that his pacifism is all but forgotten is an indication that the purification and restoration that began with him has not yet been completed.

This excerpt is taken from [Select English Works of John Wyclif, Volume III, Miscellaneous Works](#), pages 119-167, edited from original manuscripts by Thomas Arnold M.A. of University College, Oxford at the Clarendon Press, 1871. Wycliffe’s tract, written circa 1384, is organized as follows: (chapter 1) introduction, (2-7) pride, (8-11) envy, (12-16) anger, (17-20) sloth, (21-24) greed, (25-28) gluttony, and (29-32) lust. Wycliffe classified pride, envy, and anger as sins of the devil; anger, sloth, and greed as sins of the world; and greed, gluttony, and lust as sins of the flesh. He called these sins “sisters” that are so knitted together that one brings in all of the others.

The original editor’s preface is transcribed here together with the chapters on envy, anger, and sloth, which contain nearly all of what Wycliffe had to say in this tract about war and fighting. This transcription is under no copyright protection. It is our gift to you. You may freely copy, print, and transmit it, but please do not change or sell it. And please bring any mistakes to our attention. We are indebted to the University of Michigan’s [Middle English Dictionary](#) for help in puzzling out the meaning of Wycliffe’s text, but mistakes were surely made nonetheless.

Please refer to Carl Rogers’ excellent [thesis](#) for more information regarding the pacifism of John Wycliffe, and please contact us if you know of an English translation of his *De Civili Dominio* or his *De Officio Regis*.

Transcribed and edited by WWW.NONRESISTANCE.ORG.

¹ Transcriber’s note – When the morning star appears, the dawn cannot be far behind.

Preface

The evidence connecting the following tract with Wycliffe may be deemed tolerably satisfactory. Besides being mentioned by Bale² under the title of *De Peccatis fugiendis*, it is the first tract in a small manuscript volume (Bodleian 647), nearly all the contents of which are known or reputed to be by Wycliffe. The Bodleian Library (University of Oxford) has a second copy of it (Douce 373), and there is a third at Dublin (Trinity College v.6). This text is based on the Bodleian 647 manuscript, which is written in the West Midland dialect. The internal evidence proves the tract to be of Lollard origin, but no more. Yet the passage about the right to take back church endowments if misused (chapter 24) sounds like the voice of Wycliffe, as does also the rough humor in the comparison of the feats of a knight to those of a hangman (chapter 15). The mention of the romance of the battle of Troy, if it were a reference to the version penned by Lydgate, would indeed fix the date of the composition to a period subsequent to Wycliffe's death. But, besides the old and well-known French version of Guido delle Colonne, which had been long in circulation, an English metrical version was written by John Barbour³, author of *The Brus*.

² Bale, John, *Illustrium Majoris Britanniae Scriptorum Summarium*, 1549 and 1559.

³ John Barbour (c.1320-1395) was a Scottish poet and contemporary of Wycliffe. See Morley's *English Writers*, volume 2, part 1, page 432.

Chapter 8

The next sister of pride is the sin of envy. Envy is called an evil desire of a man, by which he desires harm to fall upon his neighbor, and if the desire is fulfilled, he rejoices in his neighbor's misfortune. Just as pride, the first of these seven sins, is inordinate desire of a man's own loftiness, envy, the second sister of sin, is inordinate desire of man toward his neighbor. And so envy always begets evil, and is entirely contrary to love. Scholars dispute that envy exists, since no man can desire a thing unless he thinks that it is good, or that good will come from it, and neither of these qualifies as envy. But here shall the devil be certain that envy is his sin, for a man thinks something is good that is harmful to someone else. And so, just as God's children have a liking for good, the devil and his children have a liking for harm. The devil finds no advantage in a close relationship with envious men, for such a relationship would show his involvement in their evil desires, and appearing to be unassociated does them more harm. And so, as goodness profits a good man, so also wickedness pleases an evil man. Each envious man is obviously foolish, for he thinks that an evil thing is good.

Men tell a fable of two men in a city – the first was envious and the second was covetous. The judge of the city proclaimed that, when one of these two men asked something of the court, the second should have the double what the first asked. These two men came at the time and place assigned, disagreeing among themselves who should ask first. The envious man thought that if he asked first, he would do much good to his brother. The covetous man thought that if he asked first, his brother would have double his own share. The judge ordered that the envious elder brother should ask first what he would. This envious man was compelled to obey the judge's decree, and he was grieved to have to profit his covetous brother. He therefore asked that his eye should be put out, understanding that by this his brother would be completely blinded, and the judge of the city saw that this decision was carried out.⁴

This judge of the city may be God Almighty, who put in man the freedom to choose good or evil, and by his choosing good his brother should fare the better. This Judge is Lord both of God's city and of the city of the devil, for both good and evil men are His creatures. The envious man, of the city of the devil, chooses to harm himself in order to harm his neighbor. But this Righteous Judge by His true discernment judges the envious man to be completely blind, for He is judge of all and judges men by their desires. The envious man is blind in both his eyes – the eye of his body and the eye of his soul. Whatever he sees, either physically or spiritually, is to his everlasting harm. Thus, envious men are the devil's children, and do harm to themselves and to their standing in God's sight. If you ask the reason why they act this way, they are without reason, and therefore reason condemns them.

⁴ A somewhat different version of this fable, in French of the thirteenth century, may be seen in the *Recueil* of Barbazan. St. Martin meets the two men on a plain and, on parting company with them, says that if one of them will ask him for something and shall have it, whatever it may be, but the man who has not asked shall receive double. Urged on and menaced by the covetous man, the envious man asks that he may lose an eye – and the rest of the story agrees with the version given in the text. Barbazan took this fable from a manuscript of S. Germain des Prés.

A third version is given in the appendix to Robert's edition of La-fontaine's Fables. In this version (which bears the name of Ysopet-Avionnet, who professes to have translated it, and his other fables, from the Latin), Phoebus occupies the place of St. Martin, and the language and whole air of the fable are of much later date.

From what source our author derived his version of the fable cannot be determined. The *Gesta Romanorum* will immediately occur to the literary reader, but this fable is not found there.

Chapter 9

In order to speak more of this sin of the devil, we will consider the three divisions of the church: the preachers, the defenders, and the laborers. The preachers should be priests, for Christ, the head of the Church, told His disciples to preach the Gospel to all manner of men, and thus He won this world. And mark well how Christ, who was both God and man, told His spiritual knights to go into the entire world, not to fight with cold physical weapons, but with weapons of love – the Gospel. He told them to preach, not lies or fables, but the truth of the Gospel, which is virtue. Nor did He tell them only to preach to men who were inclined toward them, but to all manner of men without excluding anyone. And, on a related matter, Christ forbade all His clergy to practice simony, begging, and covetousness. Since they freely received their knowledge of God, they should freely pass it on to the people.

The first part of the Church should be close to Christ, close to heaven, and overflowing with love; but the devil belabors it through envy. This part should be all of one religion, as priests and deacons living the life of scholars; but the devil has changed this part in many ways, as independent clergy and religious orders. Both of these have many branches: popes, cardinals, bishops, archdeacons, monks, canons, hospitallers, and friars. It is the custom of these religious orders that one loves his brethren more than he loves a man of a different order, and will defend his order by personal favoritism. It is no wonder that love is put aside, for once the life-blood is removed the body will soon grow cold. And so Christian men believe, by the ordinance of Christ, that it is better for the clergy to be all of one sect. Then the other two parts of the Church might live with them in more love. For now men can see that the four orders of friars that were lately founded by the ordinance of men do not care about love among themselves. Not only does one order envy the other, but also one person in one order envies the distinctive worship or office of his brother. And for this cause one order would have another disband. It harms the order's authority and begging, for one beggar is grieved that another hinders him. Thus it is of other religious orders. By the ordinance of Christ, priests and bishops were all one, but afterward the emperor⁵ separated them and made bishops lords and priests their servants. This became a cause of envy, and quenched much love. The ordinance of Christ is rooted in meekness, unity, and love, but inequality of wealth and status and differences in worship commonly beget envy among many men. And so, if those with wealth and status were brought to that state which Christ ordained for His clergy, then men would love both the independent clergy and the religious orders.

⁵ Transcriber's note – Wycliffe may be referring to the Roman Emperor Constantine.

Chapter 10

The second part of the Church is the defenders: lords, knights, and other men of arms. Envy reigns in them for many reasons. In their pride they covet honor and wealth, and the authority of the clergy makes the lords too poor. We shall understand that the Holy Church, just as she is our mother, so also she is a body, and the health of this body is rooted in this: that one part of it answers to another, after the same measure that Jesus Christ has ordained. As in a man's body, if its systems are imbalanced, sickness will come quickly upon whole parts of it, or fevers, or other strange maladies. And thus it must be in the body of the Church, for our Lord Jesus Christ is its maker, and ordains better laws to members of His Church than He ordains to the parts of a man's body. Due to men's sins, the Church shall surely never be healthy until her parts are healed again by His heavenly doctoring and the medicine of men. Oh, if it were a kindness to heal a sick man, how much more kindness would it to be to heal the Church, our mother! Men who do not help this sick woman lack mercy, for men should have more love toward her and her members.

This lack of love brings in envy, and makes men of arms fight and strive with one another. Battles are the unkindly work of these defenders, fought to maintain the ordinances of God by physical strength. And here they lack love, when they leave what is better and always easier, and take the devil's work. God's law tells us it is the misfortune of devils to fight with each other because of pride and envy, and it should be the work of the clergy to draw men to peace. But now they encourage men unkindly, both in word and in deed, to war against God's law. So many principles that the devil has created in these great warriors are contrary to love. They have taken for a rule that it is lawful for them to harass their enemies in whatever way that they can, but the love of Christ bids the contrary: that men should love their enemies and do them good for evil. And so this part of the Church lacks all sorts of love and walks in envy. As virtuous priests give life to the Church, so also sins or vices that rule them poison the other two parts of the Church. This is especially true when the clergy yields to sinful desire and hides God's law from the other two parts. The virtue of love should be greatest in the clergy; envy is greatest in them when they are turned to evil. But now, to please the lords, the clergy hides God's law, and persecutes priests for preaching the truth.

Chapter 11

The third part of the Church walks in envy for many reasons, but three are the most common. One is a lack of preaching, in that they should be taught to speak about love more than any worldly good. In this matter the clergy fails them both in word and deed, for there are none more covetous than these priests. The second cause of envy among the laborers is that they are too burdened and deprived of their goods by the two other parts, which should be protecting them. Friars, parsons, and other men who are robbing the Church make them sweat their own blood by their hypocrisy. And since worldly lords should protect them from this, both of these two parts are impoverishing the people. Just as the light and virtue of heaven comes from above, so also the help of the common people should come from the other two parts of the Church. The people's examples of good living, good teaching, and good deeds should come from these clergymen and worldly lords. A man's stomach should digest his food and thus provide nourishment to the other parts of his body that need it; so also, as God's people sin, priests should be the stomach to digest spiritual food and thus nourish the body of our mother the Holy Church. But the clergy fail in this. As the eyes in the head direct the whole body to go in ways that are right and profitable to men, so the prelates of the Church should lead it in God's way. But Christ says in His Gospel that if one blind man leads another, they will both fall into a pit. The path of love, which should be broad and easily traveled by all men, is cut off by envy, and this prevents men from seeing Christ.

The unequal distribution of the goods of this world creates much envy among these worldly men. And so some of these commoners, and especially merchants, are moved to envy by the nature of their livelihood. Just as lords should be corrected by the preaching of their bishops, so also lords should correct the merchants and other folk in the third part of the Church who, by their envy, sow the seeds of dissension and sin that disturb kingdoms. But all of the poor commoners, because of their busy toil, sin less in envy and in other sins than do men of the higher classes who do not work so much. Nevertheless, money causes many to fall through envy, for every sin brings in another, and all of our three enemies – the world, the flesh, and especially the devil – make each sin worse than the previous one.

If a man is separated from God, who should be his foundation to stand against sin, he is a house built upon shifting sand that is easily moved. And so, by the law handed down by Saint Paul, each member of the Holy Church should be like the limbs and organs of a man, each helping the others. A man's hand kindly helps his head, his eye helps his foot, and his foot helps his body. The parts of a man that are less attractive help the body very much, and one part does not hinder the others from being honored. Instead, each helps the others without envy, doing its proper work, and so makes the body strong. And thus should it be among the parts of the Church, but departing from the tree of life hinders such help, and some men, as limbs removed by sin, do not help the Church, but rather do it harm. This is what men do who have been removed from the root of love. Therefore, true members of the Church pull together like oxen in a single yoke and are all of one mind, as the Church teaches. And this is how we can tell who are of the Holy Church, and who are allies of the devil and make up the wicked church. Love is a cloth that separates that one part of the Church from the other, as holy men say. Predestination and the foreknowledge of God join these two bodies and keep them together. The sign that the people are not of one mind shows us that they are not all members of the one Church. God's law should be a rule to shape men to be of one mind, but departing from this law separates men from love, separates them from members of God's body, separates them from members of the Holy Church, and unites them with the devil.

Chapter 12

Anger is the third sister attributed to the devil. But there are two types of anger: good and evil. Good anger arises when a man becomes provoked in a godly cause; not to avenge his own cause, but to avenge God's wrong. God's righteous anger and fury are spoken of in Scripture, as is the commendable anger of His holy prophets such as Moses, who was a meek man but angry in godly matters. Anger that is sin comes from men's pride and, where money is concerned, an irrational desire for vengeance. And although many hypocrites excuse this sort of anger by reason of the first anger,⁶ nonetheless the judge above shall rule on the Day of Judgment how that thinking will hold up. Envy and anger are different in nature, for envy is rooted in evil thought and is not immediately obvious. Envy, the mother of anger, has the manner of the devil, but anger disturbs a man's mind, moves his body, and draws him toward vengeance upon his neighbor just as Cain, the father of anger, slew his brother. But anger that is godly is of a completely different type. According to the teaching of Saint Augustine, take away the moving and disturbing of the mind, as well as everything that is imperfect, and keep the desire to punish, as justice demands, and such anger is godly. When God takes great vengeance, suddenly and unexpectedly, it seems like madness to the one punished, but God reproves His servants by His anger, and on Judgment Day He will condemn them severely. Each demon serves God through its well deserved suffering, and the anger with which God reproves seems to men like He is putting the blame on the devil's children. No wise man asks God not to chastise him, but instead meekly takes the pain that God sends him. Otherwise, he would be a rebellious student to his master.

And thus three harms come from anger. First, a man's mind is hindered in his worshipping, and by his folly he is made like a beast. The moving of their spirits often hinders men from harboring the Holy Spirit, which loves to rest in men's souls. Such men do not absorb the warmth of love, just as the sun does not make quickly flowing water hot. An example of this is Cain, who shook his head and despaired of having his sin forgiven. His intellect, which was in command of his soul, was impaired. And so the moving of anger within a man makes a comfortable resting place for the devil, who lurks and watches for when he may harass him – and this is the second harm that comes of anger. The third harm of anger is that it spoils a man of material goods. He who kills his brother loses a friend, just as Judas lost Christ, who called him His friend. And not only does a man lose through anger the friendship of one who he unjustly kills, but also the friendship of his comrades and the love of God and angels. A man loses his strength through such anger, and will lose his possessions for the harm that he does. The devil may make him strong while he is angry, but he will be quite feeble afterward. Thus, among sins, anger is the most contrary to the fellowship and love that should exist between people. Therefore, the prophet bids us to beware of the man who is impetuous, easily angered, and hastily takes vengeance.

⁶ Transcriber's note – a reference to Cain and Abel, and reasoning that violent anger is simply human nature.

Chapter 13

Each man who is disposed to vengeance by irrational anger is like a devil that blasphemes against God, who is the proper one to punish His subjects. No man should take vengeance unless God commands him to, and shows him as His instrument how God would have that punishment delivered. Thus, each wrathful man blasphemes against God. According to civil law, no man may make battle unless he has the permission of his prince. Certainly an earthly prince is usually proud, and lacks the understanding to teach when men should fight, and therefore it is likely that worldly prince is the instigator of the battles that men now endure. I am certain that Christ is the king of peace and love, and guides men to the patience that flowed from His own human nature.

And here may we see how the devil's interference deceives the people and moves them to fight. The devil takes for a fact that under the Old Law men were permitted to fight by the authority of God, and since He is the same God now, why should men not fight now? We agree with the devil's claim that in the Old Testament it was lawful to fight. Scripture teaches us this. Under the New Law, it would now be lawful for us to fight if the same circumstances justified it as were present under the Old Law; otherwise, men should live in peace out of love for our God. Truly, men fought with God's enemies under the Old Law to avenge wrongs committed against God and for no other reason. The same applies to men now, if their fighting is to be lawful. The second requirement for lawful fighting demands that fighting be made by the authority of God – that God should speak to them, command them to fight, muster the necessary men, and teach them how to fight. If men kept this in mind, they would not fight now against anyone. But treacherous men stir up battles now, even though the time has come that Isaiah spoke of regarding Christ – that men shall beat their swords into plowshares and the iron of their spears into scythes or sickles. The third condition that men should meet in fighting and warring is that they should perform the deeds of their fighting out of love, loving God and their neighbors – specifically, the men they are fighting with. Saint Paul commanded that all our deeds be done in love, and according to God's law we should love our enemies, and so make them friends by the strength of our love.

Since no man should fight except with these three conditions, it is obvious that men should not fight now. And therefore Jesus Christ, the champion of our battle, taught us the law of calmly enduring misfortune and suffering, and not to fight bodily. If God whispers in your ear and commands you to fight in His cause, then, as God taught by His prophets in the Old Testament, fight vigorously in God's cause as He Himself commands you; otherwise, hold your peace as Christ did with His disciples. And so this argument – if men fought at one time with these three conditions, then men should fight now – can be seen as an false argument. Now is the time of peace. The Church is mature, and it does not follow from any of these conditions that men should fight with each other – in fact, just the opposite follows, as each man should know. And so the devil, the father of anger, is the one who authorizes this fighting, and his disciples follow along, moved by their master.

Chapter 14

Furthermore, in order to maintain men's fighting, the Antichrist argues that nature teaches that men should stand against their enemies by force. Since an adder by its nature bites a man who treads on it, why should we not fight against our enemies? Otherwise, they would destroy us and condemn their own souls. Thus, we chastise them out of love, as God's law teaches us. And so, since our enemies would attack us, if we hear about them beforehand and love ourselves more, we should attack them first in order to secure our peace.

Here I think the devil deceives many men by the falseness of his reasons and principles. What man, who has understanding, cannot see this fraud? If it is lawful to stand against violence with brute strength, then it is lawful to fight with men who stand against us. I am certain that angels stand against devils, and many men stand against their enemies by strength of law; and yet they do not kill them or fight with them. Wise men of the world hold back their strength, and thus vanquish their enemies without throwing a punch. Men of the Gospel conquered through patience, and yeomen won rest and peace by suffering death. We may also do right, if we care about love. Though men may seize our estates or our possessions, we should suffer in patience – yes, though they do even more to us. These are the counsels of Christ, but the world grumbles and says that kingdoms are destroyed in this way. But here faith teaches us, since Christ is our God, that this is the way kingdoms should be established, and our enemies be vanquished. But perhaps many men would lose their worldly riches. What harm would that be, since all men were without such an estate before Adam's fall?

The devil uses venomous snakes as his example, and by a simple animal characteristic he teaches men to fight. But many other examples of patience in animals should teach us to endure suffering, and so accomplish a greater good. A devil's feelings govern him and convince him that his enemies would kill him if he were patient. That is equivalent to saying that the devil would destroy him if he obeyed Christ's word, thus making the devil greater than Christ. And if we fight thus out of "love," it is not a benevolent love, for benevolence does not seek one's own good in this life, but the common good in heaven by virtuous patience. I am sure that worldly men will scorn this teaching, but men who would be martyrs out of love for God will embrace it, and they are more to be desired because they have more and better love with God. Men who fight have a deceitful love, the kind of false love that the demons of hell invent. But men shall know on Judgment Day who fights thus for "love." It is no loving thing to ride against your enemy upon a strong war-horse and armed with a sharp spear – in comparison, the kiss of Judas was more of a token of love. And so God's law teaches men to excel in deeds of love and works of worship. I do not read in God's law that Christian men should excel in fighting or battle, but in meek patience. And this is the means whereby we should have God's peace.

Chapter 15

Yet the devil argues that men must fight, for by means of fighting men gain respect, honor, and a great name, and these are the rewards of virtue. Right of ownership gained through conquest is the best of all, but conquest only comes with great fighting, and so our battles must be lawful. If this were not true, it would mean that in all the world men occupy their land unjustly. A man should therefore fight with his brother when he lacks such right of ownership. Since Christ commended soldiers and told his apostles to sell their coats and buy swords for themselves – what are they good for but to fight with? If the deeds and words of Christ approved fighting, why is it not lawful?

But here we answer as we did before, that wars and fighting are now unlawful. To the first argument we answer that the worldly name that the devil has promoted is a great evidence that battle is cursed. Many men are praised now for the devil's works, and the respect and honor that the world gives them are commonly for vices and not for virtues, for worldly men judge more by vices than by virtues. Lord, what respect is bestowed upon a knight because he kills many men? I am sure that hangmen kill many more, and by more righteous authority and power, and so they should be praised more than such knights. A butcher of animals often does his job justly and charitably, and so he does it well, but it is not so obvious that a butcher of his brother slays men charitably or justly. Why shouldn't this butcher [of animals], for his better deed, be praised more than this knight, who the world glorifies, since the more virtuous deed is more worthy of praise? And so it would be better for a man to be butcher of animals than to be a butcher of his brother, for the latter is more unnatural. The suffering of Christ is to be highly praised, but the slaying of His tormentors is odious to God. Lord, since the king of this entire world praises suffering so much, and hates such butchery, why shouldn't men do likewise?

As for right of ownership gained through conquest, we should understand that if God commands conquest, it would then be lawful, just as the children of Israel justly won their kingdom. Since God is Lord of all these worldly goods, He may give man right to whatever He wants. And so, if a kingdom transgresses against the Most High God, as punishment for this trespass He may give that kingdom to other folk. But man should not imagine that people have so sinned that God will punish them thus; a man should only think such things if God tells him. The Amorites sinned for four hundred years while God justly allowed them to remain in His promised land. Also, in such a conquest the conquerors must be worthy to have the land that they should conquer. And thirdly, if God gives land to a people and commands them to conquer it, their right of ownership is only valid if they continue to live righteously. But it is likely that many conquerors falter in such times of grace. Of one thing I am certain by my knowledge of God's law: if a man occupies an estate unjustly, and his heir after him is a just man, the Most High God approves of the heir's ownership. The gift of God is the best right of ownership, yes, better than inheritance. And so the just life of the heir should clear his conscience. Therefore, no man should fight with another for right of ownership by conquest unless God commands him. And so, as John the Baptist said, God sanctioned knights to defend His law by force, although they may not kill anyone.⁷ And Christ told his followers to sell their coats and buy swords, not to fight bodily, but to gently defend both godly and worldly causes – and these are the two swords that Christ said are enough.

⁷ Transcriber's note – In the Wycliffe Bible, John's reply to the soldiers in Luke 3:14 begins, "Smite ye wrongfully no man..." Several other translations, including the King James Version, render it, "Do violence to no man..."

Chapter 16

But yet men reply that the pope approves of the Crusades, and men should place their confidence in him. It is said plainly in other places that the pope may sin, as well as the priests under his direction. He is not any more steadfast than Saint Peter was, and he sinned even after he had received the Holy Spirit, as Paul reports. Why might not the Antichrist sin? He is the Antichrist, who by hypocrisy repudiates Jesus Christ by his corrupt living. Christ handed temporal property over to the devil, but the Antichrist amasses it on the basis of many false grounds. Christ was the most willing to serve of any priest on earth; the Antichrist is the most dangerous, closed in a castle, and not being like other men as a model of the Gospel any more than a spirit in hiding. How could he be Christ's representative? Meekness, service, and poverty to the world reveal the deceptive pretenses of such a hypocrite. He beguiles the common folk with the absolution of sins and many other privileges that are grounded in deceptive lies. They may not see him but they should trust what he says as he fabricates lies and blasphemies, making it spiritually beneficial to slay Christian men and maintain his authority. Yes, he says these are more spiritually beneficial than to defend Christ's life. And thus the Christian faith is turned upside down.

Priests commonly sin by consenting to this sin of the pope, since tacitly consenting to a sin entangles a person in the same sin. There are six ways in which a man may consent, and it is known by priests' deeds how they consent in this. A person consents when he helps to do a wicked deed, when he defends it in one way or another, when he counsels it, when he approves it, when he fails to help men against it, and when he shrinks away from condemning it.

The pope is the instigator of this fight and sins more than the other fighters, as the priests of the temple sinned more than Pilate or the soldiers who slew Christ, for the priests authorized this sin. But who should have the authority to defend the pope's property, his office, or his life by such manner of fighting? I read that Christ rebuked Saint Peter when he wanted to defend Christ's life by striking with a sword. I also read that Christ would not take vengeance on the Samaritans when they withheld His own goods from Him and His apostles, and denied them both food and lodging. But Christ said he did not come to take men's lives. Also, Christ is a good shepherd in this situation, for He offers his own life in order to save His sheep. But the Antichrist is a ravenous wolf, for he always does the opposite: he offers thousands of lives for his own wretched life. If he were to forsake the things that Christ commands His priests to forsake, he might put an end to all this strife. Why is he not a devil? The priests who fight in this cause sin wickedly in homicide, for if man-slaying by the laity is odious to God, it is much more so by the priests who should be Christ's representatives. The clergy agrees in the preaching and maintaining of this cause, timidly failing to speak out against such love of wickedness, and the laity in many ways also agrees to this sin. And thus the clergy violates the rules of our faith, and the laity encourages them. This entire world is wickedly in decline, and I am certain that the pope and all of his councilors cannot provide the least reason to prove that he should do these things. Swelling with anger – particularly in the priests – disturbs the Church in many ways, and hinders men from winning heaven. Faith should teach us to be meek as Christ was, and then should we fare the better, both physically and spiritually. If we have anger in God's cause, and if we temper it with the meekness and prudence of God, then we shall please Him.

Chapter 17

The fifth sin of these seven is called sloth in God's service; and the world helps the devil both in this and in anger. We shall understand that idleness in God's service nourishes many other sins, and thus pleases the devil. Therefore, the Gospel says that the devil watches whether the servants of a man's house are idle and proud, and if he finds that it is so, he dwells with that man. Lord, a good husband does not want his household to be idle, but rather much more devoted to God, who loves good hard work. Thus we read of the angels who are idle neither night nor day in God's service, but blissfully serve Him. Man, in his state of innocence before Adam's fall, was kept from idleness for, as Scripture says, he tended the Garden of Paradise. It is even more important for him to remain alert in God's service when in his state of sin. The devil is a thief who watches men both day and night, and if he sees them napping or idle, he tempts them into misfortune. If they sleep in God's service, the thief strips them of God's provision, given to help them resist the devil. If a man is idle, the devil is waiting and sees that it is an opportune time to tempt the man to serve him and to advance his cause. Similarly, if a man has a request to bring before his master, he chooses a time when the master is idle to get his attention. And so the devil waits for the time when a man pauses in his service to God. He then moves to cater to him, in lustful service of the flesh or worldly desires and put God's service behind him. By doing so, a man breaks the first commandment, and then the devil sees his time to move that man to serve him. Each man must do something, just as a spear thrown in a clearing must go somewhere, but if it is blown by a great wind it will go in a different direction. Likewise, each man's soul is a spear that must do something, and if it not led by the Holy Spirit to God's service, the devil will lead it to his. Before Adam's fall, mankind was strong and not beset with enemies, and yet it was not idle but busily served God. Otherwise, it would have been by idleness that he would have fallen from innocence. How can we risk idleness now when the peril is much greater?

One should understand here to what state a man is called by God, and the proper function of this state in faithful service to God, just as the diverse parts of a man serve the body according to their nature. The diverse parts of a man function unnaturally if one leaves its own proper work and takes on the function of another. In the same way, the diverse parts of the Church have their own proper work in God's service, and if one leaves the work that God has assigned to him and takes the work of another, the Church will see sinful wonders. Therefore, each man needs to understand in what state he stands and to keep serving in that state. Otherwise, he will sin in idleness. And if a man sins through idleness, some sister [other sin] will be coupled with it. Men here on earth must serve either God or the devil, and just as virtues are knitted together, so are vices. Also, it follows that each man needs to know his faith, for a servant of a lord must understand what he should do. Thus, the faith of Holy Scripture should teach men about their state and how they should serve their God, lest they sin in idleness. Faith is necessary to each man in this world.

Chapter 18

Christian men should understand that some service is common to all states that men of sound judgment find themselves in. Each man is obliged to keep God's commandments and to serve busily in all that God has given him. But, as we have said before, the three parts of the Church should truly serve their God in three different ways: as priests, as noblemen, and as common laborers. Because priests have a state higher than the others, God asks of them more perfect service, and idleness in priests is more damnable. The highest service in the world that men can perform is to preach God's word, and that falls to the priests. God therefore asks this service of them according to strict standards, for it is by preaching that priests raise God's children, who are the fruit of His marriage to the Church. It is pleasant to have a son who is a nobleman in this world. It is much more pleasant to have a son in God, who will go to heaven as a member of the Holy Church.

Therefore, Jesus Christ left other works behind and occupied himself most in the work of preaching. His apostles also did this, and God loved them for it. The better a person keeps God's commands, the better he will do. The fourth commandment bids us to honor our elders – our father and mother – but this should apply most to honoring the Holy Church. She is the mother that we should love most, for our faith teaches us that Christ died for her. She is most honored by the preaching of God's word, and this is the highest service that priests can render to God. A woman said to Christ that God should bless the womb that bore Him and the breasts that He suckled, but Christ answered that men who hear God's word and put it into practice should be blessed instead. And preachers should do this more than other men, for they should hear the word that God speaks to them and cherish it more than any other treasure. Idleness in the priestly office hinders the Church the most, begets the devil's children the most, and sends them to his court. Also, the best service has the worst antithesis. Preaching, if it is done well, is the best service of all, so the antithesis of preaching is worse than anything else.

Jesus Christ, when he ascended to heaven, specifically directed all of His apostles to preach the Gospel freely to each man. Also, when Christ spoke last with Peter, He bade him three times upon his love to feed His sheep. A wise shepherd would only do this if he loved the sheep greatly, for the office of spiritual shepherd is rooted in this. Christ told the rabbis that Sodom and Gomorrah would fare better than them on the Day of Judgment for mistreating their spiritual offspring, which is worse than the killing of physical offspring. Thus, if our bishops do not preach personally and prevent true priests from preaching to their sheep, they are in the same sin as those who killed Jesus. Praying is good, but not as good as preaching, for no priest dwelling with us can be certain that his prayer is better than the prayers of the people. A priest does not know the value of his prayers, and so should not trade his own prayers for the people's money. The man who does, trades against God and reason and does not know the value of his own merchandise. And so a priest's life should be rooted in preaching, praying with sincerity, giving of the sacraments, learning of God's law, and giving good example by righteous living. It would profit a priest to do these five things first, and to engage in eating, sleeping, and appropriate merry-making as a means to that end.

Chapter 19

Noblemen of the world should serve their God in the gifts that He has given them, and particularly by defending God's law by worldly power. The priests should win righteous people to the Church, and noblemen should use their power to protect them from evil men. But no man has any position in God's service such that he could not serve Him more if God gifted him to do so. Thus, the devil's children should be chastised with strength so that the Church might profit from God's law. Fighting and warring are not the duty of this part of the Church, but if God bids them for the protection thereof, they should hold them in meekness and measure as God instructs them. They should enjoy jousting, hunting, hawking, and other amusements that are not sinful – but enjoy them in moderation as long as such things help to serve God. But if priests abandon the responsibility that is prescribed for them, and devote themselves to chess, backgammon, dice, or taverns, they exceed the natural limits of the priesthood. They should hunt the devil, destroy sins, busy themselves in Gods law, and taste of His sweetness. They will not seek the pleasures of the nobility if they remember their calling, but the covetousness of amassing wealth and the idleness of leisure lead many priests to serve the devil.

Just as garments of pride should be far from knights, so also should be the plundering of poor men, particularly if they are their own tenants. These knights should know the righteousness of God's law and they should maintain it both in themselves and in others, for the mighty defense of the law of righteousness falls to knights by a holy purpose in order to serve God and maintain His law. If there are weak men, such as priests or commoners, who stand with God's law and have many enemies, it is the duty of knights to protect them from these enemies. Therefore, John the Baptist told the Roman soldiers that, if they would win heaven, they should restrain themselves. "Do not oppress your brethren and do not do them injury, but flee the coveting of possessions and be satisfied with your wages." And because they should surpass the commoners in knowing God's law, they should teach the commoners to embrace righteousness. This is the reason why God approves their status and gives them worldly respect with power and wealth, and if they abandon this responsibility, they sin against God, serve God's enemy, and are God's traitors. They should show love toward their servants, not punishing them in any way or taking service from them except by the way of love and profit to their souls. Just as God loves man more than man loves God, so also lords out of their goodness should love their servants more than their tenants love them, for this is God's law. And, because love does many things and is not idle, lords should help their tenants and protect them in righteousness. If they are oppressed by unproductive groups, such as priests or friars, lords should help them like the keeper of a vineyard should help the vines and cut away superfluous growth. Unproductive branches that grow from the root should be cut away for the benefit of the tree. Although lords should commonly do this, greater lords, and especially kings, are more to blame if they fail to do so. Just as their reward is greater if they do well in their office, so also their blame and punishment are greater for their failure. Priests should tell the lords this, or else they are to blame as well.

But some truths in this matter have been hidden and men will not agree with them, for they do not understand the conditions. God is obliged to man by His own free will, and God by His just law may forcibly take no service from man. God gives better things to men than He gets back from them. And so God is more faithful to man than man may be to God, for even as much [or little] as man is faithful, God [still] gives to man. Friend, since lords are representatives of the virtue of Christ, let them pursue virtue in the way they govern.

Chapter 20

Moreover, be alert to how commoners should flee this sin and serve God and man.⁸ By the law of God, they should meekly serve God and their lords and do true service to God and their masters – not serving when watched and idle in their absence. As Saint Paul says, they serve God first and, since God is never away, nothing is hidden from Him. Yes, by the law of Christ, if the lord is an unbeliever and a tyrant to his subjects, they should still serve him, for they should serve God in meekness and love. I have not read in God's law that subjects should fight with their worldly sovereigns in order to obtain peace. Instead, Christ taught us to vanquish our enemies by patience, and to win the bliss of heaven without other strife. Oh, if the killing of men by knights is wicked, it is more so by subjects, who should be meek and patient. And so, true men come to the conclusion that no one should take vengeance unless God commands him to avenge God's wrong. Men should teach this law to the common folk and leave the devil's law behind them. Then men would have peace and strife would cease.

We all say that we love Christ and obey His law. When He ascended to heaven, Christ told His apostles to preach, and they were mindful of His words at that time for He had rebuked them.⁹ He told them to perform this duty by going into the whole world and preaching the Gospel to every person. He did not tell them to only walk to Judea and preach there, nor to the folk of Israel who were His kin. He told them to preach to both governments and men without exception. But they were not to preach about worldly romances such as the Battle of Troy,¹⁰ or about nice fables, or about men's laws invented to earn them money. Christ commands His priests to preach the Gospel, and by that they will win the world and overcome the devil. He who believes this word, is baptized, and stands firm in this teaching shall be safe in heaven, and he who does not believe it shall be condemned in hell. Truth that leads to salvation cannot be found in the other three trifling matters.¹¹ Failure to preach the law of Christ disrupts the entire world and makes strife among men.

God's law teaches submission and peace; it teaches the means to achieve peace and forbids the contrary. The common folk should be taught this to keep them from sin and to employ them in virtue. But this is not accomplished by war, since the people who fight in wars shall always be inferior in virtue, and this is worse than much loss of worldly goods. We shall understand by God's law that a good community produces good leaders, for they are worthy of God, and God ordains that sin in the community be punished by the wickedness of the sovereign. They should therefore flee sin, for these two parts of the Church are coupled to each other. Every man should understand that the entire world is controlled by law, and obeying Christ's law brings in peace and love, but obeying the Antichrist's law brings in strife and envy. And thus may men know the fruit of these two laws. The Antichrist busies himself to gather men, to curse them, to deprive them of their goods, and to put them back into bondage. This is the law that is more often taught, feared, and enforced, for the devil and covetousness have mastery of more men, and those of Christ and His law are scattered thinly. Take note of countries and communities, for this is the way you may know them.

⁸ The studiously undemocratic tone of this chapter is very noticeable when one remembers the charge continually brought against Wycliffe and his followers by their contemporaries: that of exciting the commoners to contempt and hatred of their lords.

⁹ Transcriber's note – See Mark 16:14.

¹⁰ See the remarks in the preface.

¹¹ Romances, fables, and human laws.