

A Treatise on Good Works

by

Martin Luther

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Introduction.....	3
Dedication	11
The Treatise, Part I.....	13
The Treatise, Part II	34
The Treatise, Part III.....	52

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 (1. 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 Wittenberg, 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. Melancthon, 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.

M. REU.

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TREATISE ON GOOD WORKS

1520

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