
The First Good Work

“You shall have no other gods before me”¹⁹

2. The foremost and noblest good work is faith in Christ, just as he himself said when the Jews asked him what they should do in order to perform good and godly works. He answered: “This is the good work of God, that you believe in him whom God has sent.”²⁰ Now when we hear that or preach it, we pass right over it, thinking it is a small thing that is easy to do. We should, however, pause there a long time and ponder it in depth; for all good works have to be included in this one and benefit from its goodness as something received from another source. We have to make it simple and clear so that it can be understood. 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.²¹ See here! All those 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 lifeless and lose all their goodness. Now you see why, whenever I exalt faith and reject as false those works done without it, I am accused of forbidding good works, although my real desire is to teach the genuine good works that belong to faith.

19. Exod. 20:3; Deut. 5:7

20. John 6:28-29.

21. Luther refers here to medieval scholastic theologians who discussed whether or not believers could be certain of having saving grace.

3. Ask 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. The rest are done in vain, people think, and lack significance in the eyes of God. 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. Ecclesiastes 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 life with the wife you love all the days of these uncertain times that are granted to you."²² For our clothing always to be white means that without distinction all our works are good, no matter what we name them. They are white when I am certain and believe that they please God; then the head of my soul will never lack the oil of a good conscience. Therefore Christ says, "I always do what is pleasing to him."²³ How could it have been "always" unless it included those times when he was eating, drinking, and sleeping? And St. John says: "By this we know that we stand in the truth, when we can comfort our hearts and have confidence in his presence. Even if our heart afflicts us with remorse, God is greater than our heart, and we have assurance that we will receive that which we have sought when we keep his commandments and do what pleases him."²⁴ Again: "Whoever is born of God (that is, believes and trusts God) does not sin and cannot

22. Eccl. 9:7-9.

23. John 8:29.

24. 1 John 3:19-22.

sin.”²⁵ And Psalm 33: “None of those who trust in him shall sin.”²⁶ And that other psalm: “Blessed are those who trust in him.”²⁷ If that is true, then everything they do must be good, or the evil they do must be quickly forgiven. See now why I exalt faith so highly and embrace all works within it and reject all works that do not flow from faith.

4. All people are able to tell whether or not what they do is good. If their hearts are confident that their work is pleasing to God, then it is good even if it were something as trivial as picking up a straw. If the heart is unsure instead of confident, then the work is not good even if it raised all the dead and the doers would give their bodies to be burned.²⁸ Paul teaches that very thing: “For whatever does not proceed from faith is sin.”²⁹ We are called believers in Christ on the basis of faith as the chief work and not on the basis of other works, which can also be done by unbelievers, Jews, Turks,³⁰ and sinners. Resolute trust, however, that God is pleased with them is possible only for Christians who have been enlightened and fortified by grace.

Speaking this way seems strange, and I have been called a heretic by those who adhere to blind reason and pagan ways of thinking. They have not set faith above other virtues but on the same level with them and assigned to faith its own work, which is then isolated from the works of other virtues. Faith alone, however, validates all other works and makes them acceptable and worthy, as long as the doers trust God and do not doubt that God approves everything they do. Those who criticize me,

25. 1 John 3:9.

26. Ps. 34:22.

27. Ps. 2:11.

28. 1 Cor. 13:3.

29. Rom. 14:23.

30. Luther's term for adherents of Islam, who were familiar to sixteenth-century Europeans primarily as Muslims from the Ottoman Turkish Empire.

however, have not allowed faith to be a work but have made of it a *habitus*,³¹ although nowhere does Scripture call anything a divine good work except faith alone.³² No wonder, then, that they are blind and have become leaders of the blind.³³ This faith [of which I speak] is soon joined by love, peace, joy,³⁴ and hope. Those who trust God receive the Holy Spirit immediately, as St. Paul tells the Galatians: “You have received the Spirit not because of your good works but because you have believed God’s word.”³⁵

5. This faith makes all works equal. One is like the other, and all distinctions among them disappear whether they are large or small, short or long, many or few. Works are pleasing not for their own sake but for the sake of faith, which is present in one and the same way in every work. Faith is alive and efficacious no matter how different the works are from one another, just as our bodily members derive their life, functions, and names from the head but without the head would have none of those. Moreover, it follows that Christians who live in this faith do not need to be taught good works; instead, they do whatever is there to be done and it is well done, as St. Samuel³⁶ said to Saul: “You will become a different person when the Spirit comes into you, and when you do whatever presents itself, God will be with you.”³⁷

31. For medieval theologians, the term *habitus* referred to a disposition of the soul created by grace and containing the virtues faith, hope, and love. Luther objected to this concept because *habitus* was not a biblical term and because it emphasized faith as a static quality of the soul instead of active trust in God.

32. John 6:29.

33. A reference by Jesus to the Pharisees in Matt. 15:14.

34. Love, peace, and joy are named fruits of the Spirit in Gal. 5:22.

35. Gal. 3:2.

36. Luther regarded the patriarchs, prophets, and other faithful women and men of Hebrew Scripture as saints in the biblical story of God’s people that embraced both testaments.

37. 1 Sam. 10:6-7.

Saint Hannah, Samuel's mother, so we read, believed the priest Eli, who assured her of God's grace, and she was happy, went home contentedly, and from that time on she quit moving about from place to place.³⁸ Whatever happened was all the same to her. Saint Paul says: "Where the Spirit of Christ is, everything is free."³⁹ Faith does not allow itself to be bound to any work, nor does it let any work be taken from it. Instead, as the first psalm says: "It bears fruit when the time is right,"⁴⁰ that is, as it comes and goes.

6. A common human illustration will make this clearer. When a husband and wife cherish and please each other and are sure of it, who needs to be taught how to act or what to do, when to speak or not, or what to think? Trust and confidence alone teach all that and more. There is no difference in the works they do, be they great or small, extended or brief, many or few. They do them all with joyful, serene, and confident hearts and feel completely free. But if uncertainty is present, they look to do the best thing that will gain them favor and thus imagine there to be differences among the works. Now they are trapped and must proceed with heavy hearts and without enthusiasm, half despairing, and as often as not they end up acting the fool.

Christians, therefore, who live with this confidence in God, know all things,⁴¹ are able to do all things, trust themselves to do what is needed, and do it all joyfully and freely, not in order to accumulate meritorious deeds but in order to fulfill their desire to please God in this way. For them to serve God sincerely and without return, it suffices that God is pleased. Others, however, who are not one with God or uncertain about it, cast about anxiously for ways to make satisfaction and sway God with many

38. 1 Sam. 1:6-28.

39. 2 Cor. 3:17.

40. Ps. 1:3.

41. Cf. 1 Cor. 2:15-16.

works. They run to St. James,⁴² Rome,⁴³ Jerusalem, here and there, pray to St. Bridget to grant this or that,⁴⁴ fast on this or that day, make confession here, make confession there, beseech this or that person, and yet they find no rest. They are weighed down by all this to the point of despair, and their heart is not in it. For that reason, such good works are called by Hebrew Scripture *aven amal*,⁴⁵ in German “effort” and “toil.” They are not good works at all and are wasted to boot. This matter has driven many people mad and made them miserable with anxiety. The book of Wisdom says of them: “We have worn ourselves out on unrighteous paths and we have taken ways that are arduous and bitter; we have not known the way of God and the sun of righteousness has not risen over us.”⁴⁶

7. In such works, faith is still paltry and weak. Let us inquire further. When people suffer bodily affliction or lose their property, reputation, friends, or anything else, do they believe they are still pleasing to God and, whether their suffering and vexation be great or small, that God is still mercifully disposed toward them? In that situation, when all our senses and understanding tell us that God is angry, it is an art to trust in God and to regard oneself as better cared for than it appears. In this situation, God is hidden, just as the bride says in the Song of Songs: “See, he

42. The burial shrine of St. James at Santiago de Compostela in northwestern Spain was a favorite destination for pilgrims.

43. Luther later recalled that he visited some of the holy places in Rome during his sojourn in late 1511 and early 1512. The trip to Rome has been convincingly redated (from 1510 to 1511) by Hans Schneider, “Martin Luthers Reise nach Rom neu datiert und neu gedeutet,” in *Studien zur Wissenschafts- und Religionsgeschichte*, ed. Akademie der Wissenschaften zu Göttingen (Berlin, 2011), 1–157.

44. Special prayers ascribed to Bridget (Birgitta), a Swedish saint who died in Rome in 1373, were popular among late medieval Christians.

45. Ps. 10:7; 55:11; 90:10; Job 4:8; 5:6; Isa. 10:1.

46. Wisd. of Sol. 5:6–7.

stands behind the wall looking in through the windows.”⁴⁷ That is: during our sufferings, which try to separate us from God like a wall or even a barrier, he stands there hidden and sees me and never leaves me. He is standing ready to help with mercy and allows himself to be seen through the window of a dim faith. Jeremiah says that God rejects mortals but never with callous disregard.⁴⁸ They do not recognize this kind of faith but acquiesce in their fate and think God has abandoned them and become their adversary. They attribute their affliction to other people and the devil, and there is no trust in God whatsoever. Their suffering remains forever repugnant, and they go forth doing what they think are good works without recognizing any lack of faith on their part. Those who are afflicted, however, and nevertheless trust in God with firm confidence that he is pleased with them consider their suffering and adversity to be nothing but costly merits and assets, the value of which no one can appreciate. Faith and confidence render everything that others regard as the worst that can happen precious before God. That applies even to dying, according to the 115th Psalm: “The death of the saints is considered precious in the eyes of God.”⁴⁹ Confidence and faith at this level are greater and stronger than they are when there is no suffering. The afflictions that are endured in faith are likewise superior to any and all works done in faith, and suffering produces immeasurably greater benefits than such works can ever provide.

8. Stronger still is the highest degree of faith, which is required when God torments the conscience not with earthly afflictions but with death, hell, and sin while withholding divine grace and mercy, as if God would condemn and stay angry forever. Few people experience this, as David laments in the sixth

47. Song of Sol. 2:9.

48. Cf. Lam. 3:31-33.

49. Ps. 116:15.

Psalm: "Do not . . . discipline me in your wrath."⁵⁰ At this point, to trust that God is gracious is the finest work of which any creature is capable. People who seek to be righteous through good deeds and religious acts know nothing about this; for how could they be certain of God's goodness and mercy, since they are not certain of their own works and have doubts about even the lowest degree of faith? Now you see why I have insisted that faith should always be praised and every work done without faith be rejected: so that people can be freed from the false, hypocritical, pharisaical, faithless good works that now fill to overflowing the cloisters, churches, houses, and all of society, and be directed toward the proper, genuinely good and faithful works. No one contradicts me except the unclean animals with uncloven hooves, as Moses says in the law,⁵¹ who refuse to make any distinction among good works. They fall into the trap of thinking they have done enough good when they have prayed, fasted, endowed masses, and made confession, even though they are not confident of receiving divine grace and blessing. For the most part, they consider it good when they have performed many great things over a long period without such confidence and only then expect good things for themselves. When the works are done, and they count on them in place of God's goodwill, then they build on sand and water and must suffer a cruel fall, as Christ says in Matthew 7.⁵² On the night Christ was born, the angels proclaimed this goodwill from heaven when they sang: "Glory to God in the highest, peace on earth and goodwill to all people."⁵³

50. Ps. 6:1.

51. Cf. Lev. 11:1-8. An indirect, sarcastic reference to those who do in fact disagree with his view of good works.

52. Matt. 7:26-27.

53. Luke 2:14.

9. This is the work of the first commandment: "You shall not have other gods." That is to say: Since I alone am God, all your confidence, trust, and faith should be placed only in me and no one else. You do not have a god when all you do is mouth the word, bow the knee, or make external gestures instead of trusting God from the heart and counting on God's goodness, mercy, and favor in all that you do and or have to endure, in living and dying, in weal and in woe, just as Christ said to the Samaritan woman: "Whoever worships God must worship in spirit and truth."⁵⁴ Faith, trust, and confidence, which come from the bottom of the heart, are in truth the fulfillment of the first commandment. Without them no work of any kind can satisfy its demand. Whereas this commandment is the first, highest, and best, from which flow all the others that are comprehended in it and judged by it, the work that fulfills it (trust and confidence in God's favor at all times) is the first, noblest, and best work from which all the others flow and abide and by which they must be judged and evaluated. To do other works without this trust and confidence is to act as if neither the first commandment nor God existed. Hence St. Augustine calls the work that fulfills the first commandment faith, hope, and love.⁵⁵ It was said above that such confidence and faith entail love and hope. In fact, rightly considered, love should be first or at least on the same level with faith. I cannot trust God without believing that he is favorably inclined toward me. As a consequence, I am favorably inclined toward God and moved to trust him from the heart and rely upon him for everything good.

54. John 4:24.

55. "God is to be worshiped with faith, hope, and love." Augustine, *Enchiridion* 3 in *Basic Writings of Saint Augustine*, ed. Whitney J. Oates (New York: Random House, 1948), 1:658.

10. Now consider all those who do not trust God at every moment and expect divine favor and grace in all their working or suffering, living or dying, but instead look for those things elsewhere or from themselves. They fail to keep this commandment and are in fact guilty of idolatry even though they perform the works of the other commandments and, in addition, pile up prayer to all the saints with fasting, obedience, patience, chastity, and innocence. The chief work will not be there, and without it all the others are nothing but pure glitter and makeup with nothing underneath. Christ warns us against that: “Beware of false prophets who come to you in sheep’s clothing.”⁵⁶ That is, all those who try to make themselves pleasing to God through good works and buy God’s favor as if God were a second-hand dealer or a day laborer, who did not want to give away his favor for nothing. Such characters are the most perverse people on earth; they can never be turned in the right direction or only with the greatest difficulty. Others act like them when in adversity they run to and fro seeking help and consolation from everyone and everything except God, from whom they are strictly commanded to request it. They were chastised by the prophet Isaiah: “The unwise folk do not turn to him who strikes them.”⁵⁷ God struck them by sending them suffering and adversity so that they would seek and trust God, but they ran away instead to others, sometimes in Egypt, sometimes in Assyria, sometimes even to the devil. That idolatry is recorded by the same prophet and the books of Kings. All holy hypocrites act the same way: when something bad happens, instead of running to God they flee, wondering how they can help themselves or find others to rid them of their troubles and, as a consequence, applaud themselves and be applauded by others.

56. Matt. 7:15.

57. Cf. Isa. 9:13.

11. At those places where he attributes so much to faith, it is St. Paul's opinion that righteous persons live from their faith or, in good German, that righteous persons have life from their faith and that on account of faith they are accounted righteous before God.⁵⁸ If righteousness consists in faith, it is clear that faith alone fulfills all the commandments and makes all their works righteous, especially since nobody is just unless all the commandments are kept. It follows that before God no works are able to justify apart from faith, and the holy apostle rejects works and praises faith so roundly that some people have taken umbrage at his words and said: "Then we will do no more good works." He condemns such people as mistaken and simpleminded; but it still happens in our day, whenever we reject impressive deeds done without faith and mainly for show, that people conclude they should only have faith and do nothing good at all—as if the first commandment were to be obeyed now by singing, reading, playing the organ, saying mass, matins, vespers and prayers at other appointed times, endowing churches, altars, cloisters, and clerical chapters with their bells, expensive ornaments, vestments, and altar ware, also by collecting treasure and running to the saints' shrines in Rome. If that were true, whenever we don our vestments and bow, genuflect, pray the rosary and the psalms, and do all that not before an idol but before the holy cross of God or a picture of his saints, that would be honoring and worshiping God and, according to the first commandment, to have no other gods. Any usurer, adulterer, or sinner of any kind could do that every day.

So it is, but if we do these things with the faith that we espouse, then they are praiseworthy not for the sake of their virtuous quality but because of the faith that makes all works equal, as we have said. If we doubt that, however, or do not believe that God is gracious to us and takes pleasure in us but presume

58. Rom. 1:17; 3:28.

that we please God only according to our works, then it is pure deception to honor God externally but internally to elevate ourselves as an idol. That is why I have spoken out so often against the whole assortment of works and denounced their pomp and lavishness. It is evident not only where there is doubt or no faith at all but also where scarcely one person in a thousand relies on faith in place of presuming that works make them acceptable to God and eligible for grace. They make a business of it, but God cannot abide it because grace is freely promised so that people will begin to rely on it and perform all the works identified in the commandments.

12. Note the gap between fulfilling the first commandment with external works and fulfilling it with innermost trust. The latter makes genuine and lively children of God, while the former produces a ruinous idolatry and the most harmful hypocrites on earth. With their pretentious displays, they lead countless people astray, strip them of faith, and leave them woe-fully seduced, blubbing in their fantasies. Christ warns us about those hypocrites: “Watch out for those who tell you, ‘Here is the Christ or there he is.’”⁵⁹ And in the Gospel of John: “I tell you the time will come that you will worship God neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem, for the Father seeks those who worship spiritually.”⁶⁰ These verses and others like them have caused me, and should cause others, to reject that pompous display of bulls, seals, and banners surrounding indulgences, with which the poor laity are enticed to build churches, make contributions, set up endowments, and offer prayers, even as faith is passed over in silence or, better said, completely suppressed. Since it makes no distinction among works, faith cannot tolerate that some are grossly exaggerated and touted over others. God desires only genuine worship and refuses to allow that honor to

59. Matt. 24:23.

60. John 4:21-23.

be given to any work unless it is imparted by God himself, from whom that work originates. The Old Testament records a similar type of mischief when the Jews are said to abandon the temple and to offer sacrifices in gardens of lust and on the mountaintops.⁶¹ Our hypocrites act the same way: eager to perform every work but ignoring the chief work of faith.

13. Where now are those who ask which works are good, or what they should do, or how they can become pious? Moreover, where are those who accuse us, when we preach about faith, of denying that any good work should be taught or done? Is it not true that the first commandment by itself demands more than anybody can do? Even if the commandment applied collectively to a thousand people, or the whole human race, or every living creature, it would still demand too much, since it commands us at every moment to conduct our lives with faith and confidence in God alone, putting such trust in nothing else, and hence to have no other divinity than the one true God. Since, therefore, human nature requires us at every moment to be doing something, either tolerating or fleeing from what happens (for life never rests, as we see), let those who desire to be godly abound in good works, practicing faith in every situation and learning constantly to do everything with that trust. Then you will discover how much there is to accomplish, how everything is comprehended in faith, and how you can never be idle because even idleness occurs within the practice and work of faith.

In short, everything that we are and have and come to possess has to be good and meritorious when we believe, as we should, that it all pleases God. Therefore St. Paul says: "So, brothers and sisters, whatever you do, whether you eat or drink, do everything in the name of Jesus Christ our Lord."⁶² Now it cannot happen

61. Isa. 65:3.

62. Cf. Col. 3:17.

in his name if it does not happen in faith: “We know, however, that everything works to the best advantage of the holy ones of God.”⁶³ When we preach faith alone, therefore, and some people say good works are forbidden, that is like saying to a sick person: “If you were healthy, your body could perform all its functions, but without your health everything you do is nothing.” Then the sick person would conclude that I had forbidden his body to perform any of its functions, although I meant that health first had to be restored in order to activate all the bodily members. Likewise, in every work, faith must be the boss and the captain, or it amounts to nothing at all.

14. Now you might say: If faith does everything, according to the first commandment, why are there so many ecclesiastical and secular laws, along with rituals in the churches, cloisters, and shrines, which urge and encourage people to do good works? The answer: Precisely because not all of us have faith or pay attention to it. If everyone had it, we would need no law, for good works would be done by them spontaneously all the time, just as the confidence that belongs to faith would certainly teach them.

Now there are many kinds of people. The first sort, just mentioned, need no law. Paul refers to them when he says no law is given to just persons, that is, to those who have faith,⁶⁴ for they do voluntarily what they know and are able. And they do it alone with firm trust that in all they do God is pleased and his favor hovers over them.

The second sort intend to abuse this freedom by relying upon it improperly and becoming lazy. Saint Peter says about them: “You should live as those who are free, but do not use this freedom to cloak your sin,”⁶⁵ as if he were saying: “The freedom

63. Cf. Rom. 8:28.

64. Cf. 1 Tim. 1:9-11.

65. 1 Pet. 2:16.

of faith does not give free rein to sin and will not cover it up, but it does allow you to endure everything and to do sundry good works as the occasion offers, so that no one is restricted only to this or that specific task.” Paul also says as much: “Take care that this freedom not become a pretext for you to live according to the flesh.”⁶⁶ Such people have to be prodded with laws and kept in line by teaching and warnings.

The third kind are malicious persons who are ready at any time to commit atrocities. Like wild horses and dogs, they must be restrained by the force of ecclesiastical and civil laws and, if that fails, removed from society by the worldly sword, as Paul says: “Civil authority bears the sword and with it serves God . . . not for the godly but to instill fear in the ungodly.”⁶⁷

The fourth sort of people understand this faith and spiritual life, but their understanding is immature and child-like. They have to be enticed with rituals, rules, and external things—readings, praying, fasting, singing, attending worship in churches with all their trappings, adornment, organ music, and whatever else is observed in cloisters and churches—until they learn to recognize faith. A great danger lurks here because the leaders are caught up in these rituals and external matters and treat them as if they were most important while ignoring faith. Unfortunately, that is happening now, although people should be learning faith just as a mother gives her children other food along with milk until the children can eat solid food by themselves.

15. Because we are not all the same, we must have patience with those people and take upon ourselves and observe what they take upon themselves and observe. We should not despise them but direct them in the proper path of faith. Saint Paul teaches

66. Gal. 5:13.

67. Cf. Rom. 13:3-4.

as much: "Receive the weak in faith and instruct them."⁶⁸ And he did that himself: "To those who are under the law I became as one under the law, although I was not under it."⁶⁹ Consider the debate between Christ and Peter about paying the temple tax even though they were not obligated to do so. Jesus asked Peter "whether taxes were paid by the children of kings or only by others," and Peter said, "the others." Then Jesus said: "The children of kings are exempt from taxation. However, so that we give them no offense, go to the sea and cast out a line. Open the mouth of the first fish that comes up, and you will find there a penny. Give it to them for you and for me."⁷⁰ Here we see that a Christian is free through faith and not bound to any work or anything else. Since others, however, do not yet believe, Christians take upon themselves and observe that which the others are not obligated to do. Christians do it freely because they are certain that it pleases God; they do it with pleasure, assume it freely like any other work that has presented itself without having been chosen. They seek and desire nothing more than to act in faith in a way that pleases God.

In this sermon, we have undertaken to teach which works are truly good and which work is supreme. It should now be clear that we are not talking about the people in groups two, three, and four, but about the first group, which the others should imitate. The first group should, however, bear patiently with the others and instruct them. Those who are still weak in faith and without comprehension but would like to do good and learn even better should not be belittled on account of the rules and customs to which they cling so tightly as if to appear lost

68. Cf. Rom. 14:1.

69. 1 Cor. 9:20.

70. Matt. 17:24-27. In v. 27, Luther uses the word *pfennig* for the coin. In the sixteenth century, the coin would have been worth more than a modern German *pfennig* before the euro replaced the German mark.

without them. Instead, blame their ignorant and blind instructors, who never taught them faith and led them so deeply into works. Carefully and gradually, as if handling people with infirmities, they should be guided into faith but still allowed to cling to some works for the sake of their conscience and reassurance until they have attained the right understanding of faith. In this way, their weak conscience, if ripped out too quickly, will not be completely destroyed or so baffled that they retain neither faith nor works. We should not, however, trouble ourselves with obstinate folk who stick only with works and ignore what is said about faith even to the point of contesting it, as Christ taught us to do when he said: "Let them alone; they are blind guides of the blind."⁷¹

16. You may ask, however: "How can I be sure that all my works are pleasing to God, since from time to time I fall short, for example, by talking, eating, drinking, or sleeping too much or by cutting loose in some other way, none of which I seem able to avoid?" The answer is: "Your question demonstrates that you consider faith to be like any work and fail to set it above all the others. Faith is the highest and best work because it persists through everyday sins and erases them by not doubting that God is so well disposed toward you that such pitfalls and mistakes are, as it were, invisible. In fact, when believers commit a mortal sin⁷² (although that should never, or at most seldom, happen to those whose lives are filled with faith and trust in God), they stand up again and do not doubt that their sins have already been forgiven, as it is written in 1 John: "I am writing this to you, my children, so that you may not sin. But if anyone does sin, then we have an advocate with God, Jesus

71. Matt. 15:14.

72. In the early church, murder, adultery, and apostasy were considered mortal sins. The seven deadly sins of the Middle Ages were wrath, greed, sloth, pride, lust, envy, and gluttony.

Christ. He is the atonement for our sins.”⁷³ Moreover, “Even if we sin, we are still yours and acknowledge that you are great.”⁷⁴ And: “The righteous may fall seven times, but every time they rise again.”⁷⁵ Faith has to be so strong and substantial that believers can bear knowing that in the judgment of God all their doing is sinful and worthy of damnation, as it is written in the psalm: “No one living is righteous before you.”⁷⁶ They must be uncertain about their works, because they cannot be good except when they are done in faith, which does not expect judgment but only divine grace, favor, and mercy, as David says: “For your mercy is forever before my eyes, and I walk cheerfully in your truth.”⁷⁷ Again: “The light of your countenance hovers over us,” that is, the awareness of your grace through faith, and “with it you have made my heart glad,” for we receive what we expect.⁷⁸

Now you see that works are blameless, forgiven, and good not by their own nature but by the mercy and grace of God and through faith that relies upon this mercy. The works by themselves do nothing but instill fear, but we can comfort ourselves through the grace of God, as the psalm says: “The Lord takes pleasure in those who fear him and yet still trust in his mercy.”⁷⁹ With complete trust, we pray “our Father,” but also “forgive us our debts.” We are his children and yet still sinners; we are

73. 1 John 2:1-2.

74. Cf. *Wisd. of Sol.* 15:2.

75. Cf. *Prov.* 24:16.

76. *Ps.* 143:2. Cf. the third thesis prepared by Luther for the 1518 disputation in Heidelberg: “Although human works always seem attractive and good, they are nevertheless likely to be mortal sins” (LW 31:43; WA 1:353).

77. Cf. *Ps.* 26:3.

78. Cf. *Ps.* 4:6-7.

79. *Ps.* 147:11.

precious to him and yet fail to do enough.⁸⁰ All of that is done by faith, which has its firm foundation in the goodness and favor of God.

17. You may ask about the source of faith and confidence or where they can be found. To know that is more necessary than anything else. First, without a doubt, it does not come from your works or merits but alone from Jesus Christ, who has freely promised it and bestows it, as St. Paul says: "God makes his love so sweet and agreeable in that Christ died for us while we were still sinners."⁸¹ It is as if Paul wanted to say: "Is it not a strong and invincible confidence that is given to us because Christ died for our sins even before we asked for it or were even concerned about it, indeed, while we were still living in our sins?" Paul continues: "If Christ died for us a long time ago, while we were still sinners, much more surely then will we be saved through him now that we have been justified by his blood. For if while we were still enemies we were reconciled with God through the death of his Son, we will certainly be saved by his life now that we are reconciled."⁸²

You must take the image of Christ into yourself and behold how God presents his mercy to your eyes, offering it without any prevenient merit on your part. From this image of his grace you must draw faith and confidence that all your sins are forgiven. Faith does not originate with works, nor is it manufactured by them, but it must bubble up and flow from the blood, wounds, and death of Christ.⁸³ In this faith, when you recognize that God is so gracious to you that his Son was sacrificed for you,

80. An expression of Luther's assertion that the believer is "simultaneously saint and sinner" (*simul iustus et peccator*).

81. Cf. Rom. 5:8.

82. Cf. Rom. 5:9-10.

83. Luther took this description of faith's origin from the Christ-mysticism of the Middle Ages.

then your heart has to be pleased and in turn be pleasing to God. Your confidence grows out of pure favor and love, that is, out of God's love for you and your love for God. We also read that the Holy Spirit was never given to anyone when works were performed but always when people heard the gospel of Christ about the mercy of God. Today and in every age, faith comes only from that word and nowhere else.