

Rudolf Mau in *Martin Luther Studienausgabe*, with constant reference to the critical “Weimar” edition of Luther’s works.^e That text is taken from the first printed edition that came from the press of Melchior Lotter Jr. in Wittenberg around the end of May 1520. The editors also took into consideration the text of Luther’s manuscript that was discovered in 1892. A comparison of the printed edition with the manuscript reveals a number of variations and alterations, some of which come from the printer. In addition, other modern versions have been consulted.^f



TREATISE ON GOOD WORKS¹⁰

JESUS.¹¹

TO THE ILLUSTRIOUS AND NOBLE prince and lord, John, Duke of Saxony, Landgrave of Thuringia, Margrave of Meissen, my gracious lord and patron.

Illustrious and noble prince, gracious lord, with my humble prayer I am always at the service of your princely majesty.

10. See the final paragraph of the introduction.

11. Following a monastic tradition, Luther began many of his early writings and letters with this word.

^e *Martin Luther Studienausgabe*, vol. 2, ed. Hans-Ulrich Delius (Berlin: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 1982), 12–88; and WA 6:196–276. The manuscript in Luther’s hand is found in WA 9:226–301.

^f *Die guten Werke*, in *Martin Luther Taschenausgabe*, vol. 4, *Evangelium und Leben*, ed. Horst Beintker (Berlin: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 1983), 36–131; *Von den guten Werken*, ed. Werner Jetter, in *Martin Luther Ausgewählte Schriften*, vol. 1: *Aufbruch zur Reformation*, ed. Karin Bornkamm and Gerhard Ebeling, 2d ed. (Frankfurt am Main: Insel, 1983), 38–149.

Gracious prince and lord. For some time I have wanted to acknowledge my humble devotion and duty to your grace with one of the spiritual wares that suit my position, but I found myself unfit for the task of creating a gift that would be worthy of you. Now, however, my most gracious Lord Frederick, Duke of Saxony, Elector of the Holy Roman Empire, Vicar, etc.,¹² and brother of your princely grace, has not disdained to receive my amateurish little book, which was dedicated to him and now much to my surprise has been published.¹³ I am encouraged by his gracious example and make bold to presume that, just as both of you have the same noble blood, you also have the same noble spirit evident in a mild and beneficent disposition. I hope, therefore, that your princely grace will not scorn my poor, humble offering, which I have found more necessary to publish than any of my other sermons or pamphlets, because good works, which involve much greater deception and cunning than anything else, have provoked the most controversy. In this matter, it is easy to take advantage of ordinary people, and for that reason our Lord Christ commanded us to beware of sheep's clothing that hides the wolf underneath.^g Good works have more things added to and subtracted from them than any gold, silver, precious stones, or other expensive things, even though such works must have the same, simple goodness; otherwise, they are mere fakes that sparkle with pretty colors.

I know full well and hear daily that many people belittle my poverty and say I produce only little pamphlets and sermons in German for the uneducated laity. That does not bother me, however. Would God that I had worked my whole life and devoted all my ability to the improvement of one layperson! I would be satisfied with this, give thanks to God, and willingly let all my little books turn to dust. I will let others judge whether or not writing many thick books is a scholarly method that serves Christendom well; but if I wanted to write big books in their way, I think I could produce them faster than they could prepare a small sermon in

12. Following courtly protocol, Luther lists Elector Frederick's chief offices. "Vicar," a position in the political hierarchy of the Holy Roman Empire (the official surrogate for the emperor when he was absent, was held by Duke John's brother, Elector Frederick, who was Luther's overlord. After Frederick's death in 1525, his brother, John, to whom Luther is dedicating this writing, succeeded him as elector.

13. *Fourteen Consolations for Those Who Labor and Are Heavy-Laden*, written for and dedicated to the ailing Elector Frederick in August 1519 (LW 42:117-66; WA 6:99-134). Georg Spalatin produced a German translation that was made from Luther's Latin manuscript, and both versions were published at Wittenberg in February of 1520, the same month that Spalatin reminded Luther of a promise to write a treatise on good works.

g An allusion to Matt. 7:15.

my way. If reaching a goal were as easy as pursuing it, then Christ would long since have been thrown out of heaven and the throne of God overturned. “Even though we cannot all be authors, we want to be critics all the same.”^h I will happily let others have the honor of great accomplishments and will not be ashamed to preach and write in German for the uneducated laity. Although I can only do a little, I am of the mind that Christendom would have benefited much more from such activities (had we occupied ourselves with it sooner and tried to keep it up) than from the learned tomes and disputations conducted only by scholars at the universities. Moreover, I have never forced or invited anyone to listen to me or read my sermons. I have openly and dutifully served the communityⁱ with what God has given me, and whoever is not pleased can read and listen to someone else. Nor does it bother me if my contribution is not needed. For me it is more than enough that a few of the laity, especially the most eminent of them, deign to read my sermons.

Even if other incentives were lacking, I have plenty now that I have learned how much your princely grace has been pleased by these German pamphlets and desires to know more about good works and faith. It has pleased me to provide this service as diligently as I can, and as your humble subject I request your princely grace kindly to accept this opus of mine until God grants me time to offer a full explanation of faith. For now I wanted to indicate how we should practice and use faith in every good work and allow it to be the noblest work of all. If God permits, at another time I will treat the [Apostles’] Creed and how we should daily pray and recite it.^j Herewith I commend myself humbly to your princely grace.

^h A rhymed German adage also found in the Latin. See Wander, 1:582.

ⁱ *Gemeinde*: his Wittenberg congregation and community.

^j German: *den Glauben* (the faith). Luther published an explanation of the Apostles’ Creed in 1520 along with explanations of the Ten Commandments and the Lord’s Prayer that had been printed in 1518 and 1519 (WA 7:194–229).

Wittenberg, the twenty-ninth day of March, one thousand five hundred and twenty years after the birth of Christ.

Your princely grace's obedient chaplain, Doctor Martin Luther, Augustinian at Wittenberg.

[Introduction]

1. It should be known, first of all, that no good works exist other than those that God has commanded, just as there is no sin other than what God has forbidden. Whoever wishes to recognize and perform good works need only learn God's commandments.¹⁴ Accordingly, Christ says in Matt. 19[:17]: "If you wish to enter life, keep the commandments." And when the young man asks in Matt. 19[:16-19] what he has to do to be saved, Christ holds up to him the Ten Commandments and nothing else. Therefore we must learn to distinguish among good works from God's commandments and not from the appearance, magnitude, or quantity of the deeds themselves or from human opinion, laws, or approaches. We have seen how this happened in the past and still happens owing to our blindness and complete disdain for God's commandments.

14. Luther is setting up a contrast between the God-given Ten Commandments, on the one hand, and human regulations and Christ's so-called counsels, on the other.

[The First Good Work]^k

2. The foremost and noblest good work is faith in Christ, just as he himself said in John 6[:28-29] when the Jews asked him what they should do in order to perform good works of God. He answered: "This is the (good) work of God, that you believe in him whom he has sent." Now when we hear this or preach it, we pass right over it, thinking it is a small thing that is easy to do. We should instead pause here a long time and ponder it in depth. For all good works have to be

^k Luther relates this first good work, faith, to the first commandment, beginning below in par. 9 (p. 274).

15. A reference to the medieval practice of a lesser noble receiving a grant of land from his lord, so that the former must live totally from the benevolence of the latter. So all good works arise out of faith.

16. Luther investigates a first aspect of faith: its relation to works.

17. Luther refers here to medieval Scholastic theologians who insisted believers could not be certain whether they were in a state of grace, where they would receive due reward for their good works. See Luther's encounter with Cardinal Cajetan (1469-1534) in 1518, above, pp. 141-47.

18. See Matt. 6:1-18, used in the Middle Ages to define three categories of good works. This begins Luther's discussion of the first level of faith.

included in this one and receive their goodness from it, as if receiving a fief.¹⁵ We have to make it simple and clear so that it can be understood.¹⁶ We find that many people pray, fast, create pious endowments, do this and that, and lead respectable lives in the opinion of others; but if you ask them whether or not they are certain that God is pleased with what they do, they do not know or at least have their doubts. Moreover, they cite learned scholars who do nothing but teach good works and claim it is unnecessary to have such certainty.¹⁷ See here! All these good works are performed apart from faith; they amount to nothing and are completely dead, because the attitude of your conscience before God determines the goodness of the works that proceed from it. If there is no faith or good conscience toward God, your works are decapitated, and your life and goodness amount to nothing at all. Now you see why, whenever I exalt faith and reject as false those works done without it, they accuse me of forbidding good works, although my real desire is to teach the genuine good works that belong to faith.¹

3. If you then ask these people the following: when they are on the job, walking or standing still, eating, drinking, sleeping, or engaging in any activity that sustains the body or promotes the common good, do they consider their actions to be good works pleasing to God? You will find they say no. They define good works very narrowly and confine them to church-related activities like praying, fasting, and giving alms.¹⁸ The rest are done in vain, people think, and lack significance in the eyes of God. Thus, their contemptible unbelief causes them to minimize and trivialize the service of God, who on the contrary is served by everything, whatever it may be, that is done, spoken, or conceived in faith. Eccl. 9[:7-9] teaches the same: "Go forth with joy, eat and drink, knowing that your work pleases God. Always clothe yourself in white and keep your head anointed with oil. Spend your

¹ See charges 31 and 32 in the papal bull, *Exsurge Domini*, published in October 1520. For a later example of this same charge, see the *Augsburg Confession* XX.1-2 in BC, 52-53.