

# Treatise on Good Works

1520

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## INTRODUCTION<sup>1</sup>

In late March of 1520, one month after he started to prepare for publication a “sermon” on good works, Martin Luther wrote to his contact at the Saxon court, Georg Spalatin (1484–1545): “It will not be a sermon but rather a small book, and if my writing progresses as well as it has, this book will be the best work I have published so far.”<sup>a</sup> Although the better-known pamphlets of 1520 were still to appear—*Address to the Christian Nobility*, *The Babylonian Captivity of the Church*, and *The Freedom of a Christian*<sup>b</sup>—the finished *Treatise on Good Works* fulfilled Luther’s prediction as one of the clearest and most accessible introductions to Luther’s reforming work and theology. Luther’s main goal was to commend a new, down-to-earth piety to all Christians. This piety was new, because at its center was a radically different meaning of good works that would transform the way believers practiced their faith. That different meaning, it turned out, was

1. This introduction is a revision of the “Translator’s Introduction” by Scott Hendrix, in Martin Luther, *Treatise on Good Works*, trans. Scott Hendrix (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2012), 2–11. The translation that follows is also a revision of the work by Hendrix.

<sup>a</sup> WA Br 2:75 (March 25, 1520).

<sup>b</sup> For the *Address and Freedom of a Christian*, see below, p. 369 and 467. For the *Babylonian Captivity*, see LW 36:3–126.

2. Matt. 5:16. The term “good works” also appears in the Vulgate text of 2 Pet. 1:10 and was therefore present in the Latin Bible of the Middle Ages; but the phrase, for which there is only moderate textual evidence, is absent from most English translations of 2 Pet. 1:10.

3. In his later career, Augustine’s opponents included the British monk, Pelagius (354–420) and his adherents, who insisted that human beings were born with the ability to resist sin and could thus fulfill God’s gracious commandments. These “Pelagians” were condemned in various councils of the ancient church.

easy to misunderstand and required a detailed explanation that Luther offered in this “small book.”

Today the term “good works” is often associated with acts of charity in general, but in late medieval theology it designated acts of religious devotion and charity that made up for sins committed by believers and thus were considered meritorious for salvation. Already in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus said, “Let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven.”<sup>2</sup> Augustine of Hippo (354–430), the bishop and theologian whom Martin Luther cited more than any other, debated with his Pelagian opponents the place of good works in the Christian life.<sup>3</sup> Augustine was the source of Luther’s claim that actions that appear to be good works are in fact sinful unless done in faith.<sup>c</sup>

In the *Rule of St. Benedict* (c. 480–542), “good works” are given a primary role in monastic life. Chapter 4, titled “The Instruments of Good Works,” concludes with the following admonition: “Behold, these are instruments of the spiritual art, which, if they have been applied without ceasing day and night and approved on judgment day, will merit for us from the Lord that reward which he has promised.” These “instruments” of merit are also evident in a definition from a popular medieval dictionary of theology printed in 1517: “Certain works are directed toward our neighbor and pertain to love of neighbor, while others are directed toward God alone and pertain to divine worship and adoration.”<sup>d</sup> By the sixteenth century, such good works were a required part of the Christian life that applied to every believer who desired eternal life. Often, these basic religious works were outlined by another part of the Sermon on the Mount, where Jesus talked about prayer, almsgiving, and fasting.

When confronted with Martin Luther’s basic message, readers and listeners were sometimes confused or angered

<sup>c</sup> Hans-Ulrich Delius, *Augustin als Quelle Luthers*, 3d ed. (Berlin, 1984), 66.

<sup>d</sup> Johannes Altenstaig (d. c. 1525), *Vocabularius theologiae* (Hagenau, 1517), fol. 169b.

by what they read and heard about good works. In sermons and pamphlets, Luther and his colleagues claimed that salvation came by faith alone and not by works. Their assertion was based on their reading of biblical verses like Rom. 3:28, “For we hold that a person is justified by faith apart from works prescribed by the law”; or Eph. 2:8-9, “For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God—not the result of works, so that no one may boast.” Even though, they argued, Paul’s message did not overthrow the law, understood especially as the Ten Commandments, still the origin of Christian good works came from faith.<sup>4</sup>

Some of Luther’s readers and listeners charged that his position implied that believers were free from the obligation to perform any good works at all—a complaint to which not only Luther but also other early preachers who defended Luther’s views had to respond. One preacher described the opposing attitude this way: “If it is true, all the better, we need to perform no good works; we will gladly take faith alone. And if praying, fasting, holy days, and almsgiving are not required, then we will lie near the stove, warm our feet on its tiles, turn the roasting apples, open our mouths, and wait until grilled doves fly into them.”<sup>5</sup>

The late medieval believers who heard that good works would not save them associated those good works with religious activities that were no longer necessary for salvation. The quotation above mentions praying, fasting, worship, and almsgiving, which Luther and his supporters viewed as appropriate works for believers. But the list of unnecessary works included acquiring indulgences, venerating and praying to saints, making pilgrimages to their shrines, holding private Masses (said by a priest without communicants), requiring clerical celibacy, making binding monastic vows, venerating relics, and so on.<sup>6</sup> In the *Treatise on Good Works*, Luther takes pains to distinguish these activities, which he calls the “wrong kind of good works,” from the “right kind of good works,” namely, those nurturing faith and obeying the Ten Commandments out of faith. For that reason, the treatise shows how faith, by which one is saved, leads

4. See, e.g., Rom. 3:31; 10:4; and Gal. 2:15-21.

5. Urbanus Rhegius (1489–1541), a preacher at Augsburg, *Anzeigung, daß die römische Bulle merklichen Schaden in Gewissen mancher Menschen gebracht und nicht Doctor Luthers Lehre* (Augsburg, 1521), C4r–v. These examples of leisure relate to *Schlaraffenland*, an imaginary place mentioned in European fairy tales that was alleged to contain a surplus of everything. Luther also alludes to it in this *Treatise*, p. 359, n. 126.

6. For an exhaustive list of religious practices Luther regarded as for the most part unnecessary in the “true Christian church,” see his *Exhortation to All the Clergy* (1530), written during the Diet of Augsburg (LW 34:54–59).

inevitably to obedience, that is, how properly fulfilling the first commandment (“You shall have no other gods”) leads to obedience of the remaining commandments—and all of this not as a human work at all but as a gift and work of the Holy Spirit. This theme appears repeatedly throughout the composition, as if to say: the right kind of good works follow from faith, just as the last nine commandments follow the first. Another significant theme attacks the late medieval distinction between commands and counsels, where lay believers in a state of grace had to fulfill the Ten Commandments but those under a vow and hence in a state of perfection also could also fulfill Jesus’ “counsels” of poverty, chastity, and obedience as a higher level of Christian obedience. For Luther, there is enough simply in the Ten Commandments to keep every Christian busy.

Luther preached on the Ten Commandments throughout his career. His *Small Catechism* and *Large Catechism* (1529) remain the best-known expositions of the commandments, but prior to 1529 Luther had preached and written on them six times: 1516–1517, 1518, 1520, 1522, 1525, and 1528. A sermon from 1528 reveals why Luther deemed the Ten Commandments so important—namely, to foster a proper understanding of Christian freedom: “It used to be that the Sabbath was ‘made holy’ in that after hearing a Mass we spent the day getting drunk. Now, too, we abuse the Sabbath, going in and out of the church by habit to hear a sermon but not observing the word. You go in [to church] and come out no wiser than before, snoring and sleeping in church. But that does not sanctify the Sabbath.”<sup>7</sup> In other words, Christian freedom from the law and works does not imply license to abuse that freedom by spurning the fruits of faith.

The *Treatise on Good Works* was written with strong encouragement from Georg Spalatin, secretary and court chaplain to Elector Frederick III of Saxony (1463–1525), to whom, as noted above, Luther enthusiastically reported on his progress. One month before that letter, however, Spalatin had reminded him of a promise to compose a sermon on good works. Luther replied that he did not remember the

7. WA 31/1:66, 29–32. See also LC, “Ten Commandments,” par. 96–97, in BC, 399.

promise and, besides, had already published so much that nobody would buy it. Two days later, however, he wrote to Spalatin that he did remember and would get down to work.

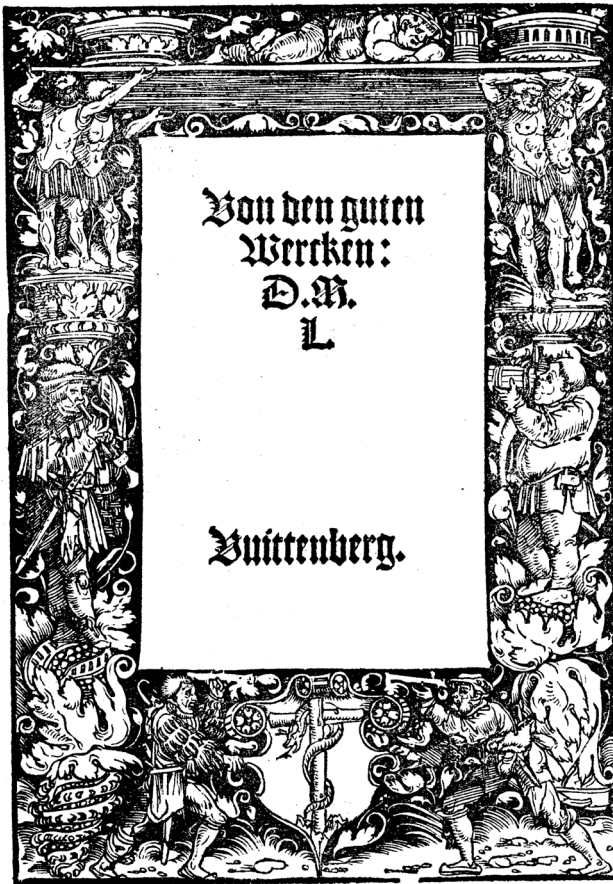
It was the beginning of a very busy twelve months. On 9 January 1520, the legal proceedings against Luther were reopened in Rome, and Pope Leo X (1475–1521) had appointed three commissions to prepare a denunciation of the German professor. In June, the denunciation was issued in the form of a papal edict, *Exsurge Domine*, which threatened Luther with excommunication if he did not recant. The papal ban of excommunication itself took effect in January of 1521. Meanwhile, Luther was lecturing on the Psalms and composing one important work after another. His rejection of the pope's claim to be the vicar of Christ and to rule over the entire church appeared in May of 1520 under the title *The Papacy at Rome*.<sup>8</sup>

In the midst of the confrontation between Luther and the papal Curia, this tract on good works appeared. Judging by the number of reprints and editions, it was popular and sold well. The first edition was printed by Melchior Lotter Jr. (c. 1490–1542) in Wittenberg and appeared in late May or early June of 1520. Before the end of the year, the treatise had been reprinted eight times, with another six reprints appearing in 1521. That same year, a Latin translation was published in Leipzig and then reprinted in Wittenberg. It was followed by translations into other languages: English, French, Dutch, and Low German, a dialect spoken in the lowlands of northern Germany.

Some refer to the treatise as the *Sermon on Good Works*, presumably because it started as a sermon and because the title of at least one edition claimed that it had been preached. The title of the first edition, however, is simply *Von den guten Werken*, best rendered in English as *Good Works* or literally as *Concerning Good Works*. As Luther said, however, it turned out to be a small book, and therefore this edition uses the title *Treatise*, as did the American edition of Luther's works.

Luther argues that the Ten Commandments define all the good works for the Christian life. The first commandment is fulfilled through faith, which is the first and chief

8. LW 39:49–104.



This historiated title page border of Luther's *Treatise on Good Works* features the crest of the printer, Melchior Lotter the Younger, at the foot. It has been attributed to Lucas Cranach the Elder or to his workshop.

9. Unlike the later Reformed penchant for numbering the commandments according to the Hebrew text (and thus adding a second commandment against images), Luther follows the tradition of the Greek and Latin texts by dividing the commandments

good work that leads to and undergirds all the others. Reflecting a late medieval approach to good works that emphasized Christian virtues, Luther defines the kind of good work proceeding from that faith for each commandment. Thus, the second commandment is fulfilled by praise (of God and thus not of the self), the third by worship (understood as attending Mass, hearing preaching, and prayer [especially corporate prayer]), the fourth by obedience to superiors and solicitude to underlings, the fifth by gentleness, the sixth by purity and chastity, the seventh by generosity, and the eighth by truth telling.<sup>9</sup> Additionally, when Luther is ready to explain the second commandment against taking God's name in vain, he does it under the heading of "the second good work." He then discusses the ways through which the second commandment is obeyed, and he identifies four of those ways, each of which he calls a work of the second commandment. In this case, the term "good work" refers both collectively to obeying the second commandment and specifically to the ways in which that obedience can take place. His explanations of the third and fourth commandments are also extensive, but after that Luther, perhaps realizing that

his sermon had indeed become a book, devotes less space to the last six commandments. His commentary on the last two commandments is compressed into one paragraph.

The headings under which the work or works of each commandment are explained are not uniform. At the fourth commandment, the traditional division of the commandments into two tables leads Luther to call the fourth commandment "the first commandment of the second table

of Moses.” As in many of Luther’s early writings, the paragraphs are numbered consecutively throughout the entire treatise, a customary way of dividing late medieval tracts and sermons. Here Luther numbers the paragraphs consecutively through the first two commandments, but after that the numbering of paragraphs starts over within each commandment. His explanations of the first four commandments are much longer than those of the last six, and his treatment of prayer, which is the third work of the third commandment, is a little treatise in itself.

Biblical passages are translated as Luther cited or phrased them rather than according to modern translations. At this point in Luther’s career, there was no standard German translation of the Bible (Luther’s German New Testament appeared first in 1522). As was common among late medieval preachers, Luther had in mind or sometimes even cited a text in Latin and rendered it into German as a paraphrased translation. Thus, although his citations may not appear to today’s readers as accurate, they are in fact a blend of citation and explanation not at all unusual for his day. Luther’s biblical citations arise from the Vulgate, or Latin version of the Bible, much of which he knew by heart.

On the advice of Spalatin, Luther dedicated the treatise to Duke John (1486–1532), the brother of Luther’s first prince, Elector Frederick III of Saxony. In 1525, Elector Frederick died, and Duke John became the new elector. John was firmly committed to Luther and his colleagues and did all he could to ensure the survival of Wittenberg theology and practice in Saxony and beyond. Besides leading the Saxon delegation at the Diet of Augsburg and signing the *Augsburg Confession* (1530), Elector John led the reform of the University of Wittenberg and endorsed the inspection and reorganization of parishes (starting in 1527), in which the evangelical forms of worship and piety recommended by Luther were often utilized. Although Luther could not have foreseen it in 1520, he could not have dedicated a more fitting piece to Duke John than the *Treatise on Good Works*.

The translation of the treatise is based primarily on the text in Luther’s German edited by Hans-Ulrich Delius and

to covet into two, and he views the prohibition of images as a special expansion of the first commandment for the Israelites.



Duke John of Saxony.  
Portrait by Lucas Cranach  
the Elder, 1534.

Rudolf Mau in *Martin Luther Studienausgabe*, with constant reference to the critical “Weimar” edition of Luther’s works.<sup>e</sup> 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.<sup>f</sup>



## TREATISE ON GOOD WORKS<sup>10</sup>

JESUS.<sup>11</sup>

**T**O 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.

<sup>e</sup> *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.

<sup>f</sup> *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.