

MARTIN LUTHER

A TREATISE
ON GOOD
WORKS

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A Treatise on Good Works

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Martin Luther

A Treatise on Good Works

INTRODUCTION

1. The Occasion of the Work.—Luther did not impose himself as reformer upon the Church. In the course of a conscientious performance of the duties of his office, to which he had been regularly and divinely called, and without any urging on his part, he attained to this position by inward necessity. In 1515 he received his appointment as the standing substitute for the sickly city pastor, Simon Heinse, from the city council of Wittenberg. Before this time he was obliged to preach only occasionally in the convent, apart from his activity as teacher in the University and convent. Through this appointment he was in duty bound, by divine and human right, to lead and direct the congregation at Wittenberg on the true way to life, and it would have been a denial of the knowledge of salvation which God had led him to acquire, by way of ardent inner struggles, if he had led the congregation on any other way than the one God had revealed to him in His Word. He could not deny before the congregation which had been intrusted to his care, what up to this time he had taught with ever increasing clearness in his lectures at the University—for in the lectures on the Psalms, which he began

to deliver in 1513, he declares his conviction that faith alone justifies, as can be seen from the complete manuscript, published since 1885, and with still greater clearness from his Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans (1515-1516), which is accessible since 1908; nor what he had urged as spiritual adviser of his convent brethren when in deep distress—compare the charming letter to Georg Spenlein, dated April 8, 1516.

Luther's first literary works to appear in print were also occasioned by the work of his calling and of his office in the Wittenberg congregation. He had no other object in view than to edify his congregation and to lead it to Christ when, in 1517, he published his first independent work, the Explanation of the Seven Penitential Psalms. On Oct 31 of the same year he published his 95 Theses against Indulgences. These were indeed intended as controversial theses for theologians, but at the same time it is well known that Luther was moved by his duty toward his congregation to declare his position in this matter and to put in issue the whole question as to the right and wrong of indulgences by means of his theses. His sermon Of Indulgences and Grace, occasioned by Tetzels attack and delivered in the latter part of March, 1518, as well as his sermon Of Penitence, delivered about the same time, were also intended for his congregation. Before his congregation (Sept., 1516-Feb., 1517) he delivered the Sermons on the Ten Commandments, which were published in 1518 and the Sermons on the Lord's Prayer, which were also published in 1518 by Agricola. Though

Luther in the same year published a series of controversial writings, which were occasioned by attacks from outside sources, viz., the *Resolutiones disputationis de Virtute indulgentiarum*, the *Asterisci adversus obeliscos Joh. Eccii*, and the *Ad dialogum Silv. Prieriatis responsio*, still he never was diverted by this necessary rebuttal from his paramount duty, the edification of the congregation. The autumn of the year 1518, when he was confronted with Cajetan, as well as the whole year of 1519, when he held his disputations with Eck, etc., were replete with disquietude and pressing labors; still Luther served his congregation with a whole series of writings during this time, and only regretted that he was not entirely at its disposal. Of such writings we mention: Explanation of the Lord's Prayer for the simple Laity (an elaboration of the sermons of 1517); Brief Explanation of the Ten Commandments; Instruction concerning certain Articles, which might be ascribed and imputed to him by his adversaries; Brief Instruction how to Confess; Of Meditation on the Sacred Passion of Christ; Of Twofold Righteousness; Of the Matrimonial Estate; Brief Form to understand and to pray the Lord's Prayer; Explanation of the Lord's Prayer "vor sich und hinter sich"; Of Prayer and Processions in Rogation Week; Of Usury; Of the Sacrament of Penitence; Of Preparation for Death; Of the Sacrament of Baptism; Of the Sacrament of the Sacred Body; Of Excommunication. With but few exceptions these writings all appeared in print in the year 1519, and again it was the congregation which Luther sought primarily to serve.

If the bounds of his congregation spread ever wider beyond Wittenberg, so that his writings found a surprisingly ready sale, even afar, that was not Luther's fault. Even the *Tessaradecas consolatoria*, written in 1519 and printed in 1520, a book of consolation, which was originally intended for the sick Elector of Saxony, was written by him only upon solicitation from outside sources.

To this circle of writings the treatise *Of Good Works* also belongs. Though the incentive for its composition came from George Spalatin, court-preacher to the Elector, who reminded Luther of a promise he had given, still Luther was willing to undertake it only when he recalled that in a previous sermon to his congregation he occasionally had made a similar promise to deliver a sermon on good works; and when Luther actually commenced the composition he had nothing else in view but the preparation of a sermon for his congregation on this important topic.

But while the work was in progress the material so accumulated that it far outgrew the bounds of a sermon for his congregation. On March 25. he wrote to Spalatin that it would become a whole booklet instead of a sermon; on May 5. he again emphasizes the growth of the material; on May 13. he speaks of its completion at an early date, and on June 8. he could send Melanchthon a printed copy. It was entitled: *Von den guten werckenn: D. M. L. Vuittenberg*. On the last page it bore the printer's mark: *Getruck zu Wittenberg bey dem iungen*

Melchior Lotther. Im Tausent funfhundert vnnd zweyntzigsten Jar. It filled not less than 58 leaves, quarto. In spite of its volume, however, the intention of the book for the congregation remained, now however, not only for the narrow circle of the Wittenberg congregation, but for the Christian layman in general. In the dedicatory preface Luther lays the greatest stress upon this, for he writes: "Though I know of a great many, and must hear it daily, who think lightly of my poverty and say that I write only small *Sexternlein* (tracts of small volume) and German sermons for the untaught laity, I will not permit that to move me. Would to God that during my life I had served but one layman for his betterment with all my powers; it would be sufficient for me, I would thank God and suffer all my books to perish thereafter.... Most willingly I will leave the honor of greater things to others, and not at all will I be ashamed of preaching and writing German to the untaught laity."

Since Luther had dedicated the afore-mentioned *Tessaradecas consolatoria* to the reigning Prince, he now, probably on Spalatin's recommendation, dedicated the *Treatise on Good Works* to his brother John, who afterward, in 1525, succeeded Frederick in the Electorate. There was probably good reason for dedicating the book to a member of the reigning house. Princes have reason to take a special interest in the fact that preaching on good works should occur within their realm, for the safety and sane development of their kingdom depend largely upon the cultivation of morality on the part of their subjects. Time and

again the papal church had commended herself to princes and statesmen by her emphatic teaching of good works. Luther, on the other hand, had been accused—like the Apostle Paul before him (Rom. 3 31)—that the zealous performance of good works had abated, that the bonds of discipline had slackened and that, as a necessary consequence, lawlessness and shameless immorality were being promoted by his doctrine of justification by faith alone. Before 1517 the rumor had already spread that Luther intended to do away with good works. Duke George of Saxony had received no good impression from a sermon Luther had delivered at Dresden, because he feared the consequences which Luther's doctrine of justification by faith alone might have upon the morals of the masses. Under these circumstances it would not have been surprising if a member of the Electoral house should harbor like scruples, especially since the full comprehension of Luther's preaching on good works depended on an evangelical understanding of faith, as deep as was Luther's own. The Middle Ages had differentiated between *fides informis*, a formless faith, and *fides formata* or *informata*, a formed or ornate faith. The former was held to be a knowledge without any life or effect, the latter to be identical with love for, as they said, love which proves itself and is effective in good works must be added to the formless faith, as its complement and its content, well pleasing to God. In Luther's time every one who was seriously interested in religious questions was reared under the influence of these ideas.

Now, since Luther had opposed the doctrine of justification

by love and its good works, he was in danger of being misunderstood by strangers, as though he held the bare knowledge and assent to be sufficient for justification, and such preaching would indeed have led to frivolity and disorderly conduct. But even apart from the question whether or not the brother of the Elector was disturbed by such scruples, Luther must have welcomed the opportunity, when the summons came to him, to dedicate his book *Of Good Works* to a member of the Electoral house. At any rate the book could serve to acquaint him with the thoughts of his much-abused pastor and professor at Wittenberg, for never before had Luther expressed himself on the important question of good works in such a fundamental, thorough and profound way.

2. *The Contents of the Work.*—A perusal of the contents shows that the book, in the course of its production, attained a greater length than was originally intended. To this fact it must be attributed that a new numeration of sections begins with the argument on the Third Commandment, and is repeated at every Commandment thereafter, while before this the sections were consecutively numbered. But in spite of this, the plan of the whole is clear and lucid. Evidently the whole treatise is divided into two parts: the first comprising sections 1-17, while the second comprises all the following sections. The first, being fundamental, is the more important part. Luther well knew of the charges made against him that "faith is so highly elevated" and "works are rejected" by him; but he knew, too, that "neither

silver, gold and precious stone, nor any other precious thing had experienced so much augmentation and diminution" as had good works "which should all have but one simple goodness, or they are nothing but color, glitter and deception." But especially was he aware of the fact that the Church was urging nothing but the so-called self-elected works, such as "running to the convent, singing, reading, playing the organ, saying the mass, praying matins, vespers, and other hours, founding and ornamenting churches, altars, convents, gathering chimes, jewels, vestments, gems and treasures, going to Rome and to the saints, curtsying and bowing the knees, praying the rosary and the psalter," etc., and that she designated these alone as truly good works, while she represented the faithful performance of the duties of one's calling as a morality of a lower order. For these reasons it is Luther's highest object in this treatise to make it perfectly clear what is the essence of good works. Whenever the essence of good works has been understood, then the accusations against him will quickly collapse.

In the fundamental part he therefore argues: "Truly good works are not self-elected works of monastic or any other holiness, but such only as God has commanded, and as are comprehended within the bounds of one's particular calling, and all works, let their name be what it may, become good only when they flow from faith, the first, greatest, and noblest of good works." (John 6:29.) In this connection the essence of faith, that only source of all truly good works, must of course be rightly

understood. It is the sure confidence in God, that all my doing is wellpleasing to Him; it is trust in His mercy, even though He appears angry and puts sufferings and adversities upon us; it is the assurance of the divine good will even though "God should reprove the conscience with sin, death and hell, and deny it all grace and mercy, as though He would condemn and show His wrath eternally." Where such faith lives in the heart, there the works are good "even though they were as insignificant as the picking up of a straw"; but where it is wanting, there are only such works as "heathen, Jew and Turk" may have and do. Where such faith possesses the man, he needs no teacher in good works, as little as does the husband or the wife, who only look for love and favor from one another, nor need any instruction therein "how they are to stand toward each other, what they are to do, to leave undone, to say, to leave unsaid, to think."

This faith, Luther continues, is "the true fulfilment of the First Commandment, apart from which there is no work that could do justice to this Commandment." With this sentence he combines, on the one hand, the whole argument on faith, as the best and noblest of good works, with his opening proposition (there are no good works besides those commanded of God), and, on the other hand, he prepares the way for the following argument, wherein he proposes to exhibit the good works according to the Ten Commandments. For the First Commandment does not forbid this and that, nor does it require this and that; it forbids but one thing, unbelief; it requires but one thing, faith, "that confidence

in God's good will at all times." Without this faith the best works are as nothing, and if man should think that by them he could be well-pleasing to God, he would be lowering God to the level of a "broker or a laborer who will not dispense his grace and kindness gratis."

This understanding of faith and good works, so Luther now addresses his opponents, should in fairness be kept in view by those who accuse him of declaiming against good works, and they should learn from it, that though he has preached against "good works," it was against such as are falsely so called and as contribute toward the confusion of consciences, because they are self-elected, do not flow from faith, and are done with the pretension of doing works well-pleasing to God.

This brings us to the end of the fundamental part of the treatise. It was not Luther's intention, however, to speak only on the essence of good works and their fundamental relation to faith; he would show, too, how the "best work," faith, must prove itself in every way a living faith, according to the other commandments. Luther does not proceed to this part, however, until in the fundamental part he has said with emphasis, that the believer, the spiritual man, needs no such instruction (I. Timothy 1:9), but that he of his own accord and at all times does good works "as his faith, his confidence, teaches him." Only "because we do not all have such faith, or are unmindful of it," does such instruction become necessary.

Nor does he proceed until he has applied his oft repeated

words concerning the relation of faith to good works to the relation of the First to the other Commandments. From the fact, that according to the First Commandment, we acquire a pure heart and confidence toward God, he derives the good work of the Second Commandment, namely, "to praise God, to acknowledge His grace, to render all honor to Him alone." From the same source he derives the good work of the Third Commandment, namely, "to observe divine services with prayer and the hearing of preaching, to incline the imagination of our hearts toward God's benefits, and, to that end, to mortify and overcome the flesh." From the same source he derives the works of the Second Table.

The argument on the Third and Fourth Commandments claims nearly one-half of the entire treatise. Among the good works which, according to the Third Commandment, should be an exercise and proof of faith, Luther especially mentions the proper hearing of mass and of preaching, common prayer, bodily discipline and the mortification of the flesh, and he joins the former and the latter by an important fundamental discussion of the New Testament conception of Sabbath rest.

Luther discusses the Fourth Commandment as fully as the Third. The exercise of faith, according to this Commandment, consists in the faithful performance of the duties of children toward their parents, of parents toward their children, and of subordinates toward their superiors in the ecclesiastical as well as in the common civil sphere. The various duties issue from the

various callings, for faithful performance of the duties of one's calling, with the help of God and for God's sake, is the true "good work."

As he now proceeds to speak of the spiritual powers, the government of the Church, he frankly reveals their faults and demands a reform of the present rulers. Honor and obedience in all things should be rendered unto the Church, the spiritual mother, as it is due to natural parents, unless it be contrary to the first Three Commandments. But as matters stand now the spiritual magistrates neglect their peculiar work, namely, the fostering of godliness and discipline, like a mother who runs away from her children and follows a lover, and instead they undertake strange and evil works, like parents whose commands are contrary to God. In this case members of the Church must do as godly children do whose parents have become mad and insane. Kings, princes, the nobility, municipalities and communities must begin of their own accord and put a check to these conditions, so that the bishops and the clergy, who are now too timid, may be induced to follow. But even the civil magistrates must also suffer reforms to be enacted in their particular spheres; especially are they called on to do away with the rude "gluttony and drunkenness," luxury in clothing, the usurious sale of rents and the common brothels. This, by divine and human right, is a part of their enjoined works according to the Fourth Commandment.

Luther, at last, briefly treats of the Second Table of

the Commandments, but in speaking of the works of these Commandments he never forgets to point out their relation to faith, thus holding fast this fundamental thought of the book to the end. Faith which does not doubt that God is gracious, he says, will find it an easy matter to be graciously and favorably minded toward one's neighbor and to overcome all angry and wrathful desires. In this faith in God the Spirit will teach us to avoid unchaste thoughts and thus to keep the Sixth Commandment. When the heart trusts in the divine favor, it cannot seek after the temporal goods of others, nor cleave to money, but according to the Seventh Commandment, will use it with cheerful liberality for the benefit of the neighbor. Where such confidence is present there is also a courageous, strong and intrepid heart, which will at all times defend the truth, as the Eighth Commandment demands, whether neck or coat be at stake, whether it be against pope or kings. Where such faith is present there is also strife against the evil lust, as forbidden in the Ninth and Tenth Commandments, and that even unto death.

3. The Importance of the Work.—Inquiring now into the importance of the book, we note that Luther's impression evidently was perfectly correct, when he wrote to Spalatin, long before its completion—as early as March 25.—that he believed it to be better than anything he had heretofore written. The book, indeed, surpasses all his previous German writings in volume, as well as all his Latin and German ones in clearness, richness and the fundamental importance of its content. In comparison with

the prevalent urging of self-elected works of monkish holiness, which had arisen from a complete misunderstanding of the so-called evangelical counsels (comp. esp. Matthew 19:16-22) and which were at that time accepted as self-evident and zealously urged by the whole church, Luther's argument must have appeared to all thoughtful and earnest souls as a revelation, when he so clearly amplified the proposition that only those works are to be regarded as good works which God has commanded, and that therefore, not the abandoning of one's earthly calling, but the faithful keeping of the Ten Commandments in the course of one's calling, is the work which God requires of us. Over against the wide-spread opinion, as though the will of God as declared in the Ten Commandments referred only to the outward work always especially mentioned, Luther's argument must have called to mind the explanation of the Law, which the Lord had given in the Sermon on the Mount, when he taught men to recognize only the extreme point and manifestation of a whole trend of thought in the work prohibited by the text, and when he directed Christians not to rest in the keeping of the literal requirement of each Commandment, but from this point of vantage to inquire into the whole depth and breadth of God's will—positively and negatively—and to do His will in its full extent as the heart has perceived it. Though this thought may have been occasionally expressed in the expositions of the Ten Commandments which appeared at the dawn of the Reformation, still it had never before been so clearly recognized as the only correct principle, much

less had it been so energetically carried out from beginning to end, as is done in this treatise. Over against the deep-rooted view that the works of love must bestow upon faith its form, its content and its worth before God, it must have appeared as the dawn of a new era (Galatians 3:22-25) when Luther in this treatise declared, and with victorious certainty carried out the thought, that it is true faith which invests the works, even the best and greatest of works, with their content and worth before God.

This proposition, which Luther here amplifies more clearly than ever before, demanded nothing less than a breach with the whole of prevalent religious views, and at that time must have been perceived as the discovery of a new world, though it was no more than a return to the clear teaching of the New Testament Scriptures concerning the way of salvation. This, too, accounts for the fact that in this writing the accusation is more impressively repelled than before, that the doctrine of justification by faith alone resulted in moral laxity, and that, on the other hand, the fundamental and radical importance of righteousness by faith for the whole moral life is revealed in such a heart-refreshing manner. Luther's appeal in this treatise to kings, princes, the nobility, municipalities and communities, to declare against the misuse of spiritual powers and to abolish various abuses in civil life, marks this treatise as a forerunner of the great Reformation writings, which appeared in the same year (1520), while, on the other hand, his espousal of the rights of the "poor man"—to be met with here for the first time—shows that the Monk of

Witttenberg, coming from the narrow limits of the convent, had an intimate and sympathetic knowledge of the social needs of his time. Thus he proved by his own example that to take a stand in the center of the Gospel does not narrow the vision nor harden the heart, but rather produces courage in the truth and sympathy for all manner of misery.

Luther's contemporaries at once recognized the great importance of the Treatise, for within the period of seven months it passed through eight editions; these were followed by six more editions between the years of 1521 and 1525; in 1521 it was translated into Latin, and in this form passed through three editions up to the year 1525; and all this in spite of the fact that in those years the so-called three great Reformation writings of 1520 were casting all else into the shadow. Melanchthon, in a contemporaneous letter to John Hess, called it Luther's best book. John Mathesius, the well-known pastor at Joachimsthal and Luther's biographer, acknowledged that he had learned the "rudiments of Christianity" from it.

Even to-day this book has its peculiar mission to the Church. The seeking after self-elected works, the indolence regarding the works commanded of God, the foolish opinion, that the path of works leads to God's grace and good-will, are even to-day widely prevalent within the kingdom of God. To all this Luther's treatise answers: Be diligent in the works of your earthly calling as commanded of God, but only after having first strengthened, by the consideration of God's mercy, the faith within you, which

is the only source of all truly good works and well-pleasing to God.

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DEDICATION

JESUS

To the Illustrious, High-born Prince and Lord, John Duke of Saxony, Landgrave of Thuringia, Margrave of Meissen, my gracious Lord and Patron.

Illustrious, High-born Prince, gracious Lord! My humble duty and my feeble prayer for your Grace always remembered!

For a long time, gracious Prince and Lord, I have wished to show my humble respect and duty toward your princely Grace, by the exhibition of some such spiritual wares as are at my disposal; but I have always considered my powers too feeble to undertake anything worthy of being offered to your princely Grace.

Since, however, my most gracious Lord Frederick, Duke of Saxony, Elector and Vicar of the Holy Roman Empire, your Grace's brother, has not despised, but graciously accepted my slight book, dedicated to his electoral Grace, and now published—though such was not my intention, I have taken courage from his gracious example and ventured to think that the princely spirit, like the princely blood, may be the same in both of you, especially in gracious kindness and good will. I have hoped that your princely Grace likewise would not despise this my humble

offering which I have felt more need of publishing than an other of my sermons or tracts. For the greatest of all questions has been raised, the question of Good Works; in which is practised immeasurably more trickery and deception than in anything else, and in which the simpleminded man is so easily misled that our Lord Christ has commanded us to watch carefully for the sheep's clothings under which the wolves hide themselves.

Neither silver, gold, precious stones, nor any rare thing has such manifold alloys and flaws as have good works, which ought to have a single simple goodness, and without it are mere color, show and deceit.

And although I know and daily hear many people, who think slightingly of my poverty, and say that I write only little pamphlets and German sermons for the unlearned laity, this shall not disturb me. Would to God I had in all my life, with all the ability I have, helped one layman to be better! I would be satisfied, thank God, and be quite willing then to let all my little books perish.

Whether the making of many great books is an art and a benefit to the Church, I leave others to judge. But I believe that if I were minded to make great books according to their art, I could, with God's help, do it more readily perhaps than they could prepare a little discourse after my fashion. If accomplishment were as easy as persecution, Christ would long since have been cast out of heaven again, and God's throne itself overturned. Although we cannot all be writers, we all want to be critics.

I will most gladly leave to any one else the honor of greater things, and not be at all ashamed to preach and to write in German for the unlearned laymen. Although I too have little skill in it, I believe that if we had hitherto done, and should henceforth do more of it, Christendom would have reaped no small advantage, and have been more benefited by this than by the great, deep books and questiones, which are used only in the schools, among the learned.

Then, too, I have never forced or begged any one to hear me, or to read my sermons. I have freely ministered in the Church of that which God has given me and which I owe the Church. Whoever likes it not, may hear and read what others have to say. And if they are not willing to be my debtors, it matters little. For me it is enough, and even more than too much, that some laymen condescend to read what I say. Even though there were nothing else to urge me, it should be more than sufficient that I have learned that your princely Grace is pleased with such German books and is eager to receive instruction in Good Works and the Faith, with which instruction it was my duty, humbly and with all diligence to serve you.

Therefore, in dutiful humility I pray that your princely Grace may accept this offering of mine with a gracious mind, until, if God grant me time, I prepare a German exposition of the Faith in its entirety. For at this time I have wished to show how in all good works we should practice and make use of faith, and let faith be the chief work. If God permit, I will treat at another time

of the Faith itself—how we are daily to pray or recite it.

I humbly commend myself herewith to your princely Grace,
Your Princely Grace's Humble Chaplain,

DR. MARTIN LUTHER.

From Wittenberg, March 29th, A. D. 1520.

THE TREATISE

I. We ought first to know that there are no good works except those which God has commanded, even as there is no sin except that which God has forbidden. Therefore whoever wishes to know and to do good works needs nothing else than to know God's commandments. Thus Christ says, Matthew xix, "If thou wilt enter into life, keep the commandments." And when the young man asks Him, Matthew xix, what he shall do that he may inherit eternal life, Christ sets before him naught else but the Ten Commandments. Accordingly, we must learn how to distinguish among good works from the Commandments of God, and not from the appearance, the magnitude, or the number of the works themselves, nor from the judgment of men or of human law or custom, as we see has been done and still is done, because we are blind and despise the divine Commandments.

II. The first and highest, the most precious of all good works is faith in Christ, as He says, John vi. When the Jews asked Him: "What shall we do that we may work the works of God?" He answered: "This is the work of God, that ye believe on Him Whom He hath sent." When we hear or preach this word, we hasten over it and deem it a very little thing and easy to do, whereas we ought here to pause a long time and to ponder it well. For in this work all good works must be done and receive from it the inflow of their goodness, like a loan. This we must put

bluntly, that men may understand it.

We find many who pray, fast, establish endowments, do this or that, lead a good life before men, and yet if you should ask them whether they are sure that what they do pleases God, they say, "No"; they do not know, or they doubt. And there are some very learned men, who mislead them, and say that it is not necessary to be sure of this; and yet, on the other hand, these same men do nothing else but teach good works. Now all these works are done outside of faith, therefore they are nothing and altogether dead. For as their conscience stands toward God and as it believes, so also are the works which grow out of it. Now they have no faith, no good conscience toward God, therefore the works lack their head, and all their life and goodness is nothing. Hence it comes that when I exalt faith and reject such works done without faith, they accuse me of forbidding good works, when in truth I am trying hard to teach real good works of faith.

III. If you ask further, whether they count it also a good work when they work at their trade, walk, stand, eat, drink, sleep, and do all kinds of works for the nourishment of the body or for the common welfare, and whether they believe that God takes pleasure in them because of such works, you will find that they say, "No"; and they define good works so narrowly that they are made to consist only of praying in church, fasting, and almsgiving. Other works they consider to be in vain, and think that God cares nothing for them. So through their damnable unbelief they curtail and lessen the service of God, Who is served

by all things whatsoever that are done, spoken or thought in faith.

So teaches Ecclesiastes ix: "Go thy way with joy, eat and drink, and know that God accepteth thy works. Let thy garments be always white; and let thy head lack no ointment. Live joyfully with the wife whom thou lovest all the days of the life of thy vanity." "Let thy garments be always white," that is, let all our works be good, whatever they may be, without any distinction. And they are white when I am certain and believe that they please God. Then shall the head of my soul never lack the ointment of a joyful conscience.

So Christ says, John viii: "I do always those things that please Him." And St. John says, I. John iii: "Hereby we know that we are of the truth, if we can comfort our hearts before Him and have a good confidence. And if our heart condemns or frets us, God is greater than our heart, and we have confidence, that whatsoever we ask, we shall receive of Him, because we keep His Commandments, and do those things that are pleasing in His sight." Again: "Whosoever is born of God, that is, whoever believes and trusts God, doth not commit sin, and cannot sin." Again, Psalm xxxiv: "None of them that trust in Him shall do sin." And in Psalm ii: "Blessed are all they that put their trust in Him." If this be true, then all that they do must be good, or the evil that they do must be quickly forgiven. Behold, then, why I exalt faith so greatly, draw all works into it, and reject all works which do not flow from it.

IV. Now every one can note and tell for himself when he

does what is good or what is not good; for if he finds his heart confident that it pleases God, the work is good, even if it were so small a thing as picking up a straw. If confidence is absent, or if he doubts, the work is not good, although it should raise all the dead and the man should give himself to be burned. This is the teaching of St. Paul, Romans xiv: "Whatsoever is not done of or in faith is sin." Faith, as the chief work, and no other work, has given us the name of "believers on Christ." For all other works a heathen, a Jew, a Turk, a sinner, may also do; but to trust firmly that he pleases God, is possible only for a Christian who is enlightened and strengthened by grace.

That these words seem strange, and that some call me a heretic because of them, is due to the fact that men have followed blind reason and heathen ways, have set faith not above, but beside other virtues, and have given it a work of its own, apart from all works of the other virtues; although faith alone makes all other works good, acceptable and worthy, in that it trusts God and does not doubt that for it all things that a man does are well done. Indeed, they have not let faith remain a work, but have made a habitus of it, as they say, although Scripture gives the name of a good, divine work to no work except to faith alone. Therefore it is no wonder that they have become blind and leaders of the blind. And this faith brings with it at once love, peace, joy and hope. For God gives His Spirit at once to him who trusts Him, as St. Paul says to the Galatians: "You received the Spirit not because of your good works, but when you believed the Word of God."

V. In this faith all works become equal, and one is like the other; all distinctions between works fall away, whether they be great, small, short, long, few or many. For the works are acceptable not for their own sake, but because of the faith which alone is, works and lives in each and every work without distinction, however numerous and various they are, just as all the members of the body live, work and have their name from the head, and without the head no member can live, work and have a name.

From which it further follows that a Christian who lives in this faith has no need of a teacher of good works, but whatever he finds to do he does, and all is well done; as Samuel said to Saul: "The Spirit of the Lord will come upon thee, and thou shalt be turned into another man; then do thou as occasion serves thee; for God is with thee." So also we read of St. Anna, Samuel's mother: "When she believed the priest Eli who promised her God's grace, she went home in joy and peace, and from that time no more turned hither and thither," that is, whatever occurred, it was all one to her. St. Paul also says: "Where the Spirit of Christ is, there all is free." For faith does not permit itself to be bound to any work, nor does it allow any work to be taken from it, but, as the First Psalm says, "He bringeth forth his fruit in his season," that is, as a matter of course.

VI. This we may see in a common human example. When a man and a woman love and are pleased with each other, and thoroughly believe in their love, who teaches them how they are

to behave, what they are to do, leave undone, say, not say, think? Confidence alone teaches them all this, and more. They make no difference in works: they do the great, the long, the much, as gladly as the small, the short, the little, and vice versa; and that too with joyful, peaceful, confident hearts, and each is a free companion of the other. But where there is a doubt, search is made for what is best; then a distinction of works is imagined whereby a man may win favor; and yet he goes about it with a heavy heart, and great disrelish; he is, as it were, taken captive, more than half in despair, and often makes a fool of himself.

So a Christian who lives in this confidence toward God, a knows all things, can do all things, undertakes all things that are to be done, and does everything cheerfully and freely; not that he may gather many merits and good works, but because it is a pleasure for him to please God thereby, and he serves God purely for nothing, content that his service pleases God. On the other hand, he who is not at one with God, or doubts, hunts and worries in what way he may do enough and with many works move God. He runs to St. James of Compostella, to Rome, to Jerusalem, hither and yon, prays St. Bridget's prayer and the rest, fasts on this day and on that, makes confession here, and makes confession there, questions this man and that, and yet finds no peace. He does all this with great effort, despair and disrelish of heart, so that the Scriptures rightly call such works in Hebrew Avenama, that is, labor and travail. And even then they are not good works, and are all lost. Many have been crazed thereby; their fear has

brought them into all manner of misery. Of these it is written, Wisdom of Solomon v: "We have wearied ourselves in the wrong way; and have gone through deserts, where there lay no way; but as for the way of the Lord, we have not known it, and the sun of righteousness rose not upon us."

VII. In these works faith is still slight and weak; let us ask further, whether they believe that they are well-pleasing to God when they suffer in body, property, honor, friends, or whatever they have, and believe that God of His mercy appoints their sufferings and difficulties for them, whether they be small or great. This is real strength, to trust in God when to all our senses and reason He appears to be angry; and to have greater confidence in Him than we feel. Here He is hidden, as the bride says in the Song of Songs: "Behold he standeth behind our wall, he looketh forth at the windows"; that is, He stands hidden among the sufferings, which would separate us from Him like a wall, yea, like a wall of stone, and yet He looks upon me and does not leave me, for He is standing and is ready graciously to help, and through the window of dim faith He permits Himself to be seen. And Jeremiah says in Lamentations, "He casts off men, but He does it not willingly."

This faith they do not know at all, and give up, thinking that God has forsaken them and is become their enemy; they even lay the blame of their ills on men and devils, and have no confidence at all in God. For this reason, too, their suffering is always an offence and harmful to them, and yet they go and do some good

works, as they think, and are not aware of their unbelief. But they who in such suffering trust God and retain a good, firm confidence in Him, and believe that He is pleased with them, these see in their sufferings and afflictions nothing but precious merits and the rarest possessions, the value of which no one can estimate. For faith and confidence make precious before God all that which others think most shameful, so that it is written even of death in Psalm cxvi, "Precious in the sight of the Lord is the death of His saints." And just as the confidence and faith are better, higher and stronger at this stage than in the first stage, so and to the same degree do the sufferings which are borne in this faith excel all works of faith. Therefore between such works and sufferings there is an immeasurable difference and the sufferings are infinitely better.

VIII. Beyond all this is the highest stage of faith, when; God punishes the conscience not only with temporal sufferings, but with death, hell, and sin, and refuses grace and mercy, as though it were His will to condemn and to be angry eternally. This few men experience, but David cries out in Psalm vi, "O Lord, rebuke me not in Thine anger." To believe at such times that God, in His mercy, is pleased with us, is the highest work that can be done by and in the creature; but of this the work-righteous and doers of good works know nothing at all. For how could they here look for good things and grace from God, as long as they are not certain in their works, and doubt even on the lowest step of faith.

In this way I have, as I said, always praised faith, and rejected

all works which are done without such faith, in order thereby to lead men from the false, pretentious, pharisaic, unbelieving good works, with which all monastic houses, churches, homes, low and higher classes are overfilled, and lead them to the true, genuine, thoroughly good, believing works. In this no one opposes me except the unclean beasts, which do not divide the hoof, as the Law of Moses decrees; who will suffer no distinction among good works, but go lumbering along: if only they pray, fast, establish endowments, go to confession, and do enough, everything shall be good, although in all this they have had no faith in God's grace and approval. Indeed, they consider the works best of all, when they have done many, great and long works without any such confidence, and they look for good only after the works are done; and so they build their confidence not on divine favor, but on the works they have done, that is, on sand and water, from which they must at last take a cruel fall, as Christ says, Matthew vii. This good-will and favor, on which our confidence rests, was proclaimed by the angels from heaven, when they sang on Christmas night: "Gloria in excelsis Deo, Glory to God in the highest, peace to earth, gracious favor to man."

IX. Now this is the work of the First Commandment, which commands: "Thou shalt have no other gods," which means: "Since I alone am God, thou shalt place all thy confidence, trust and faith on Me alone, and on no one else." For that is not to have a god, if you call him God only with your lips, or worship

him with the knees or bodily gestures; but if you trust Him with the heart, and look to Him for all good, grace and favor, whether in works or sufferings, in life or death, in joy or sorrow; as the Lord Christ says to the heathen woman, John iv: "I say unto thee, they that worship God must worship Him in spirit and in truth." And this faith, faithfulness, confidence deep in the heart, is the true fulfilling of the First Commandment; without this there is no other work that is able to satisfy this Commandment. And as this Commandment is the very first, highest and best, from which all the others proceed, in which they exist, and by which they are directed and measured, so also its work, that is, the faith or confidence in God's favor at all times, is the very first, highest and best, from which all others must proceed, exist, remain, be directed and measured. Compared with this, other works are just as if the other Commandments were without the First, and there were no God, Therefore St. Augustine well says that the works of the First Commandment are faith, hope and love. As I said above, such faith and confidence bring love and hope with them. Nay, if we see it aright, love is the first, or comes at the same instant with faith. For I could not trust God, if I did not think that He wished to be favorable and to love me, which leads me, in turn, to love Him and to trust Him heartily and to look to Him for all good things.

X. Now you see for yourself that all those who do not at all times trust God and do not in all their works or sufferings, life and death, trust in His favor, grace and good-will, but seek

His favor in other things or in themselves, do not keep this Commandment, and practise real idolatry, even if they were to do the works of all the other Commandments, and in addition had all the prayers, fasting, obedience, patience, chastity, and innocence of all the saints combined. For the chief work is not present, without which all the others are nothing but mere sham, show and pretence, with nothing back of them; against which Christ warns us, Matthew vii: "Beware of false prophets, which come to you in sheep's clothing." Such are all who wish with their many good works, as they say, to make God favorable to themselves, and to buy God's grace from Him, as if He were a huckster or a day-laborer, unwilling to give His grace and favor for nothing. These are the most perverse people on earth, who will hardly or never be converted to the right way. Such too are all who in adversity run hither and thither, and look for counsel and help everywhere except from God, from Whom they are most urgently commanded to seek it; whom the Prophet Isaiah reproves thus, Isaiah ix: "The mad people turneth not to Him that smiteth them"; that is, God smote them and sent them sufferings and all kinds of adversity, that they should run to Him and trust Him. But they run away from Him to men, now to Egypt, now to Assyria, perchance also to the devil; and of such idolatry much is written in the same Prophet and in the Books of the Kings. This is also the way of all holy hypocrites when they are in trouble: they do not run to God, but flee from Him, and only think of how they may get rid of their trouble through their own efforts

or through human help, and yet they consider themselves and let others consider them pious people.

XI. This is what St. Paul means in many places, where he ascribes so much to faith, that he says: *Justus ex fide sua vivit*, "the righteous man draws his life out of his faith," and faith is that because of which he is counted righteous before God. If righteousness consists of faith, it is clear that faith fulfils all commandments and makes all works righteous, since no one is justified except he keep all the commands of God. Again, the works can justify no one before God without faith. So utterly and roundly does the Apostle reject works and praise faith, that some have taken offence at his words and say: "Well, then, we will do no more good works," although he condemns such men as erring and foolish.

So men still do. When we reject the great, pretentious works of our time, which are done entirely without faith, they say: Men are only to believe and not to do anything good. For nowadays they say that the works of the First Commandment are singing, reading, organ-playing, reading the mass, saying matins and vespers and the other hours, the founding and decorating of churches, altars, and monastic houses, the gathering of bells, jewels, garments, trinkets and treasures, running to Rome and to the saints. Further, when we are dressed up and bow, kneel, pray the rosary and the Psalter, and all this not before an idol, but before the holy cross of God or the pictures of His saints: this we call honoring and worshiping God, and, according to the First

Commandment, "having no other gods"; although these things usurers, adulterers and all manner of sinners can do too, and do them daily.

Of course, if these things are done with such faith that we believe that they please God, then they are praiseworthy, not because of their virtue, but because of such faith, for which all works are of equal value, as has been said. But if we doubt or do not believe that God is gracious to us and is pleased with us, or if we presumptuously expect to please Him only through and after our works, then it is all pure deception, outwardly honoring God, but inwardly setting up self as a false god. This is the reason why I have so often spoken against the display, magnificence and multitude of such works and have rejected them, because it is as clear as day that they are not only done in doubt or without faith, but there is not one in a thousand who does not set his confidence upon the works, expecting by them to win God's favor and anticipate His grace; and so they make a fair of them, a thing which God cannot endure, since He has promised His grace freely, and wills that we begin by trusting that grace, and in it perform all works, whatever they may be.

XII. Note for yourself, then, how far apart these two are: keeping the First Commandment with outward works only, and keeping it with inward trust. For this last makes true, living children of God, the other only makes worse idolatry and the most mischievous hypocrites on earth, who with their apparent righteousness lead unnumbered people into their way, and yet

allow them to be without faith, so that they are miserably misled, and are caught in the pitiable babbling and mummery. Of such Christ says, Matthew xxiv: "Beware, if any man shall say unto you, Lo, here is Christ, or there"; and John iv: "I say unto thee, the hour cometh, when ye shall neither in this mountain nor yet at Jerusalem worship God, for the Father seeketh spiritual worshipers."

These and similar passages have moved me and ought to move everyone to reject the great display of bulls, seals, flags, indulgences, by which the poor folk are led to build churches, to give, to endow, to pray, and yet faith is not mentioned, and is even suppressed. For since faith knows no distinction among works, such exaltation and urging of one work above another cannot exist beside faith. For faith desires to be the only service of God, and will grant this name and honor to no other work, except in so far as faith imparts it, as it does when the work is done in faith and by faith. This perversion is indicated in the Old Testament, when the Jews left the Temple and sacrificed at other places, in the green parks and on the mountains. This is what these men also do: they are zealous to do all works, but this chief work of faith they regard not at all.

XIII. Where now are they who ask, what works are good; what they shall do; how they shall be religious? Yes, and where are they who say that when we preach of faith, we shall neither teach nor do works? Does not this First Commandment give us more work to do than any man can do? If a man were a thousand men,

or all men, or all creatures, this Commandment would yet ask enough of him, and more than enough, since he is commanded to live and walk at all times in faith and confidence toward God, to place such faith in no one else, and so to have only one, the true God, and none other.

Now, since the being and nature of man cannot for an instant be without doing or not doing something, enduring or running away from something (for, as we see, life never rests), let him who will be pious and filled with good works, begin and in all his life and works at all times exercise himself in this faith; let him learn to do and to leave undone all things in such continual faith; then will he find how much work he has to do, and how completely all things are included in faith; how he dare never grow idle, because his very idling must be the exercise and work of faith. In brief, nothing can be in or about us and nothing can happen to us but that it must be good and meritorious, if we believe (as we ought) that all things please God. So says St. Paul: "Dear brethren, all that ye do, whether ye eat or drink, do all in the Name of Jesus Christ, our Lord." Now it cannot be done in this Name except it be done in this faith. Likewise, Romans vii: "We know that all things work together for good to the saints of God."

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