Piers Plowman

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF WILLIAM LANGLAND

Not much is known about William Langland, the supposed author of *Piers Plowman*. In fact, even his name is just a speculation, hailing from *passus* XV, line 152 of *Piers Plowman*: "'I have lived in land,' said I, 'my name is Long Will.'" Many critics consider this line to be a play on the name William Langland, though it can't be considered solid proof. Langland was probably born around 1325 and died sometime after 1388. Based on the form and content of *Piers Plowman*, Langland likely lived in the western Midlands, near the Malvern Hills, though he was also familiar with London. Langland was likely well educated, considering his intimate knowledge of a myriad of topics, spanning from law to politics to religion. He probably was a cleric, although if he was married (like the narrator and dreamer, Will, in *Piers Plowman*), Langland likely served in minor orders. Alongside the unknown author of Sir Gawain and the Green Knight (known as the Pearl Poet), Langland is considered one of the greatest alliterative poets and a catalyst for the alliterative revival—an influx of works written in English alliterative verse in the mid- to late-fourteenth century. In his work, Langland explores some of the most pressing religious, political, and social issues of fourteenth-century English life.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Part of what makes *Piers Plowman* so important (and sometimes difficult to understand) is the way that it encapsulates and responds to nearly every element of life in mid- to late-fourteenth century England. The poem was penned in the years following the Great Plague of 1348-1349, during the reigns of Edward III and Richard II and in the midst of the Hundred Years' War, a century-long struggle over the French Throne between two British and French noble families. The first two versions of *Piers Plowman*, referred to as the A-text and B-text, were written just before the Peasant's Revolt of 1381, which was the peasantry's impassioned response to high taxes and, more generally, a revolt against the ceaseless suffering that British peasants endured as serfs dominated by noble masters. Leaders of the revolt used snippets of *Piers Plowman* as soundbites to motivate and empower the peasants. Although it is unknown whether or not Langland supported the revolt, the third version of the poem, the C-text, dated in the years following the revolt, removes a particularly ambiguous and impassioned event, where Piers Plowman gets into a heated argument with a priest and then tears up a pardon. This moment may have served as a particular kind of inspiration for the peasantry and its feelings about the clergy, which many felt were corrupt. *Piers Plowman* was used in similar ways in the sixteenth century, following the Protestant Reformation, when early Protestants used Langland's pointed criticisms of the clergy to further their own agendas.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

As an allegorical poem, *Piers Plowman* is similar to the late-fifteenth-century dramatized allegory, *Everyman*, which boasts of characters like Knowledge, Confession, Five-Wits, and Discretion. Both allegorical works also center on religious quests that are undertaken by everyman figures—Will in *Piers Plowman*, and the aptly named Everyman in *Everyman*. Similarly, *Piers Plowman* also bears resemblance to the 1961 children's novel, *The Phantom Tollbooth*, which also centers on a quest and contains allegorical characters, such as the princesses Reason and Rhyme, and places, such as the Kingdom of Wisdom. Langland's *Piers Plowman* and Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales* also contain several similarities. Though written in different forms—*Piers Plowman* in alliterative verse, and *The Canterbury Tales* in rhyming couplets and iambic pentameter—both works belong to a genre of writing called *estates satire*: each work seeks to illustrate and criticize the different estates (similar to social classes) that made up Medieval society. Thematically, both works are concerned with corruption in the Church, seen in similarities between the friars that populate *Piers Plowman* and the Friar in *The Canterbury Tales*.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** Piers Plowman
- **When Written:** Last third of the fourteenth century (three versions of the poem were penned sometime between 1365 and 1387)
- **Where Written:** England
- **When Published:** Last third of the fourteenth century
- **Literary Period:** Medieval
- **Genre:** Allegorical poem
- **Setting:** The western Midlands
- **Climax:** When Antichrist and his evil forces attack Unity, which represents the Christian community; Christ's Crucifixion
- **Antagonist:** The Devils (Lucifer, Satan, the Devil, and the Fiend) and Antichrist's followers
- **Point of View:** First person

EXTRA CREDIT

The More, The Merrier. *Piers Plowman* features over 100

characters, many of which only appear for a few lines. Also, some characters go by several names, like Piers Plowman, who is also called Peter and Perkin.

Popular Poetry. Despite its complexity, *Piers Plowman* was hugely popular in its day. The fact that there are more than fifty surviving manuscripts today, around seven centuries later, attests to that popularity.

PLOT SUMMARY

Piers Plowman opens with narrator and main character, Will, wandering the world as a hermit. One day, Will lies down by a stream and slips into a deep sleep, where he experiences an extraordinary dream.

In the dream, Will sees a "**field full of folk**"—a large swath of land bustling with people from all walks of life. The field is sandwiched between a beautiful **castle on a hill** and an ominous-looking **dungeon in a valley**. Will watches the people in the field as the king is chosen, and the peasantry, clergy, and knighthood are established.

Suddenly, Will finds himself watching a court procession of a thousand rats. The rats voice their bitter complaints about the local **cat**, who torments them daily. One rat suggests they tie a bell to the cat's collar, so the rats can at least know when the cat is approaching and can keep clear of it. When a bell is brought out, however, none of the rats are willing to risk their safety by being the one to tie it to the cat's collar. A single mouse commands the rats' attention and lectures them about trying to change the status quo. He reminds the rats that even if they managed to tie the bell to the cat's collar—or went so far as to kill the cat—another cat is certain to come along someday to torment them again. Plus, says the mouse, even if the cat were out of the picture, the rats wouldn't be able to effectively rule themselves.

The rats disappear, and Will finds himself once again observing the "field full of folk," where he meets a beautiful and gentle woman named Holy Church. She teaches Will a number of lessons, most of which center on Truth, a representation of God as Creator of mankind. Will desperately wants Holy Church to teach him how to save his soul, as well as how to recognize evil. Holy Church points him to a scene where several people are rushing around in preparation for a wedding. The bride-to-be is a magnificently dressed woman named Meed, who is draped in jewels, furs, and luxurious textiles—she also happens to be Holy Church's greatest enemy, as Meed is just as well-connected with the papacy and has just as much clout as Holy Church herself. Holy Church says that Meed was instructed by God to marry Truth, but instead, Meed is trying to marry a man named False, who only loves her for her riches. The ceremony is arranged by several of False's friends, including Favel (Greed), Simony, Civil, Liar, and Guile. During the ceremony, a man named Theology objects, demanding Meed and False go to court in London to ask Conscience if their marriage is just, or if Meed must marry Truth.

The group travels to London, where the King has already been warned about False's bad intentions behind marrying Meed. Knowing the King is after them, False and his companions flee, leaving Meed alone at court. The King asks Meed if she will take one of his knights, Conscience, for a husband. Wanting to evade punishment for almost marrying False, Meed readily agrees. Conscience, however, refuses. In front of both Meed and the King, Conscience lists all of the reasons why Meed is evil and dangerous. The King tries to make Conscience agree to marry Meed by force, but Conscience is adamant in his refusal, and says he won't even consider marrying Meed unless Reason says it's the right thing to do. The King tells Conscience to find Reason and bring him back to court so that the whole situation can be settled.

Reason arrives, but the King must first see to a legal case between two men named Peace and Wrong before dealing with Meed. In the legal battle, Peace accuses Wrong of three serious crimes. Wrong's lawyers, Wisdom and Wit, try to buy Wrong's way out of punishment. Now guided by both Conscience and Reason, the King knows that financial payment isn't punishment enough. Meed steps in and tries to bribe Peace into dropping the charges, which angers the King even more. As the King calls for a harsh punishment for Wrong, Will wakes up.

Will drifts back to sleep moments later and sees Reason standing before the people in the "field full of folk," urging them to repent for their sins. One by one, the Seven Deadly Sins make their confession to Repentance—Parnel Proud-Heart (pride) goes first, followed by Lecher, Envy, Wrath, Covetousness, Glutton, and Sloth. Repentance prays for the group's sins, spurring a crowd of a thousand people to change their ways. The crowd searches for Truth but has no idea where to look. They ask for directions from a knowledgeable-looking pilgrim, but much to their dismay, he's never even heard of Truth.

A modest peasant named Piers Plowman appears, claiming to be a dedicated follower of Truth, as well as a plowman on Truth's land. Piers offers the group directions to Truth, but his directions turn out to be complicated and detailed, making the people anxious about making the journey without a guide. Piers offers to accompany them on the journey with the caveat that his half-acre of land needs to be plowed before they leave. To make the work quick and efficient, Piers assigns tasks to the people based on their social class and sex. Although the system runs smoothly at first, eventually, some people try to fake injury or illness to get out of working—leading Piers no choice but to call upon Hunger, who inflicts the fakers with starvation until they begin to work out of necessity. As Piers suspects, once Hunger departs, many of the people go back to lazing. Truth

sends down a pardon to Piers, which states that those who help Piers work will be able to pass through purgatory quickly. There is no mention of those who can work but refuse to, but those who genuinely cannot work are fully excused. A priest asks Piers for the opportunity to translate the pardon out loud from Latin to English, as is part of his duties, and Piers complies. Upon reading the pardon for himself, the priest is surprised to only see two lines, and declares that it is not a pardon whatsoever. Angry, Piers rips the pardon in two and begins to argue with the priest, which startles Will awake.

Will wanders the world during the summer, thinking about how penance and pardons are helpful for salvation, but that it is better for a Christian to avoid sin and Do-Well. One day, he comes across two friars and tries to ask them where he can find Do-Well, but the friars are arrogant and claim that Do-Well resides permanently with them at their convent. Will politely excuses himself, knowing he will learn more by continuing his quest than by listening to the friars. Will journeys through the woods and pauses to rest, eventually slipping into another dream.

In the dream, a man named Thought teaches Will about the nature of Do-Well, along with two other Christian values, Do-Better and Do-Best. He says Do-Well engages in honest labor, Do-Better helps others, and Do-Best rebukes sinners. Will is still confused about the concept of Do-Well, Do-Better, and Do-Best, so Thought recommends he speak with a man named Wit.

Wit turns out to be a thin, serious man. He explains the values as being people who reside in the heart of a Christian. Do-Well and Do-Better attend to the Soul (whom Wit refers to as a beautiful lady named Anima), while Do-Best offers guidance. The whole group is protected by a knight named Sir Inwit and his five sons, who are the five senses. Wit introduces Will to his wife, Study, who is openly suspicious of Will, as she thinks Will wants to learn for all the wrong reasons. Study gives her own explanation of Do-Well, which proves to be so hard to follow, that even her own husband feels confused. Study sends Will to her cousin Clergy, and his wife, Scripture, who can explain possibly explain Do-Well in a way that Will can understand.

As Will listens to Clergy and Scripture's explanations of Do-Well, Do-Better, and Do-Best, he falls into a dream-within-a-dream, where he is tempted by a woman named Fortune and her two maids. The women tempt Will into wasting several years of his life chasing pleasure. However, as Will grows old, Fortune and her companions abandon him, and Will falls into poverty. During this time, Will meets the Roman Emperor, Trajan, who was a non-Christian saved from the pits of Hell by Saint Gregory. Trajan explains to Will the value of living a moral, loving life—for these qualities are what saved Trajan from Hell and allowed him to go to Heaven, even though he wasn't a Christian during his lifetime.

Will awakens from his dream-within-a-dream to a man named Imaginative, who answers Will's questions about Trajan—that is, how a person who hasn't been baptized can go to Heaven. Cutting their discussion short, Imaginative disappears, and Will wakes up.

Will spends several years wandering as a hermit, ruminating over his strange dreams. One day, Will slips into yet another strange dream, where he is invited to a dinner party with Conscience, Clergy, Patience, and Scripture, as well as a Master of Divinity. At the feast, the Master gluttonously stuffs himself with rich, fattening foods between slurps of fine wine. Meanwhile, Patience and Will—who are seated at the very edge of the feast at a side table of their own—are only given simple, sour food. Will asks the Master for his explanation of Do-Well, Do-Better, and Do-Best, which turn out to all be centered on obeying the clergy and teaching other people. The mood gets tense, as Will openly criticizes the Master for his gluttonous behavior at the feast. To change the subject, Conscience asks Patience about his understanding of Do-Well. Patience admits his uncertainty, explaining that his confusion stems from hearing Piers Plowman claim that the only thing worth pursuing and studying is love. Patience shares a teaching he learned from someone named Love, who taught him to love all people—including one's enemies—through words and good works. The Master of Divinity calls Patience a liar, claiming that all poor pilgrims are liars. Standing up for Patience, Conscience declares that he has decided to become a pilgrim himself and will travel the world with Patience in order to learn and have new experiences. Both Clergy and the Master are aghast—Clergy even offers to fetch his Bible to teach Conscience all the things Patience couldn't possibly know—but Conscience is adamant.

Soon after departing on their journey, Conscience, Patience, and Will come across a man named Hawkin. Immediately, Will notices that **Hawkin's coat** is disgusting and encrusted with stains. Hawkin explains that his coat is Christendom and the stains are his own frequent sins. Although he's tried to wash the coat, it doesn't stay clean for more than a few moments before it gets splattered with stains again. Patience patiently instructs Hawkin to use the combination of contrition, Do-Well, Do-Better, and Do-Best to launder the coat effectively. According to Patience, contrition will scrape the scum off the coat, Do-Well will wash it, Do-Better will scrub it, and Do-Best will ensure the coat always stays clean. Hawkin begins to weep, overwhelmed by guilt for his past sins, and Will wakes up.

In his waking life, Will ruminates on his dreams so much, that other people begin labeling him as a lunatic. Reason takes pity on Will, allowing him to fall back to sleep and experience another dream. In the dream, Will meets a man named Anima, who introduces himself by several other names as well. Anima teaches Will that society is like a **tree** whose roots—the priesthood—are rotten, inflicting the rest of the tree with sickness as well. Anima also teaches Will about

Charity—someone who, whether he is clothed in fine furs or a modest frock, will instantly give his clothing away to anyone who needs it. Will longs to meet Charity, for he's never truly seen charity play out in his own life. Once again drawing upon the analogy of a tree, Anima says that charity is the fruit of the tree of Patience, tended to by Piers Plowman. At the sound of Piers Plowman's name, Will faints, and enters a dream-within-a-dream.

In this dream, Piers Plowman appears and explains to Will that the tree of Patience is under attack by evil forces—namely, Covetousness, the flesh, and the Devil. Piers uses **three wooden poles** to beat the evil forces when they try to snatch any of the fruit that has fallen from the tree. A woman named Mary appears, declaring that Jesus will joust an evil force called the Fiend for the fallen fruits. Instantly, Will witnesses the events leading up to the Crucifixion rapidly unfold, including the Last Supper, Judas' betrayal of Jesus, and Jesus' Crucifixion.

Will awakens from his dream-within-a-dream and meets a man named Faith (Abraham), who is on the road to Jerusalem in search of a knight named Jesus. Faith tells Will the story of when God tested his devotion by telling him to kill his son Isaac. He also explains to Will that he is carrying a multitude of souls in his coat, to be saved by Jesus. They come across another man on the road, who introduces himself as *Spes*, or Hope (Moses). Hope explains that he is in search of a knight named Jesus who will seal the commandment that God gave to Hope on Mount Sinai. The men also see a Samaritan riding along, also headed to Jerusalem. Suddenly, all of the men notice a wounded man on the side of the road, who has been brutally attacked by thieves and left to die. Faith and Hope flee at the gruesome sight, but the Samaritan immediately jumps off his horse to help the man and tend to his wounds. The Samaritan hoists the wounded man up onto his horse, and they travel for seven miles to the nearest inn, where the Samaritan pays the innkeeper to take care of the wounded man. Will, following close behind, is curious about the Samaritan's empathy toward the wounded man. Will catches up to the Samaritan and tells him that his own companions, Faith and Hope, fled. Samaritan explains that this is to be expected, as the wounded man was in such critical condition, that neither Faith nor Hope could save him. The wounded man's only hope for survival is Jesus. After a short discussion, the Samaritan says he must depart, and Will awakens.

Once again, Will travels the world as a hermit. On Palm Sunday, he pauses to rest and experiences another dream. In his dream, he sees Jesus' entry into Jerusalem, standing barefoot on the back of a mule, as the crowd sings joyful songs. Will is startled to see that Jesus looks a lot like the Samaritan and Piers Plowman. Will calls out to Faith for an explanation, and Faith immediately appears. Faith explains that as Mary declared earlier, Jesus has come to Jerusalem to joust against the Fiend for the fruit of Piers Plowman. Suddenly, Will sees the crowd turn sour, as their joyful songs turn to bitter cries of "*Crucifige!*" In a flurry, the Crucifixion unfolds as Jesus is nailed to the cross and takes his final breath.

Jesus descends into Hell, and Will follows. Will notices four beautiful sisters, Mercy, Truth, Righteousness, and Peace, arguing with one another about the events of the Crucifixion. Mercy and Peace are joyful, declaring that Christ's death means that the prophets and patriarchs in Hell will be released, and that humankind will be saved. Righteousness and Truth are steadfast in their belief that Hell is permanent—even the prophets and patriarchs are eternally damned. The sisters are interrupted by a bright light that commands the devils to open Hell's gates. Several devils, including Lucifer, Satan, the Fiend, and Goblin, bicker nervously with one another, wondering if Jesus really can enter Hell and steal away some of its souls. Their anxieties come true, as eventually, the gates break open, and Christ rescues all of the worthy souls, including the prophets and the patriarchs. Christ explains that because of Satan's trick—appearing to Eve as a serpent and manipulating her and Adam into eating the forbidden fruit—Christ himself had to be a trickster, becoming human and allowing himself to be killed in order to descend to Hell and save those whom God loves. The four sisters celebrate, and begin to play music, which awakens Will.

Will prepares his family for Easter Mass and departs for church. Not long into the service, however, Will falls asleep again. This time, Will is faced with an image of Piers Plowman coated in blood and carrying Christ's Cross. Startled and confused, Will calls out to Conscience to ask if the man before him is Jesus or Piers Plowman. Conscience affirms that the man is Jesus, although he is outfitted in Piers' coat of arms. Conscience explains the way Jesus came to Do-Well, Do-Better, and Do-Best through his miracles, as well as how Jesus granted Piers Plowman power to oversee the church.

Will witnesses Grace, God's messenger, gifting Piers Plowman with **four types of seeds** to be plowed, along with **four oxen**, **four horses**, and **two harrows**. Among the common people, Grace distributes different talents so that the people can fight off idleness and the forces of Antichrist. Grace instructs Piers Plowman and Conscience to build a barn called Unity, which will house all of the grain. Once the barn is built, Piers Plowman and Grace depart to plow the fields all over the world. Pride sees that Unity is vulnerable and sends his evil followers to attack Conscience and the Christian community. Conscience cries for the Christians to take refuge in Unity—which becomes the Holy Church. Although most people obey Conscience, a handful of people refuse to listen and abandon Unity. Will wakes up and quickly writes down the contents of his dream.

Will continues to wander the world but feels somber and doesn't know where to find his next meal. Still in his waking life, Will meets a man named Need. The man explains to Will why being needy is a good thing, ultimately trying to tempt Will into

begging so that he never has to work. After Need departs, Will drifts asleep once more.

In his last dream, Will sees Antichrist and his followers attacking Unity. The Christians cry out to Kind to help them, so Kind sends Death, Old Age, and different ailments. Chaos ensues, and at one point, Will is hit on the head by Old Age, immediately making him bald, toothless, sick, and impotent. Death draws dangerously close to Will, but Will cries for Kind to keep him safe. Kind instructs Will to take refuge in Unity and learn to love—if he loves other people genuinely, he will always be provided for.

The forces of evil continue to attack, and Hypocrisy proves to be particularly deadly, seriously injuring many of the people in Unity. Conscience sends for a doctor to heal the sick and injured, but the people dislike the doctor because he forces them to do penance and the ointment he applies to their wounds stings greatly. The people ask for a doctor with a gentler touch, and someone suggests Friar Flatterer. Conscience reluctantly agrees, as he knows that the doctor they really need is Piers Plowman—not a friar.

Although Friar Flatterer is almost denied entry to Unity by Peace, Courteous Speech vouches for the friar and lets him in. Conscience begs the friar to heal the sick and the wounded, starting with his cousin, Contrition. Friar Flatterer says he is glad to help, as long as he is paid in silver. He doles out a drugged beverage to the people, which puts everyone in an apathetic daze that makes them all indifferent to sin and punishment.

Distraught that the Christian community has gone from bad to worse, Conscience declares that he will once again become a pilgrim and vows to search the world for Piers Plowman—the only person who can save Unity and truly heal the people. As Conscience cries out for Grace, Will wakes up.

CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Will – Will is the poem's protagonist, narrator, and dreamer. During his waking life, Will wanders the world like a hermit. During his dreaming life, Will learns from a series of allegorical teachers, such as Conscience, Patience, and Piers Plowman. Will embarks on several quests, including the search for Truth and the search for the Christian values of Do-Well, Do-Better, and Do-Best. Will is deeply concerned with salvation, and most of the poem centers on one of Will's very first questions to his first allegorical teacher, Holy Church: "How…may [I] save my soul?" Will is full of questions, making him an eager student, but his naivety makes him an annoyance to his less patient teachers, like Dame Study. Will himself is allegorical as well—although Will is a common name, will also means one's mental capacity, as in one's willpower. And so Will comes to stand for every person's willpower. Ultimately, although Will is a devout follower of Christ, he still falls into sin and human corruption at times, such as when he gives into Fortune.

Piers Plowman – Piers Plowman is a humble peasant who is a follower of Truth, a husband to Dame-Work-When-It's-Time-To, and a father to Do-Just-So-Or-Your-Dame-Will-Beat-You and Suffer-Your-Sovereigns-To-Have-Their-Will-Condemn-Them-Not-For-If-You-Do-You'll-Pay-A-Dear-Price-Let-God-Have-His-Way-With-All-Things-For-So-His-Word-Teaches. Piers tries to show society how to follow Truth through honest, hard labor, but he frequently grows discouraged by the laziness and disobedience that crops up among the people. Piers Plowman also briefly serves as a teacher to Will, teaching him about the **tree** of Patience (the Christian community) and the **three wooden poles** (the Trinity) that he uses to defend the tree from the Devil. Eventually, Piers Plowman comes to represent Christ, underscoring the humble, human side of Jesus.

Conscience – Conscience is first introduced as the knight whom the King wants Meed to marry. Later, Conscience becomes one of Will's most important and most enduring teachers, appearing in the majority of Will's dreams. Conscience proves himself a friend to Patience and Reason, the target of Pride and Antichrist, and a faithful follower of Piers Plowman. Although he is initially a teacher figure advising Will on his quests, Conscience eventually becomes the pilgrim, vowing to wander the world until he finds Piers Plowman—the only person who can save the Christian community.

Christ / Jesus – Christ is the Son of God, and one part of the Trinity (alongside God the Father and Holy Ghost). Christ is the subject, directly or indirectly, of all of Will's dreams, as well as all of his teachers' lessons. Ultimately, Christ saves mankind by becoming human and dying on the cross. Doing so allows him to descend to Hell and rescue all of the worthy souls, as well as grant salvation to those who have faith in him. Throughout the poem, Christ is loosely represented by the Samaritan, and strongly represented by Piers Plowman.

Friar Flatterer – Friar Flatterer is the friar who is called into Unity to heal those whom Hypocrisy and other evil forces wounded. Although Peace and Conscience are wary of him, Courteous Speech welcomes him warmly. Friar Flatterer turns out to be corrupt, as his method for healing the Christians is giving them a drugged potion that makes them careless about sin and consequence. Friar Flatterer is the last straw for Conscience, as the friar's drugged drink is what spurs Conscience to abandon Unity in search of Piers Plowman.

Truth – Truth is one of the two representations of God (the other being Kind). Truth is first introduced by Holy Church and is portrayed as a Creator God who lives in the **castle on the hill**. However, although Truth is a representation of God, he isn't exactly God—made clear by the fact that Truth has been

instructed by God to marry Meed (a marriage that doesn't pan out). Later, in the Harrowing of Hell, Truth is one of the four daughters of God. Her sisters are Mercy, Righteousness, and Peace.

Samaritan – The Samaritan is one of the biblical characters that Will meets on the road to Jerusalem. The Samaritan immediately establishes himself as being empathetic. When Will and his new acquaintances, Faith and Hope, see a wounded man lying limp on the side of the road, Faith and Hope flee. The Samaritan, however, drops everything to help the wounded man. Later, when Will watches Jesus ride into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday, he notices that Jesus bears resemblance to the Samaritan.

King – The King oversees the court case of Peace vs. Wrong and also deals with Lady Meed's misbehavior. The King doesn't abuse his power—he trusts Conscience and Reason's input and is committed to keeping them as his advisors for his entire reign. The King represents an ideal ruler who makes thoughtful decisions based on Christian values.

Meed – Meed is False's fiancée and Holy Church's enemy. Although she has been instructed by God to marry Truth (due to the fact that her mother, Amends, is a righteous woman), she disobeys. The King tries to marry her off to Conscience, but to no avail. Meed is a lavishly dressed woman who tries to endear herself to everyone through her extravagant gifts—something Conscience pegs as sinful.

Simony – Simony is a shady character who conducts False and Meed's wedding ceremony with help from Civil. Later, the extent of his evil is realized when he attacks Unity with Fortune, Lechery, and Covetousness and persuades the pope to appoint Antichrist's allies as bishops. In practice, the term "simony" refers to the practice of selling and purchasing Church functions, sacraments, or offices (for example, pardons). Such practices were common, but were also seen by many as profoundly corrupt and a stain upon the Church.

Wrong – Wrong is introduced by Holy Church as being the leader and founder of the **dungeon in the valley**, Hell, which thus conflates him with Lucifer. Later, Wrong is the criminal in the legal case of Peace vs. Wrong, where he is charged with rape, theft, and murder. Wrong is ultimately condemned by Reason and the King and is subjected to harsh punishment.

Lecher – Lecher is one of the Seven Deadly Sins who confesses to Repentance. His confession is the shortest of the seven, comprised of four lines. Even though lechery means lust, Lecher asks for mercy and promises to only drink when he eats duck and only eat once on Saturdays. Lecher's promise is incongruent with his actual sin, suggesting that he has no actual intentions of reeling in his lust.

Covetousness – Covetousness, also called Sir Harvey, is a naïve man who knows so little about Christianity, he doesn't even know what restitution means—even though his title (Sir) denotes status, either in the clergy or the nobility. After he confesses to Repentance, however, Covetousness is overwhelmed by crippling guilt for his sins—this is one of the poem's many examples of contrition, or genuine remorse for one's wrongdoings.

Grace – Grace is God's messenger, as well as the gatekeeper at Truth's palace. Grace reveals himself to be extremely generous, as he distributes the gifts and talents to the common people to prepare them for an attack by Antichrist and gives Piers Plowman the considerable gift of **four oxen**, **four horses**, **two harrows**, and **four types of seeds**.

Hunger – Hunger is a threatening (albeit, not evil) man who Piers Plowman calls upon to make those who are faking injury to start working again. Hunger is a natural consequence that comes about because of the fakers' refusal to work. Although Hunger's presence spurs the fakers to resume work, he has a negative impact on all people in society—including those who worked dutifully the whole time.

Anima – Anima, who represents the soul, initially is a beautiful woman who resides in a castle made of the four elements, which represents the human body. She lives with a duke named Do-Well, his daughter named Do-Better, and a bishop's peer named "Do-Best." Anima is guarded by the five senses—the five sons of a knight named Sir Inwit. Later in the poem, Anima is male and is the last teacher Will meets. Anima's teachings primarily focus on charity.

Knight – The knight signifies the nobility in Piers Plowman's ideal (but short-lived) feudal society. Although he is supposed to keep order and protect the people, he is too meek to do so, underscoring the way that feudal society can only work properly when all of the estates (social classes) work together.

Parnel Proud-Heart – Parnel Proud-Heart is the woman who represents pride at the confession of the Seven Deadly Sins. Her brief but emotional confession is the first of the seven confessions. Although Parnel's sin is pride, she remains distinct from the character named Pride who attacks Unity with Antichrist and other evil forces.

Trajan – Trajan is the ex-Roman Emperor who lived his life as a non-Christian but was saved from Hell by Saint Gregory the Great. Trajan was ultimately allowed to reside in the lowest part of Heaven—an event covered by Anima in his teachings to Will. Trajan himself becomes one of Will's teachers in a dream-within-a-dream, where his teachings mainly focus on the power of love.

Master of Divinity – The Master of Divinity is one of the guests at Patience's feast, along with Clergy, Scripture, Conscience, and Will. The Master is unabashedly gluttonous, as he stuffs himself with rich dishes, leaving only simple, sour foods for the others. Will immediately dislikes the Master and even criticizes him to his face.

Hawkin – Hawkin, also called *Activa Vita* (Active Life), is one of

the characters that Will meets while traveling as a pilgrim with Patience and Conscience. **Hawkin's coat** is badly stained, and he complains to his new acquaintances that no matter how hard he tries, he can't keep the coat clean. Once he explains that his coat is Christendom and the stains are his sins (long-windedly detailing every single one of his sins), Patience provides him with a better method for laundering the coat—contrition (guilt for sin) and the sacrament of penance.

Faith – Faith is the biblical figure Abraham, whom Will meets while on the road to Jerusalem. He explains to Will that he is seeking Jesus, who can help the multitude of souls that he carries in his coat, against his chest. Faith travels a short while with Will and Hope but flees when the group comes across a wounded man on the side of the road.

Hope – Hope is Moses, the biblical figure who received the ten commandments from God on Mount Sinai. He explains to Will that he is traveling to Jerusalem to find a knight named Jesus who can seal the commandments from God. Hope travels for a short while with Faith and Will before fleeing nervously at the sight of a wounded man on the side of the road.

Peace – Peace is one of the four daughters of God, alongside her sisters, Mercy, Righteousness, and Truth. Peace is hopeful for the fate of mankind, echoing her sister Mercy's belief that Christ's death means that humanity will be saved, and the prophets and patriarchs will be rescued from Hell. At the end of the poem, Peace is the gatekeeper of Unity, and is clearly suspicious of Friar Flatterer.

Lucifer – Lucifer is one of the main devils in Hell, as he was the heavenly being who pridefully refused to obey God and manipulated other heavenly beings into following him rather than Christ. For his sinfulness, Lucifer and his followers were thrown out of Heaven and sent to the pits of Hell. Although Lucifer is usually distinct from the other devils in the poem, his name is occasionally used interchangeably with that of Satan.

Satan – Satan is one of the devils in Hell who was cast out of Heaven alongside Lucifer, the Fiend, Goblin, and thousands of other heavenly beings who became devils. Throughout the course of the poem, Satan is sometimes distinct from the other devils (such as in the Harrowing of Hell, when he clearly bickers with the others). Other times, however, Satan's name is used interchangeably with that of Lucifer.

Devil – The Devil is one of the devils in Hell, thrown out of Heaven for following the prideful Lucifer who refused to obey God. The Devil's name is often used interchangeably with the Fiend and sometimes seems to refer to a more general chief devil figure, who may be Lucifer and Satan wrapped up into one.

Patience One of the seven sisters guarding the gates of the **castle on the hill** in the **field of folk**, an allegorical figure representing one of the attributes that a Christian should cultivate. Patience attends the dinner with Will and the Master of Divinity, and, as might be expected, counsels patience when Will loses his temper with the corrupt and hypocritical Master of Divinity. Patience also explains to Hawkin the right (and Christian) way to truly clean **Hawkin's coat** that's stained with sin.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Kind – Kind is one of the two main representations of God, along with Truth. He is the representation of God that the Christian community calls out to when Unity is under attack, leading Kind to send down Death and Old Age.

God – Although God never actually appears in the poem, he is referred to often. He is represented by two characters, Kind and Truth. He is both one part and all three parts of the Trinity (God the Father, Jesus, and Holy Ghost).

Do-Well – Do-Well is both a person *and* a value that Christians should try to cultivate. Do-Well is described in various ways by Will's many teachers. However, the common thread is that Do-Well lives an active life and is committed to hard, honest labor.

Do-Best – Like Do-Well, Do-Best takes on several definitions. However, Do-Best tends to be a person (and a value) who leads a morally upright existence and is committed to helping other people.

Do-Better – Similar to Do-Well and Do-Best, Do-Better is both a person and a value and is described in many different ways by Will's teachers. Do-Better tends to be a high-up Church official—perhaps a pope—who reprimands sinners.

Holy Church – Holy Church is the beautiful, gentle woman who descends from the **castle on the hill** to teach Will about Truth, one of the representations of God. Holy Church represents the Church in its purest form, unstained by human corruption.

False – False is Meed's fiancé and is close companions with Favel, Dread, Guile, and Liar. He is open about wanting to marry Meed only for her money.

Favel – Favel is a close friend of False, Liar, Dread, and Guile. Representing greed, Favel is quick to use bribery to get what he wants (in this case, bringing to completing the marriage of Meed and False).

Guile – Guile is companions with False, Favel, Dread, and Liar. Like Favel, Guile often resorts to bribery. He later reveals himself to be a follower of Antichrist.

Dread – Dread is a friend of False, Favel, Liar, and Guile who overhears King proclaiming to punish False and his followers, and consequently warns the evil group.

Liar – Liar is a friend of False, Favel, Dread, and Guile. He is quick, sneaky, and evades punishment.

Clergy – Clergy is Scripture's wife, Dame Study's cousin, and one of Will's many teachers. Clergy is also one of the dinner guests at Patience's feast, along with Conscience and a Master of Divinity. Clergy is arrogant, claiming to know more than

Patience possibly can.

Civil – Civil and his companion, Simony, are the two underhanded men who conduct Meed's wedding ceremony.

Wisdom – Wisdom serves as Wrong's lawyer (along with Wit) in the case of Peace vs. Wrong.

Wit – Initially, Wit acts as one of Wrong's lawyers (along with Wisdom) in the case of Peace vs. Wrong. Conscience and the King are suspicious of Wit, as he is known for being close with covetousness. Later, however, Wit is one of Will's teachers, along with his wife, Dame Study.

Lewte – Lewte is one of Will's teachers and is a close companion of Holy Church. Lewte's teachings are brief, mainly centering on the value of exposing corruption in the Church.

Repentance – Repentance builds on Reason's sermon by overseeing the confessions of the Seven Deadly Sins and helping them repent.

Envy – Envy, one of the Seven Deadly Sins, gives a lengthy confession to Repentance, who teaches him about contrition—genuine guilt for sin. Envy is so overridden by jealousy that his face is sallow and his lips bleed from biting them in anger.

Wrath – Wrath is a friar with nasty gossiping tendencies, which he relates almost gleefully to Repentance. Although Repentance commands Wrath to repent, Wrath never voices guilt for his sins, nor does he vow to change his ways.

Glutton – Glutton is one of the Seven Deadly Sins who confesses to Repentance. Glutton's primary problem is overindulgence in alcohol—something he even puts before going to Mass. He vows to change his gluttonous ways by fasting until his aunt, Abstinence, lets him eat and drink again.

Sloth – One of the Seven Deadly Sins, Sloth is a man of status who has been reduced to a beggar because of his idleness and lethargy. During his confession to Repentance, Sloth vows to attend Mass every day for the next seven years.

Priest – The Priest asks Piers Plowman to read aloud the pardon from Truth. Upon seeing the pardon's brevity (it's only two lines long), the Priest pompously declares that it's not a real pardon. His words anger Piers Plowman so much that Piers rips the pardon in two.

Thought – One of Will's many allegorical teachers, Thought is a large man who teaches Will about Do-Well, Do-Better, and Do-Best. He later travels with Will for a short while and acts as a mediator between Will and Wit.

Dame Study – Dame Study is Wit's wife, Scripture and Clergy's cousin, and one of Will's teachers. Dame Study is a no-nonsense woman, but her explanation of Do-Well, Do-Better, and Do-Best is so complex and confusing, that it even leaves her own husband speechless.

Imaginative – Imaginative is one of Will's many teachers. His discussion with Will focuses on whether or not non-Christians can achieve salvation—a lesson that references one of Will's other teachers, Roman Emperor Trajan.

Scripture – Scripture is Clergy's wife, Dame Study's cousin, and one of Will's many teachers. Her complicated teachings primarily rest on the dangers of amassing riches.

Reason – Reason is a trusted companion of Conscience and later an advisor of the King.

Sir Inwit – Sir Inwit is the knight who protects Anima with help from his five sons. His sons, who align with each of the five senses, are See-Well, Say-Well, Hear-Well, Work-Well-With-Your-Hands, and Go-Well.

Fortune – Fortune is an evil woman who, along with her maids, Concupiscentia-Carnis and Covetousness-of-Eyes, tempts Will into pursuing fleshly pleasures for several years. She proves herself to be flighty and untrustworthy, abandoning Will when he needs her the most.

Concupiscentia-Carnis – Concupiscentia-Carnis, or Lust of the Flesh, is one of Fortune's maids. She helps Fortune lead Will astray by tempting him with fleshly pleasures.

Covetousness-of-Eyes – Covetousness-of-Eyes is one of Fortune's maids. She tempts Will into pursuing sinful, earthly pleasures for several years of his life.

Old Age – Old Age is an ambivalent man, as he looks out for Will—warning Will to resist the temptation of Fortune and her maids—but later physically hits Will, rendering him bald, toothless, sickly, and impotent.

Righteousness – Righteousness is one of the four daughters of God, alongside her sisters, Peace, Mercy, and Truth. Like Truth, Righteousness is pragmatic and initially believes that Hell is a place of permanent damnation, even for the important biblical figures who predated Jesus.

Mercy – Mercy is one of the four daughters of God, alongside her sisters, Peace, Righteousness, and Truth. She and Peace are joyful and optimistic, believing that Christ's crucifixion will not only save the prophets and patriarchs in Hell but will also save mankind.

Fiend – The Fiend is one of the many devils in Hell who were cast out of Heaven for following Lucifer. The Fiend is sometimes referred to as the Devil, but sometimes those two figures act as different entities.

Antichrist – Antichrist is the leader of the evil forces that attack Unity, such as Fortune, Guile, Simony, and many friars. God's messenger, Grace, explains to the Christian community that Antichrist's goal is to destroy Conscience and the Church, appointing Pride as the Pope with Covetousness and Unkindness as cardinals.

Contrition – Contrition is Conscience's cousin who is wounded by Hypocrisy, then drugged by Friar Flatterer so that he no

longer feels remorse for sin.

Need – Need is a man who appears in Will's waking life and in one of his dreams. Need proves himself to be conniving, as he tries to tempt Will into living his whole life as a beggar and pretending to be needy so that he never has to work hard.

Death – Like Old Age, Death is an ambivalent force. He is originally sent down by Kind (one of the representations of god) to protect the Christian community, but his very presence causes chaos.

Pride – Pride is one of the leaders of the evil forces that attack Unity. He is one of Antichrist's followers and will be named Pope if Antichrist succeeds in destroying Conscience.

Hypocrisy – Hypocrisy is one of the forces of evil that attacks Unity. He manages to do the most widespread damage, wounding several people in the Christian community—an event that leads to Friar Flatterer's admission into Unity, and the Christian community's further destruction.

Presumption – Presumption is Pride's sergeant-at-arms, who goes to Unity with Spoil-Love to announce to the Christian community that they are under attack.

Spoil-Love – Spoil-Love is Pride's spy, who visits Unity with Pride's sergeant-at-arms, Presumption, to tell the Christian community that they are under attack.

Courteous Speech – Courteous Speech is the person who lets Friar Flatterer into Unity, despite protests from Peace.

Judas – Judas is Jesus' disciple who betrays Jesus by turning him into the authorities in exchange for money.

Mary – Mary is the mother of Jesus. She announces to Will and Piers Plowman that Jesus will joust in Jerusalem against the Fiend to win back Piers' stolen fruit.

Pontius Pilate – Pontius Pilate is the Roman Governor who gives in to the angry crowd and allows Jesus to be crucified.

Longeus – Longeus is the blind knight who spears Jesus after he dies on the Cross. After doing so, he is overcome by remorse and cries out to Jesus for forgiveness.

Pilgrim – The pilgrim is the palmer (professional pilgrim) from whom society asks for directions to Truth. The pilgrim isn't of real spiritual help, as he is preoccupied with earthly shrines.

Kind Wit – Kind Wit represents common sense. With help from an angel, he establishes laws for each of the three estates (social classes) to abide by.

Theology – Theology is the man who objects to Meed and False's wedding, demanding they ask Conscience before a court of law if the marriage is allowed.

Love – Love is another name for Christ.

Mouse – The pragmatic mouse speaks up at the rats' court procession and urges them to let go of their plan to tie a bell around the cat's neck and instead accept the status quo.

Pardoner – The pardoner is the Church official who pretends to be a priest in order to cheat peasants out of their valuables in exchange for absolution from sin.

Dame-Work-When-It's-Time-To – Piers Plowman's wife

Do-Just-So-Or-Your-Dame-Will-Beat-You – The daughter of Piers Plowman and Dame-Work-When-It's-Time-To.

Suffer-Your-Sovereigns-To-Have-Their-Will-Condemn-Them-Not-For-If-You-Do-You'll-Pay-A-Dear-Price-Let-God-Have-His-Way-With-All-Things-For-So-His-Word-Teaches – The son of Piers Plowman and Dame-Work-When-It's-Time-To.

Cato – Reason's servant, alongside Tom-True-Tongue-Tell-Me-No-Tales-Nor-Lies-To-Laugh-At-For-I-Loved-Them-Never.

Tom-True-Tongue-Tell-Me-No-Tales-Nor-Lies-To-Laugh-At-For-I-Loved-Them-Never – One of Reason's servants, alongside Cato.

Free Will An allegorical figure that stands for individuals' ability to make their own decisions. Free will helps to beat off the Devil using one of the **three wooden poles**.

Book An allegorical figure with "two broad eyes," who stands for the two halves of the Bible: the Old Testament and the New Testament.

Goblin One of the devils of hell.

Unkindness One of the cardinals of Antichrist.

THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.

LOVE

Piers Plowman follows the protagonist, Will, through a series of eight complex dream visions (plus two additional dreams within dreams), where he learns from a wide variety of allegorical figures. With Will's teachers as a mouthpiece, the poem asserts that the life of a Christian must revolve around love, just as Christianity itself does. However, such love must extend beyond loving God to loving others, especially one's enemies. *Piers Plowman* asserts that although such widespread love sounds difficult, everyone is capable of giving love.

Christianity rests on a foundation of love. Wit's wife, Dame Study, affirms that Theology (the study of God) is laced with love. She says that since Theology "…allows so much to Love, I love it the better, / For wherever Love is leader, there's no lack of grace." Love makes Theology worth exploring, since without this love, Theology "would be a lame study." Earlier in the poem,

love is conflated with Christ himself. Holy Church explains to Will, "Love is leader of the Lord's people in Heaven." Love, meaning Christ, is the "street that goes straight to Heaven." In this way, love is both the way to Christ and Christ himself. Holy Church also defines God in terms of love, referring to him as "*Deus caritas*," meaning God is love. She says that God declares Truth, which is a "love-gift." Throughout the poem, Truth is one of the two representations of God (alongside Kind). Thus, the Holy Church means that God and his message are imbued with love. Later in the text, during the Harrowing of Hell, Christ rescues "those that our Lord loved," showing that Christianity centers on a reciprocal love between God and his people.

Because love in *Piers Plowman* is a fundamental part of Christianity, Christians are called to love other people—including their enemies. Scripture, Clergy's wife, teaches Will that loving God and loving others is an essential part of receiving salvation: "…love your God as dearest love of all, / And then all Christian creatures… / And thus it behooves him to love that hopes to be saved." Building on Scripture's teaching, the Samaritan, a biblical figure from the Gospel of Luke, teaches Will that he must love his fellow Christians as much as he loves himself. However, the poem points out that Christians cannot be selective with who they love. Christians are called to love people from all walks of life, as represented by the "field full of folk" from the Prologue. Kind, one of the two representations of God, tells Will that the most important thing to do during one's lifetime is to learn to love, for "If you love folk faithfully," God will always provide for you. Likewise, Roman Emperor Trajan, whom Will meets in a dream-within-a-dream, instructs Will to love "…folk of all factions, whether friends or enemies." Loving people from all walks of life means that Christians must also love their enemies and those who frustrate them. When Piers Plowman is angered by the people who refuse to work, he calls upon Hunger for help. Piers tells Hunger, "…they're my blood brothers, for God bought us all. / Truth taught me once to love them every one." Piers knows that he is called by God (Truth) to love all people, even when he feels frustrated. Hunger affirms that such non-discriminatory love is what "the law of Kind [i.e. God] directs." Likewise, Patience teaches Will to love "Your enemy in every way even as you love yourself." Patience's teaching highlights that loving one's enemy is done "for the Lord of Heaven's sake," meaning that loving one's enemies is part of loving God.

Even though constantly showering others with love sounds difficult, *Piers Plowman* affirms that everyone is capable of giving love. The Samaritan, a biblical figure from the Gospel of Luke, explains to Will that "no one is so sick or so much a wretch / That he may not love if he likes… / And love them like himself, and lead a better life." Love is possible even for those who are physically ill or have hardened hearts. Even Roman Emperor Trajan, a non-Christian, lived his life with such love and upright moral character that he was saved from Hell and allowed to dwell in the lowest part of Heaven.

Piers Plowman asserts that just as Christianity centers on love, so should the life of a Christian. Much of *Piers Plowman* is marked by sharp, often-overt criticisms of the Church, but the emphasis on love is a reminder that the poem is not critical of Christianity itself but the way that the Church has given into human corruption. In the text, William Langland urges his readers to recognize that Christianity hinges on love and to carry over this love into their daily lives. Langland emphasizes what is peppered throughout both the Old Testament and the New Testament: love God, love your neighbor, and love your enemies. *Piers Plowman* provides particular emphasis on the latter—love your enemies—suggesting that for Langland, loving one's enemies could be an antidote for the tumultuous political, religious, and social climate of the late fourteenth century.

CORRUPTION

Piers Plowman uses a series of dream visions, which are allegorical stories that unfold in a character's dreams, to illustrate the corruption that William Langland sees as having poisoned religious, political, and social life in fourteenth-century England. *Piers Plowman* clearly points to the Church as the main source of corruption, suggesting that the Church's far-reaching authority in Medieval society means that depravity among the clergy negatively affects the nobility and the peasantry as well. Despite its focus on the severity and impact of corruption in the Church, the poem does highlight that in fact all people, even commoners, are susceptible to corruption.

Because of the clergy's authority in society, the text shows how corruption in the Church affects lay people (i.e. everyone who isn't in the clergy) negatively. The Church functions as the roots of the **tree** of the Christian community. Since the Church (the roots) of the tree are rotten, the entire tree isn't healthy. Some of the branches thrive while some are barren, pointing to the way that the Church's corruption means that the rich get richer and the poor get poorer. Anima, who represents the soul, quotes John Chrysostomus, one of the Fathers of the Eastern Church, saying, "Just as when you see a tree faded and withered, you know it has a defect in its roots, so when you see a people undisciplined and irreligious, without doubt the priesthood is not healthy." In his first dream vision, the protagonist, Will, sees friars from all four orders (Franciscans, Dominicans, Carmelites, and Augustinians) "Preaching to the people for their own paunches' welfare, / Making glosses of the Gospel that would look good for themselves." The friars are supposed to be trustworthy figures who guide other people in the community, but instead the friars teach a skewed gospel that works in their favor. The poem also closes with the friars' corruption. In the final lines of the poem, Friar Flatterer leads the Christian community astray by, rather than preaching against sin, giving everyone "a drugged drink" that makes them

not care about sin and punishment.

Even though those in power are most likely to give in to corruption, the poem makes clear that all people are at risk. For example, although the rats from the Prologue think the not-so-friendly neighborhood **cat** is a tyrant, the poem points out that the rats and mice would be just as bad if they were in power. A particularly wise mouse states that without the cat keeping them in check, the rats and mice would cause mayhem at court by disrupting people's sleep and ruining people's clothes. Besides, says the mouse, "For if you rats held the reins, you couldn't rule yourselves." Similarly, Meed, who represents bribery, unearned rewards, and profit, has "lain" with both "learned men and unlearned [men]," suggesting that all people, regardless of their social level, are susceptible to giving into corruption. At the end of the poem, when Conscience prepares the Christian community for the inevitable attack from Pride and other evil forces, a person from each level of society (called an "estate") turns away from Conscience and instead chooses evil. That each estate is represented in the people who reject Conscience—first a brewer, then a vicar, then a lord, and finally, a king—emphasizing that all people have the capacity to choose evil over good.

Piers Plowman exposes the corruption that permeates fourteenth-century society, specifically focusing on the way that the major source of corruption, the Church, has the power to lead the other estates astray as well. However, *Piers Plowman* points out that the clergy is not the only group at fault. By demonstrating how all people have the capacity to give in to corruption, Langland encourages readers to remain alert in their own lives to avoid temptation. In addition, Langland's illustration of the widespread corruption that has infiltrated the Church is not a rejection of the clergy but a call for reformation. Through his sharp criticisms of the Church's current defiled state, Langland encourages the clergy to rid themselves of evil temptations and realign themselves with Christ and the core values of the Church.

PENANCE AND REPENTANCE

While *Piers Plowman* is critical of Church corruption in general, the poem's most prevalent grievance relates to the practice of selling indulgences. Indulgences (a promise that a person's punishment in purgatory for their sins would be reduced), could be granted by the pope in exchange for charitable contributions called alms. However, these charitable contributions came to be conflated with financial transactions that let a person easily buy forgiveness—especially because the pardoners who were meant to collect alms took part in unauthorized sales of indulgences, as well. Throughout eight intricate dream visions (and two dreams within dreams), Will, the poem's protagonist, learns from a wide variety of allegorical teachers that financial transactions like indulgences can't replace or satisfy confessing one's sins to a priest and then receiving absolution. *Piers Plowman* argues that the Church has been so caught up in financial transactions that they've failed to provide proper guidance for those who wish to repent. Ultimately, *Piers Plowman* asserts that it is genuine repentance, not the purchase of an indulgence, which can save a soul.

The poem argues that financial payment is not proper penance for sin, nor is it a way to get around penance. For example, in the legal case of Peace vs. Wrong, lawyers Wisdom and Wit think that Wrong's grave charges of rape, murder, and theft can be erased with payment, implying that Wrong should be able to buy an indulgence in place of punishment. The King firmly rejects this idea, stating that if Wrong "got off so easily, all he'd do is laugh." Later, when Piers Plowman is frustrated by the people who refuse to work, Hunger tells him that if the people are sinful, leave it up to God. Hunger's comment implies that the Church's practice of selling indulgences is wrongly taking other people's sin into their own hands, rather than leaving it to God. Ultimately, Will learns that financial transactions like indulgences are worthless after death: "I count your patents and your pardon not worth a pie's heel." A "pie's heel" is the pie crust that is left over after the rest of the slice has been eaten—indulgences (patents) and pardons are even more useless.

Piers Plowman reveals that the Church isn't providing the proper guidance for those who want to repent. When Repentance asks Covetousness to repent for his sins, Covetousness doesn't know what the word "restitution" means, nor does he even know that his behavior has been sinful—a moment that seems to point to the Church, which should have been providing him with such guidance. Later, when society frantically seeks Truth after the confessions of the Seven Deadly Sins, they don't know who to turn to. Even the pilgrim doesn't know how to help them and can only point them in the direction of earthly shrines. Likewise, at the end of the poem, Friar Flatterer who is supposed to heal the sick gives people in the Christian community a "drugged drink" that, rather than help them resist sin, simply makes them numb to sin and unconcerned about its consequences.

The poem highlights that penance and repentance must be genuine to be effective. For example, rich people waiting till the very end of their lives to repent and give their money to the poor "will sound in our Lord's ear like a magpie's chattering." In one of his many dreams, Will meets a man named Hawkin, whose coat is constantly stained with sin. Although **Hawkin's coat** is cleaned by confession, it doesn't stay clean for more than a few moments. To Hawkin, penance is no more than a habitual washing. Patience explains to him that alongside "confession of the mouth," Hawkin needs "contrition of the heart," or genuine remorse for his sins, to keep the coat clean for good. The combination of faith and "contrition," or genuine remorse, can turn deadly sins into small, easily forgivable ones.

Likewise, Repentance teaches, "sorrow for sins is salvation for souls."

Piers Plowman argues that financial transactions, such as the Church's practice of selling indulgences, do not count as penance. In addition, the Church's preoccupation with selling indulgences means that they are failing to guide those who want to repent. It is genuine sorrow for one's sins, not the simple purchase of an indulgence, which can help a person be forgiven and saved. By highlighting the clergy's shortcomings, William Langland exposes one of the most significant religious and social issues of his time. In fact, anger surrounding the sale of indulgences was one of the catalysts for the Protestant Reformation in the sixteenth century. Interestingly, hundreds of years after it was written, *Piers Plowman* was printed and distributed by early Protestants as proof of the clergy's serious flaws. Langland's emphasis on the importance of genuine sorrow for sin serves as a teaching moment for the reader, as Will learns alongside the reader the importance of contrition.

GOOD WORKS AND SALVATION

In the fourteenth-century Church (and even in the modern-day Roman Catholic Church), good works like feeding the poor were considered a requirement for salvation alongside having faith in Jesus. *Piers Plowman* echoes this idea, asserting that good works are necessary for salvation, and that those who do not do good works are unworthy of being saved. However, the poem stresses that doing good works isn't just a box that a Christian can check at the end of his or her life. Through a series of complicated dreams featuring a myriad of allegorical figures, Will, the poem's protagonist, learns that good works should be given and received freely throughout the course of one's life because they are a way for Christians to show their love for God and for other people.

Piers Plowman affirms that good works are required for salvation. Likewise, those who do not do good works are unworthy of salvation. Near the beginning of the poem, Holy Church teaches Will "That faith without works is worse than nothing / And as dead as a doornail unless the deed goes with it. / Faith without works is dead." This idea is immediately drilled into Will as being important. Later, when Piers Plowman divides labor among the estates, he says he will help those who work, meaning those who dedicate themselves to hard, honest labor. However, the word "work" can also imply good works, an implication that is made clear by Piers Plowman's later association with Christ and the idea that those who work alongside Piers Plowman are given the opportunity to pass through Purgatory and into Heaven quickly. Thus, this passage suggests that Christ will save those who do good works. Likewise, Piers Plowman rejects those who refuse to work, so Christ rejects those who refuse to do good works.

Besides being a requirement for salvation, doing good works is part of how a Christian can express love. At Patience's feast, Patience says that love is shown "with words and with works." Similarly, Wit explains to Will that a person can Do-Best when they act on their love and help others, showing that doing good works is an instrument of love. Just as giving help is giving love, refusing to help is refusing to love. Roman Emperor Trajan, one of Will's many teachers, affirms that "whoever lends no help loves not." Trajan also says, "Unless they're learned for our Lord's love, the labor's all lost." Drawing again on the parallel between work (labor) and good works, people must do good works "…for the love of our Lord and to love the people better." Similarly, Imaginative references Paul's Epistle, teaching Will that Do-Well is a combination of "Faith, hope, charity, and the greatest of these." What Imaginative means is that charity is the most important value in a Christian life. In many translations of the Bible, this verse, 1 Corinthians 13:13, reads, "faith, hope, and love, but the greatest of these is love." Thus, acts of charity—good works—are acts of love.

Because good works are rooted in love, they should be given and received freely. At the confession of the Seven Deadly Sins, Sloth says, "If any man does me a good turn or helps me at need, / I'm unkind in return for his courtesy and cannot understand it, / …I'm not lured with love unless something's lying under the thumb" Sloth wrongly rejects help and love from others because of his own practice of only helping others when it benefits himself. In contrast, Piers Plowman is so committed to giving help freely to others that he won't take payment for helping society find Truth. Piers' behavior mirrors Anima's lesson to Will that Charity loves and helps all people: "He's glad with all who're glad, and good to all wicked / And loves and lends help to all that our Lord made."

Piers Plowman argues that good works are a necessary part of earning salvation, so those who fail to do good works are unworthy of being saved. This idea, which is foundational for the Catholic Church, appears in James 2:26, "For as the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without works is dead also." Good works are a necessary part of salvation and go hand-in-hand with faith. The concept of good works became a significant point of argument in the sixteenth century, when a monk named Martin Luther argued that faith alone—not faith coupled with good works—was needed for salvation. This argument over faith and good works proved critical, and soon resulted in the outbreak of the Protestant Reformation. (Interestingly, early Protestants printed and distributed copies of *Piers Plowman* to reveal corruption in the Catholic Church and consequently support Protestantism. While it's true that *Piers Plowman* highlights the corruption in the Church, on the point of good works, the poem is clearly aligned with the Catholic Church.) Throughout *Piers Plowman*, Langland shows his readers that refusing to do good works is unacceptable, as is doing good works out of obligation. Good works should flow

from the heart and be an instrument for Christians to show their love for God and other people.

SOCIAL HIERARCHY, COMMUNITY, AND SELFISHNESS

The society of the Middle Ages was split into three groups, called estates: the clergy (first estate) the nobility (second estate), and the peasantry (third estate). Each estate was defined by a man's occupation—whether the man prays as a Church official, fights as a knight, or works as a peasant. *Piers Plowman* asserts that these divisions aren't necessarily a bad thing. In fact, the poem suggests that social hierarchy is a positive force as long as everyone is working toward a common goal. In several instances throughout the poem, God (or another heavenly being) tries to encourage humans to work together as a tight-knit community, with each of the three estates helping one another. In every instance, however, this sort of idealized feudalism is short lived. The poem ultimately argues that as long as people choose selfishness—putting the individual above the community—feudalism does more harm than good. The interdependence of the first, second, and third estates means that like a drop of ink in a glass of water, it only takes a few selfish people to bring down society.

The poem defends social hierarchy as good thing as long as all people are oriented toward a common goal. In several instances throughout the poem, God or another heavenly force tries to encourage humans to embrace such idealized feudalism. For example, a heavenly angel and Kind Wit (common sense) create a system where the three estates live and work in harmony for the sake of a common goal: "The king in concert with knighthood and with clergy as well / Contrived that the commons [common people] should provide their commons [food] for them." In this system, each of the estates provide for one another. Later, Piers Plowman, who comes to represent Christ, also creates an ideal, but short-lived, social hierarchy. Like Kind Wit, Piers Plowman divides labor based among the estates, so that all people are in charge of a job that they are well suited for. He explains the way this works to the knight, saying "I shall sweat and strain and sow for us both… / In exchange for your championing Holy Church and me / Against wasters and wicked men who would destroy me." As a peasant, Piers will produce food to support the knight if the knight will support the peasants by keeping them safe. Similarly, Grace, God's messenger, gifts people in the Christian community with different talents (the seven gifts of the Holy Spirit) so that they can each pursue different occupations for the common good. In doing so, the people are able to combat the evil forces of idleness, envy, and pride. Lastly, the ideal scenario of each estate working together as one is shown in Christ, who is "knight, king, [and] conqueror" while still being the Piers Plowman figure whose humble life is marked by honest labor.

Although *Piers Plowman* clearly illustrates the value of idealized feudalism, the poem ultimately argues that human selfishness has warped feudalism into a structure that currently does more harm than good. That is, since the social hierarchy is composed of several interdependent estates, the reality of feudalism is that it only takes a few people choosing selfishness and sin to bring down the entire community. For example, a handful of people disrupt the rhythmic cycle of Piers Plowman's idealized feudalism (plowing the half-acre) by choosing sinfulness—refusing to work even though they're in good health. Piers tries to correct the snag by having the knight restore order. The knight fails in doing so, forcing Piers to call upon Hunger. Everybody suffers from Hunger in one way or another, including those who have worked faithfully the whole time. Similarly, the opening of the poem illustrates how when a few people choose selfishness in a feudal society, other people are negatively affected as well. In the Prologue, friars change the scriptures out of selfishness in order to make themselves look good. This means that that the friars are teaching a distorted version of the Bible, consequently leading astray the unlearned people who depend on the friars and the priests for religious teaching and guidance.

Piers Plowman shows that social hierarchy—in this case, feudalism—is a powerful, positive force when all people are dedicated to the common good. Throughout the poem, such idealized feudalism is always established by God or one of his companions. However, the poem shows that every time idealized feudalism is put into place, it is ruined by human selfishness. Although Langland plainly points out the problems with fourteenth-century feudal society, he doesn't provide a clear-cut political solution. Instead, his focus lies in the widespread impact of sin. Langland shows that an individual's selfishness reverberates through the community, causing even more destruction. Thus, Langland's aim is spiritual, not political, as he seeks to reveal the repercussions of sin and urge readers to place the community before themselves.

LABOR VS. IDLENESS

Considering the poem's title, *Piers Plowman*, and the way that Piers Plowman himself comes to be conflated with Christ, it makes sense that the poem praises honest labor and hard work, such as plowing the fields. The poem highlights that such labor can help lead a person toward salvation. Those who choose idleness instead of hard work, however, are depicted as being sinful and unworthy of salvation. Aligning with the poem's commitment to love and helping others, the poem is careful to point out that those who genuinely cannot work—be it from sickness, old age, or motherhood—are pardoned by God and should be helped by those who can work.

Piers Plowman shows how honest labor can fight off evil and lead a person toward salvation. The praise of honest, hard

work, and the sharp criticism of idleness appears in the very first page of the poem, in the "**field full of folk**." The field is populated with people from each of the estates (classes), including the clergy, the nobility, and the peasantry. While "Some applied themselves to plowing, played very rarely, / Sowing seeds and setting plants worked very hard," other people "…pursued pride, put on proud clothing, / …With some lush livelihood delighting their bodies." Holy Church tells Will that it is "those who wish to work well," like the plowmen from the field of folk, that will go to Heaven. Later, Will meets Piers Plowman, who knows Truth (who represents God) through work. Piers explains that Truth wants other people to engage in honest labor, too, regardless of what that labor is: "But you could work as Truth wants you to and earn wages and bread / By keeping cows in the field, the corn from the cattle, / Making ditches or dikes or dinging on sheaves, / Or helping make mortar, or spreading muck afield." Truth says that those who helped Piers work, regardless of the craft, "Have pardon to pass through purgatory quickly." Another one of Will's teachers, Anima, explains to Will that even Christ's followers Paul and Peter knew the value of work: "After his preaching Paul practiced basket-making, / And earned with his hands what his stomach had need of. / Peter fished for his food, like his fellow Andrew; / They sold some and stewed some and so they both lived."

In contrast, sloth and idleness consume those who can work but choose not to, making such people undeserving of salvation. Expanding upon Isaiah 2:4, Conscience says, "Each man shall play with a plow, pickax, or spade, / Spin or spread dung—or spoil himself in sloth." In *Piers Plowman*, Sloth, at the confession of the Seven Deadly Sins, admits to putting his own laziness above love of God and love of others. In the Middle Ages, sloth refers to laziness that plays out in a parasitic way, like the modern-day concept of a moocher. The poem emphasizes that if someone chooses to be a beggar even though they are capable of work, he "Is as false as the Fiend and defrauds the needy, / And also beguiles the giver against his will."

Those who can't work, however, are excused by God and should be helped by those who can work. While reprimanding those who choose idleness over labor, Piers Plowman excuses those who are "… blind or broken-legged, or bolted with iron— / Those shall eat as well as I do…" Likewise, Truth's pardon clearly excuses beggars who have "a real reason that renders them beggars" and ask for alms out of "need." Addressing false beggars, Truth says, "For if he were aware he was not needy he would give his alms / To another that was more needy; thus the neediest should have help," affirming that those who cannot work are to be taken care of by those who can. Truth lists examples of those who are excused from work, including old men who have lost their strength, women who are nursing, and those who are blind, injured, or ill. Such people "Have as plenary pardon as the plowman himself; / For love of their low hearts our Lord has granted them / Their penance and their purgatory in full plenty on earth." Truth points out that these people should be excused from work because they are also excused from purgatory from God, considering they suffer enough on earth.

Piers Plowman praises labor for the way that it helps the community and the individual. If those who can work hard choose to do so, they are able to help the needy who can't work *and* can help earn their own salvation. In contrast, those who are fully capable of working but choose not to are sinful and align themselves with Sloth, one of the Seven Deadly Sins. Though *Piers Plowman* presents many types of labor as being worthy and honest, there is an emphasis on occupations meant for the third estate, the common people (for example, tending to livestock, making mortar, and plowing fields). By praising the work of the commoners, William Langland highlights that peasants are worthy in God's eyes even though they don't have power like kings, riches like nobles, or theological training like the clergy. In fact, the commoners' poverty and dedication to wholesome hard work actually makes them worthier of salvation than the other estates.

SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.

FIELD FULL OF FOLK

The busy, bustling "field full of folk" that Will sees in his first few dreams represents society, which is populated by humans from each of the three estates, or social classes: the clergy (first estate), the nobility (second estate), and the peasantry (third estate). However, the field also symbolizes society on a grander scale, as it symbolizes the whole earth, teeming with people from all different walks of life. Since the field is positioned directly between the **castle on the hill** and the **dungeon in the valley**, the field symbolizes the way that all people have the capacity to go to either Heaven or Hell, depending on their behavior on earth.

CAT

The neighborhood cat that torments the rats represents a tyrannical ruler and the danger of unbridled power. The cat's behavior means that the rats live in perpetual fear, mirroring the impact of a tyrannical ruler on his powerless subjects. Although the rats want to reclaim some of their independence by tying a bell to the cat's neck—so that they can avoid the cat when they hear it approaching—none of the rats are brave enough to be the one to fasten the bell to the

cat's collar. This echoes the way that oppressive rulers breed feelings of helplessness and cowardliness among their subjects, forcing them to stick to the status quo.

CASTLE ON THE HILL

The castle on the hill, which lies on one side of the "**field full of folk**," and opposite of the **dungeon in the valley**, symbolizes Heaven. Truth, one of the representations of God in the poem, resides in the castle, enhancing the connection between God's heavenly kingdom and Truth's castle perched on a hill. The word "truth" has several meanings in the poem, which affect and broaden the interpretation of the castle. First, the castle can be inferred to be home to truth in the form of "integrity," which points to Heaven because of its associations with moral perfection and goodness. Likewise, the castle is also where one can find truth in the sense of the reality of things, which points to the Christian understanding of God and Heaven. Since the humans in the "field full of folk" exist in between the castle and the dungeon, they have the ability to either earn Heaven or be damned in Hell.

DUNGEON IN THE VALLEY

The dungeon in the valley, which lies on the opposite side of the "**field full of folk**" from the **castle on the hill**, symbolizes Hell. Holy Church explains to Will that the dungeon is governed by Wrong and was established when the prideful Lucifer disobeyed God and was cast out of Heaven and flung as far down as possible, where he would be forced to stay. A particularly low-lying place on earth is a valley, revealing the connection between the dungeon in the valley and Hell. Since humankind exists in between the castle and the dungeon, their lives on earth dictate whether they will earn Heaven or be sent to Hell.

HAWKIN'S COAT

Hawkin's coat, which is splattered with numerous stubborn stains, symbolizes Christendom, meaning the Christian community, while the stains represent sin. Hawkin laments to Patience, Conscience, and Will that laundering the coat only keeps it clean temporarily, suggesting the human inclination toward sin. Patience explains to Hawkin that the only thing that will clean his coat—that is, the only thing that will cleanse the Christian community from their sins and keep them from sinning in the future—is contrition (genuine remorse for one's sins) and the sacrament of penance.

TREE

The tree appears several times throughout the poem, but each time, the tree symbolizes the Christian community. One of Will's many teachers, Anima, explains that society is like a tree whose roots (the priesthood) are rotting, consequently poisoning the rest of the tree (society). This tree is the Christian community at its present, sickly state. Later, Anima (and also Piers Plowman) introduces the idea of the tree of Patience. This tree symbolizes the Christian community in its ideal state, as its roots are made of mercy, the leaves are the laws of the Church, the flower buds are obedience, and the fruit is charity. The tree is defended by Piers Plowman, who brandishes **three wooden poles** (the Trinity) to strike down the evil forces that try to attack the tree and steal its fruit. Near the end of the poem, the tree becomes the tree of Truth, which is destroyed by Antichrist, representing the subsequent destruction of the Christian community.

THREE WOODEN POLES

The three wooden poles that support the **tree** of Patience and aid Piers Plowman in attacking evil forces who try to steal the tree's fruits symbolize the Trinity. Will notices that the three poles are each fashioned out of wood from the same tree—underscoring the idea that God is both three and one—that is, God the Father, God the Son (Jesus), and the Holy Ghost. By relying on the three wooden poles—the Trinity—Piers Plowman is able to keep the tree of Patience (the Christian community) supported and safe.

HAND

The hand in the Samaritan's teaching represents the Trinity. The hand is composed of several different parts—a palm, fingers, and a fist—while still remaining one unit, a hand. Likewise, the Trinity is one God but also three Gods, meaning God the Father, Jesus, and the Holy Ghost. In addition, the three parts of the hand (the palm, fingers, and a fist) are used for different tasks in the same way that the three parts of the Trinity have different spiritual purposes as well, such as Jesus' role in taking on flesh to save mankind.

FOUR OXEN

The four oxen that God's messenger, Grace gives Piers Plowman for the purpose of plowing his field symbolize the four Gospels—Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. The largest ox is Luke, just as the Book of Luke is the longest of the four Gospels. The oxen called Mark and Matthew are both "mighty," pointing to their importance. Lastly, the ox named John is the gentlest and the most prized, which may be

suggestive of the way that the Book of John centers on Jesus' status as the Son of God, rather than on his ministry. The oxen are meant to plow the fields—prepare the fields for the **four types of seeds** to be planted—just as the four Gospels prepare one to live a virtuous life as a Christian.

FOUR HORSES

The four horses that God's messenger, Grace, gives Piers Plowman symbolize the four Fathers of the Western Church—Saint Augustine, Saint Ambrose, Saint Gregory the Great, and Saint Jerome. The four horses are meant to build on the work of the **four oxen** (the four Gospels) by pulling **two harrows** (the Old Testament and the New Testament) to further prepare the land for planting. In other words, the four Church Fathers are to prepare the institution of the Church by using the Gospels, along with the entire Old Testament and New Testament.

TWO HARROWS

A harrow is a tool drawn by horses and used to plow the land. The two harrows that God's messenger, Grace gives Piers Plowman symbolize the Old Testament and the New Testament. The harrows are to be pulled by **four horses** (the four Fathers of the Western Church) to further prepare the land for planting after it has been plowed by the **four oxen** (the four Gospels). In this way, the Church Fathers, the Gospels, and the Old and New Testaments must all work together to establish the Church.

FOUR TYPES OF SEEDS

The four types of seeds that God's messenger, Grace gives Piers Plowman to plant represent the four cardinal virtues of prudence, temperance, fortitude, and justice. For these virtues to be grown successfully, Piers must use the **four oxen** (the four Gospels), the **four horses** (the four Fathers of the Western Church), and **two harrows** (the Old Testament and the New Testament). Once the four seeds grow into grain, Piers is to store them in the barn called Unity, where the Christian community resides, suggesting that the four cardinal virtues must be carefully cultivated and are nourishment for the Church.

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the W. W. Nortona & Company edition of *Piers Plowman* published in 2006.

Prologue Quotes

I saw a tower on a hill-top, trimly built,
A deep dale beneath, a dungeon tower in it,
With ditches deep and dark and dreadful to look at.
A fair field full of folk I found between them,
Of human being of all sorts, the high and the low…

Related Characters: Will (speaker), Truth, Wrong, Holy Church

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 3

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Will experiences his first dream vision (an allegorical dream that imparts the dreamer with truth), during which he sees a landscape marked by a castle, a field, and a dungeon. The field, filled with people from all walks of life, represents society. "The high and the low" people in the field are a nod to social hierarchy in the Middle Ages. Society was organized by estates, which were similar to social classes but had a stronger emphasis on a man's occupation. The clergy made up the first estate, followed by the nobility in the second estate, and the peasantry in the third estate. So, basically, one's estate depended on whether a person prayed, fought, or worked. Populated by people from every inch of the social spectrum, the field is also suggestive of society on a global scale—that is, all humans across time and place who inhabit the earth. This understanding of the field is significant when the other two elements of the landscape, the castle and the dungeon, are taken into account.

The castle represents Heaven, made clear by its spatial position (towering high above the earth), its structure as a castle (which brings to mind the Kingdom of God), and the later mention in the poem (after the quote included here) that the castle is inhabited by Truth. Likewise, the dungeon in the valley, which sits far below the earth, represents Hell. The dungeon also points to the way that Hell is an eternal prison for those who sin, just as a dungeon is a prison for those who have committed crimes. Because the earth (the "field full of folk") is sandwiched between Heaven and Hell, the landscape imparts the idea that all people have the ability to receive salvation or be damned depending on how they live their earthly lives.

Passus I Quotes

For James the gentle enjoined in his books
That faith without works is worse than nothing,
And as dead as a doornail unless the deed goes with it.
Faith without works is dead.

Related Characters: Holy Church (speaker), Will

Related Themes:

Page Number: 23

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Holy Church, Will's first allegorical teacher, explains to Will about the nature of faith. Holy Church here references James 2:26 from the Bible, which reads, "For just as the body without the spirit is dead, so also faith without works is dead." In this verse and in Holy Church's teaching, works and deeds refer to the concept of good works, such as giving clothes to the poor or caring for the sick. Holy Church emphasizes one of the foundational ideas in Medieval Christianity (and modern-day Catholicism), which is that one's faith in God and Jesus must be coupled with a commitment to do good deeds during one's lifetime. This combination helps a person earn salvation. The centrality of good works to the Church's doctrine is reinforced by Holy Church's own allegorical significance, as she represents the Church fully aligned with God and uncorrupted by human influence. By spelling out the importance of good works in Will's very first dream, Holy Church (and the poem's author, William Langland) indicates that good works will play a major role in Will's impending quests and in his own understanding of what it means to live a Christian life.

Passus III Quotes

She makes men misbehave many score times.
In trust of her treasures she troubles a great many.
...Poisoned popes, impaired Holy Church.
...She's as common as the cartway to comers and goers,
To monks, to messengers, to leper-men in hedges.

Related Characters: Conscience (speaker), King, Meed

Related Themes:

Page Number: 43

Explanation and Analysis

Here, a knight named Conscience explains to the King why Meed is evil, and consequently, why Conscience refuses to marry her. As an allegorical character, Meed represents gifts and rewards, which may sound innocent or even charitable. However, Conscience highlights that in practice, such rewards are actually bribes. He blames Meed for weakening Holy Church (who represents a perfect, pure Christian Church untouched by humans), and for poisoning several popes. These accusations reveal a belief that corruption in the form of bribery is destroying the Church. The idea of corruption among the clergy, especially as it relates to bribery and greed, resonates throughout the entirety of the poem.

This passage also highlights the way that all people, not just the clergy, are susceptible to giving into corruption. Like a common cold or an aggressive illness, Meed is found among everyone from monks to lepers. This passage also develops Conscience as a morally upright character who is not hesitant to point out evil when he sees it—a behavior that he demonstrates even in the final lines of the poem.

Passus IV Quotes

If he may make amends, let Bail manumit him
And put up pledges for his crimes and purchase recompense,
Amend that misdeed and be evermore the better.

Related Characters: Wisdom (speaker), Peace, Wrong, King

Related Themes:

Page Number: 59

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Wrong's lawyer, Wisdom, attempts to persuade the King to allow Wrong to buy his way out of punishment for his charges of rape, murder, and theft. Wrong's charges in the case of Peace versus Wrong are just about as severe as it gets, so it appears almost comical that Wisdom believes that money will "manumit him"—that is, free Wrong without further punishment.

This moment gestures to the Medieval Church's practice of distributing indulgences, which the Church decreed would decrease a person's punishment in purgatory for his or her sins. Originally, indulgences were granted by the Pope in exchange for a donation to the Church, but this practice took an unethical turn when people realized they could quickly and painlessly buy their way out of punishment. Likewise, those not authorized to give indulgences began to do so in order to make money (like the pardoner in the "field

full of folk" who tricks the poor into giving him their already meager supply of wealth). In its allegorical depiction of the trial of wrong, the poem portrays how the practice of selling indulgences causes people to become remorseless about their sins, since their punishment after death could be softened with a financial transaction—just as Wrong would be if he was allowed to evade punishment.

Passus V Quotes

If any man does me a good turn or helps me at need,
I'm unkind in return for his courtesy and cannot understand it,
For I have and always have had some of a hawk's manners;
I'm not lured with love unless something's lying under the thumb.

Related Characters: Sloth (speaker), Repentance

Related Themes:

Page Number: 85

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Sloth, one of the Seven Deadly Sins, confesses his sins to Repentance. The word "sloth" in the Middle Ages meant a combination of laziness, wastefulness, and mooching, revealing that not only is Sloth lazy, he also preys on what other people work for. In this quote, sloth compares himself to a hawk that is lured back to its trainer with food (a common training method in the Middle Ages), admitting that he prefers bribery to love. By comparing himself to a hawk, Sloth furthers the idea that he preys on other people to feed himself—and while this is natural behavior for a hawk, it is not for a man who is supposed to be a helpful member of society. Sloth's laziness and mooching tendencies impact more than just himself, as his selfishness makes him a burden on the entire community.

He's the promptest payer that poor men know.
He withholds no worker's wages so he's without them by evening.
He's as lowly as a lamb and lovely of speech.

Related Characters: Piers Plowman (speaker), Truth

Related Themes:

Page Number: 91

Explanation and Analysis

Here, Piers Plowman tells the people searching for Truth that he serves Truth as a plowman, and that Truth is a good master. Truth is one of the two representations of God in the poem (the other being Kind), so this passage is meant to highlight the ways that Truth is a loving, beneficent God who takes care of his people. The passage mentions the things that the common people would value—being treated well and being payed quickly and consistently—to further compel them to seek Truth.

The passage also highlights that engaging in hard, honest labor is a key part of following God. The link between hard work and salvation is revisited a number of times throughout the poem, as it is not just a religious lesson but also a social one. Just as hard work is vital to living a Christian life, it is also necessary for the Medieval community to thrive, since Medieval society was made up of several estates (social classes) that were all meant to perform their given work with the idea that this outcome would lead to a common goal and well-functioning society. It is worthwhile to note that while the poem is extremely critical of the society of the time, it isn't actually critical of the overall structure of that society. The poem isn't, for instance, advocating that the peasants revolt against their oppressors. Rather, it is seeking to show how people can act in an ideally Christian way, and how such behavior would result in a perfect version of the feudal Medieval society.

Passus VI Quotes

I shall sweat and strain and sow for us both,
And also labor for your love all my lifetime,
In exchange for your championing Holy Church and me
Against waters and wicked men who would destroy me.

Related Characters: Piers Plowman (speaker), Knight

Related Themes:

Page Number: 97

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Piers assigns jobs to the people doing work on his land, so that the half-acre is plowed quickly and the quest for Truth can officially begin. In doing so, Piers illustrates what feudalism is supposed to look like: the nobles (knights) protect the people, and in return, the peasants work in the fields and produce food. In Piers' social structure, every person has a specific job that benefits the community. A bit later in the poem, this idealized feudalism that Piers establishes falls apart, with some people in each of the estates ceasing to do their parts. The failure of Piers

idealizes feudalism due to the moral failures of some portion of its inhabitants, can be seen as portraying what William Langland, the writer of the poem, sees as the real-life political and social problems of fourteenth-century England.

With Piers Plowman's later conflation with Christ taken into account, this passage also lends itself to a second meaning. On the surface, this passage is Piers Plowman, an everyday peasant, telling the knight that he will undertake hard labor if the knight promises to keep him safe and protect the Church. However, the allegorical meaning of the passage is Jesus telling his followers that he will "sweat and strain" in their place—that is, suffer on the Cross for the sake of mankind—with the hope that his followers will try to keep the Church safe from those who seek to corrupt it.

Passus VII Quotes

...I can find no pardon here—
Only, "Do well, and have well," and God will have your soul.
And "Do evil, and have evil," and hope nothing else
But that after your death-day the Devil will have your soul.

Related Characters: Priest (speaker), Truth, Piers Plowman

Related Themes:

Page Number: 119

Explanation and Analysis

Here, the priest who asks to read Truth's pardon, which was given to Piers Plowman, asserts that it is not an actual pardon because it is only two lines long. The pardon itself introduces the key ideas that will come to be referred to as Do-Well, Do-Better, and Do-Best. Here, Do-Well is not yet a person but a value: behaving as one should as a Christian in order to achieve salvation. The pardon's two lines are from the Athanasian Creed, which is a statement of faith that has been used in the Church since the sixth century.

The passage is interesting because although the reader is meant to side with Piers Plowman, the priest is not actually out of line in his objection. One of a priest's responsibilities was to translate Church documents aloud from Latin to English so that the common people could understand them—just as the priest volunteers to do. Secondly, Truth's pardon isn't formatted or worded in the standard way, so the priest's shock at only seeing two lines (and his subsequent rejection of the pardon as being genuine) is also understandable.

The priest's rejection of the pardon leads to an event that stumps even the most seasoned *Piers Plowman* scholars: the moment when Piers rips Truth's pardon into two. Perhaps Piers feels that his own spiritual authority is being challenged by the priest, or maybe he feels frustrated with mankind in the same way that Moses did when he broke the tablets that contained the Ten Commandments when he saw society's sinfulness. There is a suggestion here that perhaps the priest has become either too arrogant or too caught up in the complex rules around religious life to recognize a true religious pardon—these sorts of accusations against the Catholic Church were also part of the religious revolt called the Reformation that erupted about a century and a half after *Piers Plowman* was written. And it is true that the Reformation regularly used Piers Plowman as a work that captured what was wrong with the Catholic Church. But the poem itself never quite suggests this sort of revolt or breakage with the Church. The poem generally seems to want to morally reform the Church and humanity, not to break from either.

Passus VIII Quotes

Do-Well...and Do-Better and Do-Best the third
Are three fair virtues and are not far to find.
Whoever is meek of his mouth, mild of his speech,
True of his tongue and of his two hands,
And through his labor or his land earns his livelihood,
...Do-Well is with him.
Do-Better does the same, but he does much more.
He's lowly as a lamb, lovely of speech;
...he helps where there's need
...Do-Best is above both and bears a bishop's crozier
That has a hook at one end to hold men in good lives.
A spike is on that staff to shove down the wicked...

Related Characters: Thought (speaker), Do-Well, Do-Better, Do-Best, Will

Related Themes:

Page Number: 127

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Thought explains to Will the nature of Do-Well, Do-Better, and Do-Best. Thought builds on Will's knowledge of Do-Well, which stems from Truth's pardon that instructs people to "Do well and have well." Thought is the first person to introduce the concept of Do-Better and Do-Best, revealing that the Christian life is a constant struggle to live more perfectly like Christ.

Thought's definition of Do-Well—"He's lowly as a lamb,

lovely of speech"—directly reflects Piers Plowman's earlier description of Truth as a perfect master to peasants. In this way, Thought's explanations of Do-Well, Do-Better, and Do-Best actually coincide with each of the three estates, showing people from each rung of the social ladder how to conduct themselves. Do-Well is the peasant who, "through his labor or his land earns his livelihood." Do-Well teaches the third estate (the peasantry) to work dutifully and honestly. Since Do-Better is conflated with Truth as a master to peasants, Do-Better reflects the nobility. Do-Better teaches the second estate (the nobility) to be humble and helpful. Lastly, Do-Best is dressed as a bishop, showing that the first estate (the clergy) must be able to discern goodness from sinfulness and reprimand those who engage in the latter.

Passus IX Quotes

❝ Do-Well, my dear sir, is to do as law teaches,
To behave lovingly and humbly and harm no person;
But to love and to lend aid, believe me, that's Do-Better;
To protect and provide for people young and old,
To heal them and to help them, is Do-Best of all.

Related Characters: Wit (speaker), Do-Well, Do-Better, Do-Best, Will

Related Themes:

Page Number: 139

Explanation and Analysis

Here, one of Will's allegorical teachers, Wit, explains his understanding of Do-Well, Do-Better, and Do-Best. Back in the beginning of the poem, Wit was one of Wrong's lawyers in the case of Peace versus Wrong, during which Wit was a shady character, so it's interesting that he is now one of Will's teachers. Wit, who represents the human wit or intellectual abilities, can thus be used for good (teaching Will about the Christian life) or bad (advocating for Wrong), just as the human mind can be used for both purposes.

Taking Wit's background as a lawyer into account, this passage reads like a lawyer speaking before the court. It begins with "my dear sir," as if Wit were speaking to a judge with feigned politeness. Wit's status as a lawyer is similarly evident in his description of Do-Well, as Wit claims that people Do-Well when they follow the law. Unlike Thought, Wit's conception of Do-Well doesn't have to do with labor, nor does Do-Best directly connect to the Church. However, the common thread is that Do-Better centers on loving and helping others, especially those who can't help themselves, suggesting that one must do good works out of love.

Passus X Quotes

❝ Can neither kinghood nor knighthood, as far as I can see,
Help at all toward Heaven when one's hour comes,
Nor riches, nor revenue, nor royal lord's estate.
Paul proves it impossible, rich men in Heaven.

Related Characters: Scripture (speaker), Will

Related Themes:

Page Number: 157

Explanation and Analysis

Here, Scripture, Clergy's wife, explains to Will that high social status and wealth on earth can make it more difficult for a person to earn salvation and Heaven. Scripture highlights the way that social status (whether someone is a member of the peasantry, the nobility, or the clergy), wealth, profit, and property are all worldly things that hold no weight in Heaven. Scripture references Paul, one of Jesus' apostles and an author of seven books of the Bible. These books are known as epistles, or letters, in which Paul shares his teachings about many topics, including wealth and poverty. For example, in 1 Timothy 6:10, Paul refers to "the love of money" as "a root of all kinds of evil." People who have this love of money, according to Paul, "have wandered from the faith."

Throughout the poem, greed is one of the main sources of corruption in society, especially among the clergy. Scripture fittingly references scripture to highlight that what seems beneficial on earth (wealth and status) hinders salvation. This lesson refers back to one of Holy Church's teachings from the beginning of the poem—what seems good for the body may be poisonous to the soul, and what is good for the soul may seem bad for the body.

Passus XI Quotes

❝ And let folk of all factions, whether friends or enemies,
Love each other and help each other as they would themselves.
Whoever lends no help loves not, the Lord knows the truth,
And he commands every creature to conform himself to love
Other Christians as himself and his enemies as well.
For whoever hates us it's our merit to love.

Related Characters: Trajan (speaker), Will

Related Themes:

Page Number: 173

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Trajan teaches Will about what it means to live a Christian life built on love. In his lifetime, Trajan was a Roman Emperor who was well known for being a loving, just, moral ruler. These characteristics eventually saved Trajan from Hell, even though he was a non-Christian. Trajan is a fitting teacher for this particular lesson, as he reveals that a Christian must love their friends, enemies, fellow Christians, themselves, and God. In other words, a Christian can't be selective about who they love, because loving all people ("folk of all factions") is a fundamental part of living a Christian life.

The phrase "folk of all factions" brings to mind the "field full of folk" from the beginning of the poem, which was populated by people from each of the three estates (social classes). Therefore, Trajan explains here, Christians must love all people in their society. The implication is that if the three estates were committed to loving each other, Medieval society would run much more smoothly, and the commitment to the common good would be unanimous and steadfast. Trajan says, "Whoever lends no help loves not," drawing the connection between working hard for the sake of the community and loving others. The idea of lending help out of love also relates to the idea that good works must be done out of love for God and other people (not out of a selfish desire to get to Heaven).

Passus XII Quotes

Just as the plumes of the peacock impede him in his flight,
So there is an impediment in possession of pennies and nobles
To all those who hold on to them until their tails are plucked.
And though the rich man repent then and start to rue the time
That he ever gathered such a great amount and gave away so little,
His language will sound in our Lord's ear like a magpie's chattering.

Related Characters: Imaginative (speaker), Will

Related Themes:

Page Number: 199

Explanation and Analysis

Here, Imaginative teaches Will about the danger of amassing riches and selfishly hoarding them until the end of one's life. Using bird imagery, Imaginative compares rich men (the nobility) to peacocks. He explains that peacock's intricate and richly-colored feathers are all for show and actually keep the peacock from being able to fly very high or far. Likewise, a man's riches only help him to show off on earth, and his wealth also keeps him from getting very far spiritually—that is, earning salvation and Heaven.

Imaginative explains that many rich men wait to repent until their "tails are plucked," meaning when their fortune begins to reverse or when they grow old. This systematic hoarding of riches until the very last moment is sinful in God's eyes, as illustrated by the description of such people's cries of repentance sounding to God like "a magpie's chattering"—birds that are known for their loud, incessant, annoying noises. Implied in Imaginative's teaching is the idea that if a man is wealthy, he must be generous with his riches and use them to help others. Most of the poem centers on the benefits of poverty, so this is one of the few moments in the poem that addresses what to do if one does have substantial wealth.

"All these clerks," I declared then, "that believe in Christ's teaching,
Say in their sermons that neither Saracens nor Jews
Nor any creature of Christ's likeness can be saved without Christendom."

"Contra!" exclaimed Imaginative...
..."Salvabitur vix Justus in die judicii;
Ergo salvabitur."

Related Characters: Imaginative, Will (speaker), Trajan

Related Themes:

Page Number: 199-200

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Will asks Imaginative if being a Christian is the only way for a person to receive salvation. Although Imaginative later goes on to explain the ways a person can be saved, in this particular passage his response is focused on showing the error in Will's question. Will assumes that being a Christian automatically makes a person worthy of salvation, but as Imaginative points out, no one is deserving. As part of his response, Imaginative quotes 1 Peter 4:18 from the Bible in Latin. That Latin translates to: "The righteous man will scarcely be saved in the day of judgment;

therefore he will be saved." This verse means that even the most morally upright, nearly perfect person is undeserving of salvation, but because of Christ, salvation is possible.

This interpretation is reflected in a significant pun on the word "scarcely" ("vix"). Broken up into separate characters, V refers to the Roman numeral five, representing the five wounds of Christ from the Crucifixion—one in each foot, one in each hand, and one from blind Longeus' spear. In Greek, IX are Jesus' initials (iota and chi). Thus, the verse means that "The righteous man will" be saved by Jesus and the Crucifixion.

Passus XIII Quotes

❝ Disce…doce, dilige inimicos.
Disce and Do-Well, doce and Do-Better, dilige and Do-Best:
I learned this from a lover once—Love was her name.
"With words and with works," she said, "and will of your heart,
…learn to love, for the Lord of Heaven's sake,
Your enemy in every way even as you love yourself."

Related Characters: Love, Patience (speaker), Will

Related Themes:

Page Number: 209

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Patience explains his understanding of Do-Well, Do-Better, and Do-Best to the other guests at the feast: Will, Conscience, Clergy, Scripture, and a Master of Divinity. Speaking in Latin, Patience says, "Learn, teach, love your enemies." This teaching hails from Luke 6:35: "Love your enemies, do good to them, and lend to them without expecting to get anything back…you will be children of the Most High, because he is kind to the ungrateful and wicked." Patience conflates learning with Do-Well, teaching with Do-Better, and loving one's enemies with Do-Best. These three values build on one another, as a Christian must first learn about Christianity, then teach others about the faith, and lastly, put those teachings into action. Luke 6:35 reveals that, ultimately, people should love their enemies (Do-Best) in order to be more like God, since God himself loves all people.

Patience refers to a woman named Love (it's worth noting that, up until this point in the poem, Love has been male and served as a kind of stand-in for Christ). In this part of the poem, Love highlights that people should also love their enemies because they love God: "learn to love, for the Lord of Heaven's sake, / Your enemy…as you love yourself." Love's teaching is trifold, as it reveals that Christians must love God, love their enemies, and love themselves.

Passus XIV Quotes

❝ …Contrition may
be used
To scrape your coat clean of all kinds of filth.
…Do-Well will wash it and wring it with a wise confessor.
…Do-Better will scrub it and scour it…
…And then send you to Satisfaction, to let the sun bleach it.
…Do-Best will keep it clean from unkind deeds.

Related Characters: Conscience (speaker), Do-Best, Do-Better, Do-Well, Hawkin

Related Themes:

Page Number: 225

Explanation and Analysis

Here, Conscience explains to Hawkin how he can clean his coat effectively. As Hawkin explicitly states earlier in the poem, his coat represents the Christian life, and the stains are visual reminders of his constant sins. Conscience's method for cleaning the coat of its stains (that is, cleaning the Christian life of sin) draws on the sacrament of penance, which is comprised of three parts: contrition, confession, and satisfaction. Contrition means genuine guilt for one's sins, so Hawkin must truly be remorseful for the wrongs he has committed. Contrition is the first step in penance and is the first step in cleaning the coat, as it scrapes off the first layer of gunk and prepares it for a more thorough cleaning. Conscience compares Do-Well to the second step, confession, and suggests that confessing one's sins to a priest is like being washed in water—an idea that also subtly implies baptism. The third step of penance is Do-Better, which scrubs the now-wet coat. Scrubbing is an action that takes a lot of effort, pointing to the third part of penance, satisfaction, which refers to the prayers or good works that a sinner is instructed to do by a priest. Conscience says that Do-Best is the key to keeping the coat clean and keeping a person free from sin, suggesting that Do-Best refers to a person who has undertaken the sacrament of penance in full.

Passus XV Quotes

And for an example see how on trees in the summer time
There are some boughs that bear leaves and some bear none.
There is some sickness in the root of such sots of trees;
Just so parsons and priests and preachers of Holy Church
Are the root of the right faith to rule the people;
But where the root is rotten…
Shall never flower nor fruit grow nor fair leaf be green.

Related Characters: Anima (speaker), Will

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 247

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, a man named Anima, who represents the soul, explains to Will that the Christian community is like a tree that has begun to rot. Anima explicitly points out the tree's symbolism. The tree is unhealthy because it's roots are rotting, just as the Christian community is unhealthy because its foundation, the priesthood, has succumbed to sin. Anima's analogy of the tree is reflective of Medieval social hierarchy—each estate (social class) was interdependent because each estate was in charge of a different task that helped the community. Working smoothly, such social hierarchy meant that the peasantry (third estate) would do hard labor to produce food for the community, the nobility (first estate) would keep the community safe, and the clergy (first estate) would give the other two estates religious guidance.

However, Anima's example points out the underbelly of this social structure. The interdependence of the estates coupled with the authority of the Church means that corruption among the clergy directly impacts the other two estates. The clergy's greed and loyalty to the nobility means that the poor are left with little spiritual guidance—the bough that bears no leaves. It's also possible that the barren bough refers to the way that the poor get poorer in this society, while the rich get richer. As other instances in the poem reveal, the clergy only helps those who already have money (the bough that bears leaves) instead of helping the needy.

Therefore by color nor by clergy, you'll never come to know him,
Neither through words nor works, but through will alone,
And no clerk knows that, nor creature on earth
But Piers the Plowman, Petrus id est Christus.

Related Characters: Anima (speaker), Piers Plowman, Will

Related Themes:

Page Number: 253

Explanation and Analysis

Here, Anima explains to Will that he can only fully know Charity through Piers Plowman. Anima declares that Will won't be able to recognize Charity by sight ("by color"). Likewise, the clergy doesn't know Charity and can't help Will either. Even doing good works isn't exactly Charity. Anima says Charity is recognized "through will alone," suggesting that a person must have the will or intrinsic motivation to know Charity. However, this statement also suggests that Will himself (and, by extension, all individual people)—"through will alone"—must learn about Charity for himself.

Anima makes the first direct comparison between Piers Plowman and Christ when he states in Latin, Piers the Plowman, "Peter, that is, Christ." Peter and Piers are two forms of the same name (along with Perkin, which is also used occasionally in the poem). Thus, the person who knows Charity best—and perhaps is the embodiment of Charity—is Christ. Connecting back to the beginning of the passage, Anima suggests that Christ cannot be recognized by sight ("by color"), and that the clergy doesn't seem to know Christ either, since they've grown corrupt.

Passus XVI Quotes

…Piers's fruit flowered and befell to be ripe.
And then Jesus should joust for it by judgment of arms
Which one should fetch the fruit, the Fiend or himself.

Related Characters: Mary (speaker), Fiend, Christ / Jesus, Piers Plowman, Will

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 277

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Mary, mother of Jesus, appears to Will and Piers Plowman while Piers is teaching Will about the tree called Patience. This passage harkens back to when the fakers refused to help plow Piers' half acre, and the knight was too submissive to reestablish order. Here, Jesus is the true knight who lives up to his title, intent on protecting the common people (Piers Plowman's fruit) from evil forces (the Fiend, one of Hell's devils), even if it means he must joust to do so.

Mary takes on a surprisingly minor role in the poem. Her brief appearance to Will and Piers suggests that Langland's intention is to focus on Christ's humanity—that Christ is the link between God and man (a statement made earlier in the poem), and that Christ is both the fierce warrior who will joust against the Fiend and the good, gentle, and loving God who cares for his people.

Passus XVIII Quotes

❝ The bitterness that you have brewed, imbibe it yourself
Who are doctor of death, the drink you made.
For I who am Lord of Life, love is my drink
And for that drink today I died upon earth,
I struggled so I'm thirsty still for man's soul's sake.

Related Characters: Christ / Jesus (speaker), Satan, Lucifer

Related Themes:

Page Number: 319

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Jesus, who has descended to Hell, reprimands Lucifer and Satan for their evil ways. Jesus contrasts himself with Satan and Lucifer (who are two different devils in Hell) by contrasting life and death. Jesus, the "Lord of Life" offers eternal life—salvation from sin and eternal life in Heaven—while Satan and Lucifer offer eternal death and suffering in Hell. Because of Satan and Lucifer's own evilness, they are forced to consume their own death-drink, meaning that they, too, are trapped in Hell to exist in suffering (a concept that relates to the modern-day phrase of getting a taste of your own medicine).

In contrast, Jesus' drink is one of love—reaffirming that Christianity is built on a foundation of love. Jesus explains that he died for his love-drink, meaning that the root of the Crucifixion was God's love for mankind. In addition, by noting that he is "thirsty still for man's soul's sake," Jesus reveals his purpose for descending to Hell: to rescue all of the worthy souls (such as the prophets and the patriarchs, good men who lived before Jesus and thus never had the chance to be Christians) and to offer salvation to those still on earth.

Passus XIX Quotes

❝ Surely you know…
That knight, king, conqueror can be one person.
To be named a knight is fair, for men shall kneel to him.
To be called a king is fairer, for he can make knights;
But to be called a conqueror, that comes by special grace,
…To make lads lords of the lands he wins
And foul slaves of free men who will not follow his laws.

Related Characters: Conscience (speaker), Will, Christ / Jesus

Related Themes:

Page Number: 325

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Conscience responds to Will's question regarding if the man who looks like Piers Plowman, but is bloody and carrying the Cross, is actually Piers or Jesus. Conscience's explanation of Christ outlines many of Christ's attributes. Like an ideal knight, Jesus is moral, worthy of respect, and is committed to protecting the people. Like an ideal king, Jesus is powerful, just, and cares for his people. Like an ideal conqueror, Jesus creates order. Lastly, like a simple plowman, Jesus is humble, approachable, and works alongside his people.

In addition, by depicting Christs as "knight, king, [and] conqueror" who still resembles Piers Plowman, Conscience illustrates the inherent value in each of the estates (social classes) in Medieval society, as well as the way that these estates can and should work together for one common purpose. The value of a knight is that he is worthy of respect, since (ideally) he is morally upright and is a protector of the community. The value of a king is that he can make men into knights—he can turn regular people into morally upright men who protect the community. The benefit of a conqueror is that he can "make lads lords" and make "foul slaves of free men" who disobey him. This connects to priests and bishops who can encourage those who live good, Christian lives, and reprimand those who choose sin. Just as each of these qualities combine in the person of Jesus, so do each of these social standings create a well-functioning community built on the common good.

This Jesus…when he was just a boy,
Turned water into wine, as holy words relate.
And there God of his grace began to Do-Well.
…And when he'd grown more mature…
…fed with two fishes and with five loaves
Near-famished folk, more than five thousand.
Then he comforted those full of care and acquired a greater name
Which was Do-Better...

Related Characters: Conscience (speaker), Do-Well, Do-Better, Do-Best, Christ / Jesus, Will

Related Themes:

Page Number: 329

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Conscience explains to Will how Do-Well and Do-Better manifested in Jesus' life and ministry. Conscience says that Jesus "began to Do-Well" when he "Turned water into wine," which refers to Jesus' very first miracle, performed at a wedding at Cana. The event is described in the Bible John 2:1-11 and also alludes to wine as the blood of Christ in the Eucharist. When Jesus' miracles were performed on a larger scale and directly helped people—like when he fed a crowd of five thousand people with two fish and five loaves of bread—he began to Do-Better. Like many of Will's allegorical teachers, Conscience defines Do-Better in terms of charity and helping others. The miracle of feeding the five thousand is found several places throughout the Bible, including Luke 9:10-13, John 9, and Mark 8:22-26. The last time Do-Well, Do-Better, and Do-Best are discussed in the poem are in the context of Jesus' life, showing that these three values culminate in the person of Jesus. A Christian should strive to Do-Well, Do-Better, and Do-Best—meaning that a Christian should strive to live like Jesus.

Passus XX Quotes

He lies drowned in dream…and so do many others.
The Friar with his physic has enchanted the folk here,
And given them a drugged drink: they dread no sin.

Related Characters: Peace (speaker), Friar Flatterer, Contrition, Conscience

Related Themes:

Page Number: 363

Explanation and Analysis

Here, Peace responds to Conscience's call for his cousin, Contrition, explaining that Friar Flatterer has drugged the Christian community. The significance in this passage is that Contrition has been drugged and now exists in a dazed, lifeless state—meaning that in the Christian community, people no longer feel sincere guilt for their sins, despite contrition being a crucial element to the sacrament of penance. The fact that it is Friar Flatterer who administers this "drugged drink" clearly points to the clergy as being the source of this moral lapse, as they lead astray those who depend on their religious guidance.

The "drugged drink" is suggestive of indulgences, referring to the way that people began to simply purchase indulgences (instead of receiving an indulgence and then make a donation to the Church) as a justification to continue sinning. Like those who have been drugged by Friar Flatterer and suddenly "dread no sin," many Medieval Christians no longer feared the consequences of sin, since they believed that they could soften their punishment with a simple payment.

…I will become a pilgrim,
…To seek Piers the Plowman, who might expunge Pride,
And see that friars had funds who flatter for need
And contradict me, Conscience; now Kind avenge me,
And send me heart and health till I have Piers the Plowman.

Related Characters: Conscience (speaker), Friar Flatterer, Kind, Piers Plowman

Related Themes:

Page Number: 363

Explanation and Analysis

This passage makes up the last few lines of the poem, when Conscience, distraught by the corruption that has destroyed Unity (the Christian community) vows to find Piers Plowman. Throughout the poem, Conscience comes to represent both one's integrity (the modern-day word, conscience) and one's awareness (consciousness). The significance of this is that Conscience is the only one who has the awareness that the Christian community is falling apart, as well as the ethical understanding that the state of the Christian community is sinful and dangerous. This ending is actually hopeful and empowering, because

Conscience remains untouched by Friar Flatterer's enchantments and faithfully committed to Christ—meaning that despite the corruption that the poem depicts as saturating the fourteenth-century Church, readers should take comfort in the fact that they have a Conscience that can help them discern evil and lead them to Christ.

This is the second time Conscience becomes a pilgrim (the first being when he joined Patience and Will on a pilgrimage that led to the group meeting Hawkin). This means that Conscience is able to humble himself and is committed to finding spiritual understanding, even if it requires a long, difficult journey. He seeks Piers Plowman, who, upon the completion of Unity, left the community with Grace to plow the earth all over the world. In this passage, the associations between Piers Plowman and Christ are clear, as Christ is the only one who can save humanity from sin. Conscience's vow to search for Piers is also hopeful because it means that Piers (Christ) exists in the world and can, in fact, be found.

SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

PROLOGUE

The poem opens with the narrator, Will, wandering around the world, clothed like a sheep in "the habit of a hermit unholy of works." One day, Will grows tired from walking and pauses by a stream to rest, where he falls asleep and experiences "a most curious dream."

Will's sheep-like clothing suggests that Will is pretending to be holy and pure, just like a hermit who doesn't actually live a morally upright life or do any good works (like feeding the hungry or caring for the sick) Will may look like a good Christian, even to himself, but he isn't. The rest of the poem will first reveal this to him and send him on a quest to understand what being a good Christian entails.

In his dream, Will sees a "**field full of folk**" nestled between a tower on a hill and a dungeon in a valley. The field teems with people from all walks of life. Some people are peasants, dutifully plowing the fields and "play[ing] very rarely." There are also merchants, foolish jokers, and overfed beggars. There are pilgrims who spend their days journeying to and from religious sites and embellishing the truth about their travels, as well as hermits who dress up in cleric's clothing "to have an easy life" because they dislike working. There are also friars from all four orders, who "make glosses of the Gospel that would look good for themselves." Many of the friars are richly clothed, "For their money and their merchandise march hand in hand."

In Will's first dream vision—an allegorical dream that imparts the dreamer with truth—he sees a "field full of folk," which symbolizes society on a local and global scale. Will's description of society illustrates what the social structure was like in Medieval England. The three estates, or social classes, are the clergy (first estate), nobility (second estate), and peasantry (third estate). Immediately, the poem seems critical of the first estate. Contrasting from the humble, hardworking peasants are deceitful, greedy friars and lazy hermits.

Brandishing a papal bull, a pardoner pretends to be a priest and tricks peasants into giving him their valuables. Meanwhile, the priests ask the bishops for permission to leave the town and live in London, where they plan to "…sing Masses there for simony, for silver is sweet." As for the bishops, some counsel the king, while others are "like servants" to the nobility. Will thinks these bishops live "undevoutly" and worries that they will be condemned.

Pardoners were messengers who distributed pardons—the lessening of one's punishment in Purgatory, as granted by the Pope. However, pardoners didn't have the power to actually absolve people of their sins. Thus, the pardoner here exploits his job title for financial gain, just like the priests and bishops who perform their services for silver and serve the rich nobility more dutifully than the Church. Put more bluntly: this part of the poem describes corruption in the Church.

Will sees a king, followed by a group of knights, and the community names him their ruler. Someone named Kind Wit appoints clerks to advise the king and keep the common people safe. The king, knighthood, and clergy decide that the common people should be in charge of producing food for the community. Kind Wit establishes "law and lewte" for people in each level of society, and an angel from Heaven appears, granting the king unlimited power. The common people vow to always obey the king.

Kind Wit, who represents common sense, is the first of many allegorical figures (ideas or concepts embodied as people) that appear in the poem. In the social system he helps create—which the poem holds up as an ideal structure for society so long as each part of it acts morally and according to Christian teachings—each estate (social class) in society is responsible for a certain task that will help the community. Kind Wit also establishes "lewte," which is a medieval word that means justice but has a heavy emphasis on relationships that the modern word "justice" lacks.

Still dreaming, Will sees a thousand rats and a few mice holding a "council for their common profit." The rats complain about the neighborhood **cat**, who torments them endlessly for its own amusement. The cat's behavior makes all of the rats and mice live in fear. One rat suggests they fasten a bell to the cat's collar so that they can hear its comings and goings. That way, they can venture out while the cat is in a good mood and hide when the cat is angry. A bell and a collar are brought out, but no one volunteers to be the one to fasten it to the cat's neck. The rats are sheepish and think their whole plan was silly.

The court procession of the rats is suggestive of the Good Parliament of 1376, which addressed royal corruption. Thus, the cat symbolizes the dangers of such unbridled power. The allusion to the Good Parliament of 1376 is helpful in dating this version of Piers Plowman (the B-text), suggesting that it is a product of the late 1370s.

A prudent mouse reminds the rats that even if they managed to go so far as to kill the **cat**, it wouldn't be long until there was another cat in the neighborhood to torment them. The mouse urges the rats to leave the cat to its own devices and warns them not to show the cat the bell. After all, the cat eats rabbits, so at least the rats are somewhat safe. The mouse reminds the rats that if the rats themselves were in power, they would cause chaos in the town by nibbling on men's clothes and disrupting their sleep with constant scuttling. The mouse claims that the rats wouldn't be able to rule themselves if they were in power, so "neither cat nor kitten shall be grieved." The mouse urges all creatures "to stick to what's his own."

Using the mouse as a mouthpiece, the poem's author William Langland highlights that while the cat may be cruel and corrupt, the answer is not for the common people to revolt because they are incapable of ruling themselves. Should the common people gain power, Langland asserts, they, too, would fall into corruption and unearth an entirely new crop of problems. While the poem consistently highlights the problems in society, it never advocates destroying the underlying structure of society—instead it asserts that if people were to play their role as they should, then this structure will result in an ideal society. Of historical note is that, even though the Good Parliament of 1376 brought some success (impeaching several government ministers), all of these successes were undone the following year—similar to the way the rats' plan is undone.

Back in the "**field full of folk**," Will sees all kinds of people in the bustling town, including bakers, brewers, butchers, tailors, and cooks yelling about their freshly cooked food for sale, and tavern-keepers talking customers into buying lavish wines. Will says, "All this I saw sleeping, and seven times more."

The busy "field full of folk" centers on earthly pleasures—beer, meat, fresh bread, fancy wine, fine clothes. This emphasis on the physical world sets the stage for a lesson from Will's first allegorical teacher.

PASSUS I

Still in deep sleep, Will sees a beautiful woman (who later introduces herself as Holy Church) dressed in linen and departing from the **castle on the hill**. Holy Church approaches Will and speaks to him gently, explaining to him that the hilltop tower is home to Truth, who is "father of faith" and creator of the world. Out of compassion for his creation, Truth has deemed "three things common to all" to keep humans comfortable: clothing, food, and drink. However, says Holy Church, these things must be consumed in moderation. Those who don't drink in moderation, for example, will end up like Lot from the Bible, who "Did with his daughters what the Devil found pleasing." Holy Church warns Will to listen to his soul, not his body.

Will's first allegorical teacher is Holy Church—the Church in its purest form, unpolluted by human sin and corruption. She descends to the "field full of folk" from the castle on the hill, which represents Heaven, revealing that the Church is a gift from God to help guide the people on earth. Holy Church introduces one of two representations of God in the poem, Truth (the other being Kind). In her lesson on the importance of moderation, Holy Church draws upon the biblical story of Lot from Genesis 13. Instead of choosing moderation, Lot drank gluttonously, leading him to fall asleep and be vulnerable to his daughters, who, in an effort to continue his lineage, slept with him.

Will asks Holy Church about the **dungeon in the valley** that sits on the other side of the field of folk. She says the dungeon is founded and ruled by Wrong—the very being who "egged to evil" Adam and Eve, Cain, and Judas. Wrong is "a molester of love" who "lies to every one."

The dungeon in the valley symbolizes Hell, as it lies opposite of the castle on the hill (Heaven), and is governed by a character named Wrong, otherwise known as Lucifer. Just as the dungeon lies opposite of the castle, so is Wrong the opposite of Truth.

Holy Church finally introduces herself by name to Will, telling him that he should already recognize her, for "I befriended you first and taught the faith to you." Kneeling out of respect and admiration, Will asks her to pray for his sins and asks her how to save his soul. Holy Church responds that Truth, a "love-gift" declared by *Deus caritas*, is the answer.

Holy Church's comment to Will is almost suggestive of Sunday school that a child attends: "I befriended you first and taught the faith to you." In this way, Will is cast as spiritually a child who has much to learn. Holy Church complicates the idea of Truth being a person, as Truth is also a gift given by God, whom she refers to as Deus caritas, *God is love.*

Holy Church briefly teaches Will about the beginnings of Heaven and Hell. She explains that Christ created ten orders of heavenly beings, gave them power, and taught them to obey Truth. However, Lucifer, "the loveliest of light after our Lord," refused to obey Christ, causing him to fall from God's graces and from Heaven, where he landed in "a deep dark hell, to dwell there forever." Thousands of other heavenly beings were damned as well, since they wrongly believed Lucifer when he told them that he will be "like the most high." However, Lucifer is the most sinful of them all and he suffers the most. Holy Church says that all people who choose to "work with wrong" will find themselves in Lucifer's company, but those who "work well" will go to Heaven.

Holy Church's teachings are directly biblical, particularly drawing on Isaiah 14:13-14. Her lesson points to the way that corruption and selfishness erode and eventually destroy society—an idea that reverberates throughout the text. In addition, it's important to note that Holy Church refers to the devil in question as Satan—even though she previously said that a devil named Wrong was the founder of Hell. Although the two are used somewhat interchangeably, the two names point to the medieval tradition that Hell is inhabited by many different devils.

Holy Church explains to Will that Truth is the "trustiest treasure on earth," and that this idea is imbedded in all people, whether those people are learned or unlearned. Will objects, claiming he has no "natural knowledge" and needs to be taught "more clearly." Reprimanding him, Holy Church calls Will a "doting dolt," and explains that all people are instilled with "natural knowledge" in their hearts to love God more than they love themselves and to turn away from deadly sins.

Will claims to not have the "natural knowledge" to understand Holy Church's teachings—meaning that he doesn't have the experiential knowledge that would help him absorb the lesson. Once again, Will emphasizes his spiritual youth and naiveté (and perhaps, the fact that he is a "doting dolt," as Holy Church says). At this point, religious teachings are just words to him.

While Truth is "trustiest" on earth, love is "trustiest" in Heaven, as love erases sin and establishes peace. Holy Church explains that Love took on "flesh and blood" on earth, and is now the "leader of the Lord's people in Heaven," serving as a point of contact between the God and his people.

Holy Church's teachings about love morph from being about a concept to a person, Jesus Christ. In her explanation of Love, Holy Church emphasizes the humanity of Jesus, revealing that he is both God and man.

Holy Church also teaches Will that "faith without works is worse than nothing, / And as dead as a doornail unless the deed goes with it." She says that many people on earth seem pure and faithful, but they are lacking charity. She declares that people should treat one another with love, since love is "the strait street that goes straight to Heaven."

Drawing upon James 2:26 from the Bible, Holy Church emphasizes one of the cornerstones of the Medieval Church, good works, the practice of selflessly doing good within the world, which is still important in the Roman Catholic Church today. Holy Church refers to love, both as a feeling and the person of Christ, as the "strait" path that leads directly to Heaven. The word "strait" means narrow, as it appears in Matthew 7:13-14.


PASSUS II

Before Holy Church departs, Will asks her to teach him how "to distinguish the false." Holy Church tells Will to look to his left, where False and Favel, along with their friends, stand. Among the group, Will sees a stunning woman dressed in lavish garments and dripping with precious jewels, red-gold ribbons, and expensive furs. Holy Church tells Will that this woman is named Meed and is as intimate with the papacy as Holy Church herself. Whereas Holy Church is a daughter of God and is set to marry Mercy, Meed is the daughter of a false man with a "fickle tongue"—not to be confused with the man Meed is set to marry, False Fickle-Tongue.

To better understand Truth, Will wants to know about false—a dichotomy that points back to Truth in the castle on the hill opposite of Wrong in the dungeon of the valley. In the scene that appears, Holy Church points out a woman named Meed, who represents rewards and gifts. In the Middle Ages, the word "meed" referred to undeserved gifts. Meed's parentage (one holy parent, one sinful parent) as well as her love life reveals how the concept of meed can be used for both good and bad.

In his dream, Will sees the preparations for Meed's wedding. Many people are involved in the wedding planning, including common people, clerks, and knights. Will notices that two men, Simony and Civil, seem particularly intimate with Meed during this process. Eventually, the ceremony is set to begin, and a man named Favel runs to get Meed from her bedroom and "like a broker," brings her to the wedding ceremony.

The word simony refers to the practice of selling Church offices or privileges (like selling indulgences which the Church decreed would lighten people's punishment for their sins). Since the practice of selling indulgences quickly became corrupt, it's clear that the character Simony is too. Civil, on the other hand, refers to civil law (not criminal law), which in the Middle Ages, was rife with corruption in the form of bribery. Meanwhile, Favel is the Middle English word for greed.

Simony and Civil conduct the ceremony by reading a "charter" procured by their friends Liar and Guile. As they read, Simony and Civil declare that Meed is not being married for any of her good qualities but for her property—her fiancé, False, "fancies her for her knows she's rich." As part of their speech, Simony and Civil proclaim that once joined by marriage, Meed and False will be "princes in pride" and will live a life of slander, disobedience, boastfulness, gluttony, and sloth. Closing the ceremony, the two officiants recite the vow, "to have and to hold and their heirs after them / A dwelling with the Devil, and be damned forever."

Instead of reading the standard wedding speech that most officiants recite, Simony and Civil read a charter, which is a legal document that expresses one's rights or property. This emphasizes that False sees Meed as a commodity that will increase his riches, not a person that he loves. In addition, Simony and Civil alter the typical wedding vows (to have and to hold, in sickness and in health) by distorting them into an allegiance to evil.


A man named Theology objects to the wedding, saying that it will anger Truth. He reminds the crowd that Meed is the daughter of a woman of legitimate birth, Amends, and thus has been instructed by God to marry Truth. Theology declares that Meed and False must go to London to ask Conscience in front of a court of law for permission to wed. Upon hearing this, False and Favel prepare to bribe anyone they need to in order to ensure that the marriage goes as planned.

The person of Truth is further complicated with the Theology's assertion that Meed is meant to marry Truth. In this instance, Truth seems like God but is not quite God himself. This comment also reveals that God intends Meed (rewards and gifts) to be used for holy purposes (by marrying Truth) rather than evil, corrupt purposes (by marrying False). Meed's intent to marry False, however, seems to suggest the way that rewards and gifts always seem to slip into corruption.

Meed, False, and many of their other companions depart for London, all led by Guile. Along the way, Soothness passes the group and arrives at court before them. He warns Conscience of False and Favel's impure intentions, and Conscience warns the King. The King promises to hang False and his companions for their evil intents and instructs Meed to be brought to him. Dread, however, overhears the King's proclamation and warns False. Fearful of death, False, Guile, Liar, and many others flee, leaving Meed to face the King alone.

As his name suggests, Conscience represents one's ability to discern right from wrong. The King's willingness to listen to Conscience, as well as his vow to punish False and his friends, reveals that the King is good and just—an ideal King. False, Guile, and Liar prove themselves to be flighty companions when they abandon Meed, suggesting that choosing evil is ultimately unsatisfying and its benefits are short lived.

PASSUS III

The King decides that he will simply ask Meed which man she would like to marry, Truth or False, "And if she works with wit and follows my will / I will forgive her her guilt." Meanwhile, Meed is shown to her room by a clerk and several minstrels who promise to help Meed marry False. As a thank you, Meed showers them with jewels. A priest disguised as a friar also visits her, promising to absolve her "for a seam of wheat," even though he knows that "learned men and unlearned had both lain" with Meed. He adds that her salvation will be guaranteed if she also pays for a window that is getting installed at the local church.

Once Meed is at court (meaning the King's kingdom, not yet the legal court), she rapidly gains a following, even receiving loyalty from clerks and priests. Meed's quick popularity shows the danger of rewards, since in practice they often take the form of bribery. The clergy's devotion to Meed shows their greed and corruption, seen by the priest who promises Meed will be saved if she pays for a new window to be installed at the Church.

The King calls for Meed to be brought before him. When she arrives, he tells her that it was unwise of her to try to marry False, but that he forgives her. He asks if she will take a knight named Conscience as her husband instead. Meed readily agrees. However, when Conscience is called in and is asked the same question, he strongly objects. Conscience knows Meed is dangerous, declaring fervently that "She makes men misbehave many score times," regardless of if they are peasants or nobles. She has even "Poisoned popes" and "impaired Holy Church."

Instead of forcing Meed to marry Truth or allowing her to marry False, the King gives Meed a third option—marrying his knight, Conscience. This is interesting considering that Truth is good, False is evil, and Conscience is the ability to discern good from evil. In this way, the King is trying to give Meed the ability to judge where and how to use her services. However, Conscience's firm rejection of Meed reveals his belief that although she has the power to do good, she is ultimately corrupt.

Contesting Conscience's charges, Meed argues that gifts are a good thing. By giving meed (rewards), a king can honor those who serve him loyally and entice young knights to undertake quests. In addition, meed is helpful for maintaining laws, helping beggars, and preserving peace. The King is thoroughly convinced by Lady Meed's argument but allows Conscience the chance to respond.

Although Meed's argument is meant to illustrate all the ways giving rewards is good and helpful, it's easy to see the way each of the examples she gives can, in fact, be instances of bribery. The King is easily swayed by her argument, revealing that although he is mostly good, he is still human.

Conscience explains that there are two types of meed—rewards given from God to those who "work well" on earth, and the bribery that men on earth give and receive. He explains that what priests get for singing Masses is the latter kind of meed, meant to support their "pampered lives." He points out that this is different from the "measurable hire" that peasants receive from their masters in exchange for hard work. Conscience asserts, "Each man shall play with a plow, pickax or spade, / Spin or spread dung—or spoil himself in slot," claiming that bribery has spoiled the priesthood.

Conscience brings labor into the conversation, claiming that those who don't work dutifully for wages, as peasants do, are slothful. Priests who charge for their services gain wealth from lack of work—they gain "meed" or undeserved gifts. Conscience, then, connects the ideas of honest labor and morality, seeing the former as necessary for the latter. This theme of labor and idleness points back to the "field full of folk," where the clergy was slothful and greedy, while the peasants worked hard and honestly.


Quoting the Bible, Meed retaliates by reciting, "He will acquire honor who gives gifts." Conscience is quick to point out that Meed has intentionally left out the second half of the verse, which reads, "But he steals the spirit of those who accept." Thus, argues Conscience, those who accept meed are "enslaved."

Meed uses scripture selectively to defend herself— she quotes half of Proverbs 22:9, while leaving out the rest. Conscience then quotes the other half to provide the true meaning. The way that Meed makes "glosses of the Scriptures" to make herself look good is similar to what the friars did in the "field full of folk," and suggests the way that clergy who are immoral but knowledgeable can use their knowledge to enrich and empower themselves, and further asserts that the members of the clergy are doing exactly that.

PASSUS IV

Sick of their fighting, the King orders Conscience to kiss Meed, but Conscience refuses to do so without permission from a man named Reason. The King respects Conscience's wishes and tells him to fetch Reason and bring him back to court as soon as possible. Conscience rides out to find Reason and hastily fills him in on the goings-on at court. Reason agrees to return to court and prepares his two servants, Cato and Tom-True-Tongue-Tell-Me-No-Tales-Nor-Lies-To-Laugh-At-For-I-Loved-Them-Never, for the journey.

Although for a brief moment, the King tries to use force to get what he wants (the union of Conscience and Meed), he ultimately chooses justice when he listens to Conscience and promises to heed to Reason. Reason's servants' names are one of the subtle moments of humor in the poem, as the succinctly named Cato is accompanied by the long-winded Tom-True-Tongue-Tell-Me-No-Tales-Nor-Lies-To-Laugh-At-For-I-Loved-Them-Never.

The group departs for court on horseback, and two men, Wisdom and Wit, follow behind closely. They, too, are headed to court but "to be charged of suits." Conscience knows that Wisdom and Wit are greedy and potentially dangerous men, so he warns Reason to ride faster as to not get tangled up with them. Conscience and Reason arrive safely to court, where they are greeted warmly by the King.

Wisdom and Wit seem like decent people, since it seems a good thing to be wise and witty. However, Conscience knows that the men are greedy. Like Meed, Wisdom and Wit are ambivalent characters, meaning that they have the capacity for both good and evil, just as human wit and wisdom can lead people either toward or away from true Christian and moral behavior.

Before dealing with Meed and her marriage, the King must first oversee a legal case. A man named Peace accuses Wrong of three crimes—rape, theft, and murder. With help from Conscience, the King knows that Peace is being honest and that Wrong is "a wicked wretch." Wisdom and Wit, serving as Wrong's lawyers, try to bribe the King, but the King is adamant that Wrong must be punished. Meanwhile, Meed intervenes and tries to bribe Peace into dropping the charges by giving him gold. Peace hastily accepts the bribe, but the King does not allow the charges to be dropped, asserting that if Wrong "got off so easily, then all he'd do is laugh."

Even though Wrong is charged with three serious crimes (rape, theft, and murder), his lawyers try to persuade the King to let Wrong buy his way out of punishment. This moment points to the Medieval Church's practice of distributing indulgences—a decreased punishment for sin. In practice, indulgences quickly became corrupt, as people saw them as an easy out from punishment and even a justification to continue sinning, while clergy saw them as a quick way to make money. The King highlights the problem with indulgences when he warns that if Wrong could buy his way out of punishment, he wouldn't be remorseful about his sins.

Reason agrees that Wrong should be punished and declares, "by the Rood, I shall render no mercy / While Meed maintains her mastery in the court of law." The King is furious at Meed for almost interfering with the law with her bribery.

The Rood refers to Jesus' Cross (like in the other popular medieval dream vision poem, "Dream of the Rood"). Thus, Reason solemnly promises Christ that he will not let Meed corrupt the justice system.

When the King demands that Wrong face punishment for his crimes, Conscience warns him that unless the common people are obedient, "It's very hard…actually to effect this." The King asks Conscience and Reason to both be permanent fixtures on his council.

Conscience's warning to the King shows the way that society in the Middle Ages was built on community and obedience—a theme visited in depth later in the poem. The King's request to Conscience and Reason indicates that any well functioning society, or individual, requires both Conscience and Reason to be active and present.

PASSUS V

Will wakes up from his dream only to drift back to sleep moments later. Once again, Will sees the "**field full of folk**," but this time he also sees Reason preaching to all of the people in the field. Reason urges the people to see their sinful ways and repent. After admonishing the common people, Reason turns his attention to the priests, advising them, "What you preach to the people, practice it yourselves, / …Live the lessons you teach us: we'll believe you the more." Reason also has words of wisdom for the King, telling him to treat his people with love. Lastly, Reason addresses those who "seek Saint James and saints at Rome," telling them to instead "Seek Saint Truth, for he can save you all."

Will's second dream vision begins. Reason morphs into a bishop who preaches to society (symbolized by the "field full of folk"). Although Reason's criticisms particularly target the priests whose sermons don't align with their own lives, all people are reprimanded for something, stressing that everyone *can fall into sin and corruption. Reason's teaching for pilgrims—to "Seek Saint Truth" instead of "Saint James and saints at Rome"—foreshadows one of the main quests in the poem, the quest for Truth.*

As Reason's sermon comes to a close, a man named Repentance enters. When Repentance speaks, his words make Will "weep water from his eyes." One by one, each of the Seven Deadly Sins come forward to repent. Parnel Proud-Heart confesses first, followed by Lecher, and then Envy, who confesses to living "loveless like a loathsome dog." Envy is distraught by his sinful life, but Repentance teaches him that "sorrow for sins is salvation for souls."

Although Repentance's actual words to the crowd are not recorded, they're clearly impactful enough that they make Will cry. This moment offers another interpretation as well, as the name Will can also refer to the human will, as in one's willpower and decision-making facilities. Will, here, himself emerges as an allegorical character who represents all individual people. Will's search for Truth and for the way to be a good Christian is all people's search.

Envy is followed by a friar named Wrath, whose "vicious verbiage" gets him into trouble. He admits that when he drinks wine, "All the nastiness I know about any of our brothers / I cough it up in our cloister so the whole convent knows it." Repentance tells the friar to keep tight-lipped about any secrets he knows and to be moderate when he drinks.

Although most of the Seven Deadly Sins are of unspecified social class and profession, Wrath is clearly a friar. This specificity in the poem shows Langland's view that hypocrisy particularly pervades among friars, who are supposed to be godly and pure but instead are often marked by overindulgence in alcohol, anger, and gossip.

Covetousness, whose real name is Sir Harvey, comes next. When Repentance asks him if he has ever made "restitution," Covetousness says yes, and launches into a story of when he "rifled" through a group of peddler's bags. Repentance quickly explains to him that "restitution" and "rifling" are not the same thing, but Covetousness claims to not know the difference since he never learned how to read. After enduring further admonishment by Repentance, Covetousness wants to hang himself, but Repentance comforts him, saying, "…all the wickedness in this world… / Is no more to the mercy of God than a spark amid the sea."

Covetousness is one of the few sins who has a real name—Sir Harvey. His title ("Sir") suggests that he belongs to either the first or second estate, as a member of the clergy or the nobility. This detail makes Covetousness' religious ignorance all the more concerning, as his title suggests that he should be learned in theology or at least literate.

After Covetousness comes Glutton, who claims he was on his way to the Church when the women working in the tavern talked him into skipping confession to drink with them. After a nasty hangover that lasts two days, Glutton finally wakes up, and his first question is "Where is the bowl?" After being reprimanded by Repentance for this behavior, Glutton promises to fast until his much-hated aunt, Abstinence, tells him he can eat and drink again.

Glutton scapegoats the tavern women by accusing them of tempting him into sin—perhaps implying the way Adam blamed Eve for giving him the forbidden fruit. Glutton's sin is so persistent that even after a horrible two-day hangover (a consequence that should have left him with an aversion to alcohol), he still asks for the "bowl"—that is, a container of more alcohol.

Sloth, "beslobbered with two slimy eyes," enters, claiming that he must sit down to give his confession or else he will fall asleep. He only speaks a few words before he begins to snore—consequently receiving a sharp wake-up call from Repentance. Continuing his confession, Sloth admits, "What I tell with my tongue is two miles from my heart." His life is comprised of "idle tales over ale," lying in bed instead of going to Mass, and being suspicious of any man who is kind toward him. Repentance teaches Sloth how to repent, and Sloth promises to attend Mass every morning for the next seven years.

In the Middle Ages, the word sloth meant laziness, as it does today, but it also carried connotations of mooching. Thus, Sloth is lazy (as seen by his tendency to fall asleep during his confession) but also benefits from what honest, hard workers make without offering anything in return. Because Sloth is so used to taking without giving, he is suspicious of all people who give without taking. In this way, sloth stands as the exact opposite of the way that good works should be freely given.

Weeping, a Robber named Robert also confesses his sins. Repentance pities the entire group of sinners and has them all kneel. As Repentance prays to God to forgive all of the sinners, the group multiplies, and "A thousand men then thronged together." Seeking Truth, the massive crowd "blunder[s] forth like beasts over banks and hills." The crowd soon comes across a pilgrim, adorned with souvenirs from his many travels. The crowd asks the pilgrim if he has ever met a saint called Truth and where the crowd might find him, but the pilgrim is clueless.

The Robber is not one of the Seven Deadly Sins but confesses right after them, serving as a link between the sins and society. Robber's confession inspires society (depicted by the thousand men) to repent and seek Truth. The pilgrim's cluelessness is significant because it highlights the way that pilgrims—supposedly on religious journeys—are preoccupied by earthly shrines and touristy souvenirs rather than actual spiritual things like Truth and repentance.

A peasant named Piers Plowman suddenly appears, claiming to know Truth intimately. As Truth's follower, Piers works in Truth's fields, "sow[ing] his seed and oversee[ing] his cattle." He says that Truth is a good master and always pays his workers on time. When Piers offers to show the crowd how to get to Truth's palace, the crowd offers to pay him for directions. Piers quickly declines payment, exclaiming that if he took their money, "Truth would love me the less a long time after."

Unlike the pilgrim, Piers hasn't been on impressive journeys to important religious places. Instead, he dutifully plows the fields and looks over the cattle for Truth himself. Piers, then, is a peasant—he belongs to the third estate, the lowest section of society. Piers, though, is immediately revealed as humble, loyal to Truth, and morally upright. Even though he's an impoverished peasant, he turns down the opportunity to make a little extra money when society offers to pay him for directions to Truth. Piers, then, while peasant, is also held up as a true Christian, and of course it is no coincidence that Jesus was also born not into the nobility or clergy but rather the peasantry.

Piers Plowman gives the crowd an overview of the directions to Truth. The crowd must first go through Meekness until they know to love God and love others—this means they've arrived at Conscience (here, Conscience is a place, not a person). Then, the crowd must then follow the riverbank, called Be-Modest-Of-Speech, until they reach a crossing called Do-Your-Fathers-Honor. After wading into the stream and bathing themselves, the group will enter Swear-Not-Unless-It-Is-For-Need-And-Namely-Never-Take-In-Vain-The-Name-Of-God-Almighty. Then, they are to journey alongside a field called Covet-Not-Men's-Cattle-Nor-Their-Wives-And-None-Of-Your-Neighbor's-Serving-Men-So-As-To-Harm-Them. At this point, the crowd should see two statues on their left, Steal-Not and Slay-Not. Once the crowd passes by a burial ground called Bear-No-False-Witness, they will see Speak-The-Truth-So-It-Must-Be-Done-And-Not-In-Any-Other-Way-Nor-For-Any-Man's-Asking.

Just as Truth takes on several meanings throughout the poem, so does Conscience. Here, Conscience is not the King's knight but is a place that the people must arrive at before they can continue their quest. Conscience, then, is a pre-requisite for the quest for Truth. When the people implicitly realize they are meant to love God and love other people, they know they've reached Conscience—a moment that points back to Holy Church's teachings that all people are instilled with the understanding that they must love God. The rest of Piers Plowman's directions have the crowd navigate through the Ten Commandments, such as the field called Covet-Not-Men's-Cattle-Not-Their-Wives-And-None-Of-Your-Neighbor's-Serving-Men-So-As-To-Harm-Them.

Finally, the group will arrive at a castle surrounded by a moat of mercy. The castle itself is composed of several structural elements, including a buttress called Believe-So-Or-You-Won't-Be-Saved and a roof made of Love-And-Lowness-As-Brothers-Of-One-Womb. The gatekeeper is a man named Grace, and his assistant is Amend-Yourself. Piers Plowman tells the crowd that to enter the gates, they must recite a specific sentence of repentance to Amend-Yourself. If the crowd does so correctly, Amend-Yourself will ask Grace to open the gate. Inside the gate, says Piers, "You shall see in yourself Truth sitting in your heart."

The castle refers back to the castle on the hill from the "field full of folk," emphasizing that Piers' directions are for an inner spiritual journey leading not just to a person named Truth but to salvation. In addition, although earlier in the poem, Grace was a messenger of God, here, Grace is a gatekeeper who allows people to enter into Truth's palace if they repent and change their ways.

Piers Plowman warns the people to be on the lookout for Anger, who may try to ambush them. Piers says that besides Grace and Amend-Yourself, there are also seven sisters who guard the gates: Abstinence, Humility, Charity, Chastity, Patience, Peace, and Largesse. If the crowd can "claim kinship" with the sisters, they will be allowed past the gates.

The seven sisters who guard the gates of Truth's palace accord to the fruits of the Holy Spirit from Galatians 5:22-23. The fruits refer to attributes that a Christian should cultivate (or, as the poem states, "claim kinship" with), including love, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and abstinence.


A pickpocket, ape-trainer, cake-seller, pardoner, and common woman all object to Piers Plowman's complicated directions. The pardoner and common woman run off in search of a papal bull with bishop's letters, but Will never sees them again.

The wide variety of people who object to Piers' directions reveals how all people—not just the rich nobility or corrupt clergy—have the capacity to reject Truth and choose evil. The way that the pardoner and the common woman fall back on their perceived safety of papal bulls—edicts issued by clergy that could lessen punishment for sins—rather than embarking on the difficult journey to Truth marks another moment when the poem identifies such easy "sin-pardoning" as antithetical to true Christian practice.

PASSUS VI

The crowd says that Piers Plowman's directions to Truth are too complicated to follow on their own—they need a guide to help them every step of the way. Piers offers to be their guide if they first help him plow his half-acre of land.

The crowd's inability to embark on such a complicated journey on their own shows that they need spiritual guidance. Once again, this supports the idea that the poem isn't advocating for an upheaval of society, but rather for the members of society to remain in their estates but to follow Christian and moral behavior. But it also highlights how the Church is failing to provide guidance to its members.

Piers Plowman instructs the women to sew clothing for the workers and sacks to hold grain while the men plow the land. A knight asks Piers to teach him how to plow, but Piers tells the knight to focus on protecting the people. If the knight protects everyone "Against wasters and wicked men," Piers and the other plowmen promise to "sweat and strain and sow" for him.

Like Grace in the Prologue, Piers Plowman here establishes an idealized, perfect feudalism, where everyone works together to support the community. Here he describes the second estate—the nobility—protecting and maintaining order so that the third estate can safely focus on growing food. William Langland, the writer of the poem, seems to imply that such a perfect feudal society is possible so long as people act morally. Modern readers might respond that of course people will never always *act morally, but Langland seems to believe that with a proper Christian outlook such behavior is possible.*

Piers Plowman promises that whoever helps him work will be provided for. His wife is Dame-Work-When-It's-Time-To, his daughter is Do-Just-So-Or-Your-Dame-Will-Beat-You, and his son is Suffer-Your-Sovereigns-To-Have-Their-Will-Condemn-Them-Not-For-If-You-Do-You'll-Pay-A-Dear-Price-Let-God-Have-His-Way-With-All-Things-For-So-His-Word-Teaches. All these family members also help with the work.

Similar to Reason's servants' names, Piers' family's names are outrageously wordy, adding humor to an otherwise-serious and sober scene of field-plowing and cloth-making.

Although most people help Piers Plowman work, some people pretend to be blind or crippled to be excused from labor. Their dishonesty and idleness anger Piers, who asks the knight to reestablish order. The knight gently asks the fakers to return to their work, but the fakers still refuse.

When the knight here actually has to act on his duty as the restorer of order, he is too docile to do so effectively. His failure, and the subsequent social breakdown, shows how Medieval social hierarchy was only functional when every faction of society is committed to community.

As a last resort, Piers Plowman calls upon a man named Hunger for help. Hunger punishes the fakers harshly, and they quickly begin to work and do as they're told. Piers knows that the victory is short lived—once Hunger disappears, the fakers will misbehave again. Despite his frustrations, Piers knows he needs to love the fakers, since "…they're my blood brothers, for God bought us all./ Truth taught me once to love them every one." Hunger agrees that Piers must show them love and tells him that if the fakers misbehave again, Piers must leave their punishment up to God. Hunger also teaches Piers that "The fellow that feeds himself with his faithful labor" is blessed according to God's word.

Hunger's teaching to Piers about leaving the fakers' sins up to God (and showing love to the sinners instead) may be a suggestion that the Church tries to intervene too much between God and man by selling indulgences—instead they should focus on loving, helping, and guiding sinners. Hunger also stresses the connection between working hard and receiving salvation—a person who "feeds himself" (a subtle pun, since it's coming from Hunger) with "faithful labor" is favorable in God's eyes.

Hunger refuses to leave until he is fed, forcing Piers Plowman and the other poor peasants to scrape together what food they can find and work rapidly to keep up with Hunger's appetite. Eventually, Hunger falls asleep after drinking ale. The fakers, no longer intimidated, return to their old ways and stop working.

Although Hunger initially seems evil, he is an ambivalent force much like Wisdom and Wit. Hunger has the capacity for good (forcing the fakers to start working again) and bad (forcing everyone to work at a frantic pace to keep up with their appetites).

PASSUS VII

Truth sends Piers Plowman a pardon "For him and for his heirs" that allows all those who faithfully help Piers work "to pass through purgatory quickly." The pardon excludes those who don't work, "Unless there's a real reason that renders them beggars." Those who can work are instructed to help those who genuinely can't—old men, women with small children, and those who are ill or seriously injured.

The pardon is an absolute pardon, meaning that it absolves Piers and his followers from punishment in purgatory and guilt from sin. Note, though, that the pardon's terms are focused not on its beneficiaries being able to pay for it. Rather, the pardon is provided only to those who work (with an exception for those who can't work). Once again, the poem connects labor and work to Christian goodness.

A priest asks Piers Plowman for the opportunity to read the pardon and explain it to the people in English. When Piers hands it over, the priest is startled to see that the pardon is only two lines: "They that have done good shall go into life everlasting; / And they that have done evil into everlasting fire." The priest proclaims that it is not a pardon at all. Seething with anger, Piers tears the pardon in half. Piers and the priest engage in an impassioned argument, which jolts Will awake.

Part of a priest's duties was to translate Church documents aloud from Latin to English for the illiterate common people. However, the priest's demand to read the pardon (and his subsequent rejection of the pardon as a genuine pardon) may have seemed like a challenge to Piers, implying that Piers doesn't have the power to interpret the pardon's meaning and belittling Piers for his low social standing. The Priest's shock that the pardon is only two lines might also be read as a critique of the clergy's establishment of more complicated rules and rituals, as such complications make the clergy more necessary and therefore more powerful.

Hungry and poor, Will walks through the Malvern Hills thinking about his strange dream. He knows that "pardon and penance and prayers will save / Souls that have sinned seven times deadly," but he thinks that trusting in Do-Well is even better.

The pardon's declaration to do well and avoid doing evil sticks with Will in his waking life. He is actively seeking the understanding to lead a more Christian life, which prompts him to undertake a new quest to find what he refers to as Do-Well—who, like Truth, seems to be both a person and a value.

PASSUS VIII

Will spends the summer wandering the world, now in search of Do-Well. One day, Will comes across two Friars, who are Masters of the Minorites, and asks them if they know where he can find Do-Well. The friars claim that Do-Well lives with them, but Will is skeptical. The friars launch into a complicated story about a boat, which Will doesn't understand because he doesn't have the "natural knowledge." He tells the friars that he will learn better if he continues on his quest.

The Minorites are one of the four groups of friars, pointing back to when Will saw friars "from all four orders" acting dishonestly in the "field full of folk" by preaching a version of the Bible that will make themselves look good. These friars prove no different. They try to make themselves look good by claiming that Do-Well lives among them—a statement Will openly rejects. Once again, Will is after experiential knowledge that he can learn firsthand rather than relying on flawed friars' teachings.

Will walks alone through the woods and lies down to enjoy the sounds of the birds. He soon falls asleep and slips into another dream. In his dream, a large man named Thought appears before him. Will asks Thought where he can find Do-Well, and Thought explains that Do-Well—along with Do-Better and Do-Best—aren't difficult to find.

Will's third dream vision begins. Thought's teachings reveal that Do-Well is just one part of a trio that also includes Do-Better and Do-Best. These three, which are both characters and Christian values, also are a subtle reference to the Holy Trinity of the Father, Son, and the Holy Ghost.

Thought says that Do-Well resides with those who earn their wages through hard, honest labor. Do-Better is similar to Do-Well but also "helps where there's need." Do-Best is dressed as a bishop and admonishes sinners. Will thanks Thought for his teachings, but says he needs more "natural knowledge" to understand what they mean. Thought suggests Will look for Wit to find the answers to his remaining questions.

Thought's explanation of Do-Well, Do-Better, and Do-Best draw on three key themes in the poem: labor and idleness, good works and salvation, and penance and repentance. Once again, Will is overwhelmed by these intellectual religious teachings and is instead in search of experiences that can bring those teachings to life for him.

Thought and Will travel together for three days and eventually run into Wit, a lanky, serious man who intimidates Will. Thought mediates the discussion between Will and Wit, asking Wit to share what he knows about Do-Well, Do-Better, and Do-Best.

Near the beginning of the poem, Wit served as one of Wrong's shady lawyers in the case of Peace versus Wrong, and advocated for Wrong being allowed to buy his way out of punishment for his crimes. But now Wit appears as a morally upright teacher. This switch suggests that much like the character himself, the human wit (intellectual ability) can be used for good or bad.

PASSUS IX

Wit tells Will and Thought that nearby is a castle constructed out of the four elements. Inside the castle, Kind has "enclosed" a beautiful woman named Anima, whom he loves. Keeping her company is a duke named Sir Do-Well, and his daughter, Do-Better, who serves as Anima's maid. Do-Best is a "bishop's peer," who also lives with the group and gives them all guidance. The group is protected by a knight named Sir Inwit and his five sons—See-Well, Say-Well, Hear-Well, Work-Well-With-Your-Hands, and Go-Well.

This passage introduces Kind, who is the second representation of God in the poem (the other being Truth). Wit explains Do-Well, Do-Better, and Do-Best as people who dwell in a castle (reminiscent of Truth's castle, Heaven, from the Prologue), perhaps implying that if a Christian is committed to cultivating the characteristics of Do-Well, Do-Better, and Do-Best, they, too will be able to reside in Heaven.

Will asks about Kind, and Wit explains that Kind is the creator who made all creatures and specifically made humans "in the image of himself." Wit reveals that the castle made of four elements is actually the human body, and Anima—the soul—dwells in the heart. Wit teaches that sinful humans have a soul "like the Devil," whereas those who live honest lives "are like God almighty."

The characters' allegorical qualities are explicitly revealed—Anima, the soul, is served by the qualities of Do-Well, Do-Better, and Do-Best, and guarded by the five senses. Wit's teaching that some people develop a soul that resembles the Devil, while others develop a soul that resembles God, refers back to the "field full of folk" perched between the castle on the hill and the dungeon in the valley—that is, the concept that all people have the ability to go to Heaven or Hell depending on how they conduct themselves on earth.

Wit ultimately explains to Will that to Do-Well "is to do as law teaches," to Do-Better is "to love and lend aid," and to "protect," "provide for," "heal," and "help" others is to Do-Best.

Similar to Thought, Wit explains that Do-Well, Do-Better, and Do-Best are characteristics that build on one another. The first involves following guidelines for acting well that exist outside the individual (the law). The second involves internal guidelines (love), but followed somewhat passively. While the third involves actively following internal guidelines for acting well. Wit connects performing good works, such as providing for the poor, healing the sick, and helping those who can't help themselves, with Do-Best.

PASSUS X

Will meets Wit's wife, Dame Study, who is suspicious of Will's intentions for wanting to learn about Do-Well, Do-Better, and Do-Best. Ultimately, Dame Study's explanation of Do-Well, Do-Better, and Do-Best is so complex, even her husband "became so confused he couldn't speak." Will asks Study to help him "comprehend Do-Well naturally." Study suggests Will meet her cousin, Clergy, and his wife, Scripture, and gives him directions to find them. As Will prepares to leave, Study teaches him that Theology is worth studying because it centers on love (here, Theology refers to the study of God, not the person named Theology). She reminds Will to "love loyally" in order to Do-Well, "For Do-Better and Do-Best are drawn from Love's school."

Dame Study's teachings about theology point out the way that Christianity centers on love. Thus far, Will has learned to love his fellow Christians as well as his enemies, but here, he learns that the very study of God (theology) is imbued with love as well. Dame Study is also the first teacher to define Do-Well, Do-Better, and Do-Best all in terms of love, emphasizing that the Christian life must be oriented toward love. Of course, these teachings feel somewhat out of place coming from such a stern woman as Study, but perhaps the incongruence makes her lesson all the more impactful—even a woman as strict and critical as Study knows that love is the root of Christianity and the Christian life.

Once he departs, Will follows Dame Study's directions and soon finds Clergy, who greets him warmly. Clergy quickly launches into his explanation of Do-Well, Do-Better, and Do-Best. He defines Do-Well as having faith in Jesus, Do-Better as "suffer[ing] for your soul's health," and Do-Best as being "bold in blaming the guilty." Clergy teaches Will that the closest thing to Heaven on earth is a cloister.

As his name suggests, Clergy represents the first estate in Medieval society, the clergy. It is interesting to note how his interpretation of Do-Well- Do-Better, and Do-Best fit his profession, just as Wit's fit his lawyerly role. It makes sense, then, that he would assert that a cloister (a monastery or convent) is practically Heaven on earth. This comment also suggests that, ideally, the clergy should be the holiest among men, so their place of residence should seem more like Heaven than earth.

Clergy's wife, Scripture, chimes in with her own teachings. She explains to Will that "neither kinghood nor knighthood," "nor riches, nor revenue, nor royal lord's estate" help a person get to Heaven. Scripture says it's nearly impossible for a rich man to go to Heaven, and Will objects, asking why baptism wouldn't be enough. Scripture explains that alongside baptism, one must also love God and love others—"it behooves him to love that hopes to be saved."

In Medieval society, only clergy members had book learning, a fact that is reflected in the marriage between Clergy and Scripture. Naturally, Scripture's teachings are drawn from scripture, as she highlights how the Bible—especially the books written by Paul—is cautious, if not outright critical, of wealth. Like Dame Study, scripture emphasizes that living a life of love can lead a Christian to salvation.

PASSUS XI

Scripture scolds Will for not understanding her teachings. Will begins to cry and falls asleep, slipping into another dream. In his dream, Will is captured by a woman named Fortune and taken to the "land of longing and love." Fortune's maids are called Concupiscentia-Carnis and Covetousness-of-Eyes. Both ladies entice Will, telling him that he is at the peak of health and can have a life of lust and pleasure.

Will's inability to grasp Scripture's teachings points to how difficult it is to fully understand the Bible—especially for an everyday Medieval man like Will. It also suggests the need for the clergy to provide this understanding to the third estate (and for the clergy to therefore not be corrupt when providing such instruction).The dream-within-a-dream that Will experiences further underscores that he is an imperfect, everyday human, swayed by the promise of Fortune (especially tempting due to Will's poverty).

A man named Old Age warns Will to be cautious, as Fortune and her maids and will fail him during his "greatest need." A man named Recklessness, dressed in "ragged clothes," tells Will not to listen to Old Age and claims that Fortune and her companions "will not grieve you greatly, nor, unless you wish, beguile you." Much to Old Age's dismay, Will is pursued by Covetousness-of-Eyes for so long that he no longer "give[s] a damn for Do-Well and Do-Better." Covetousness-of-Eyes convinces Will that as long as Fortune is on his side, friars will love him.

Old Age has the wisdom and experiential knowledge that Will lacks, so he is able to discern that Fortune is ultimately unreliable. Covetousness-of-Eyes draws a connection between Fortune and friars, once again revealing the corruption in the Church. Instead of serving and instructing the sick and the poor, friars are selfishly drawn to those who have money and power.

Will's golden years come to an end, and he grows old and impoverished. Fortune abandons him, suddenly an enemy rather than a friend. The friars also turn away from Will since he asks to be buried at his home parish where he was baptized, rather than on the friars' land. Angry, Will asks the friars why they care where he's buried, saying, "you couldn't possibly care less / Whose earth covered my corpse once you'd acquired my silver." He accuses the friars of caring more about confession and burial than baptizing converts. Will asserts that baptism is most important, since "without baptism a baby may not be saved."

As Will ages, he gains some of the experiential knowledge ("natural knowledge") he's been lacking. He's able to recognize that the friars' priorities are misaligned, as they're preoccupied by confession (which could lead to financial gain) and who is buried at their brotherhood. Will's pedagogical moment—when he teaches the friars of the importance of baptism for salvation—also shows Will's spiritual growth.

Will longs to tell other people about his dream. A man named Lewte appears and tells Will, "Thou shalt not hate the brothers secretly in thy heart, but rebuke them publicly." Will argues that if he rebuked the friars publicly in his waking life, the friars would also use scripture against him, quoting "Do not judge any one." Lewte tells Will that the point of law is to bring corruption to light, for "What the whole world's aware of, why should you hesitate / To write about it in a book to rebuke deadly sin?"

Lewte represents justice, although the Medieval conception of justice centered on relationships and was more like today's understanding of loyalty. Will's prediction that the friars will defend themselves by using scripture selectively refers back to the friars in the "field full of folk" who distorted scriptures to make themselves look good.

Scripture reappears and agrees with Lewte before shifting the conversation to talk about faith. Scripture claims that people are only saved by faith in Jesus, but Roman Emperor Trajan appears and objects to Scripture's conception of salvation. Trajan explains that he was an "unchristian creature" and was thus damned, but because he lived his life with love and upright moral character, Saint Gregory the Great intervened and Trajan was saved from Hell. Will thinks about how Trajan was saved "Not through prayer of a pope," but through "lawful love and living in truth."

In the Middle Ages, there was great concern about what would happen to non-Christians who lived moral, loving lives. The story of Trajan, a non-Christian Roman Emperor who was famous for his commitment to justice, began to circulate as an answer to this question. Saint Gregory the Great's intervention, and Trajan's subsequent rescue from Hell, shows that God's mercy may save morally upright non-Christians.

Trajan explains that "Law without love" is worthless, as are all crafts that are not learned out of love for God and other people. Continuing on the topic of love, Trajan teaches Will, "For whoever hates us it's our merit to love." He explains that it is also a Christian's duty to love the poor unconditionally and take care of them. He affirms, "we should be lowly and loving, and loyal to each other. / And patient like pilgrims, for pilgrims are we all." Trajan also points out that poverty is a good thing, because it makes a person less fearful of death and less distracted by material possessions. He thinks priests would be better off not accepting silver for their services.

Trajan's teachings encompass several key themes in the poem: the central role of love in the Christian life, the concept of doing good works out of love for God and other people, and the way that working hard can lead to salvation. Trajan's criticism of amassing riches echoes Scripture's earlier teaching but is more pointed in that it directly criticizes the priesthood.

Still dreaming, Will sees Kind, who calls him by name. Will is "lifted aloft" and sees a variety of scenes from nature, from "wild worms in woods" to "how men took Meed and dismissed Mercy." Will notices that Reason "respect[s] and rule[s] all beasts," but doesn't seem to intervene with humans. When Will pointedly asks Reason why he doesn't guide mankind, Reason tells Will to mind his own business. Reason warns Will, "before you belittle my life see that your life merits praise."

Kind, one of the two representations of God, appears briefly to have Will learn from nature, which consequently teaches him about what has gone wrong among humans. This passage is reminiscent of T.H. White's The Once and Future King, when Wart (young King Arthur) learns from an array of different animals with help from his mentor, Merlyn.

Awakening from one dream but still deep in another, Will finds himself face-to-face with a man named Imaginative. Imaginative scolds Will for being rude to Reason, asserting that Will "Praised and dispraised things of which you were not a proper judge."

Imaginative doesn't represent the modern-day conception of imagination. Instead, he represents the human mind's ability to form mental pictures to aid in memory or visualization. Imaginative's comment that Will shouldn't be judgmental suggests that Will is still spiritually naïve and prideful.

PASSUS XII

Imaginative teaches Will that an explanation of Do-Well is found in Paul's Epistle when he writes, "Faith, hope, charity, and the greatest of these." Imaginative also teaches Will about the nature of salvation for learned versus unlearned men. Imaginative tells a story of two men who are thrown into the Thames—one has learned how to swim, and one has never swum before. He asks Will which man is more threatened by the river, and Will responds with the man who doesn't know how to swim. Imaginative teaches that just as a man who knows how to swim can better survive in the river, "he that's had a clerk's education can sooner arise / Out of sin and be safe, though he sins often."

Imaginative quotes 1 Corinthians 13:13, where Paul writes that love is even greater than faith, hope, and charity. Reiterating much of what Will's other allegorical teachers have taught, Imaginative explains that love is the most important value for a Christian to cultivate. Imaginative is one of Will's only teachers to defend the clergy, noting that "a clerk's education" means that a clergy member can better recognize sin and save himself from it than an unlearned peasant can.

Imaginative points out that although Trajan, the non-Christian Roman Emperor, was saved from Hell, "he is lodged in the lowest part of Heaven" and "loosely…loiters there." He also teaches Will that rich, sinful people who wait until the very end of their lives to repent "will sound in our Lord's ear like a magpie's chattering."

Imaginative seems somewhat critical of Trajan and annoyed by Will's admiration of him. Perhaps this is why Imaginative points out that Trajan is barely *in Heaven (he "loosely…loiters" in the "lowest part of Heaven"). Imaginative's comment is based on the common medieval understanding that non-Christian "prophets and patriarchs," while not sentenced to Hell because of their goodness and morality, also couldn't fully be allowed into Heaven because they were non-Christians, and so existed in the afterlife on the edges of heaven.*

Will asks why so many clerks teach that no one can be saved without Christianity. To this, Imaginative exclaims in Latin, "*Salvabitur vix Justus in die judicii; / Ergo salvabitur*." As for why Trajan was saved from Hell even though he was not a Christian, Imaginative explains that "there is baptism both at the font and by blood-shedding, And through fire there is baptism." Without giving Will an opportunity to respond, Imaginative vanishes.

Quoting 1 Peter 4:18 in Latin, Imaginative explains a new concept: that humans are given salvation even though they are unworthy of it: "The righteous man will scarcely be saved in the day of judgment; therefore he will *be saved." In other words, humans must live a life of love in order to go to Heaven, but they must still understand that their salvation comes entirely from the goodness and sacrifice of Christ. He also explains that non-Christians can become Christians by traditional baptism ("at the font"), martyrdom ("by blood-shedding"), and by the power of the Holy Ghost ("through fire").*

PASSUS XIII

Will wakes up from his dream and wanders for many years like a friar. He thinks about the way Fortune abandoned him, how friars disregard the poor and instead pursue the rich, how Kind loves all creatures, "And how laymen are led…/ Through incompetent curates to incurable pains." Will is especially curious about the way Imaginative exclaimed "*Vix salvabitur justus*" before disappearing. Will ruminates on this particular thought for so long that he falls asleep.

This passage shows the power of the dream vision. Will's allegorical dreams impart him with truth and understanding (along with many questions) that he doesn't have access to in his waking life. Here, he briefly thinks about what he's learned thus far about love, corruption, and salvation—all things he was naive about prior to his dreams.

Conscience appears to Will in another dream and invites him to a dinner with Clergy, Scripture, Patience, and a Master of Divinity. At the feast, the Master sits at the place of honor, while Will and Patience are seated alone at a side table. The food is served, and the Master gorges himself on expensive, rich foods like "thick soups" and "eggs fried in fat." Meanwhile, Will and Patience are served a sour loaf of bread and a few simple dishes named in Latin.

Will's fourth dream vision begins. A Master of Divinity is both a friar and a theologian (an intellectual who studies God and Christianity in an academic setting). The Master is clearly gluttonous and eats like a rich noble, while Will and Patience are fed like lowly peasants. Will and Patience's food is sour and named in Latin after the sacrament of penance, suggesting that penance may feel difficult or uncomfortable but is (spiritually) healthy. Meanwhile, the Master's gluttony is incongruent with his status as a friar since friars were supposed to live humble lives and beg for their food. The Master of Divinity, then, is yet another symbol of the corruption of the church in general, and friars more particularly.

Will is distressed by the way the Master of Divinity drinks excessive amounts of wine and stuffs himself with food. He tells Patience that he heard the Master preach four days ago on penance, but that the Master omitted the verse from Paul's Epistle that states, "There is danger in false brothers."

This passage is one of many moments throughout the poem where friars alter the scriptures when they preach in order to look good (the first instance of this was in the "field full of folk").

Will thinks that the Master of Divinity "Has no pity on us poor." Angrily, he wishes that the food placed in front of the Master "Would turn to molten lead in his midriff." He tells Patience that he wishes to "prate to this pisspot with his plump belly, / and press him to say what penance is, of which he preached earlier." Patience tells Will to be patient—that the Master will soon be full, and Will can challenge him about Do-Well, Do-Better, and Do-Best.

Will demonstrates a sudden change in temperament. Although he has been well mannered throughout the poem, faced with the obvious corruption of the Master of Divinity Will gets angry and wishes physical harm to the man. Will's distaste for the man seems justified, but Patience's advice that Will be, well, patient, also suggests that to act on such anger in a physical would be a moral mistake.

Will finally has his chance to ask the Master of Divinity his questions. Between gulps of wine, the Master answers that Do-Well is to try not to harm your fellow Christians. Will immediately challenges the Master, saying that the Master does not Do-Well, since he ate so much food that there is none leftover for Will and his companions. Gesturing to Patience to keep Will quiet, Conscience asks the Master to continue explaining Do-Well and Do-Better. The Master continues, saying that Do-Well is to "do as clerks teach," Do-Better is to teach other people, and Do-Best does what he teaches.

The only other time Will has been combative was with Reason, when Will felt that Reason abandoned humankind. Will's qualms with the Master center on the Master's own hypocrisy but perhaps also point to the way the Master has also abandoned his commitment to humankind in favor of a life of leisure and gluttony. Once again, Will is directed to be patient and less combative in his anger.

Conscience asks their other dinner companion, Clergy, to put in his two cents about Do-Well. Clergy admits that he doesn't know how to define Do-Well, although he heard Piers Plowman once say, "…no study is worth a straw except for love alone." Conscience and Clergy are confused about what Piers could have meant, but they decide to shelve the matter until Piers Plowman can explain it to them in person. In the meantime, they ask Patience for his thoughts. Patience says, "*Disce* and Do-Well, *doce* and Do-Better, *dilige* and Do-Best." Patience said he learned this lesson from someone named Love, who also taught that one must love God, oneself, and one's enemies "With words and with works."

It is interesting that Clergy shows uncertainty about defining Do-Well, since he showed no hesitation in explaining Do-Well, Do-Better, and Do-Best to Will in another dream. Perhaps this suggests that the clergy is quick to teach others how to live a Christian life but that the clergy is actually uncertain as to what this means. Meanwhile, Patience explains Do-Well, Do-Better, and Do-Best in terms of learning, teaching, and loving. He explains that love is shown "with words and with works," meaning that Christians should do good works because they love God and love other people—not because they feel obligated to do good works to get to Heaven.

The Master of Divinity interrupts Patience's teachings, claiming that nothing can "…produce a peace between the Pope and his enemies" or between two kings. He calls Patience a liar, but is unsurprised, "for pilgrims often lie." Angered, Conscience declares that he will become a pilgrim like Patience in order to experience and learn more. Clergy is shocked at Conscience's decision and offers to bring him a Bible to teach him things "That Patience the pilgrim never perfectly knew." Conscience declines the offer and mutters to Clergy that he would rather "Have Patience perfectly than half your pack of books." Clergy bitterly says that once Conscience is tired of wandering, he'll wish he had Clergy to turn to.

The Master of Divinity's objection likely refers to the Papal Schism of 1379, when there were two (and later, three) different men who claimed to be Pope. The Master pompously belittles Patience, claiming "pilgrims often lie." Ironically, the life of a friar wasn't all that different from that of a pilgrim (living a humble life focused on God), so the Master unknowingly implies that he, too, is a liar. Clergy also acts self-important when he claims to know far more than Patience possibly can. It is no accident that the two arrogant characters at the feast, the Master and Clergy, are tied to the Church.

Patience packs his bag with food, including "sobriety and sincere speech and steadfast belief." Not long after embarking on their journey, Patience, Conscience, and Will come across a wafer-seller named Hawkin, or *Activa Vita*. **Hawkin's coat** is splattered with stains, like a "spot of insolent speech" or "stubborn will." Conscience politely asks Hawkin why he hasn't washed it.

Hawkin represents the active life ("Activa Vita"), meaning that Hawkin's life is marked by the happenings of the secular world rather than the contemplative life of a monk. Hawkin's coat, which represents the Christian life, is covered in stains, which represent his sins.

PASSUS XIV

Long-windedly, Hawkin explains that he only has one outfit. Plus, he has a wife and kids, and they all spill on his clothes, too. Although **Hawkin's coat** has been "laundered in Lent," he still can't manage to keep the coat clean for more than a few moments. Conscience explains to him that contrition will "scrape your coat clean," "Do-Well will wash it and wring it" with confession, and "Do-Better will scrub it… / And dye it" with satisfaction. Lastly, "Do-Best will keep it clean from unkind deeds."

Hawkin's inability to keep his coat clean for very long illustrates the way that humans are prone to frequent sin. This time, it is Hawkin, not Will, who is taught about Do-Well, Do-Better, and Do-Best. Conscience explains all three in terms of the sacrament of penance, which consists of contrition (remorse for sin), confession, and satisfaction (prayers or deeds a person has to do following confession).

Hawkin is skeptical, so Patience explains to him how "...through faith comes contrition... / Which drives away deadly sin and reduces it to venial." Patience also chimes in, explaining to Hawkin the importance of "Patient Poverty," as well as the ways that riches come between man and God and can block the path to Heaven. Hawkin asks Patience for the definition of "Patient Poverty," so Patience explains that it is, among other things, "a gift from God" and "A removal from cares." Overcome with remorse for his sins, Hawkin begins to weep, and Will suddenly wakes up.

Patience elaborates on the idea of contrition—that Christians must foster a genuine, deep sense of remorse for their sins. This means that confession isn't a box that Christians can mindlessly check in order to be absolved from sin. They must, rather, truly engage with their remorse. Like many others in the poem, Patience outlines all of the benefits of poverty (and implies all of the downsides of wealth). In a nod to his own allegorical significance, Patience calls it "Patient Poverty," as this kind of poverty is marked by acceptance and the understanding that poverty on earth can mean a spiritually rich eternal life in Heaven. Note how this idea of "patient poverty" fits with the poem's general sense that the feudal social order, with peasants on the bottom, is in fact correct and good—and just requires people to act as good Christians in order to be ideal. The entire feudal model is built on the idea that the third estate will have "patient poverty."


PASSUS XV

In his waking life, Will thinks so much about his dreams that he feels crazy. Other people think he's crazy too, as his wild raving makes him seem like a fool. Reason takes pity on Will and helps him fall back asleep. He slips into another dream, this time coming face-to-face with a man named Anima, who goes by several other names as well, including *Animus*, *Mens*, *Memoria*, *Ratio*, *Sensus*, *Conscientia*, *Amor*, and *Spiritus*. Will jokes that Anima is like a bishop, since bishops are also referred to by many names. From this comment, Anima realizes that Will "would like to learn everything that lies behind their names, / And behind mine."

Will's fifth dream vision begins. Earlier, Anima was the beautiful woman who Kind placed in a castle guarded by Sir Inwit and his sons, but here, Anima is a man. Anima still represents the soul, and his various other names (all in Latin) reveal all of the soul's functions. Anima is also "Principle of Life or Being," "Will," "Mind," "Memory," "Reason," "Sense," "Perception," "Conscience," "Love," and "Spirit."

Will adds that he would also like to "naturally, natively in my heart" have an understanding of all of the sciences and arts. Anima tells Will that wanting to know so much makes Will "one of Pride's knights," since the same desire for knowledge is what caused Lucifer's downfall. Anima explains that craving such endless knowledge goes against Kind. He points out that friars are often guilty of the same thing, "...showing off high learning / More for pomp than for pure charity; the people know the truth."

Will's thirst for knowledge makes him "one of Pride's knights," meaning that Will is a follower of Pride for wanting to know so much. This means that Will is like the friars (and Lucifer) who seek education just to show off, not to help others, just like the Master of Divinity at Patience's feast.

Anima explains that society is like a **tree**. Some branches are barren, while others have healthy growth, and this disparity means that the tree's roots are sick. Anima explains, "Just so parsons and priests and preachers... / Are the root of the right faith to rule the people." When the roots of the tree are rotten, the tree can never thrive and flower like it's supposed to. Anima explains to Will that John Chrysostom teaches the same thing—when a tree looks sickly, the roots are to blame, and when society seems "undisciplined and irreligious, without doubt the priesthood is not healthy."

Anima draws on the teachings of John Chrysostom, one of the Fathers of the Early Church. John Chrysostom was known for the way he voiced (and disapproved of) corruption among authority figures in the Church. However, the passage that Anima quotes and attributes is actually not from John Chrysostom but is from an unknown author.


Will asks Anima about charity, explaining that he's never seen charity play out in his life: "I have lived in land…my name is Long Will, / And I have never found full charity." He explains that he's only seen people act charitably when they know they will be repaid. Anima teaches Will that that's not Charity. Instead, Charity is "…glad with all who're glad, and good to all wicked / And loves and lends help to all that our Lord made." Anima explains that Charity is a "sweeter sustenance" than bread.

Will's strange comment, "I have lived in land…my name is Long Will," has extraordinary significance. This line is why scholars call the author of the poem, William Langland, since all that is otherwise known about the author is found within the context of the poem. This line also suggests that the protagonist, Will, may also represent the author. Meanwhile, Anima's teachings build on Will's knowledge of good works, revealing that good works should be freely given to all people.

Will wishes he could meet Charity, but Anima says that without Piers Plowman's help, Will has no hope of meeting Charity. Piers Plowman knows Charity better than anyone because Piers is empathetic to other people and is attuned to God's will. Anima says other people aren't as pure—many beggars "…look like lambs and seem life-holy" but are just putting on an act to receive more alms. Anima calls Piers Plowman "*Petrus id est Christus*," and affirms that he is not a fraud like many hermits are.

Anima's comment that beggars often "look like lambs and seem life-holy" refers back to the second line of the poem, when Will says, "I clad myself in clothes as I'd become a sheep; / In the habit of a hermit unholy of works." This suggests that prior to his dream visions, Will, himself may have been one such beggar. This passage is also significant for the way Anima directly links Piers Plowman to Christ, stating, "Peter [a nickname for Piers], that is, Christ."

Continuing his teaching about Charity, Anima tells Will that whether Charity is clothed in expensive furs or simple cloth, "…he'd hand it over happily to any one who needed it." However, Charity is elusive. Although Charity frequents the king's court, he refuses to attend if Covetousness is serving on the council. Charity also rarely goes among the common people "Because of brawling and backbiting and bearing false witness." He also rarely is seen among the bishop's representatives, since "…their lawsuits last overlong unless they get silver."

Anima's comment that Charity is rarely found among the common people is a play on words. On the surface, Anima explains that the person named Charity rarely associates with the king's court, the commoners, or the clergy. However, Anima's comment is also a social criticism, revealing that charity (as a value and an action) is practically nonexistent on every *level of society.*

Anima declares that people will do well to remember that even though humans suffer greatly, "…God suffered for us more." Likewise, the holy saints lived lives of suffering, marked by penance and poverty. Anima explains that even Jesus' early followers lived humble lives, as "…Paul practiced basket-making, / And earned with his hands what his stomach had need of," and "Peter fished for his food." Anima teaches that these days, it seems that the rich only help the rich, which isn't much different from someone who uses a bucket full of fresh river water "to wet down the Thames."

Anima's analogy of using water "to wet down" the river reveals the absurdity in the rich's tendency to only help their fellow rich men. Like the tree whose branches are either completely barren or thriving, the poor are ignored and sink deeper into poverty. Anima contrasts this behavior with venerated Christian figures that people should try to emulate—such as Peter and Paul who, despite their towering religious importance, knew the value of earning their livelihood.

Anima tells the story of a Christian man named Mohammed who trained a dove by putting corn in his ear so the dove would fly to him. Mohammed traveled the world giving sermons and used his trained dove to pretend that he was God's messenger. Anima explains that Mohammed's trick "…brought into misbelief men and women, / So that learned there and unlearned still believe in his laws." Likewise, friars and hermits are like Mohammed, and their dove is greed.

In the Middle Ages, many people believed that Muhammad, the founder of Islam, was a Christian who went astray and used his trained dove to make crowds believe it was the Holy Ghost. Thus, Anima's story paints Muhammad as a trickster who leads people astray. By comparing the clergy to Muhammad, Anima is saying that the clergy itself has gone astray and, rather than offer true Christian teachings, uses tricks to please and influence the people.

Anima says that even though "…Christ's Cross that overcame death and deadly sin" should be revered, "Both rich and religious" people only worship the cross that is stamped in their gold coins.

The "rich and religious" people who are in love with money likely refer to the nobility and the clergy, respectively.

PASSUS XVI

Still dreaming, Will thanks Anima for his teachings but admits that he still is confused about Charity. Anima responds with an explanation of a **tree** called Patience. Its roots are made of mercy, its leaves are the laws of the Church, the flowers are "…obedient speech and benevolent looks," and the fruit, grown by "God and good men," is Charity. Will says he would travel hundreds of miles to see this tree and taste its fruit. Anima says the tree can be found in a garden "that God made himself"—the heart of the human body. Anima mentions that Piers Plowman oversees the garden. At the sound of Piers Plowman's name, Will "swoon[s]" with "pure joy," and falls into another dream.

The tree of Patience contrasts with Anima's first tree example, the tree with the rotten roots. The tree of Patience represents the ideal Christian community, marked by obedience to Church law, kindness, mercy, and charity (in this passage, Charity refers to the fruit of the tree, rather than to a person). In contrast, Anima's first tree example represents the reality of the Christian community, which is marked by sin and spiritual rot.

Piers Plowman appears to Will and shows him the **tree** called Patience. Will notices the tree is propped up by **three wooden poles**, which Piers says is to keep the tree from falling over when the winds come. Piers explains that he uses the first pole to protect the tree from Covetousness. The second pole protects against the flesh, which introduces "worms of sin" to the tree. Sometimes, the Devil also tries to attack the tree. He uses a ladder made of lies, and often has help from flesh. When this happens, Free Will uses the third pole—with help from Holy Ghost—to "dash down the Devil directly through grace."

Piers Plowman defends the Christian community from sin, which takes the form of Covetousness, the flesh, and the Devil. In this instance, the Devil, one of the many devils in the poem, seems to refer to a figure who embodies Satan, Lucifer, and the Fiend. Free Will, different than the protagonist, Will, refers to mankind's ability to make their own decisions, guided by Christian spirit, rather than being bound by fate.

Will asks Piers Plowman about the **three wooden poles**, noting that they all seem to have come from the same tree. Piers explains that the poles "betoken the Trinity," and also explains the three types of fruit on the tree: Matrimony, Maidenhood, and Widowhood. Will notices the Devil positioned at the bottom of the tree, waiting to snatch any fallen fruit. When fruit does fall and the Devil tries to collect it, Piers beats him with one of the poles.

The three wooden poles represent the Trinity. The three poles all hail from the same particular tree, reflecting the way that the Trinity is both three (God the Father, Jesus, and the Holy Ghost) and one (God or the Trinity). The three types of fruit on the tree are the three feminine estates (social classes) in the Middle Ages, which defined a woman in terms of having (or lacking) a husband.

A woman named Mary appears and explains that "Jesus should joust for it [the fallen fruit] by judgement of arms / Which one should fetch the fruit, the Fiend or himself." Will suddenly sees visions of Jesus healing the sick. Although some people recognize Jesus to be "lord of high heaven," some people think his healing abilities come from witchcraft or the Devil.

The fallen fruit represents mankind in its fallen, sinful state. The joust between Jesus and the Fiend refers back to the landscape from the Prologue: the "field full of folk" wedged between the castle on the hill and the dungeon in the valley, reflecting the human capacity to earn Heaven or be damned in Hell, and Jesus's willingness to fight for and save humanity.

Sitting at dinner on a Thursday evening, Jesus tells his followers that one of them will betray him for money. Although Judas objects to this, he later meets with the Jews and establishes with them the signal of a kiss. Later, Judas walks up to Jesus and greets him with a kiss, and Jesus is captured and crucified.

Judas chooses money over love, loyalty, and, of course, Jesus. By recounting this event, the poem may suggest that the clergy's greed aligns them Judas.

Will suddenly wakes up from his dream—but is still in the midst of another. He can no longer find Piers Plowman, so he wanders through the country looking for him. One day, he meets a man named Abraham, who initially introduces himself as Faith. Faith tells Will that he's looking for a man whose shield has "Three beings in one body, none bigger than the others" on it—one is called *Pater*, one is *Filius*, and the third is Holy Ghost. He explains to Will that the nature of God is threefold, comprised of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost, "...and all are but one God."

Abraham is a key figure in the Old Testament. Abraham is looking for a knight whose shield illustrates the Trinity ("Pater" means father, and "Filius" means son), who clearly is Jesus. The fact that Abraham doesn't seem to know Jesus' name is reflective of Abraham's status as a figure from the Old Testament, thus preceding Jesus' life and death. Like Mary, Faith describes Jesus as a knight, suggesting that Jesus is a protector.

Faith tells the story of the time when God told him to kill his son, Isaac, as a test to find out if Faith loved his son or God more. Will notices that Faith has a multitude of souls under his coat. As Faith talks about how he is now seeking Jesus, Will sees another man running down the road. Will asks the man who he is, where he is coming from, and where he is going.

Faith's story about almost killing his son, Isaac, as a demonstration of faith to God comes from Genesis 22:1-19. The souls in Faith's coat represent the Bosom of Abraham from Luke 16:22. The phrase refers to what was an ancient Jewish belief: once in Sheol (Hades), the righteous dead did not dwell in a place of suffering but lived in bliss alongside Abraham.

PASSUS XVII

The man introduces himself as *Spes*, also called Hope, and says he is looking for a knight who once gave him a commandment on Mount Sinai. Hope says that the commandment, which is in the form of letters, isn't sealed. He asserts that "...Cross and Christendom, and Christ" will seal the commandment, and then the Devil will be defeated. When Will asks to see one of the letters, Hope pulls out a stone engraved with the words, "Love God and thy neighbor." Hope teaches Will about the importance of loving God and loving others.

Hope is another major figure from the Old Testament, Moses, who led the Jews out of bondage in Egypt. The commandment Hope refers to is the Ten Commandments, which God gave Moses on Mount Sinai—an event detailed in Exodus 19-20. Hope knows that Christ will seal the commandment (set it into motion) since Christ's Crucifixion is meant to "fulfill" the law (as stated in Matthew 5:17).

As Hope, Faith, and Will walk along the road, they come upon a Samaritan, riding on a mule on his way from Jericho to Jerusalem, to see a jousting match. All of the men come across a wounded man on the side of the road, who has been attacked by thieves. Faith and Hope flee, leaving Will and the Samaritan to help the man. The Samaritan checks the man's pulse, washes his wounds, and hoists the man up on his mule. The Samaritan rides with the man for seven miles until he comes to an inn. The Samaritan pays the innkeeper to take care of the man and then departs.

The Samaritan is another biblical character, this time from the New Testament, appearing in Luke 10:30-36. Although there are some subtle differences in the story (here, the Samaritan is traveling to Jerusalem, while in the biblical story he is traveling away from it), the core of the story remains the same: a man demonstrates extraordinary compassion and empathy for a wounded stranger. That such important religious figures as Faith and Hope flee rather than help once again attests to the critical important of good works. Faith and Hope are important components of living a Christian life, but they are not enough. One must also, as the Samaritan does, perform good works out of a selfless love for others and for God.

Touched by the Samaritan's pity for the wounded man, Will catches up to the Samaritan and tells him about how Faith and Hope fled. The Samaritan says this is understandable, as no medicine, nor faith, nor hope, can help save the wounded man. He can only be saved by being bathed in "…the blood of a babe born of a maid," and then undergoing penance. Even still, the wounded man will not be fully healed "Till he has eaten all the babe and drunk of his blood."

On the surface, the Samaritan's explanation of what will save the wounded man sounds ominous, if not repulsive. However, like much of the poem, this moment is allegorical—Samaritan is alluding to the Eucharist (Holy Communion), where Christians consume bread (the body of Christ) and wine (the blood of Christ) to unite themselves with Christ.

Will asks the Samaritan about the Trinity, explaining what Faith and Hope have already taught him. The Samaritan affirms that God is both three and one, just like a **hand** that is also a palm, fingers, and a fist. After giving Will a long lesson on loving his fellow Christians and repentance, the Samaritan says he must go and quickly rides away, as Will jolts awake.

Just as a single hand is made of several parts, each with different functions, so the Trinity is both one and three. This analogy may also point to the way that Medieval society was made up of three estates with different functions that, as the poem has it, make up a larger community.

PASSUS XVIII

Will continues to wander around the world, now "Wool-chafed and wet-shoed." He trudges around "Like a careless creature." Growing weary, Will lies down to rest and sleeps until Palm Sunday. In his dream, he sees Jesus, who looks like both the Samaritan and Piers Plowman, riding barefoot on a mule's back into town. The crowds sing joyfully that Jesus has come in the name of God. Will asks Faith what is going on, and Faith tells him that Jesus has come to joust in Jerusalem "and fetch what the Fiend claims, the fruit of Piers the Plowman." Will asks if Piers is also in attendance, and Faith tells him that Jesus is going to joust wearing Piers' coat of arms. Faith says Jesus is to joust the Fiend.

Will's chafed skin shows how long he's been wandering in his waking life. Although his shoes are soaked, Will is "Like a careless creature," because Jesus is now on the forefront of his mind. In his sixth dream vision, Piers Plowman is identified with Christ again, but this time, the Samaritan is added into the mix. This comparison suggests that Christ embodies the Samaritan's empathy and charity, as well as Piers Plowman's humility.

Pontius Pilate appears at court, where everyone is crying "*Crucifige!*" The people place a crown of thorns on Jesus' head and shoot him with small arrows. After nailing him to a Cross with three nails, the people yell, "If you are Christ and a king's son, come down from the Cross!" Eventually, Jesus "swoon[s]" and says, "*Consummatum est.*" As Jesus' eyes close, the earth quakes and the skies darken. Even after his death, some people call him the Son of God, while others call him a sorcerer.

The people yell "Crucify!" and demand that the Roman governor, Pontius Pilate, put Jesus to death—a scene that appears in John 19:6. Jesus is nailed to the Cross with three nails (instead of four), and in Latin, utters, "It is finished," as written in John 19:30. The entire earth reacts to Jesus' death, revealing Jesus' power.

A blind knight named Longeus is sent to spear to Jesus, since no one else is willing to touch Jesus' dead body on the Cross. Blind Longeus spears Jesus in the heart but immediately kneels and weeps, asking Jesus for mercy. Meanwhile, Faith scorns the Jews for making "…the blind beat the dead." However, Faith says that Jesus has still won, "For your champion jouster, the chief knight of you all, / Weeping admits himself worsted and at the will of Jesus."

Longeus' lance accounts for Jesus' fourth wound in the poem but fifth wound according to tradition. This event is detailed in the Gospel of Nicodemus—a gospel that was widely circulated but didn't have enough authority to be included in the bible. Longeus' immediate, impassioned response to spearing Jesus is an example of contrition—genuine, overwhelming regret for one's sins.

Will descends with Christ to Hell, where he sees several women approaching. The first is a young woman named Mercy, who is gentle and kind. The second is her sister, Truth, who is beautiful and fearless (in this instance, Truth is now the female daughter of God rather than God himself). Truth is confused about "…gleam and glint [that] glowered before Hell." Mercy explains to her that Mary's son has died and descended to Hell in order to rescue the patriarchs and the prophets. Truth rejects Mercy's explanation, claiming that "For whatever is once in hell, it comes out never." Mercy kindly refutes Truth's point, reminding her that "…venom destroys venom." Mercy believes that Christ's death has the power to "beguile the beguiler." Mercy and Truth see their two sisters, Peace and Righteousness, approaching, and decide to ask them if they know what is going on.

Truth, who now refers to one of the four daughters of God, draws upon Job 7:9 to prove to Mercy that Hell is permanent: "As a cloud vanishes and is gone, so one who goes down to the grave does not return." In response, Mercy recites a Medieval Latin hymn that explains how Jesus "beguile[d] the beguiler." It is interesting to note that Truth uses the Old Testament to bolster her argument, while Mercy uses a Medieval Christian hymn. This means that Mercy already knows the significance of the Crucifixion. While both Truth and Mercy are daughters of God, in the case of this debate Mercy ends up having the right of it: Jesus does release the prophets and patriarchs from Hell. This suggests the critical important of Mercy to Christian life.

Peace, dressed in clothes of patience, is joyful, as she has just received word from Love that Christ has won the joust and that Peace and Mercy are going to save humankind. Righteousness accuses Peace of being drunk for saying such a thing, echoing Truth's claim that Hell is permanent, even for the prophets and the patriarchs. Peace explains that it is important that the prophets and patriarchs experienced Hell, "For had they known no woe, they'd not have known well-being; / For no one knows what well-being is who was never in woe." Peace explains that through Christ, God became man in order to save mankind.

Peace's explanation of why it's good that the prophets and patriarchs have experienced Hell—"For had they known no woe, they'd not have known well-being"—seems to point back to the considerable attention the poem has given to poverty. The prophets and patriarchs' experience in Hell means that Heaven is an even greater joy, just as a poor peasant's suffering on earth makes Heaven all the sweeter.


A person named Book appears with "two broad eyes." He affirms that Jesus was born in Bethlehem to eventually "…save man's soul and destroy sin." He explains that all the elements of the earth have revealed that Jesus is the Son of God—first, the star that shone over Bethlehem when Jesus was born, then the water Jesus walked on, and finally, the darkness that cloaked the sun and the earthquake when Jesus was crucified. Book says that Jesus has now come "…to have out of hell every one he pleases." Truth tells the group to be silent, for she sees a spirit calling for the gates of Hell to be opened.

Book's two eyes represent the Old Testament and the New Testament, which are both necessary to understand Jesus and Christianity. Among Book's examples of the way nature revealed Jesus' status as the Son of God, is the time when Jesus walked on water (and then allowed his disciples to do so as well), which is recorded in Matthew 14:28. Book also affirms that Christianity is about love between Jesus and his people, which is the reason that Jesus has descended into Hell.

Several devils, including Satan and Lucifer, bicker about if Christ can actually steal their prey from them. Satan knows that if Christ is allowed to enter the gates of Hell, he will "…carry off mankind / And lead it to where Lazarus is." He says that patriarchs and prophets have been boasting of this day for a long time. Lucifer says he's known Christ for a long time, and so he knows that "No death may do this lord harm, nor any devil's trickery." However, Lucifer says that it is his right to lay claim to the souls in Hell, since long ago, Truth told him that "If Adam ate the apple, all should die / And dwell with us devils" (this time, Truth refers to God, not the daughter of God). Lucifer thinks Jesus will therefore not be allowed to enter the gates.

In modern-day Christianity, Satan, Lucifer, and the Devil are seen as the same being. Langland adheres to an early tradition that considered each of these devils to be separate entities, which is a traditional also adhered to by John Milton in Paradise Lost. Lucifer is the ex-heavenly being who, out of pride, disobeyed God and was kicked out of Heaven. Satan refers to John 11, when Christ raised a man named Lazarus from the dead. The devils are fully aware of Jesus' power and status of Son of God—they are clearly trying to find a loophole that will keep Christ out of Hell.

Satan points out that because Lucifer trespassed in the garden disguised as a serpent and tricked Adam and Eve into eating the apple, the devils don't have a true claim to the souls in Hell. Another devil, Goblin, agrees with Satan, affirming that God can't be tricked. Goblin says that as for the souls in Hell, "We have no true title to them, for it was by treason they were / damned." A fourth devil, the Fiend, says that for the past thirty years, he's tried to tempt Jesus into sin. He admits that when he realized Jesus would not give in, he went to Pontius Pilate's wife in a dream to tell her to persuade Pontius Pilate to not harm Jesus. The Fiend says his goal was to keep Jesus on earth so that we would not descend to Hell and take the devil's prey.

Here, the devils are aware of the power of justice, since they know that their evil trickery was "treason" and legally means that they "have no true title" to the souls in Hell. The devils are also afraid of Jesus and his power, implying that they are no match for him. Fiend admits to actually trying to keep Jesus alive on earth (so he wouldn't ever come to Hell) by appearing to Pilate's wife in a dream, alluding to Matthew 27:19 when Pilate's wife begs Pilate, "Don't have anything to do with that innocent man, for I have suffered a great deal today in a dream because of him."

The Fiend suggests that all the devils flee. He blames Lucifer and his lies for the whole thing, claiming, "Because we believed your lies we all leapt out [of Heaven]. / And now for your latest lie we have lost Adam, / And all our lordship…on land and in Hell."

The Fiend refers back to when all of the devils were heavenly beings, unspoiled by Lucifer's lies. He almost seems regretful for following Lucifer in the first place.

A bright light calls for the devils to unlock the gates, to which Lucifer answers, "Who is that?" The light answers, "The King of Glory," and commands the devils to unlock the gates so that Christ can enter. To the devils' horror, the gates break open, "And those that our Lord loved his light caught away." The patriarchs and prophets sing praises, while Lucifer is blinded by light.

This dialogue comes from the Old Testament, in Psalm 23:8, suggesting the importance of reading the Old Testament in hindsight to understand Jesus, since Christians believe that the Old Testament prophesizes and explains Jesus and his ministry. This is why Book, with his eyes representing the Old Testament and the New Testament, knows that Christ's love will rescue souls from Hell.

Christ tells Satan, "…here's my soul in payment / For all sinful souls, to save those that are worthy." Christ asserts that although the law states that those who ate the apple would die, it was Satan's trickery that manipulated them into eating it. The law also states "That guilers be beguiled," so Jesus coming to Hell to retrieve the worthy souls is lawful. Christ explains that to save humankind, he became human himself, ultimately telling Lucifer, "…what you got with guile through grace is won back." Christ refers to Lucifer as "…doctor of death" who brews a drink of bitterness. Christ, as "…Lord of Life," brews a drink of love. Christ binds Lucifer in chains—as the other devils hide.

Just as Mercy (one of the four daughters of God) believed that Jesus had the power to "beguile the beguiler," Jesus explains that it is lawful for "guilers [to] be beguiled." Although Jesus isn't an allegorical character in the poem, his interaction with Satan emphasizes what most of the allegorical characters have in common: they are all concepts that can be used for good or evil. Here, Jesus uses trickery (along with God's grace and love) to rescue the souls that the devils' trickery damned.

As Christ leads the worthy souls out of Hell, hundreds of angels sing, and Peace declares that the sun is always brightest after a storm. She says, "There was never war in this world nor wickedness so sharp / That Love, if he liked, might not make a laughing matter." Peace, Truth, Mercy, and Righteousness reconcile and kiss one another. As music begins to play, Will wakes up and calls for his family to get ready for Easter Mass.

Peace contrasts weather and war, alluding to Psalm 84:11, "For the Lord God is a sun and shield," showing that God's love can overcome evil. The kiss between the four sisters alludes to Psalm 85:10, "Love and faithfulness meet together; righteousness and peace kiss each other."

PASSUS XIX

Will writes down the contents of his dream and leaves for church. In the middle of Mass, however, he falls asleep once more. In his dream, he sees Piers Plowman coated in blood, carrying a cross. Will calls out to Conscience to ask if the man before him is Jesus or Piers Plowman. Conscience appears and responds that the man is Christ, but he is dressed in Piers' armor.

This passage begins Will's seventh dream vision. The connection between Piers Plowman and Jesus is strengthened here. The poem's tone dramatically shifts from the celebratory ending of the Harrowing of Hell to a dark, somber image of the Crucifixion. Back-to-back, these two events emphasize that Christ suffered terribly for the sake of the world.

Will asks why Conscience refers to him as Christ, not Jesus. Conscience says that Will should already know "That knight, king, conqueror can be one person." He explains that being called a knight is "fair," since people respect him. Being called a king is "fairer," because a king can make knights. But being called a conqueror is even better, because a conqueror can "…make lads lords of the lands he wins / And foul slaves of free men who will not follow his laws."

Conscience's explanation, "That knight, king, conqueror can be one person," refers to the way that God the Father, the Son of God (Jesus), and the Holy Ghost are all God (the Trinity). He also suggests that Jesus is a protector of the people, the King of Heaven, and a conqueror of sin and death.

Conscience explains that when Jesus turned water into wine, he began to Do-Well. When he fed more than five thousand people with two fish and five loaves of bread, he began to Do-Better. When he was crucified and resurrected—appearing to his apostles—Jesus "put Do-Best in train." Conscience explains that in doing so, Jesus also gave power to Piers Plowman to absolve people of their sins, "To bind and unbind both here and elsewhere."

Conscience explains Do-Best in terms of Jesus' Crucifixion and Resurrection—Jesus's sacrifice of himself is the ultimate good work. Here, Piers Plowman is briefly associated with Peter, whom Christ deemed the head of the earthly Church. This passage draws on Matthew 16:19, when Jesus tells Peter, "Whatever you bind on earth will be bound in Heaven."

Will witnesses the Holy Ghost descending upon Piers Plowman and his companions at Pentecost. The men begin to "speak and understand all sorts of languages." Will is frightened by the bright light, but Conscience explains that what he is witnessing is a messenger of Christ, named Grace.

Will here witnesses the Pentecost, detailed in Acts 2 in the bible, when the Holy Ghost descends upon the apostles (in the poem, described as Piers and his followers). Now that Jesus has been Crucified and Resurrected, the earthly Church begins to take form.

Grace counsels Piers Plowman and Conscience to gather up the common people so that Grace can distribute among them "Treasure to live by to their lives end, / And weapons to fight with that will never fail." Grace explains that Antichrist and his followers will try to destroy Conscience and the rest of the world. If Antichrist succeeds, Pride will be the Pope, guided by his cardinals, Covetousness and Unkindness.

The Antichrist comes from 1 John 2:18, 22, which warns the Christian community about a false Christ, who denies God and will oppose Christ at the end of time. The concept of the Antichrist was important in Medieval Christianity. In the poem, Antichrist has already come, and as later events in the poem will suggest it seems as if the poem sees a connection between the Antichrist and the corrupt clergy.

Grace gives all people "…a grace to guide himself with / So that idleness would not overcome him, nor envy or pride," and Grace assigns a multitude of skills, including wisdom, understanding, and courage. To Piers Plowman, Grace gives **four oxen**—a large ox named Luke, two "mighty" oxen named Mark and Matthew, and a "gentle" ox named John, who is the most prized of them all. Grace also gives Piers **four horses**, named Austin, Ambrose, Gregory, and Jerome, as well as **two harrows**, one old and one new.

Grace's distribution of gifts follows that of 1 Corinthians 12:4-11. Interestingly, the biblical passage explains that each different gift from the Holy Ghost "is given for the common good," which ties into the way that Medieval society required each estate (social class) to work together for the sake of the community. The gifts are also symbolic: Grace gifts Piers with four oxen (the four gospels), four horses (the four Fathers of the Western Church), and two harrows (the Old and New Testaments) to help with his labor—establishing the Church. Piers here is again being connected to Peter, the founder of the Church. Note how Piers himself and the gifts also connect the Church to farming. While the peasants in the third estate physically farm, the poem describes the proper function of the Church as being a kind of spiritual farming.

Along with these gifts, Grace also gives Piers Plowman **four types of seeds**: the cardinal virtues, to sow in mankind's soul. The seeds are called *Spiritus Prudentiae*, *Spiritus Temperantia*, *Spiritus Fortitudinis*, and *Spiritus Justitiae*. Piers sows each of the seeds and harrows them "With Old Law and New Law so that love might increase / Among the four virtues, and bring vices to destruction."

The four seeds Pier must plow are the four cardinal virtues: prudence, temperance, justice, and fortitude. The two harrows—the Old Testament and the New Testament—are both important for cultivating these virtues. Grace also refers to the power of love to blot out evil.

Grace instructs Piers Plowman to build a house to store his crops in. When Piers asks for wood with which to build it, Grace gives him Christ's cross and crown of thorns. Piers and Grace build the house together and call it Unity, or Holy Church. Grace also constructs a cart called Christendom, which will be pulled by two horses, Contrition and Confession.

By giving Piers the Cross when he asks for wood, Grace suggests that the Church is built on the Cross, meaning that the Crucifixion is central to Christianity. Here, Holy Church is no longer a person but a structure—the barn, Unity, that will house the Christians.

Once construction is complete, Piers Plowman and Grace depart to plow the entire earth. Seeing his chance, Pride gathers his followers and prepares them to attack Conscience, the Christian community, and the cardinal virtues. He instructs his followers to, "Blow them down and break them and bite the roots in two." Pride sends his sergeant-at-arms, Presumption, and a spy named Spoil-Love to approach the Christian community. Presumption and Spoil-Love tell Conscience and the Christians that they are under attack and that "…Conscience will not be able to discriminate between a Christian and a heathen."

Pride's main goal is to target Conscience, which means that pride and egotism can confuse one's conscience (integrity) about right and wrong. Pride's instruction to his followers to "bite the roots in two" refer to the cardinal virtues grown by Piers Plowman. The concept of roots also refers back to the numerous times in the poem when a tree's rotting roots represented the sinful clergy. Thus, Pride also wants his followers to infiltrate and break down the clergy (which much of the poem seems to suggest has already happened).

Conscience tells the Christians to take refuge in Unity, since the group isn't strong enough to fight against Pride and his followers without Grace there. Kind Wit instructs the people to dig a moat around Unity. Conscience instructs the people to confess their sins and receive the Eucharist, but a brewer objects, accusing Conscience of speaking nonsense. A vicar and a lord follow suit. An arrogant also refuses to obey Conscience and instead asserts his superiority over the entire Christian community. As the vicar abandons Unity, Will wakes up and writes down his dream.

Here, a person from each level of Medieval society refuses to listen to Conscience: a brewer from the peasantry, a vicar from the clergy, a lord from the nobility, and a king. This widespread rejection of Conscience shows that the clergy isn't solely to blame for society's ills. The poem emphasizes that all *people are susceptible to sin, especially if they choose to ignore their conscience.*

PASSUS XX

In his waking life, Will wanders the world feeling "Heavy-hearted" and doesn't know where to find food. Will meets a man named Need, who scolds him and tells him to not "…be abashed to abide and to be needy," and to instead let neediness be an excuse for begging.

Will meets the allegorical character, Need, outside of the context of his dreams. This is a fitting time for Will to meet Need, since Will spends his waking life wandering and hungry—which makes it more difficult for Will to resist the temptation of Need's suggestion to embrace being a beggar. In other words, Need is advising Will to ignore the importance of labor and to be one of the "fakers" who ruined Piers Plowman's perfect feudal state earlier in the poem.

Will drifts asleep again, this time dreaming that Antichrist, appearing in human form, destroying the **tree** of Truth all over the world (here, Truth is a tree, not God or God's daughter). In every place that he tears out Truth, Antichrist plants Guile in its place. Antichrist develops a large following, including many friars. Once again, Conscience calls out to the Christian community to take refuge in Unity. Conscience tells the people to cry out to Kind to defend them. Kind sends down Death, Old Age, and the forces of sickness, including "fevers," "cardiac ailments," and "toothaches." Eventually, Conscience asks Kind to call back death and disease to see if the people will now reject Pride and "…be proper Christians."

Will's eighth and final dream vision begins. The Antichrist appears, just as Grace told the Christian community he would. Antichrist replaces Truth with Guile, who represents trickery and deception (suggestive of the "beguiling" done by the devils). At first it might seem confusing why Kind would send down Death, Old Age, and disease to humanity in its hour of need. That action hardly seems kind at all. But this moment is similar to when Piers Plowman called in Hunger earlier in the poem to try to get the people of his feudal state to work again. The poem, and the Christianity it inspires, holds to the idea that suffering can lead to enlightenment and improved virtue. And so the "kindness" here rests in the hope that the suffering sent down can shock people into being "proper Christians and, in so doing, save their souls from the Antichrist.

Despite the momentary peace, Fortune, Lechery, Covetousness, and Simony resume their attack on Conscience and Unity. Simony talks the pope into appointing bishops who are allies of Antichrist.

Simony was one of the two characters who conducted Meed's thwarted wedding to False. His allegiance to Antichrist shows that the concept of simony (buying or selling Church offices, documents, or privileges, like indulgences) is immoral and corrupt.

In the chaos, Old Age beats Will, leaving Will bald, nearly deaf, toothless, and inflicted with gout and impotence. When Death comes close to Will, Will cries out for Kind to help him. Kind tells him to hide in Unity until Kind comes back for him. Kind also tells Will to learn to love, for if he "…love[s] folk faithfully," he will always be provided for.

Another moment of comedy arises in the accidental fight between Old Age and Will that leaves Will bald, toothless, and impotent. However, this brawl also shows that Will has been on this spiritual quest for so long that he's now elderly. His quest in the poem has spanned his life. Meanwhile, Kind's teaching mirrors one of Trajan's earlier teachings to love "folk of all factions," meaning that Christians must love all people from all walks of life, as represented by the "field full of folk."

Antichrist's followers also include seven "great giants," and hundreds of "Proud priests" dressed as soldiers and carrying large knives. In desperation, Conscience cries out to Clergy for help, saying, "…I'll fall / Because of imperfect priests and prelates of Holy Church!" A group of friars hear Conscience's call and go to help him, but Conscience sends them away "…because they did not know their craft well." Need convinces Conscience to let the friars into Unity. Meanwhile, Envy instructs the friars to go to school.

The priests, overcome by pride, are dressed as dangerous, deadly soldiers, not religious leaders who should be committed to Christ and helping to community. This may suggest that in its current state, the priesthood is more of a danger to the community than a help. The detail that Envy instructs the friars to pursue higher education shows that the clergy is rife with ill intentions, emphasizing Anima's earlier teaching that friars go to school "more for pomp" than to help people.

Hypocrisy wounds many of the Christians, so Conscience calls for a doctor, who gives the patients "a sharp salve" and makes them do penance. Some of the Christians dislike the doctor and ask if there is a doctor who applies "softer compresses." Someone recommends Friar Flatterer, but Conscience objects, declaring that the best doctor is Piers Plowman. Conscience eventually complies, and Friar Flatterer is sent for.

The people don't like the doctor because he is too hard on them—suggesting that many people prefer the ease of indulgences (the "softer compress") to the uncomfortable, guilt-ridden, spiritually difficult experience of actual rigorous penance, which includes contrition, confession, and satisfaction (prayers or deeds a person is instructed to do by a priest).

When Friar Flatterer arrives at the gates of Unity, Peace asks him for his reason in coming to Unity. He says that he is a doctor here to heal the sick that Hypocrisy inflicted. Before giving him entry, Peace asks what his name is. Friar Flatterer responds, "Sir *Penetrans domos*." Peace immediately tells the friar to leave, but Courteous Speech intervenes and welcomes Friar Flatterer inside Unity.

Friar Flatterer introduces himself in Latin as "Sir House-Penetrator," referencing 2 Timothy 3:6: "For of these [men] are those who penetrate house and lead captive simple women burdened with sins, who are led to manifold desires." In one simple phrase, Friar Flatterer reveals his ability to lead people directly to sin. Peace sees through the Friar to his evil motives, but Courteous Speech, more attuned to surface behavior than deeper intentions, has no such understanding.

Conscience welcomes Friar Flatterer and asks him to heal his cousin, Contrition. Friar Flatterer promises to heal Contrition and the rest of the sick and injured people "for a little silver" and comforts them until Contrition forgets how "to cry and to weep." Realizing their chance, Sloth and Pride attack Conscience, who calls out again for Clergy's help. Conscience also calls for his cousin Contrition, but Peace delivers the news that Contrition "…lies drowned in a dream…and so do many / others." Peace says that Friar Flatterer "…has enchanted the folk here, / And given them a drugged drink: they dread no sin."

Conscience and Contrition are related as cousins, showing how one's conscience (integrity) is directly tied to the experience of contrition (guilt for sin). However, Friar Flatterer's "drugged drink," which represents indulgences, makes Contrition dazed and emotionless—meaning that relying on indulgences to ease punishment for sin makes people numb to the severity and consequence of sin. The story here is an allegory for the practices of the Church that the poem sees as plaguing Christian society.

Conscience vows to become a pilgrim and search for Piers Plowman, for he is the only one who can destroy Pride and "see the friars had funds who flatter for need." Conscience cries out for Grace, and Will wakes up.

Although Conscience is severely critical of friars throughout the poem, his closing thought suggests that what is needed is not to change the structure of society but rather some way to reform the friars from greed so that they perform their function as they are supposed to. It is easy to read this last section of the poem as being dark and pessimistic: here is Conscience, after all, fleeing a battle that seems to have been lost to Antichrist. At the same, time, though, the poem is offering hope. After all, despite the attack by the forces of Antichrist, Conscience still has the ability to tell right for wrong, and the conviction to go in search of Piers Plowman, who has the ability to destroy Antichrist. In this ending, the poem offers two allegorical meanings, one at the level of the individual and the other at the level of society. First, it suggests that any person through conscience can seek Christ and become a good Christian (as Will has demonstrated). Second, it suggests that despite the Church's current corruption it also can be reformed and once again become a force for Christian virtue in the world.

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