

Treatise on Good Works

Martin Luther made the teaching of the Bible about good works much more clear to the average Christian. He teaches that good works are commanded by God but that many Christians misunderstand what they really are.

9. This is the work of **the First Commandment**, which says: "**You shall have no other gods.**" This means: "Since I am the only God, you should place all your confidence, trust, and faith in Me alone, and no one else."

13. Where are those who ask **what good works are**, what they should do, and how they should be religious? And where are those who say that when we preach about faith, we neither teach nor do works? **Doesn't this First Commandment give us more work to do than anyone can handle?** Even if a person were a thousand people, or all people, or all creatures, this Commandment would still demand more than enough from them, since they are commanded to always live and walk in faith and trust toward God, to place such faith in no one else, and to have only one true God, and no other.

In short, **nothing can be in or around us, and nothing can happen to us, without it being good and worthy if we believe** (as we should) **that everything pleases God.** As St. Paul says: "Dear brethren, all that you do, whether you eat or drink, do all in the name of Jesus Christ, our Lord." Now, it can't be done in this name unless it is done in this faith. Similarly, Romans 8:28: "We know that all things work together for good to those who love God."

- How does faith in Jesus Christ cause us to have no other Gods except the one, true God? What does faith have to do with it?
- How does the first commandment give us more work than we can handle? In other words, how is it different than a list of do's and don'ts?

14. **You might ask: "Why do we have so many laws in the Church and the State, and many ceremonies in churches, monasteries, and holy places that encourage and push people to do good works if faith does everything through the First Commandment?" I answer: It's simply because not everyone has faith or pays attention to it.** If everyone had faith, we wouldn't need any more laws, and each person would naturally do good works all the time, as their trust in God guides them."

- How does a believer pay attention to their faith so that they are automatically obedient to God's laws?

There are **four types of people**: The **first type**, just mentioned, **don't need any law**. St. Paul says in 1 Timothy 1:9, "The law is not made for a righteous man," meaning for the believer. Believers naturally do what they know and can do because they firmly trust that God's favor and grace are with them in everything. The **second type** wants to **misuse this freedom**, putting false confidence in it and becoming lazy. St. Peter says in 1 Peter 2:16, "You shall live as free men, but not using your liberty for a cloak of maliciousness," as if to say: **The freedom of faith doesn't allow sins, nor will it cover them, but it sets us free to do all kinds of good works and to endure everything that happens to us**, so a person is not limited to just one work or a few. St. Paul also says in Galatians 5:13, "**Use not your liberty** for an occasion to **the flesh.**" **These people** must be **guided by laws and encouraged through teaching and exhortation**. The **third type** are **wicked people**, always ready to sin; they **must be controlled by spiritual and worldly laws**, like wild horses and dogs, and if this doesn't help, **they must be put to death by the worldly sword**, as St. Paul says in Romans 13:4, "The worldly ruler bears the sword and serves God with it, not as a terror to the good, but to the evil." The **fourth type**, who are still **immature and childish** in their **understanding of faith and the spiritual life**, must be coaxed like young children and tempted with external, specific, and prescribed decorations, like reading, praying, fasting, singing, adorning churches, organ playing, and other things commanded and observed in monastic houses and churches, until they also learn to know the faith. Although there is great danger here, when the rulers, as is now, unfortunately, the case, focus on and insist upon such ceremonies and external works as if they were the true works, and neglect faith, which they should always teach along with these works, just as a mother gives her child other food along with milk until the child can eat solid food by itself.

- Only the third type of person is really what we would call an unbeliever, at least the way Luther seems to explain things. Of course, he's writing to people who already consider themselves to be genuine believers. Do you think a believer is like one of these types at all times or changes from one type to another, from time to time (except for the third type)?
- If we do change which type of believer we are from time to time, what can we do to become like the first type more and more of the time?

15 ... we **must not look down on these people of weak faith**, who would gladly do right and learn but cannot understand because of the ceremonies they cling to. Instead, we should blame their ignorant, blind teachers, who have never taught them faith and have led them so deeply into works. They must be gently and gradually led back to faith, like treating a sick person, and must be allowed for a time, for their conscience's sake, to cling to some works and do them as necessary for salvation, as long as they rightly grasp the faith. Otherwise, if we try to pull them away too suddenly, their weak consciences might be completely shattered and confused, and they might lose both faith and works. But the stubborn ones, who are hardened in their works, ignore what is said about faith, and fight against it, we must, as Christ did and taught, let them go their way,

- If it is someone you really care a lot about why would it be more difficult to follow this advice?

16. But **you might ask: How can I be sure that all my actions are pleasing to God**, especially when I sometimes make mistakes, talk too much, eat, drink, or sleep too much, or do other things I can't help doing? **Answer: This question shows that you still see faith as just another action among many, and not as the most important one. Faith is the highest action** because it stays strong and wipes out these daily sins by not doubting that God is kind enough to overlook such daily mistakes and weaknesses.

- What do you think of the idea that faith is the highest action because it trusts God to forgive our sins?

See, this is how **works are forgiven**, are without guilt, and are good—**not by their own nature**, but by **the mercy and grace of God** because of the faith that trusts in God's mercy. Therefore, we must fear because of the works, but comfort ourselves because of the grace of God, as it is written in Psalm 147: "The Lord takes pleasure in those who fear Him, in those who hope in His mercy" (Ps. 147:11). So we pray with perfect confidence: "Our Father," and yet we ask: "Forgive us our trespasses"; **we are children and yet sinners**; are acceptable and yet do not do enough; and all this is the work of faith, firmly grounded in God's grace.

- Is Luther saying believers never sin? What is he saying?

Therefore, **faith does not start with works**, nor do works create it. Instead, **it must arise and flow from the blood, wounds, and death of Christ**. If you see in these that God is so kindly disposed toward you that He even gives His Son for you, then your heart must, in turn, become sweet and kindly disposed toward God. Your confidence must grow out of pure goodwill and love—God's love toward you and yours toward God. **We never read that the Holy Spirit was given to anyone when they did works**, but **always when people have heard the Gospel of Christ** and the mercy of God. From this same Word and from no other source must faith still come, even today and always. For **Christ is the rock from which people draw oil and honey**, as Moses says (Deut. 32:13).

- How does faith start, if it doesn't start with works?