

LUTHER'S WORKS

VOLUME 21

THE SERMON ON THE MOUNT (SERMONS) AND THE MAGNIFICAT

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¹Luther, M. (1999, c1956). *Vol. 21: Luther's works, vol. 21 : The Sermon on the Mount and the Magnificat* (J. J. Pelikan, H. C. Oswald & H. T. Lehmann, Ed.). Luther's Works. Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House.

LUTHER'S WORKS ON THE NEW TESTAMENT

THE works of Luther contained in this volume and in those which follow are all expositions of the New Testament. Like those on the Old Testament, they cover a major portion of his career as a Biblical expositor. Some of them date from the years of his struggle for religious certainty, others are a reflection of the later and more mature stages of his thought. In his expositions of the New Testament, as in those devoted to the Old, Luther ranged all the way from brief notes that are frequently little more than paraphrase to extensive and detailed examinations of the text, from philology to exhortation and back again. And in both the philology and the exhortation, the latter-day reader can discern Luther the man, Luther the preacher, Luther the theologian, Luther the Reformer.

To the reader who has not thought or read very much about Luther's activity as an interpreter of Sacred Scripture, one of the striking features of these works will be their modest scope. The works on the Old Testament occupy twenty volumes—more than a third of the entire set, fully two thirds of the exegetical works. And certain works on the Old Testament are omitted from the series! The reasons for this preponderance of commentaries on the Old Testament over commentaries on the New Testament lie partly in Luther's estimate of the Old Testament (cf. Vol. 1 of this series), but the question deserves mention here because of its importance for an evaluation of the works on the New Testament. Not only do the commentaries on the Old Testament outnumber those on the New, but also several of those on the New Testament were originally series of sermons preached in Wittenberg and then drawn together into the form of commentaries. Others were lectures delivered very early in Luther's career as a theologian. Still others were special commentaries on individual chapters prepared for particular polemical purposes. Of Luther's mature works on the New Testament, the Commentary on Galatians in its various editions is perhaps the only one that parallels the many commentaries on books of the Old Testament that he continued to produce.

Part of the thought behind this situation is probably Luther's conception of the difference between the Old and the New Testament. The cliché that he was the restorer of Pauline Christianity has obscured not only the influence of other sections of the New Testament upon his thought, but also the way his interpretation of the entire New Testament drew upon his primary exegetical work as an expositor of the Old Testament. As Heinrich Bornkamm has pointed out, if Luther were a professor on a modern theological faculty, he would occupy not the chair of New Testament, much less that of systematic theology, but that of Old Testament. His works on the Old Testament, contained in the preceding volumes of this set, provide ample documentation of his work as an exegete of the Hebrew Scriptures. But it is also true that his works on the New Testament, beginning with this volume, may well be characterized as the sort of commentaries on the New Testament that could be expected to come from a man who dealt with the Old Testament as Luther did. The Old Testament was best handled in exposition, the New Testament was best handled in sermons. This was in keeping with his distinction between the Old Testament as "Scripture" in the more precise sense of the word and the New Testament as "preaching."

The very distinction, however, helped make it possible for Luther to open the meaning of the New Testament as few exegetes before or since. Using the resources of his own remarkable memory and the help that came from others, he frequently found and cited parallels from the Old Testament to clarify passages that meant very little otherwise. Even when he did not do this, he drew upon the perspectives of the Old Testament in expounding the New. It is really instructive and noteworthy, for example, to examine any of Luther's several excursions on the Biblical contrast between "flesh" and "spirit." The checkered history of that contrast in Christian history was due at least in part to the fact that the expositors of the New Testament had so often drawn upon classical rather than upon Biblical sources for their materials. Interpreting the New Testament in the light of such sources, they could even reinterpret the Old Testament that way—a process that had already been discernible in the Septuagint and, from it, was passed on to Christian exegesis. From his early monastic inclination to see the contrast between "flesh" and "spirit" as the distinction between man's "lower nature" and his "higher nature," Luther moved to his later realization that the contrast actually lay between idolatry and the service of the living God, and that both terms were actually predicates of the same subject, the total man. By rooting his interpretation of the New Testament in his understanding of the Old Testament, Luther thus helped to break the exegetical habits of many centuries. He read the New Testament as the early church had apparently intended it, as an addition to the Scriptures which the church already possessed in the Old Testament. Far from being a Marcionite,

as he has sometimes been portrayed, Luther did precisely what Marcion seems to have criticized. He read the Old Testament as Christian Scripture, and he read the New Testament on the basis of the Old.

As he did this in the interpretation of “flesh” and “spirit,” so he worked from the Old Testament in interpreting other New Testament terms and concepts. Indeed, it could be maintained, though not without oversimplification, that the insight to which Luther attributed his great change was finally another case of this same exegesis of the New Testament in the light of the Old. The phrase “righteousness of God” had troubled him in Romans 1:17 and in the Psalms because he was conceiving of “righteousness” and of other divine attributes in a “passive” way, as that which God was and that which God possessed. Once he realized that “righteousness” and other divine attributes actually had to do with the divine activity and denoted that which God conferred as a gift, the gates of Paradise were opened to him. With a full awareness of all the other factors involved in this initial experience and discovery, we can still say that it was in part the realization of the Hebrew rather than Greek origin behind statements like Romans 1:17 that brought Luther to his “wonderful and new definition of righteousness” and of justification. There was a similar development throughout his growing and deepening grasp of New Testament vocabulary and usage. The term “church” was interpreted in the light of “the people of God”; the term “holy” recovered its connotation of transcendence after having been almost completely moralized in some of his predecessors; the title “Christ” became a title again, not merely a name. In literally dozens of instances, Luther’s growth as an interpreter of the New Testament (especially as that growth is documented in his sermons) can be linked to the way his work as an interpreter of the Old Testament (especially as that work is documented in his lectures) provided him with the tools of theological lexicography he so frequently used in the exegesis of the New Testament.

Another marked feature of Luther’s work on the New Testament is his continuing debate with his predecessors from both the patristic and the scholastic period. The vigor of this debate makes itself felt in the sharp language he sometimes used to criticize a particular interpretation, but the extent of the debate is not always equally clear. Sometimes, to be sure, Luther indicated the writer, if not always the book, from which he was quoting; since he often did this from memory, the identification of the source can often be difficult. But such an identification becomes vastly more difficult when, as so often, we are in the dark about the precise source from which Luther drew the interpretation he was condemning, and can only guess whether it came to him directly from a source we know now or indirectly through some source not available to us. And this is true even in those instances where it has proved possible to discover a source, whether direct or indirect, for the idea. In addition to the difficulty encountered in identifying the references and quotations Luther gives, there is the more subtle problem of identifying references and quotations where Luther gives no explicit indication that he is referring or quoting at all. Most scholars will acknowledge that when they have been able to make such identifications, it has only been by chance, from their other reading and study, and that it is therefore quite likely that many other references and quotations have escaped them. Scholarship in the history of theology will have to know vastly more than it now does about the theologians of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries before it will be able to go beyond such chance in identifying the sources, negative and positive, of Luther’s exegetical judgments.

The calculation of Luther’s debt to his predecessors which such scholarship will make possible will probably be accompanied, however, by a new estimate of the many ways in which he diverged from those predecessors as well. Thus Beyschlag has suggested some of the contrasts between the use of the Sermon on the Mount in the Franciscan movement and the manner in which Luther went about interpreting it. Loewenich’s study of Luther as an interpreter of the Synoptic Gospels makes it possible to see these and many other contrasts in the form and content of Luther’s commentaries on the evangelists. Even between Luther’s interpretation of Galatians and the way Augustine uses Galatians in *On the Spirit and the Letter*, one of Luther’s favorite treatises, there are many sharp differences. Thus the more that is discovered of the work of his predecessors, the more evident will it probably be that he had them in mind in his strictures on other interpretations. His one constant criticism of their New Testament exegesis, perhaps more generally distributed than any other, was that they had failed to comprehend the meaning of the “Gospel” and had therefore interpreted it as if it were another law. As a consequence, so he maintained, they had not grasped either the Gospels or Paul. The former had become new sets of rules rather than the proclamation of the words and deeds of God in Christ, and the latter had been deprived of the very center of his Epistles.

Nevertheless, both the calculation of the debt and the estimate of the divergence will emphasize the prominent role that Luther's predecessors played in his work as an interpreter of the New Testament.

A fundamental assumption of Luther's criticisms and of his exegetical work generally, as we have seen, is the unity of the Bible. It is also this assumption that separates him from many Biblical interpreters in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, especially from interpreters of the Old Testament. But after driving a wedge between the Old Testament and the New Testament, the Biblical interpretation of those centuries went on to drive similar wedges into the New Testament itself—between Jesus and Paul, between the Synoptics and John, eventually between Paul and Paul. Partly because they often found the origins of New Testament thought and language elsewhere than in the Old Testament, scholars who practiced such interpretation of the New Testament sought to explain the divergences within New Testament speech by reference to extrabiblical sources; and so they frequently ignored the possibility that differences of language and of emphasis between one writer of the New Testament and another could be part of a unity underlying and preceding the whole. For Luther, as for most of the theologians that preceded him, that was more than a possibility; it was one of the most consistent devices he employed in interpreting the New Testament. Sometimes he looked for synonyms or equivalent expressions by which one New Testament writer said what another writer had said some other way. Sometimes he proceeded on the assumption that the same term was used the same way by different writers, although he was also quick to notice the differing shades of meaning in various Biblical books. The New Testament formed a unit with the Old Testament, and it was also a unit within itself.

Because that unity had not yet become a problem in his time as it has been in modern study of the New Testament, Luther was not forced to define its precise character and to formulate its detailed implications the way present-day scholars like Rowley or Hunter or Dodd have had to do. Yet he resembled these scholars in his effort to find such unity in two themes and sources—the Old Testament and the proclamation of Jesus. The first of these, as has been mentioned, provided him with his principal source of insight into the language of the Bible, enabling him to go beyond the initial divergences between one book of the New Testament and another to the imagery of the Old Testament behind those divergences. But because the essential content of the New Testament was a proclamation—it is noteworthy that present-day Biblical scholars are concentrating once more upon this “kerygma”—Luther could also relate these divergences to the several emphases present in that proclamation. He frequently suggested that this was so in the preaching *about* Jesus Christ because it has already been so in the preaching *of* Jesus Christ. Accepting the accuracy of both the Synoptic Gospels and John, he pointed to the variety among them as a demonstration of how varied had been the teaching and preaching of Jesus itself. As far as Luther could see, no contrast within the New Testament was any sharper than the contrast evident within the transmitted words of Jesus—except perhaps the contrast between Paul and James.

One additional element in the unity of the New Testament deserves mention: the unitive function of Christian experience and of Luther's own experience. A study of his commentaries on the Old Testament bears out how prominently experience figured in his discovery of Christ there, but experience was no less prominent in the way he worked with the Gospels and the Epistles. Identifying himself with the struggles of Paul and the parables of Jesus, he perceived the fundamental harmony between the two, even though Paul hardly ever referred to “the kingdom of God.” Experience performed this function for him because he believed it to be the product of the Biblical message, or, more precisely, of the power of the Holy Spirit communicated in the preaching of the Biblical message and in the administration of the Sacraments. And this was the same Holy Spirit who spoke to and through the Biblical writers. Thus the congruence of experience and exposition in the study of the New Testament, Luther believed, was not a subjective thing, but the creation of the Creator Spirit Himself.

But as the unity of experience in the Holy Spirit was anything but a uniformity, so the unity of the New Testament was something Luther affirmed with a sharp consciousness of the great variety among the books of the New Testament. More than most of his predecessors or his immediate successors, Luther realized and emphasized that variety; and as Holl says, what began as a religious insight eventually had implications in scholarship as well. As a commentator on Scripture, Luther frequently had occasion to point out the variety of language and emphasis in Biblical literature. As a preacher on the New Testament, he compared and contrasted Biblical forms of expression in an effort to clarify the implications of the text before him. As a translator of the entire Bible, he had to deal minutely with the uniqueness of each

Biblical writer. Throughout his dealings with Sacred Scripture, therefore, Luther perceived the “diverse manners” of the prophets, evangelists, and apostles. That he was able to do this in the Gospels, accentuating distinctions and yet never losing the unity of the whole, is, as Ebeling has amply demonstrated, one of the great achievements of Luther as an interpreter of the New Testament. In the Pauline and the catholic Epistles, similarly, he traced the continuity with the primitive proclamation of Jesus, without blurring the particularity of each writer and book.

Thus Luther could construct a “miniature canon” of the New Testament, consisting of the Gospel of John, the Epistles of Paul (especially Romans), and the First Epistle of Peter. And yet this did not diminish his regard for other books, nor prevent him from preaching and commenting upon them, as these works on the New Testament amply attest. Unity amid diversity, one Gospel and yet several evangelists, two testaments but only one Bible—and all this, as he frequently quoted in connection with the question, because there was “one Lord, one faith, one Baptism.” The application of this theme to the material of Biblical interpretation was the motif of Luther’s works on the New Testament.

J. P.

INTRODUCTION TO VOLUME 21

As a preacher, teacher, and writer, Luther was occupied with the interpretation of the Synoptic Gospels throughout his career. It is evident from Erwin Mühlhaupt’s compilations of *Luthers Evangelienauslegung* (5 vols.; Göttingen, 1939–1954) that it would be possible to piece together practically an entire commentary on St. Matthew out of Luther’s sermons (e. g., Weimar, XLVII, 232–627), his “Notes on Several Chapters of Matthew” of 1538 (Weimar, XXXVIII, 443–667), and his discussions of verses and themes from Matthew in other writings. But the two works presented in this volume are probably the most significant and influential commentaries to come from this lifelong preoccupation with the Synoptics. Separated by a decade, they indicate two of the several methods Luther followed in expounding Scripture; for the *Commentary on the Magnificat* was a devotional tract composed for a particular individual, and the *Commentary on the Sermon on the Mount* was based upon a series of sermons delivered in Wittenberg. Thus neither of them came from his lecture hall, which was the source of so many of his other commentaries.

The major portion of the *Commentary on the Magnificat* (Weimar, VII, 538–604; Saint Louis, VII, 1372–1445; Holman, III, 119–200) was composed amid the stormy days of the spring and summer of 1521. In fact, the writing and the printing were both interrupted when Luther left for the Diet of Worms on April 2 and were completed during his stay at the Wartburg. Perhaps the best way to follow the development of the composition is through passages in a series of letters by and about Luther.

The earliest reference to the commentary is in a letter written by George Spalatin (1484–1545) to Frederick the Wise, Elector of Saxony, late in 1520; Otto Waltz, who edited the letter for the *Zeitschrift für Kirchengeschichte*, dated it December 3, while Berbig gives the date as December 1. In it, Spalatin reports that Luther “has also begun to expound the Magnificat and to dedicate it to my gracious young lord.” The “gracious young lord” referred to was the Elector’s nephew, John Frederick (1503–1554), who was to be a prominent supporter of the Wittenberg and Jena editions of Luther’s works. During the weeks preceding Spalatin’s letter, John Frederick had repeatedly and outspokenly indicated his support of Luther, interceding with his uncle on Luther’s behalf and assuring Luther of his backing. On February 27, 1521, Luther wrote to Spalatin: “I am occupied with the exposition of Mary’s canticle for the young prince, so that the book may be a reply, though a late one, to the letter he recently sent to me.” And a week later, on March 6, 1521, he again wrote to Spalatin: “I am occupied with Mary’s canticle, as I wrote to you earlier.” Two weeks later, on March 19, 1521, he wrote to Spalatin: “The canticle Magnificat is being born in the press, but I do not know when it will be finished.”

This accounts for the fact that the dedicatory preface of the commentary is dated March 10, 1521. Luther’s hopes of finishing the commentary were indefinitely delayed by the summons to appear at Worms. On Easter Sunday, March 31, 1521, just two days before leaving for Worms, he sent what he could of the work to the young prince, accompanying it with a letter: “Enclosed I am sending your Grace

the beginning of the Magnificat. The fourth quire is still lying in the presses. Now I must let this be postponed until my return. Your Grace knows that since I have been summoned to the Diet, I have to drop everything. If God helps me to return home, your Grace will have the whole thing in a hurry.” Almost two months passed before Luther could begin to make good on that promise, months occupied with travel, with the Diet itself, and with the exile at the Wartburg. Writing from the Wartburg on May 14, 1521, Luther told Spalatin that a number of things were on their way from Wittenberg to him at the castle, “among which I also expect the unfinished Magnificat.”

Within less than four weeks the work was done. On June 10, 1521, Luther wrote to Spalatin: “As you see, I am sending the completed Magnificat ... to be printed as soon as possible.” But there was so much printing to be done at Wittenberg that “as soon as possible” did not prove to be very soon. In a general mood of illness and despair, Luther wrote to Melanchthon on August 3, 1521: “I am amazed that my Magnificat is not finished yet.... Who knows whether this may not be the end of my ministry? ... Yet I have not lived in vain.” A few days later, on August 6, 1521, he wrote to Spalatin: “I implore you, is my Magnificat finished yet?” Apparently it was, then or soon thereafter. On September 6, 1521, Hans Pelt wrote to Thomas Münzer (cf. p. 107, n. 44 below), indicating that it had appeared; and on November 11, 1521, Johann von Botzheim wrote to Thomas Blaurer: “During these days I have seen two psalms translated into the vernacular by Master Martin, as well as something on the Magnificat.” The commentary seems to have achieved rather wide distribution; the Weimar edition lists eight separate printings in the next five years, in addition to two printings of a Latin translation. Our translation of it is a revised version of the translation originally printed in the third volume of the Philadelphia or Holman edition, and is used here with the permission of the copyright owners, the Muhlenberg Press.

Luther’s correspondence is likewise our principal source of information on the development of the other commentary in this volume, the *Commentary on the Sermon on the Mount* (Weimar, XXXII, 299–544; Saint Louis, VII, 346–677); but the information is rather sketchy, and most of it must come by inference. From 1522, the pastor of the city church in Wittenberg was Johannes Bugenhagen, sometimes called Pommer or Pomeranus (1485–1558). One of his outstanding services to the cause of the Reformation was his reorganization of church life in several territories that joined the Evangelical cause. Thus in the spring of 1528, Bugenhagen supervised the organization of the church in Braunschweig, arriving there on May 20. In a letter to Wenzeslaus Link (1483–1547) on May 12, 1528, Luther said he expected that Bugenhagen would stay there “several days.” It proved to be several months; and when he did leave Braunschweig, it was to perform a similar service in Hamburg, where he went on October 9, 1528. He did not return to Wittenberg until June 24, 1529. Meanwhile Luther was filling Bugenhagen’s pulpit, amid his myriad other duties.

This account of Bugenhagen’s work in Braunschweig and Hamburg helps to explain Luther’s reactions late in the summer of 1530, when a delegation came from Lübeck, apparently to Augsburg, to request that someone from Wittenberg visit Lübeck to supervise the reorganization of their church along Evangelical lines. On September 11, 1530, Luther wrote to Melanchthon from the Koburg: “You will hear the rest [of the news] from the delegates from Lübeck, including your relative [a man named Jakob Krappe]. I would prefer not to have Pomeranus absent; but I do not see how we can turn down their request, at least for a while. Both the church and our school need him greatly, especially since weariness over my age and my health, or rather over my very life, makes me think that I shall not have to watch and bear this accursed world much longer.” In November 1530 Bugenhagen wrote to his friends in Wittenberg: “On the day of SS. Simon and Jude, by the grace of God, we arrived safely in Lübeck.” Thus his arrival in Lübeck is to be dated on October 28, 1530. On November 13, 1530, Luther wrote to Veit Dietrich (1506–1549): “I have taken over Pomeranus’ labors. I am preaching and lecturing, and I am distracted by cases,” apparently marital cases. A few weeks later he complained to Link under the date of December 1, 1530: “I cannot find time to write to everyone. No longer am I only Luther, but Pomeranus, too, an official, a Moses, a Jethro, and what not? All things to all men.... Pomeranus is getting along very well in Lübeck.”

Pomeranus continued to get along very well in Lübeck, not for “a while,” as Luther had hoped, but until the spring of 1532. He did not return to Wittenberg until April 80 of that year. Thus Luther was his substitute in the pulpit for almost exactly one and one-half years. On Wednesdays he preached a series of sermons on St. Matthew, and on Saturdays a series on St. John. The series on St. Matthew was the origin

of what is presented here as the *Commentary on the Sermon on the Mount*, but there seems to be no way of determining who took down the sermons and who compiled them into this commentary. Both Georg Röer and Veit Dietrich could have been involved (cf, Luther's Works, 12, viii). Indeed, as Paul Pietsch says in his introduction to the Weimar text of the commentary: "When Luther began and concluded these sermons on Matthew, how many sermons he delivered, and finally whether he expounded only the three chapters from the fifth through the seventh or whether the editor trimmed the material down to the consecutive chapters, even though its beginning and end were determined by the accident of Bugenhagen's departure and return ... about all this we know little or nothing."

Because the evolution of the work from the pulpit to the appearance of the finished commentary is so completely obscure, a certain amount of caution is necessary in referring to it as a source for our understanding of Luther's thought. We cannot be sure whether the editor or editors, whoever they may have been, took certain liberties with the text of Luther's sermons as delivered. We know that this happened with other works (cf. Introduction to Vol. 1 of Luther's Works). At the same time, there seems to be no warrant for the extreme skepticism of certain scholars regarding the reliability of this commentary. There are many parallels throughout Luther's works for most of the ideas and many of the terms that appear here.

The commentary was published in the fall of 1532 for the first time by Joseph Klug in Wittenberg. It was published again in 1533, this time in Marburg. And a third edition, with certain revisions apparently intended by the editor to tone down the text, appeared in Wittenberg in 1534. We have noted all the significant textual variants throughout the commentary. An English translation by Charles Hay was published in Philadelphia in 1892.

THE SERMON ON THE MOUNT

Translated by

JAROSLAV PELIKAN

LUTHER'S PREFACE

TO THE SERMON ON THE MOUNT

I am very happy to see the publication of these sermons of mine on the three chapters of St. Matthew which St. Augustine calls "the Lord's Sermon on the Mount."¹ May God grant His grace so that they may help to preserve and keep the true, sure, and Christian understanding of this teaching of Christ, because these are such common sayings and texts that are used so often throughout Christendom. I do not doubt that here I have presented their true, pure, and Christian meaning to my friends and to anyone else that is interested. It is beyond understanding how through his apostles the wicked devil has managed so cleverly to twist and pervert especially the fifth chapter, making it teach the exact opposite of what it means. Christ here deliberately wanted to oppose all false teaching and to open up the true meaning of God's commandments, as He emphasizes when He says (Matt. 5:17): "I have not come to abolish the Law." He takes it up piece by piece and tries to make it completely dear. Still the infernal Satan has not found a single text in the Scriptures that he has more shamefully distorted and into which he has imported more error and false teaching than this very one, which Christ Himself ordered and appointed in order to head off false doctrine. This is really the devil's masterpiece!

First, this fifth chapter has fallen into the hands of the vulgar pigs and asses, the jurists and sophists, the right hand of that jackass of a pope and of his mamelukes. Out of this beautiful rose they have sucked and broadcast poison, covering up Christ with it and elevating and maintaining Antichrist. According to them, Christ does not intend everything He teaches in the fifth chapter to be regarded by His Christians as a command for them to observe; but He gave much of it merely as advice to those who want to become perfect, to be kept by anyone who pleases. This in spite of Christ's angry threat that no one will enter heaven who abolishes even one of the least of these commandments (Matt. 5:19); and He explicitly calls

them “commandments.” On this basis they have thought up the twelve “evangelical counsels,” twelve bits of good advice in the Gospel, which may be kept by anyone who pleases if he wants to attain a perfection higher and more perfect than that of other Christians. Thus they have not only made perfection as well as Christian salvation dependent upon works apart from faith, but they have even made these works optional. I call that forbidding true and fine good works—which is just what these vulgar asses and blasphemers accuse us of doing.

They cannot deny this, and no amount of covering or glossing over will help them as long as this fifth chapter of Matthew stands. Their books and glosses are in public view, as is the impenitent life, past and present, which they lead on the basis of this teaching of theirs. In their circles these twelve “evangelical counsels” are commonly taught: Do not requite wrongdoing! Do not avenge yourself! Offer the other cheek! Do not resist evil! Give your cloak along with your coat! Go the second mile! Give to everyone that asks! Lend to him who borrows! Pray for your persecutors! Love your enemies! Do good to those who hate! Do the other things that Christ teaches here! “All this,” so they spew out, “is not commanded.” And the jackasses in Paris frankly admit their reasons when they say: “Christian teaching would have much too hard a time of it if it were loaded down with things like this.”² In this way the jurists and sophists have been ruling and teaching the church till now, so that Christ with His teaching and interpretation has had to be their jester and juggler. Still they do no penance for this, but they eagerly defend it. They are trying to re-establish their cursed, shabby canons and to reinstate the crown on the head of their jackass of a pope. May God grant that I live to provide spangles and jewels for such a crown. Then, God willing, this jackass would be crowned right!

Dear brother, let this preaching of mine be of service to you, in the first place, against our squires, the jurists and sophists. I am referring especially to the canonists, whom they themselves call “asses”; and that is what they are. Thus you may preserve in its purity the teaching of Christ in this chapter of Matthew, instead of their asinine cunning and devilish dung. In the second place there are the new jurists and sophists, the schismatic spirits and Anabaptists. From their crazy heads they are making new trouble out of this fifth chapter. The others go too far to the left when they keep nothing at all of this teaching of Christ, but condemn and obliterate it. In the same way these men lean too far to the right when they teach miserable stuff like this: that it is wrong to own private property, to swear, to hold office as a ruler or judge, to protect or defend oneself, to stay with wife and children. Thus the devil blows and brews on both sides so that they do not recognize any difference between the secular and the divine realm, much less what should be the distinctive doctrine and action in each realm. Thank God, we can boast that in these sermons we have clearly and diligently shown and emphasized this. Whoever errs or will err from now on, we are excused from all responsibility for him; for we have faithfully set forth our views for everyone’s benefit. Let their blood be on their own head! We shall await our reward for this—ingratitude, hate, and all sorts of hostility. And we shall say, “Thank God!”

From these horrible examples of both the papistic and the schismatic jurists we learn and know what the devil has in mind, especially his intention to distort this fifth chapter of St. Matthew, and thereby to exterminate pure Christian teaching. So let every preacher or minister be urged and warned to keep faithful and diligent watch over the little flock entrusted to him, and to help preserve the right interpretation. So long as the devil lives and the world stands, he will not stop attacking this chapter. His aim is in this way to suppress good works altogether, as happened under the papacy; or to institute false good works and fictitious holiness, as he has now begun to do through the new monks or schismatic spirits. Even if both the papistic and the schismatic jurists and monks were to perish, he would still find or raise up others; for he has to have such a following. From the beginning of the world, his kingdom has been ruled by monks. Though they may not have been called “monk,” yet their teaching and life have been monkish, that is, different and special and better than what God has commanded. For example, among the people of Israel there were the Baalites, the **בְּמִיִּיִם**, and the like; among the heathen there were the castrated priests and the vestal virgins.³ Therefore we can never be smug in his presence. From this fifth chapter have come the pope’s monks, who on the basis of this chapter have laid claim to a more perfect station in life than other Christians, and have maintained this claim until they are full of greed, pride, and finally every kind of devil. May Christ, our dear Lord and Master, who has opened up the true meaning for us, increase and strengthen it for us, and may He help us to live and act according to it. To Him be praise and thanks, with the Father and the Holy Spirit forever. Amen.

THE FIFTH CHAPTER OF ST. MATTHEW

1. *Seeing the crowds, He went up on the mountain; and when He sat down, His disciples came to Him.*
2. *And He opened His mouth and taught them and spoke.*

HERE the evangelist opens with a preface stating how Christ prepared Himself for the sermon He wanted to deliver: He went up on a mountain, sat down, and opened His mouth, to make it evident that He was in earnest. These are the three things, so to speak, which every good preacher should do: First, he takes his place; second, he opens his mouth and says something; third, he knows when to stop. "Takes his place" means that he presents himself as a master, a preacher with both the ability and the responsibility, one who comes with a call and not on his own, one to whom it is a matter of duty and obedience. Then he can say: "I am not coming because my own purpose and preference impel me, but I must do so because it is my office." This is said against those who have been causing us so much toil and trouble and still are, the schismatic rascals and fanatics who roam all over the country. They poison the people before the clergy and the government can discover it; and so they defile one household after another, until they have poisoned an entire city, and from the city an entire country.

To guard against such sneaks and cheats, one ought not to let anyone preach unless he has been appointed and commissioned for it. Nor should anyone take it upon himself, even though he is a preacher, to preach against a lying preacher whom he hears misleading the people in a papal or other church. Nor should anyone sneak around into the houses and set up private preaching-meetings. He should stay at home and mind his own official business and pulpit. If he neither will nor can enter the pulpit publicly, he should keep quiet. God does not want people running all over the place with His Word as though they were driven by the Holy Spirit and had to preach, or were seeking nooks or corners or pulpits to preach where they have no official call. Even though St. Paul was called as an apostle by God, he did not want to preach in places where other apostles had preached before (Rom. 15:20). Therefore it says here that Christ went up the mountain openly and publicly when He began His preaching ministry. A little later He said to His disciples (Matt. 5:14, 15): "You are the light of the world. Men do not light a lamp and put it under a bushel, but on a stand, to give light to all in the house." The office of the ministry and the Word of God are supposed to shine forth like the sun. We should not go around sneaking and plotting in the dark, as when we play blind man's buff,¹ but deal openly in broad daylight, to make it perfectly plain that both preacher and hearer are sure about the propriety of the teaching and the legitimacy of the office, so that concealment is unnecessary. Act the same way if you are in the ministry and have the commission to preach. Take your place openly, and fear no one; then you can boast with Christ (John 18:20): "I have spoken openly and freely before the world, and I have said nothing in the corner."

But you say: "What? Does this mean that no one should teach anything except in public? Should not the head of a household teach his servants in his house or keep a pupil or someone there who recites to him?" Answer: Of course that is all right and in its proper place here. The head of every family has the duty of training and teaching his children and servants, or of having them taught. In his house he is like a minister or bishop over his household, and he has the command to supervise what they learn and to be responsible for them. But you have no right to do this outside your own household and to force yourself upon other households or upon your neighbors. Nor should you put up with it if some such sneak comes to you and sets up a special preaching-meeting in your household for which he has no authorization. If someone comes into a house or city, let him be required to furnish proof that he is known, or let him show by letter and seal that he has proper authorization. Not every vagabond is to be believed who boasts that he has the Holy Spirit and who uses this to insinuate himself into this or that household. In short, this means that the Gospel or proclamation should not be listened to in a corner, but high up on a mountain and openly in the free daylight. That is the first thing that Matthew wants to show here.

The second thing is that He opens His mouth. As I have said, this is also part of a preacher's duty. He should not keep his mouth shut, nor perform his office publicly merely so that everyone must keep quiet and let him take his place as one who has a divine right and command. But he should also open his mouth vigorously and confidently, to preach the truth that has been entrusted to him. He should not be silent or mumble, but testify without being frightened or bashful. He should speak out candidly without regarding or sparing anyone, let it strike whomever or whatever it will. It is a great hindrance to a preacher if he looks around and worries about what people like or do not like to hear, or what might make him unpopular or bring harm or danger upon him. As he stands high on a mountain in a public place and looks around

freely, so he should also speak freely and fear no one, though he sees many kinds of people and faces. He should not hold a leaf in front of his mouth. He should look at neither the pleasure nor the anger of lords and squires, neither money nor riches, neither popularity nor power, neither disgrace nor poverty nor harm. He should think of nothing except that he is speaking what his office demands—his very reason for standing there.

For Christ did not establish and institute the ministry of proclamation to provide us with money, property, popularity, honor, or friendship, nor to let us seek our own advantage through it; but to have us publish the truth freely and openly, rebuke evil, and announce what pertains to the advantage, health, and salvation of souls. The Word of God is not here to teach a maid or a servant how to work in the household and to earn his bread, nor a burgomaster how to rule, nor a farmer how to plow or make hay. In brief, it neither gives nor shows temporal goods for the preservation of this life, for reason has already taught all this to everyone. But it is intended to teach how we are to come to that other life. It tells you to make use of this life and to feed your belly here as long as it lasts, knowing all the while where you will remain and live when this has ended. When the preacher begins to preach concerning another life about which we should be concerned and for the sake of which we should not behave as though we wanted to stay here forever, then arguments and baffles begin. The world cannot stand it. Then if a preacher loves his belly and this temporal life more, he is not doing his job. He may stand up and jabber in the pulpit, but he is not preaching the truth, he is not really opening his mouth. It trouble threatens, he keeps quiet and does not bite the fox.²

Now you see why Matthew wrote the introductory statement that Christ as a true preacher goes up on the mountain and vigorously opens His mouth, teaching the truth and condemning both false teaching and false life, as we shall hear.

3. Blessed are the spiritually poor, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

This is a fine, sweet, and friendly beginning for His instruction and preaching. He does not come like Moses or a teacher of the Law, with demands, threats, and terrors, but in a very friendly way, with enticements, allurements, and pleasant promises. In fact, if it were not for this report which has preserved for us all the first dear words that the Lord Christ preached, curiosity would drive and impel everyone to run all the way to Jerusalem, or even to the end of the world, just to hear one word of it. You would find plenty of money to build such a road well! And everyone would proudly boast that he had heard or read the very word that the Lord Christ had preached. How wonderfully happy the man would seem who succeeded in this! That is exactly how it would really be if we had none of this in written form, even though there might be a great deal written by others. Everyone would say: “Yes, I hear what St. Paul and His other apostles have taught, but I would much rather hear what He Himself spoke and preached.”

But now since it is so common that everyone has it written in a book and can read it every day, no one thinks of it as anything special or precious. Yes, we grow sated and neglect it, as if it had been spoken by some shoemaker rather than the High Majesty of heaven. Therefore it is in punishment for our ingratitude and neglect that we get so little out of it and never feel nor taste what a treasure, power, and might there is in the words of Christ. But whoever has the grace to recognize it as the Word of God rather than the word of man, will also think of it more highly and dearly, and will never grow sick and tired of it.

Friendly and sweet as this sermon is for Christians, who are His disciples, just so irksome and unbearable it is for the Jews and their great saints. From the very beginning He hits them hard with these words, rejecting and condemning their teaching, preaching the exact opposite, yes, pronouncing woe upon their life and teaching, as Luke 6:24–26 shows. The essence of their teaching was this: “If a man is successful here on earth, he is blessed and well off.” That was all they aimed for, that if they were pious and served God, He should give them plenty upon earth and deprive them of nothing. Thus David says of them in Psalm 144:13–15: “This is their teaching, that all their corners and garners should be full of grain and their fields full of sheep that bear often and much, and of cattle that labor much, with no harm or failure or mischance or distress coming upon them. Happy are such people!”

In opposition to this, Christ opens His mouth here and says that something is necessary other than the possession of enough on earth; as if He were to say: “My dear disciples, when you come to preach among the people, you will find out that this is their teaching and belief: ‘Whoever is rich or powerful is completely blessed; on the other hand, whoever is poor and miserable is rejected and condemned before God.’ ” The Jews were firmly persuaded that if a man was successful, this was a sign that he had a

gracious God, and vice versa. The reason for this was the fact that they had many great promises from God regarding the temporal, physical goods that He would grant to the pious. They counted upon these, in the opinion that if they had this, they were right with Him. The Book of Job is addressed to this theory. His friends argue and dispute with him about this and insist that he is being punished this way because of some great sin he must have knowingly committed against God. Therefore he ought to admit it, be converted, and become pious, that God might lift the punishment from him.

At the outset, therefore, it was necessary for His sermon to overthrow this delusion and to tear it out of their hearts as one of the greatest obstacles to faith and a great support for the idol Mammon in their heart. Such a doctrine could have no other consequence than to make people greedy, so that everyone would be interested only in amassing plenty and in having a good time, without need or trouble. And everyone would have to conclude: "If that man is blessed who succeeds and has plenty, I must see to it that I do not fall behind."

This is still what the whole world believes today, especially the Turks, who draw their reliance and strength from it, coming to the conclusion that they could not have had so much success and victory if they had not been the people of God to whom He was gracious in preference to all others. Among us, too, the whole papacy believes this. Their doctrine and life are founded only upon their having enough; and therefore they have assembled all the goods of the world, as everyone can see. In short, this is the greatest and most universal belief or religion on earth. On it all men depend according to their flesh and blood, and they cannot regard anything else as blessedness. That is why He preaches a totally new sermon here for the Christians: If they are a failure, if they have to suffer poverty and do without riches, power, honor, and good days, they will still be blessed and have not a temporal reward, but a different, eternal one; they will have enough in the kingdom of heaven.

But you say: "What? Must all Christians, then, be poor? Dare none of them have money, property, popularity, power, and the like? What are the rich to do, people like princes, lords, and kings? Must they surrender all their property and honor, or buy the kingdom of heaven from the poor, as some have taught?" Answer: No. It does not say that whoever wants to have the kingdom of heaven must buy it from the poor, but that he must be poor himself and be found among the poor. It is put clearly and candidly, "Blessed are the poor." Yet the little word "spiritually" is added, so that nothing is accomplished when someone is physically poor and has no money or goods. Having money, property, land, and retinue outwardly is not wrong in itself. It is God's gift and ordinance. No one is blessed, therefore, because he is a beggar and owns nothing of his own. The command is to be "spiritually poor." I said at the very beginning that Christ is not dealing here at all with the secular realm and order, but that He wants to discuss only the spiritual—how to live before God, above and beyond the external.

Having money, property, honor, power, land, and servants belongs to the secular realm; without these it could not endure. Therefore a lord or prince should not and cannot be poor, because for his office and station he must have all sorts of goods like these. This does not mean, therefore, that one must be poor in the sense of having nothing at all of his own. The world could not endure if we were all to be beggars and to have nothing. The head of a household could not support his household and servants if he himself had nothing at all. In short, physical poverty is not the answer. There is many a beggar getting bread at our door more arrogant and wicked than any rich man, and many a miserly, stingy peasant who is harder to get along with than any lord or prince.

So be poor or rich physically and externally, as it is granted to you—God does not ask about this—and know that before God, in his heart, everyone must be spiritually poor. That is, he must not set his confidence, comfort, and trust on temporal goods, nor hang his heart upon them and make Mammon his idol. David was an outstanding king, and he really had his wallet and treasury full of money, his barns full of grain, his land full of all kinds of goods and provisions. In spite of all this he had to be a poor beggar spiritually, as he sings of himself (Ps. 39:12): "I am poor, and a guest in the land, like all my fathers." Look at the king, sitting amid such possessions, a lord over land and people; yet he does not dare to call himself anything but a guest or a pilgrim, one who walks around on the street because he has no place to stay. This is truly a heart that does not tie itself to property and riches; but though it has, it behaves as if it had nothing, as St. Paul boasts of the Christians (2 Cor. 6:10): "As poor, yet making many rich; as having nothing, and yet possessing everything."

All this is intended to say that while we live here, we should use all temporal goods and physical necessities, the way a guest does in a strange place, where he stays overnight and leaves in the morning. He needs no more than bed and board and dare not say: "This is mine, here I will stay." Nor dare he take possession of the property as though it belonged to him by right; otherwise he would soon hear the host say to him: "My friend, don't you know that you are a guest here? Go back where you belong." That is the way it is here, too. The temporal goods you have, God has given to you for this life. He does permit you to use them and with them to fill the bag of worms³ that you wear around your neck. But you should not fasten or hang your heart on them as though you were going to live forever. You should always go on and consider another, higher, and better treasure, which is your own and which will last forever.

This is said coarsely for the common man. Thus he will learn to understand what it means in Scriptural language to be "spiritually poor" or poor before God. We should not evaluate things externally, on the basis of money and property or of deficits and surpluses. For, as we have said above, we see that the poorest and most miserable beggars are the worst and most desperate rascals and dare to commit every kind of mischief and evil tricks, which fine, upstanding people, rich citizens or lords and princes, do not do. On the other hand, many saintly people who had plenty of money and property, honor, land, and retinue, still were poor amid all this property. We should evaluate things on the basis of the heart. We must not be overconcerned whether we have something or nothing, much or little. And whatever we do have in the way of possessions, we should always treat it as though we did not have it, being ready at any time to lose it and always keeping our hearts set on the kingdom of heaven (Col. 3:2).

Then, too, a man is called "rich" in Scripture, even though he does not have any money or property, if he scrambles and scratches for them and can never get enough of them. These are the very ones whom the Gospel calls "rich bellies,"⁴ who in the midst of great wealth have the very least and are never satisfied with what God grants them. That is so because the Gospel looks into the heart, which is crammed full of money and property, and evaluates on the basis of this, though there may be nothing in the wallet or the treasury. On the other hand, it also calls a man "poor" according to the condition of his heart, though he may have his treasury, house, and hearth full. Thus the Christian faith goes straight ahead. It looks at neither poverty nor riches, but only at the condition of the heart. If there is a greedy belly there, the man is called "spiritually rich"; on the other hand, he is called "spiritually poor" if he does not depend upon these things and can empty his heart of them. As Christ says elsewhere (Matt. 19:29): "He who forsakes houses, land, children, or wife, will receive a hundredfold, and besides he will inherit eternal life." By this He seeks to rescue their hearts from regarding property as their treasure, and to comfort His own who must forsake it; even in this life they will receive more than they leave behind.

We are not to run away from property, house, home, wife, and children, wandering around the countryside as a burden to other people. This is what the Anabaptist sect does, and they accuse us of not preaching the Gospel rightly because we keep house and home and stay with wife and children. No, He does not want such crazy saints! This is what it means: In our heart we should be able to leave house and home, wife and children. Even though we continue to live among them, eating with them and serving them out of love, as God has commanded, still we should be able, if necessary, to give them up at any time for God's sake. If you are able to do this, you have forsaken everything, in the sense that your heart is not taken captive but remains pure of greed and of dependence, trust, and confidence in anything. A rich man may properly be called "spiritually poor" without discarding his possessions. But when the necessity arises, then let him do so in God's name, not because he would like to get away from wife and children, house and home, but because, as long as God wills it, he would rather keep them and serve Him thereby, yet is also willing to let Him take them back.

So you see what it means to be "poor" spiritually and before God, to have nothing spiritually and to forsake everything. Now look at the promise which Christ appends when He says, "For of such is the kingdom of heaven." This is certainly a great, wonderful, and glorious promise. Because we are willing to be poor here and pay no attention to temporal goods, we are to have a beautiful, glorious, great, and eternal possession in heaven. And because you have given up a crumb, which you still may use as long and as much as you can have it, you are to receive a crown, to be a citizen and a lord in heaven. This would stir us if we really wanted to be Christians and if we believed that His words are true. But no one cares who is saying this, much less what He is saying. They let it go in one ear and out the other, so that no one troubles himself about it or takes it to heart.

With these words He shows that no one can understand this unless he is already a real Christian. This point and all the rest that follow are purely fruits of faith, which the Holy Spirit Himself must create in the heart. Where there is no faith, there the kingdom of heaven also will remain outside; nor will spiritual poverty, meekness, and the like follow, but there will remain only scratching and scraping, quarrels and riots over temporal goods. Therefore it is all over for such worldly hearts, so that they never learn or experience what spiritual poverty is, and neither believe nor care what He says and promises about the kingdom of heaven.

Yet for their sakes He so arranges and orders things that whoever is not willing to be spiritually poor in God's name and for the sake of the kingdom of heaven, must still be poor in the devil's name and not have any thanks for it. God has so hung the greedy to their bellies that they are never satisfied or happy with their greedily gained goods. Sir Greed is such a jolly guest that he does not let anyone rest. He seeks, pushes, and hunts without stopping, so that he cannot enjoy his precious property for a single hour. Thus Solomon the preacher wonders and says (Eccl. 6:2): "Is it not a sore affliction that God gives a man wealth and possessions, land and retinue, and yet he is not capable of enjoying them?" He must always be afraid, troubled, and concerned about how he is going to keep it and expand it, lest it disappear or diminish. He is so completely its prisoner that he cannot enjoy spending a heller of it. But if there were a heart that could be content and satisfied, it would have rest and the kingdom of heaven besides. Otherwise, amid great possessions and with its greed, it must have purgatory here and hell-fire hereafter. As they say: "Here you travel in a wheelbarrow, but there on one wheel";⁵ that is, you have trouble and anxiety here, but bitter grief hereafter.

Look, this is the way God always works, so that His Word remains true and no one is saved or satisfied except the Christian. Though the others have everything, their lot is never any better; indeed, it is never as good, and they must still remain poor beggars as far as their heart is concerned. The difference is that the former are glad to be poor and depend upon an imperishable, eternal possession, that is, upon the kingdom of heaven, and are the blessed children of God; but the latter are greedy for temporal goods, and yet they never get what they want, but must eternally be the victims of the devil's tortures besides. In short, there is no difference between a beggar before the door and such a miserable belly, except that the one has nothing and lets himself be put off with a crust of bread, while the other, the more he has, the less satisfied he is, even though he were to get all the goods and money in the world in one pile.

As I have said, therefore, this sermon does the world no good and accomplishes nothing for it. The world stubbornly insists upon being right. It refuses to believe a thing, but must have it before its very eyes and hold it in its hand, saying, "A bird in the hand is worth two in the bush."⁶ Therefore Christ also lets them go. He does not want to force anyone or drag him in by the hair. But He gives His faithful advice to all who will let Him advise them, and He holds before us the dearest promises. If you want it, you have peace and quiet in your heart here, and hereafter whatever your heart desires forever. If you do not want it, have your own way, and rather have sorrow and misfortune both here and hereafter. For we see and experience that everything depends upon being content and not clinging to temporal goods. There are many people whose heart God can fill so that they may have only a morsel of bread and yet are cheerful and more content than any prince or king. In brief, such a person is a rich lord and emperor, and he need have no worry, trouble, or sorrow. This is the first point of this sermon: Whoever wants to have enough here and hereafter, let him see to it that he is not greedy or grasping. Let him accept and use what God gives him, and live by his labor in faith. Then he will have Paradise and even the kingdom of heaven here, as St. Paul also says (1 Tim. 4:8): "'Godliness is of value in every way, as it holds promise for the present life and also for the life to come.'"

4. Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted.

He began this sermon against the doctrine and belief of the Jews—in fact, not only of the Jews but of the whole world as well, even at its best, which sticks to the delusion that it is well off if it just has property, popularity, and its Mammon here, and which serves God only for this purpose. In the same way He now continues, overturning even what they thought was the best and most blessed life on earth, one in which a person would attain to good and quiet days and would not have to endure discomfort, as Psalm 73:5 describes it: "They are not in trouble as other men are; they are not stricken like other men."

For that is the highest thing that men want, to have joy and happiness and to be without trouble. Now Christ turns the page and says exactly the opposite; He calls "blessed" those who sorrow and mourn. Thus

throughout, all these statements are aimed and directed against the world's way of thinking, the way it would like to have things. It does not want to endure hunger, trouble, dishonor, unpopularity, injustice, and violence; and it calls "blessed" those who can avoid all these things.

So He wants to say here that there must be another life than the life of their quests and thoughts, and that a Christian must count on sorrow and mourning in the world. Whoever does not want to do this may have a good time here and live to his heart's desire, but hereafter he will have to mourn forever. As He says (Luke 6:25): "Woe unto you that laugh and have a good time now! For you shall have to mourn and weep." This is how it went with the rich man in Luke 16. He lived luxuriously and joyfully all his life, decked out in expensive silk and purple. He thought he was a great saint and well off in the sight of God because He had given him so much property. Meanwhile he let poor Lazarus lie before his door daily, full of sores, in hunger and trouble and great misery. But what kind of judgment did he finally hear when he was lying in hell? "Remember that in your lifetime you received good things, but Lazarus evil things. Therefore you are now in anguish, but he is comforted" (Luke 16:25).

See, this is the same text as: "Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted," which is as much as saying, "Those who seek and have nothing but joy and fun here shall weep and howl forever."

You may ask again: "What are we to do, then? Is everyone to be damned who laughs, sings, dances, dresses well, eats, and drinks? After all, we read about kings and saints who were cheerful and lived well. Paul is an especially wonderful saint; he wants us to be cheerful all the time (Phil. 4:4), and he says (Rom. 12:15): 'Rejoice with those who rejoice,' and again: 'Weep with those who weep.' That sounds contradictory, to be joyful all the time and yet to weep and mourn with others."

Answer: I said before that having riches is not sinful, nor is it forbidden. So also being joyful, eating and drinking well, is not sinful or damnable; nor is having honor and a good name. Still I am supposed to be "blessed" if I do not have these things or can do without them, and instead suffer poverty, misery, shame, and persecution. So both of these things are here and must be—being sad and being happy, eating and going hungry, as Paul boasts about himself (Phil. 4:11, 12): "I have learned the art, wherever I am, to be content. I know how to be abased, and I know how to abound; in any and all circumstances I have learned the secret of facing plenty and hunger, abundance and want." And in 2 Corinthians 6:8–10: "In honor and dishonor, in ill repute and good repute; as dying, and, behold, we live; as sorrowful, yet always rejoicing."

So this is what it means: A man is called "spiritually poor," not because he has no money or anything of his own, but because he does not covet it or set his comfort and trust upon it as though it were his kingdom of heaven. So also a man is said to "mourn and be sorrowful"—not if his head is always drooping and his face is always sour and never smiling; but if he does not depend upon having a good time and living it up, the way the world does, which yearns for nothing but having sheer joy and fun here, revels in it, and neither thinks nor cares about the state of God or men.

In this way many great and outstanding people, kings and others, who were Christians, have had to mourn and be sorrowful, though in the eyes of the world they lived a glorious life. Thus throughout the Psalter David complains about his weeping and sorrow. Now, too, I could easily cite examples of great men, lords and princes, who have experienced and learned this about the gracious Gospel, at the recent Diet of Augsburg and elsewhere. Externally they lived well, dressed in princely fashion in silk and gold, and looked like people for whom life was a bed of roses.⁷ But daily they had to be right in the midst of poisonous snakes; and in their heart they had to experience such unheard-of arrogance, insolence, and shame, so many evil tricks and words from the vile papists, who delighted in embittering their hearts and, as far as possible, in denying them a single happy hour. Thus they had to stew within themselves and do nothing but lament before God with sighs and tears. Such people know something of what the statement means: "Blessed are those who mourn and are sorrowful," though they do not always show it. They eat and drink with other people and sometimes laugh and joke with them, to forget their sorrow. You must not suppose that "to mourn" means only to weep and cry and scream, like women and children. It is not the real and most profound mourning when it has come over the heart and breaks forth through the eyes, but when really great shocks come, which strike and shake the heart so that one cannot cry and dare not complain to anyone.

Therefore mourning and sorrow are not a rare plant among Christians, in spite of outward appearances. They would like to be joyful in Christ, outwardly, too, as much as they can. Daily, whenever they look at

the world, they must see and feel in their heart so much wickedness, arrogance, contempt, and blasphemy of God and His Word, so much sorrow and sadness, which the devil causes in both the spiritual and the secular realm. Therefore they cannot have many joyful thoughts, and their spiritual joy is very weak. If they were to look at this continually and did not turn their eyes away from time to time, they could not be happy for a moment. It is bad enough that this really happens oftener than they would like, so that they do not have to go out looking for it.

Therefore simply begin to be a Christian, and you will soon find out what it means to mourn and be sorrowful. If you can do nothing else, then get married, settle down, and make a living in faith. Love the Word of God, and do what is required of you in your station. Then you will experience, both from your neighbors and in your own household, that things will not go as you might wish. You will be hindered and hemmed in on every side, so that you will suffer enough and see enough to make your heart sad. But especially the dear preachers must learn this well and be disciplined daily with all sorts of envy, hatred, scorn, ridicule, ingratitude, contempt, and blasphemy. In addition, they have to stew inside, so that their heart and soul is pierced through and continually tormented.

Because the world does not want to have such mourning and sorrow, it seeks out those stations and ways of life where it can have fun and does not have to suffer anything from anyone, as the monks' and priests' station used to be. It cannot stand the idea that in a divine station it should serve other people with nothing but care, toil, and trouble, and get nothing as a reward for this but ingratitude, contempt, and other malicious treatment. Therefore, when things do not go with it as it wishes and one person looks at another with a sour face, all they can do is to batter things with cursing and swearing, and with their fists, too, and be ready to put up property and reputation, land and servants. But God arranges things so that they still cannot get off too easily, without seeing or suffering any trouble at all. What He gives them as a reward for not wanting to suffer is this: they still have to suffer, but by their anger and impatience patience they make it twice as great and difficult, and without finding any comfort or a good conscience. The Christians have the advantage that though they mourn, too, they shall be comforted and be blessed both here and hereafter.

Therefore, whoever wants to have fellowship with Christians and does not want to be an outright child of the world, let him be on the list of those who are willing to sigh and mourn, so that he may be comforted, as this promise says. We have an instance of this in Ezekiel 9. God sent out six men with "destroying weapons" against the city of Jerusalem, but one of them He sent with a writing case; he was to go through the middle of the city and put a mark upon the foreheads of those who sighed and groaned over the shameful situation and who had to watch it with sorrow in their hearts. Whoever was marked this way, was to live, but all the others were to be killed. You see, this is the Christians' advantage. In the world they have to see nothing but sorrow and trouble. Yet when the world is at its smuggest and is riding along on sheer joy, suddenly the wheel turns, and a misfortune comes upon them in which they have to stay and perish. But the Christians are rescued and saved, the way dear Lot was saved in Sodom; for as St. Peter says (2 Peter 2:7, 8), they had long vexed and distressed his heart with their licentiousness. Let the world, therefore, laugh now and live riotously in its delights and pleasures. Though you have to mourn and be sorrowful and daily see your heart troubled, take it in stride and hold fast to this saying. Let it satisfy and comfort you. Outwardly, too, refresh yourself and be as cheerful as possible.

Those who mourn this way are entitled to have fun and to take it wherever they can so that they do not completely collapse for sorrow. Christ also adds these words and promises this consolation so that they do not despair in their sorrow nor let the joy of their heart be taken away and extinguished altogether, but mix this mourning with comfort and refreshment. Otherwise, if they never had any comfort or joy, they would have to languish and wither away. No man can stand continual mourning. It sucks out the very strength and savor of the body, as the wise man says (Ecclus. 30:25): "Sadness has killed many people"; and again (Prov. 17:22): "A downcast spirit dries up the marrow in the bones." Therefore we should not neglect this but should command and urge such people to have a good time once in a while if possible, or at least to temper their sorrow and forget it for a while.

Thus Christ does not want to urge continual mourning and sorrow. He wants to warn against those who seek to escape all mourning and to have nothing but fun and all their comfort here. And He wants to teach His Christians, when things go badly for them and they have to mourn, to know that it is God's good pleasure and to make it theirs as well, not to curse or rage or despair as though their God did not want to

be gracious. When this happens, the bitter draft should be mixed and made milder with honey and sugar. He promises here that this is pleasing to Him; and He calls them “blessed,” comforting them here, and hereafter taking the sorrow away from them completely. Therefore say good-bye to the world and to all those who harm us, in the name of their lord, the devil. And let us sing this song and be joyful in the name of God and Christ. Their outcome will surely not be the one they want. Now they take pleasure in our misfortune and do much to harm us. Still we take heart, and we shall live to see that at the last they will have to howl and weep when we are comforted and happy.

5. *Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth.*

This statement fits the first one well, when He said: “Blessed are the spiritually poor.” For as He promises the kingdom of heaven and an eternal possession there, so here He also adds a promise about this temporal life and about possessions here on earth. But how does being poor harmonize with inheriting the land? It might seem that the preacher has forgotten how He began. Whoever is to inherit land and possessions cannot be poor. By “inheriting the land” here and having all sorts of possessions here on earth, He does not mean that everyone is to inherit a whole country; otherwise God would have to create more worlds. But God confers possessions upon everyone in such a way that He gives a man wife, children, cattle, house, and home, and whatever pertains to these, so that he can stay on the land where he lives and have dominion over his possessions. This is the way Scripture customarily speaks, as Psalm 37 says several times (Ps. 37:34): “Those who wait for the Lord will inherit the land”; and again (Ps. 37:22): “His blessed ones inherit the land.” Therefore He adds His own gloss here: to be “spiritually poor,” as He used the expression before, does not mean to be a beggar or to discard money and possessions. For here He tells them to live and remain in the land and to manage earthly possessions, as we shall hear later.

What does it mean, then, to be meek? From the outset here you must realize that Christ is not speaking at all about the government and its work, whose property it is not to be meek, as we use the word in German,⁸ but to bear the sword (Rom. 13:4) for the punishment of those who do wrong (1 Peter 2:14), and to wreak a vengeance and a wrath that are called the vengeance and wrath of God. He is only talking about how individuals are to live in relation to others, apart from official position and authority—how father and mother are to live, not in relation to their children nor in their official capacity as father and mother, but in relation to those for whom they are not father and mother, like neighbors and other people. I have often said that we must sharply distinguish between these two, the office and the person. The man who is called Hans or Martin is a man quite different from the one who is called elector or doctor or preacher. Here we have two different persons in one man. The one is that in which we are created and born, according to which we are all alike—man or woman or child, young or old. But once we are born, God adorns and dresses you up as another person. He makes you a child and me a father, one a master and another a servant, one a prince and another a citizen. Then this one is called a divine person, one who holds a divine office and goes about clothed in its dignity—not simply Hans or Nick, but the Prince of Saxony, father, or master. He is not talking about this person here, letting it alone in its own office and rule, as He has ordained it. He is talking merely about how each individual, natural person is to behave in relation to others.

Therefore if we have an office or a governmental position, we must be sharp and strict, we must get angry and punish; for here we must do what God puts into our hand and commands us to do for His sake. In other relations, in what is unofficial, let everyone learn for himself to be meek toward everyone else, that is, not to deal with his neighbor unreasonably, hatefully, or vengefully, like the people whom they call “Headlong Hans.” They refuse to put up with anything or to yield an inch, but they tear up the world and the hills and want to uproot the trees. They never listen to anyone nor excuse him for anything. They immediately buckle on their armor, thinking of nothing but how to take vengeance and hit back.⁹ This does not forbid the government to punish and to wreak vengeance in the name of God. But neither does it grant license to a wicked judge, burgomaster, lord, or prince to confuse these two persons and to reach beyond his official authority through personal malice or envy or hate or hostility, as commonly happens, under the cloak and cover of his office and legal right. This would be as though, in the name of the government, our neighbors wanted to take some action against us which they could not get away with otherwise.

He is talking here especially to His Jews, as He had begun. They always insisted that they were not supposed to suffer anything from a Gentile or stranger and that they had a right to avenge themselves

immediately. For this purpose they cited sayings from Moses, like Deuteronomy 28:13: "The Lord will make you the head, and not the tail; and you shall tend upward only, and not downward." There would be nothing wrong with this, But it means that if God Himself does this, then it is well done. It is one thing if He commands it and says, "I will do it," and quite another thing if we do it ourselves, without authorization. What He says should and must happen; what we say happens if it can, or maybe it does not happen at all. So you have no right to lay claim to this promise for yourself and to count on it when you want to do something which He ought to do, and you refuse to wait until He commands you to do it.

You see, then, that here Christ is rebuking those crazy saints who think that everyone is master of the whole world and is entitled to be delivered from all suffering, to roar and bluster and violently to defend his property. And He teaches us that whoever wants to rule and possess his property, his possessions, house, and home in peace, must be meek, so that he may overlook things and act reasonably, putting up with just as much as he possibly can. It is inevitable that your neighbor will sometimes do you injury or harm, either accidentally or maliciously. If he did it accidentally, you do not improve the situation by refusing or being unable to endure anything. If he did it maliciously, you only irritate him by your violent scratching and pounding; meanwhile he is laughing at you and enjoying the fact that he is baiting and troubling you, so that you still cannot have any peace or quietly enjoy what is yours.

So select one of the two, whichever you prefer: either to live in human society with meekness and patience and to hold on to what you have with peace and a good conscience; or boisterously and blusterously to lose what is yours, and to have no peace besides. There stands the decree: "The meek shall inherit the earth." Just take a look for yourself at the queer characters who are always arguing and squabbling about property and other things. They refuse to give in to anybody, but insist on rushing everything through headlong, regardless of whether their quarreling and squabbling costs them more than they could ever gain. Ultimately they lose their land and servants, house and home, and get unrest and a bad conscience thrown in. And God adds His blessing to it, saying: "Do not be meek, then, so that you may not keep your precious land, nor enjoy your morsel in peace."

But if you want to do right and have rest, let your neighbor's malice and viciousness smother and burn itself out. Otherwise you can do nothing more pleasing to the devil or more harmful to yourself than to lose your temper and make a racket. Do you have a government? Then register a complaint, and let it see to it. The government has the charge not to permit the harsh oppression of the innocent. God will also overrule so that His Word and ordinance may abide and you may inherit the land according to this promise. Thus you will have rest and God's blessing, but your neighbor will have unrest together with God's displeasure and curse. This sermon is intended only for those who are Christians, who believe and know that they have their treasure in heaven, where it is secure for them and cannot be taken away: Hence they must have enough here, too, even though they do not have treasures and pockets full of yellow guildens. Since you know this, why let your joy be disturbed and taken away? Why cause yourself disquiet and rob yourself of this magnificent promise?

See now that you have three points with three rich promises. Whoever is a Christian must have enough of both the temporal and the eternal, though here he must suffer much both outwardly and inwardly, in the heart. On the other hand, because the worldlings refuse to endure poverty or trouble or violence, they neither have the kingdom of heaven nor enjoy temporal goods peacefully and quietly. You can read more about this in Psalm 37, which is the right gloss on this passage, richly describing how the meek are to inherit the land while the ungodly are to be exterminated.

6. Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied.

"Righteousness" in this passage must not be taken in the sense of that principal Christian righteousness by which a person becomes pious and acceptable to God. I have said before that these eight items are nothing but instruction about the fruits and good works of a Christian. Before these must come faith, as the tree and chief part or summary of a man's righteousness and blessedness, without any work or merit of his; out of which faith these items all must grow and follow. Therefore take this in the sense of the outward righteousness before the world, which we maintain in our relations with each other. Thus the short and simple meaning of these words is this: "That man is righteous and blessed who continually works and strives with all his might to promote the general welfare and the proper behavior of everyone and who helps to maintain and support this by word and deed, by precept and example."

Now, this is also a precious point, embracing very many good works, but by no means a common thing. Let me illustrate with an example. If a preacher wants to qualify under this point, he must be ready to instruct and help everyone to perform his assigned task properly and to do what it requires. And when he sees that something is missing and things are not going right, he should be on hand to warn, rebuke, and correct by whatever method or means he can. Thus as a preacher I dare not neglect my office. Nor dare the others neglect theirs, which is, to follow my teaching and preaching. In this way the right thing is done on both sides. Now, where there are people who earnestly take it upon themselves to do right gladly and to be found engaged in the right works and ways—such people “hunger and thirst for righteousness.” If this were the situation, there would be no rascality or injustice, but sheer righteousness and blessedness on earth. What is the righteousness of the world except that in his station everyone should do his duty? That means that the rights of every station should be respected—those of the man, the woman, the child, the manservant, and the maid in the household, the citizen of the city in the land. And it is all contained in this, that those who are charged with overseeing and ruling other people should execute this office diligently, carefully, and faithfully, and that the others should also render their due service and obedience to them faithfully and willingly.

It is not by accident that He uses the term “hunger and thirst for righteousness.” By it He intends to point out that this requires great earnestness, longing, eagerness, and unceasing diligence and that where this hunger and thirst is lacking, everything will fail. The reason is that there are too many great hindrances. They come from the devil, who is blocking and barricading the way everywhere. They also come from the world—that is, his children—which is so wicked that it cannot stand a pious man who wants to do right himself or to help other people do so, but plagues him in every way, that he finally becomes tired and perplexed over the whole business. It is painful to see how shamefully people behave, and to get no reward for pure kindness except ingratitude, contempt, hate, and persecution. For this reason, many people who could not stand the sight of such evil conduct finally despaired over it, ran away from human society into the desert, and became monks, so that the saying has repeatedly been verified: “Despair makes a man a monk.”¹⁰ A person may not trust himself to make his own living and run into the monastery for his belly’s sake, as the great crowd has done; otherwise a person may despair of the world and not trust himself in it, either to remain pious or to help people.

But this is not hungering and thirsting for righteousness. Anyone who tries to preach or rule in such a way that he lets himself become tired and impatient and be chased into a corner will not be of much help to other people. The command to you is not to crawl into a corner or into the desert, but to run out, if that is where you have been, and to offer your hands and your feet and your whole body, and to wager everything you have and can do. You should be the kind of man who is firm in the face of firmness, who will not let himself be frightened off or dumbfounded or overcome by the world’s ingratitude or malice, who will always hold on and push with all the might he can summon. In short, the ministry requires a hunger and thirst for righteousness that can never be curbed or stopped or sated, one that looks for nothing and cares for nothing except the accomplishment and maintenance of the right, despising everything that hinders this end. If you cannot make the world completely pious, then do what you can. It is enough that you have done your duty and have helped a few, even if there be only one or two. If others will not follow, then in God’s name let them go. You must not run away on account of the wicked, but rather conclude: “I did not undertake this for their sakes, and I shall not drop it for their sakes. Eventually some of them might come around; at least there might be fewer of them, and they may improve a little.”

Here you have a comforting and certain promise, with which Christ allures and attracts His Christians: “Those who hunger and thirst for righteousness shall be filled.” That is, they will be recompensed for their hunger and thirst by seeing that their work was not in vain and that at last a little flock has been brought around who have been helped. Although things are not going now as they would like and they have almost despaired over it, all this will become manifest, not only here on earth, but even more in the life hereafter, when everyone will see what sort of fruit such people have brought by their diligence and perseverance. For example, a pious preacher has snatched many souls out of the jaws of the devil and brought them to heaven; or a pious, faithful ruler has helped many lands and people, who testify that he has done so and who praise him before the whole world.

The counterfeit saints are exactly the opposite. Because of their great sanctity they forsake the world and run into the desert, or they sneak away into a corner somewhere, to escape the trouble and worry that

they would otherwise have to bear. They do not want to pay attention to what is going on in the world. Never once do they think of the fact that they should help or advise other people with teaching, instruction, warning, reproof, correction, or at least with prayers and sighs to God. Yes, it even disgusts and grieves them when other people become pious; for they want to be thought of as the only ones who are holy so that anyone who wants to get to heaven has to buy their good works and merits from them. In brief, they are so full of righteousness that they look down their noses at other poor sinners. Just so in Luke 18:11 the great St. Pharisee in his intoxication looks down at the poor publican and spits on him. He is so much in love with himself that he pays court to God and thanks Him that he alone is pious and other people are bad.

Note that these are the people against whom Christ is speaking here, the shameful, proud, and self-sufficient spirits, who are tickled, pleased, and overjoyed over the fact that other people are not pious, whereas they ought to pity them, sympathize with them, and help them. All they can do is to despise, slander, judge, and condemn everyone else; everything must be stench and filth except what they themselves do. But going out to admonish and help a poor, frail sinner—this they avoid as they would avoid the devil. Hence they will have to hear again what Christ cries out against them in Luke 6:25: “Woe to you that are full, for you shall hunger.” As those who now hunger and thirst shall be filled, so these others must hunger forever; though they are full and sated now, no one has ever got any benefit from them or been able to praise them for ever helping anyone or setting him aright. There you have a summary of the meaning of this passage, which, as I have said, embraces many good works, indeed, all the good works by which a man may live right by himself in human society and help to give success to all sorts of offices and stations, as I have often said in more detail elsewhere.

7. Blessed are the merciful, for they shall obtain mercy.

This is also an outstanding fruit of faith, and it follows well upon what went before. Anyone who is supposed to help other people and to contribute to the common weal and success should also be kind and merciful. He should not immediately raise a rumpus and start a riot if something is missing or if things do not go as they should, as long as there is still some hope for improvement. One of the virtues of counterfeit sanctity is that it cannot have pity or mercy for the frail and weak, but insists on the strictest enforcement and the purest selection; as soon as there is even a minor flaw, all mercy is gone, and there is nothing but fuming and fury. St. Gregory also teaches us how to recognize this when he says: “True justice shows mercy, but false justice shows indignation.” True holiness is merciful and sympathetic, but all that false holiness can do is to rage and fume. Yet it does so, as they boast, “out of zeal for justice”; that is, it is done through love and zeal for righteousness.¹¹

The whole world is being forced to the conclusion that they have been carrying on their mischief and violence under the lovely and excellent pretext and cover of doing it for the sake of righteousness. In the same way, both in the past and in the present, they have been exercising their enmity and treachery against the Gospel under the guise of defending the truth and exterminating heresy. For this they want God to crown them and to elevate them to heaven, as a reward for those who out of great thirst and hunger for righteousness persecute, strangle, and burn His saints.

They want to make the claim and to give the impression, even more than the true saints, that they hunger and thirst for righteousness. They put up such a good front and use such beautiful words that they think even God Himself will not know any better. But the noble tree is known by its fruits. When they should demand justice, that is, the proper administration of both the spiritual and the temporal realm, they do not do so. It never enters their mind to instruct and improve anyone. They themselves live in continual vice; and if anyone denounces their behavior or does not praise it and do as they want, he must be a heretic and let himself be damned to hell. You see, that is how it is with every counterfeit saint. His self-made holiness makes him so proud that he despises everyone else and cannot have a kind and merciful heart.

Therefore this is a necessary warning against such abominable saints. If a man deals with his neighbor in an effort to help and correct him in his station and way of life, he should still take care to be merciful and to forgive. In this way people will see that your aim really is righteousness and not the gratification of your own malice and anger; for you are righteous enough to deal in a friendly and gentle manner with the man who is willing to forsake his unrighteousness and improve himself, and you tolerate and endure his

fault or weakness until he comes around. But if you try all this and find no hope for improvement, then you may give him up and turn him over to those whose duty it is to punish.

Now, this is the one aspect of mercy, that one gladly forgives the sinful and the frail. The other is to do good also to those who are outwardly poor or in need of help; on the basis of Matthew 25:35 ff. we call these “works of mercy.” The arrogant Jewish saints knew nothing about this aspect either. There was nothing in them but ice and frost—yes, a heart as hard as a block of stone—and not a single loving drop of blood that took pleasure in doing good for a neighbor, nor any mercy that forgave sin. All they were concerned about and thought about was their own belly, even though another man might have been starving to death. Thus there is much more mercy among public sinners than there is in such a saint. This is how it has to be; for they praise only themselves and regard only themselves as holy, despising everyone else as worthless and supposing that the whole world must serve them and give them plenty, while they are under no obligation to give anyone anything or any service.

Hence this sermon and exhortation seems contemptible and useless to such saints. The only pupils it finds are those who already cling to Christ and believe in Him. They know of no holiness of their own. On the basis of the preceding items they are poor, miserable, meek, really hungry and thirsty; they are inclined not to despise anyone, but to assume and to sympathize with the need of everyone else. To them applies the comforting promise: “It is well with you who are merciful. For you will find pure mercy in turn, both here and hereafter, and a mercy which inexpressibly surpasses all human kindness and mercy.” There is no comparison between our mercy and God’s, nor between our possessions and the eternal possessions in the kingdom of heaven. So pleased is He with our kindness to our neighbor that for one pfennig He promises us a hundred thousand guldens if we have need of them, and for a drink of water, the kingdom of heaven (Matt. 10:42).

Now, if anyone will not let himself be moved by this wonderful and comforting promise, let him turn the page and hear another judgment: “Woe and curses upon the unmerciful, for no mercy shall be shown to them.” At the present time the world is full of people, among the nobles and city people and peasants, who sin very grievously against the dear Gospel. Not only do they refuse to give support or help to poor ministers and preachers; but besides they commit theft and torment against it wherever they can, and act as if they meant to starve it out and chase it out of the world. Meanwhile they go along quite smugly, supposing that God must keep quiet about it and approve of everything they do. But it will hit them someday. I am afraid that someone will come along who will make a prophet out of me—for I have given ample warning—and treat them mercilessly, taking away their reputation and their property, their body and their life, so that the Word of God might remain true and so that he who refuses to show or to have mercy might experience endless wrath and eternal displeasure. As St. James also says (James 2:13): “Judgment without mercy will be spoken over the one who has shown no mercy.” At the Last Day, therefore, Christ will also cite this lack of mercy as the worst injury done to Him, whatever we have done out of a lack of mercy. He Himself will utter the curse (Matt. 25:41, 42): “I was hungry and thirsty, and you gave Me no food, you gave Me no drink. Depart from Me, therefore, you cursed, into eternal hell-fire.” He warns and exhorts us faithfully, out of sheer grace and mercy. Whoever does not want to accept this, let him choose the curse and eternal damnation. Think of the rich man in Luke 16; daily he saw poor Lazarus lying before his door full of sores, yet he did not have enough mercy to give him a bundle of straw or to grant him the crumbs under his table. But look how terribly he was requited; in hell he would gladly have given a hundred thousand guldens for the privilege of boasting that he had given him even a thread.

8. Blessed are those of a pure heart, for they shall see God.

This item is rather obscure, and not very intelligible to us who have such coarse and carnal hearts and minds. It is also hidden from all the sophists, who have the reputation of being most learned; none of them can say what it means to have a “pure heart,” much less what it means to “see God.” With mere dreams and random thoughts they walk around things of which they have no experience. Therefore we must look at these words according to the Scriptures and learn to understand them correctly.

They have imagined that having a pure heart means for a man to run away from human society into a corner, a monastery, or a desert, neither thinking about the world nor concerning himself with worldly affairs and business, but amusing himself only with heavenly thoughts. By this delusive doctrine they have not only beguiled and dangerously deceived themselves and other people, but have even committed the

murderous crime of calling “profane” the act and stations which the world requires and which, as a matter of fact, God Himself has ordained. But Scripture speaks of this pure heart and mind in a manner that is completely consistent with being a husband, loving wife and children, thinking about them and caring for them, and paying attention to other matters involved in such a relationship. For God has commanded all of this. Whatever God has commanded cannot be profane (Acts 10:15); indeed it must be the very purity with which we see God. For example, when a judge performs his official duty in sentencing a criminal to death, that is not *his* office and work but God’s. If he is a Christian, therefore, this is a good, pure, and holy work, one he could not do if he did not already have a pure heart. In the same way it must be regarded as a pure work and a pure heart when a servant in the household does a dirty and repulsive job, like hauling manure or washing and cleaning children. Hence it is a shameful perversion to disparage the relationships covered by the Ten Commandments this way and to gape at other special and showy works. As though God did not have as pure a mouth or eyes as we, or as pure a heart and hand when He creates both man and woman! Then how can such works and thoughts make a heart impure? This is the blindness and foolishness that comes upon men who despise the Word of God and who determine purity only by the outward mask and the show of works. Meanwhile they are causing trouble with their own wandering thoughts and gaping as though they wanted to climb up to heaven and grope for God, until they break their own necks in the process.

Let us understand correctly, then, what Christ calls a “pure heart.” Note again that the target and object of this sermon were principally the Jews. They did not want to suffer, but sought a life of ease, pleasure, and joy; they did not want to hunger nor to be merciful, but to be smug in their exclusive piety while they judged and despised other people. In the same way, their holiness also consisted in outward cleanliness of body, skin, hair, clothes, and food, so that they did not dare to have even a speck on their clothing; if anyone touched a dead body, or had a scab or a rash on his body, he did not dare to approach other people. This is what they called “purity.” “But that does not do it,” says He; “the ones I praise are those who take pains to have a pure heart.” So He says in Matthew 23:25: “You cleanse the outside of the cup and of the plate, but inside you are full of extortion and rapacity.” Again (Matt. 23:27): “You are like whitewashed tombs, which outwardly appear beautiful, but within they are full of dead men’s bones and all uncleanness.” This is the way it is with our clergy today. Outwardly they lead a decent life, and in the churches everything is conducted with such excellent taste and formality that it is beautiful to behold. But He does not ask for such purity. He wants to have the heart pure, though outwardly the person may be a drudge in the kitchen, black, sooty, and grimy, doing all sorts of dirty work.

Then what is a pure heart? In what does it consist? The answer can be given quickly, and you do not have to climb up to heaven or run to a monastery for it and establish it with your own ideas. You should be on your guard against any ideas that you call your own, as if they were just so much mud and filth. And you should realize that when a monk in the monastery is sitting in deepest contemplation, excluding the world from his heart altogether, and thinking about the Lord God the way he himself paints and imagines Him, he is actually sitting—if you will pardon the expression—in the dung, not up to his knees but up to his ears. For he is proceeding on his own ideas without the Word of God; and that is sheer deception and delusion, as Scripture testifies everywhere.

What is meant by a “pure heart” is this: one that is watching and pondering what God says and replacing its own ideas with the Word of God. This alone is pure before God, yes, purity itself, which purifies everything that it includes and touches. Therefore, though a common laborer, a shoemaker, or a blacksmith may be dirty and sooty or may smell because he is covered with dirt and pitch, still he may sit at home and think: “My God has made me a man. He has given me my house, wife, and child and has commanded me to love them and to support them with my work.” Note that he is pondering the Word of God in his heart; and though he stinks outwardly, inwardly he is pure incense before God. But if he attains the highest purity so that he also takes hold of the Gospel and believes in Christ—without this, that purity is impossible—then he is pure completely, inwardly in his heart toward God and outwardly toward everything under him on earth. Then everything he is and does, his walking, standing, eating, and drinking, is pure for him; and nothing can make him impure. So it is when he looks at his own wife or fondles her, as the patriarch Isaac did (Gen. 26:8), which a monk regards as disgusting and defiling. For here he has the Word of God, and he knows that God has given her to him. But if he were to desert his

wife and take up another, or neglect his job or duty to harm or bother other people, he would no longer be pure; for that would be contrary to God's commandment.

But so long as he sticks to these two—namely, the Word of faith toward God, which purifies the heart, and the Word of Understanding, which teaches him what he is to do toward his neighbor in his station—everything is pure for him, even if with his hands and the rest of his body he handles nothing but dirt. If a poor housemaid does her duty and is a Christian in addition, then before God in heaven she is a lovely and pure beauty, one that all the angels admire and love to look at. On the other hand, if the most austere Carthusian fasts and whips himself to death, if he does nothing but weep out of sheer devotion, if he never gives the world a thought, and yet lacks faith in Christ and love for his neighbor, he is nothing but a stench and a pollution, inwardly and outwardly, so that both God and the angels find him abhorrent and disgusting.

So you see that everything depends on the Word of God. Whatever is included in that and goes in accordance with it, must be called clean, pure, and white as snow before both God and man. Therefore Paul says (Titus 1:15): "To the pure all things are pure"; and again: "To the corrupt and unbelieving nothing is pure." Why is this so? Because both their minds and their consciences are impure. How does this happen? Because "they profess to know God, but with their deeds they deny it" (Titus 1:16). These are the people who are abominable in the sight of God. Look how horribly the apostle paints and denounces these great Jewish saints. Take, for example, a Carthusian monk. He thinks that if he lives according to his strict rule of obedience, poverty, and celibacy, if he is isolated from the world, he is pure in every way. What is this but their own way of thinking, growing up in their own heart without the Word of God and faith? In this way they think that they alone are pure and that other people are impure. St. Paul calls this an "impure mind," that is, everything they think and imagine. Since this delusion and idea is impure, everything they do on the basis of it must also be impure for them. As their mind is, so is their conscience, too. Though they should and could be of help to other people, they have a conscience that functions on the basis of their ideas and is bound to their cowls, cloisters, and rules. They think that if they neglected this routine even for a moment to serve their neighbor and had relations with other people, they would be committing a most grievous sin and defiling themselves altogether. The cause of all this is that they do not acknowledge God's Word and creatures, although, as St. Paul says (Titus 1:16): "With their mouths they profess that they do." If they knew the means and the purpose of their creation by God, they would not despise these other stations nor exalt their own so highly; they would recognize the purity of these as the works and creatures of God, and would honor them, willingly remain in them, and be of service to their neighbor. That would be the true recognition of God, both in His Word and in His creatures, and the true purity of both heart and conscience, which comes to this faith and conclusion: Whatever God does and ordains must be pure and good. For He makes nothing impure, and He consecrates everything through the Word which He has attached to every station and creature.

Therefore be on guard against all your own ideas if you want to be pure before God. See to it that your heart is founded and fastened on the Word of God. Then you will be purer than all the Carthusians and saints in the world. When I was young, people used to take pride in this proverb: "Enjoy being alone, and your heart will stay pure."¹² In support of it they would cite a quotation from St. Bernard, who said that whenever he was among people, he defiled himself. In the lives of the fathers we read about a hermit who would not let anyone come near him or talk to him, because, he said: "The angels cannot come to anyone who moves around in human society." We also read about two others, who would not let their mother see them. She kept watch, and once she caught them. Immediately they closed the door and let her stand outside for a long time crying; finally they persuaded her to go away and to wait until they would see each other in the life hereafter.

Look, this is what they call a noble deed, the highest kind of sanctity and the most perfect kind of purity. But what was it really? Here is the Word of God (Ex. 20:12): "Honor your father and your mother." If they had regarded this as holy and pure, they would have shown their mother and their neighbor all honor, love, and friendship. On the contrary, they followed their own ideas and a holiness they chose for themselves; hence they isolated themselves from them, and by their very effort to be most pure they most shamefully profaned themselves before God. As though even the most desperate scoundrels could not have such thoughts and put on such a show that people would have to say: "These are living saints! They can despise the world and have to do only with angels." With angels all right—

from the abyss of hell! The angels like nothing more than to watch us deal with the Word of God; with such people they enjoy dwelling. Therefore leave the angels up there in heaven undisturbed. Look for them here on earth below, in your neighbor, father and mother, children, and others. Do for these what God has commanded, and the angels will never be far away from you.

I have said this to help people evaluate this matter correctly and not go so far away to look for it as the monks do. They have thrown it out of the world altogether and stuck it into a corner or a cowl. All this is stench and filth and the devil's real dwelling. Let it be where God has put it, in a heart that clings to God's Word and that regards its tasks and every creature on the basis of it. Then the chief purity, that of faith toward God, will also manifest itself outwardly in this life; and everything will proceed from obedience to the Word and command of God, regardless of whether it is physically clean or unclean. I spoke earlier of a judge who has to condemn a man to death, who thus sheds blood and defiles himself with it. A monk would regard this as an abominably impure act, but Scripture says it is the service of God. In Rom. 13:4 Paul calls the government, which bears the sword, "God's servant." This is not its work and command, but His, which He imposes on it and demands from it.

Now you have the meaning of "pure heart": it is one that functions completely on the basis of the pure Word of God. What is their reward, what does He promise to them? It is this: "They shall see God." A wonderful title and an excellent treasure! But what does it mean to "see God"? Here again the monks have their own dreams. To them it means sitting in a cell and elevating your thoughts heavenward, leading a "contemplative life," as they call it in the many books they have written about it. That is still a far cry from seeing God, when you come marching along on your own ideas and scramble up to heaven, the way the sophists and our schismatic spirits and crazy saints insist on using their own brains to measure and master God together with His Word and works. But this is what it is: if you have a true faith that Christ is your Savior, then you see immediately that you have a gracious God. For faith leads you up and opens up the heart and will of God for you. There you see sheer, superabundant grace and love. That is exactly what it means "to see God," not with physical eyes, with which no one can see Him in this life, but with faith, which sees His fatherly, friendly heart, where there is no anger or displeasure. Anyone who regards Him as angry is not seeing Him correctly, but has pulled down a curtain and cover, more, a dark cloud over His face. But in Scriptural language "to see His face" means to recognize Him correctly as a gracious and faithful Father, on whom you can depend for every good thing. This happens only through faith in Christ.

Therefore, if according to God's Word and command you live in your station with your husband, wife, child, neighbor, or friend, you can see God's intention in these things; and you can come to the conclusion that they please Him, since this is not your own dream, but His Word and command, which never deludes or deceives us. It is a wonderful thing, a treasure beyond every thought or wish, to know that you are standing and living in the right relation to God. In this way not only can your heart take comfort and pride in the assurance of His grace, but you can know that your outward conduct and behavior is pleasing to Him. From this it follows that cheerfully and heartily you can do and suffer anything, without letting it make you fearful or despondent. None of this is possible for those who lack this faith and pure heart, guided only by God's Word. Thus all the monks have publicly taught that no one can know whether or not he is in a state of grace.¹³ It serves them right that because they despise faith and true godly works and seek their own purity, they must never see God or know how they stand in relation to Him.

Ask one who has most diligently observed his canonical hours of prayer, celebrated Mass and fasted daily, whether he is also sure that this is pleasing to God. He must say he does not know, that he is doing it all as a risk: "If it succeeds, let it succeed." It is impossible for anyone to say anything else. None of them can make a boast and say: "God gave me this cowl, He commanded me to wear it, He ordered me to celebrate this Mass." Until now we have all been groping in such blindness as this. We performed many works, contributed, fasted, prayed our rosaries; and yet we never dared to say: "This work is pleasing to God; of this I am sure, and I would be willing to die for it." Hence no one can boast that in all his life and activity he has ever seen God. Or if in his pride someone glorifies such works and thinks that God must be well disposed to them and reward him for them, he is not seeing God but the devil in place of God. There is no word of God to support him; it is all the invention of men, grown up in their own hearts. That is why it can never assure or pacify any heart, but remain hidden by pride until it comes to its final gasps, when it all disappears and brings on despair, so that one never gets around to seeing the face of God. But anyone who takes hold of the Word of God and who remains in faith can take his stand before God and look at

Him as his gracious Father. He does not have to be afraid that He is standing behind him with a club, and he is sure that He is looking at him and smiling graciously, together with all the angels and saints in heaven.

You see, that is what Christ means by this statement, that only those who have such a pure heart see God. By this He cuts off and puts aside every other kind of purity. Where this kind is absent, everything else in a man may be pure; but it is worth nothing before God, and he can never see God. Where the heart is pure, on the other hand, everything is pure; and it does not matter if outwardly everything is impure, yes, if the body is full of sores, scabs, and leprosy.

9. Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called the children of God.

With an excellent title and wonderful praise the Lord here honors those who do their best to try to make peace, not only in their own lives but also among other people, who try to settle ugly and involved issues, who endure squabbling and try to avoid and prevent war and bloodshed. This is a great virtue, too, but one that is very rare in the world and among the counterfeit saints. Those who are not Christians are both liars and murderers, as is their father, the devil (John 8:44). Therefore they have no other goal than to stir up unrest, quarrels, and war. Thus among the priests, bishops, and princes nowadays practically all we find are bloodhounds. They have given many evidences that there is nothing they would rather see than all of us swimming in blood. If a prince loses his temper, he immediately thinks he has to start a war. Then he inflames and incites everyone, until there has been so much war and bloodshed that he regrets it and gives a few thousand guildens for the souls that were killed. These are bloodhounds, and that is what they remain. They cannot rest until they have taken revenge and spent their anger, until they have dragged their land and people into misery and sorrow. Yet they claim to bear the title “Christian princes” and to have a just cause.

You need more to start a war than having a just cause. As we have said, this does not prohibit the waging of war; for Christ has no intention here of taking anything away from the government and its official authority, but is only teaching individuals who want to lead a Christian life. Still it is not right for a prince to make up his mind to go to war against his neighbor, even though, I say, he has a just cause and his neighbor is in the wrong. The command is: “Blessed are the peacemakers.” Therefore anyone who claims to be a Christian and a child of God, not only does not start war or unrest; but he also gives help and counsel on the side of peace wherever he can, even though there may have been a just and adequate cause for going to war. It is sad enough if one has tried everything and nothing helps, and then he has to defend himself, to protect his land and people. Therefore not “Christians” but “children of the devil” is the name for those quarrelsome young noblemen who immediately draw and unsheathe their sword on account of one word. Even worse are the ones that are now persecuting the Gospel and ordering the burning and murder of innocent preachers of the Gospel, who have done them no harm but only good and have served them with body and soul. We are not talking about these right now, but only about those who claim that they are in the right and have a just cause and think that as high and princely personages they ought not to suffer, even though other people do.

This also means that if you are the victim of injustice and violence, you have no right to take the advice of your own foolish head and immediately start getting even and hitting back; but you are to think it over, try to bear it and have peace. If that is impossible and you cannot stand it, you have law and government in the country, from which you can seek legitimate redress. It is ordained to guard against such things and to punish them. Therefore anyone who does violence to you sins not only against you but also against the government itself; for the order and command to maintain peace was given to the government and not to you. Therefore leave the vengeance and punishment to your judge, who has the command; it is against him that your enemy has done wrong. If you take it upon yourself to wreak vengeance, you do an even greater wrong. You become guilty of the same sin as he who sins against the government and interferes with its duties, and by doing so you invalidate the justice of your own righteous cause. For the proverb says: “The one who strikes back is in the wrong, and striking back makes a quarrel.”¹⁴

Note that this is one demand that Christ makes here in opposition to those who are vengeful and violent. He gives the name “peacemakers,” in the first place, to those who help make peace among lands and people, like pious princes, counselors, or jurists, to people in government who hold their rule and reign for the sake of peace; and in the second place, to pious citizens and neighbors, who with their

salutary and good tongues adjust, reconcile, and settle quarrels and tensions between husband and wife or between neighbors, brought on by evil and poisonous tongues. Thus St. Augustine boasts that when his mother Monica saw two people at odds, she would always speak the best to both sides. Whatever good she heard about the one, she brought to the other; but whatever evil she heard, that she kept to herself or mitigated as much as possible.¹⁵ In this way she often brought on a reconciliation. It is especially among womenfolk that the shameful vice of slander is prevalent, so that great misfortune is often caused by an evil tongue. This is the work of those bitter and poisonous brides of the devil, who when they hear a word about another, viciously make it sharper, more pointed, and more bitter against the others, so that sometimes misery and murder are the result.

All this comes from the shameful, demonic filth which naturally clings to us, that everyone enjoys hearing and telling the worst about his neighbor and it tickles him to see a fault in someone else. If a woman were as beautiful as the sun but had one little spot or blemish on her body, you would be expected to forget everything else and to look only for that spot and to talk about it. If a lady were famous for her honor and virtue, still some poisonous tongue would come along and say that she had once been seen laughing with some man and defame her in such a way as to eclipse all her praise and honor. These are really poisonous spiders that can suck out nothing but poison from a beautiful, lovely rose, ruining both the flower and the nectar, while a little bee sucks out nothing but honey, leaving the roses unharmed. That is the way some people act. All they can notice about other people are the faults or impurities which they can denounce, but what is good about them they do not see. People have many virtues which the devil cannot destroy, yet he hides or disfigures them to make them invisible. For example, even though a woman may be full of faults and have no other virtue, she is still a creature of God. At least she can carry water and wash clothes. There is no person on earth so bad that he does not have something about him that is praiseworthy. Why is it, then, that we leave the good things out of sight and feast our eyes on the unclean things? It is as though we enjoyed only looking at—if you will pardon the expression—a man’s behind, while God Himself has covered the unpresentable parts of the body and, as Paul says (1 Cor. 12:24), has given them “greater honor.” We are so filthy that we only look for what is dirty and stinking, and wallow in it like pigs.

You see, these are also real children of the devil, who gets his name from doing this. He is called *diabolus*, that is, a slanderer and reviler, who takes pleasure in shaming us most miserably and embittering us among ourselves, causing nothing but murder and misery and tolerating no peace or concord between brothers, between neighbors, or between husband and wife. I once heard of a case where a married couple lived together in such love and harmony that it was the talk of the whole town. When the devil was unable to undermine this in any other way, he sent an old hag to the wife, to tell her that her husband was having an affair with another woman and planned to kill her. Thus she embittered the wife against her husband and advised her to hide a knife on her person in order to beat him to it. When the hag had done this, she went to the husband and told him the same, that his wife planned to murder him; and as proof of it, she said, he would find a knife next to her in bed at night. He found it, and he cut her head off with it.¹⁶ Whether this story is fact or fiction, it does show what such wicked and poisonous mouths can do, even to people who love each other deeply. Thus they may rightly be called “the devil’s mouths” or she-devils; for the devil, *diabolus*, means nothing else than a bitter, poisonous, evil mouth.

So be on your guard against such people, and neither listen nor pay attention to them. Learn to put the best interpretation on what you hear about your neighbor, or even to conceal it, so that you may establish and preserve peace and harmony. Then you can honorably bear the title “child of God” before the whole world and before the angels in heaven. You should let this honor draw and attract you; in fact, you should chase it to the end of the world, if need be, and gladly surrender everything you have for it. Now you have it offered to you here and spread out in front of you for nothing. There is nothing that you have to do or give for it, except that if you want to be a child of God, you must also show yourself to be one and do your Father’s works toward your neighbor. This is what Christ, our Lord, has done for us by reconciling us to the Father, bringing us into His favor, daily representing us, and interceding on our behalf.

You do the same. Be a reconciler and a mediator between your neighbors. Carry the best to both sides; but keep quiet about the bad, which the devil has inspired, or explain it the best way you can. If you come to Margaret, do what is said of Monica, Augustine’s mother, and say: “My dear Margaret, why are you so bitter? Surely she does not intend it so badly. All I notice about her is that she would like to be your dear

sister.” In the same way, if you meet Catherine, do the same thing. Then, as a true child of God, you will have made peace on both sides as far as possible.

But if you will or must talk about an evil deed, do as Christ has taught you. Do not carry it to others, but go to the one who has done it, and admonish him to improve. Do not act ostentatiously when you come and expose the person involved, speaking when you ought to be quiet and being quiet when you ought to speak. This is the first method: You should discuss it between yourself and your neighbor alone (Matt. 18:15). If you must tell it to others, however, when the first method does not work, then tell it to those who have the job of punishing, father and mother, master and mistress, burgomaster and judge. That is the right and proper procedure for removing and punishing a wrong. Otherwise, if you spread it among other people, the person remains unimproved; and the wrong remains unpunished, besides being broadcast by you and by others, so that everyone washes out his mouth with it. Look what a faithful physician does with a sick child. He does not run around among the people and broadcast it; but he goes to the child and examines his pulse or anything else that is necessary, not to gratify his pleasure at the cost of the child, nor to make fun of him, but with the good, honest intention of helping him. So we read about the holy patriarch Joseph in Genesis 37. He was tending the cattle with his brothers; and when he heard an evil report about them, he went and brought it to their father as their superior, whose task it was to investigate and to punish them because they would not listen to him.

But you may say: “Then why do you yourself publicly attack the pope and others, instead of keeping the peace?” Answer: A person must advise and support peace while he can and keep quiet as long as possible. But when the sin is evident and becomes too widespread or does public damage, as the pope’s teaching has, then there is no longer time to be quiet but only to defend and attack, especially for me and others in public office whose task it is to teach and to warn everyone. I have the commission and charge, as a preacher and a doctor, to see to it that no one is misled, so that I may give account of it at the Last Judgment (Heb. 13:17). So St. Paul (Acts 20:28) commands the preachers to watch and guard their whole flock against the wolves that were to appear among them. Thus it is my duty to chastise public sinners so that they may improve, just as a judge must publicly condemn and punish evildoers in the performance of his office. As we have said often enough, Christ is not talking here about public office, but in general about all Christians insofar as we are all alike before God.

10. *Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.*

I have said earlier that all these items and promises must be understood by faith in reference to things that are neither seen nor heard and that they are not talking about outward appearances. How can the poor and the mourners be said to look outwardly successful and blessed when, in addition, they have to suffer all sorts of persecution—all things that the whole world and our reason calls trouble and that they say should be avoided? Therefore whoever wants to have the blessedness and the possessions that Christ is talking about here, must lift up his heart far above all senses and reason. He must not evaluate himself on the basis of his feelings, but he must argue this way: “If I am poor, then I am not poor. I am poor outwardly, according to the flesh; but before God, in faith, I am rich.” Thus when he feels sad, troubled, and worried, he must not use this standard and say that he is not a blessed man. But he must turn himself over and say: “I feel sorrow, misery, and sadness of heart; but still I am blessed, happy, and settled on the basis of the Word of God.” The situation in the world is the exact counterpart of this, for those who are called rich and happy are not. Christ calls out His “Woe!” against them and calls them unhappy (Luke 6:24, 25), although it appears that they are well off and having the greatest possible success. Therefore they should lift up their thoughts above the riches and fun which they are having and say: “Yes, I am rich and living in the midst of pure fun. But too bad for me if I have nothing else; for there must certainly be plenty of trouble, misery, and sorrow in all this that will come over me before I feel it or know it.” This applies to all these items; every one of them looks different before the world from the way it looks according to these words.

So far we have been treating almost all the elements of a Christian’s way of life and the spiritual fruits under these two headings: first, that in his own person he is poor, troubled, miserable, needy, and hungry; second, that in relation to others he is a useful, kind, merciful, and peaceable man, who does nothing but good works. Now He adds the last: how he fares in all this. Although he is full of good works, even toward his enemies and rascals, for all this he must get this reward from the world: he is persecuted and runs the risk of losing his body, his life, and everything.

If you want to be a Christian, therefore, consider this well, lest you be frightened, lose heart, and become impatient. But be cheerful and content, knowing that you are not badly off when this happens to you. He and all the saints had the same experience, as He says a little later. For this reason He issues a warning beforehand to those who want to be Christians, that they should and must suffer persecution. Therefore you may take your choice. You have two ways before you—either to heaven and eternal life or to hell, either with Christ or with the world. But this you must know: if you live in order to have a good time here without persecution, then you will not get to heaven with Christ, and vice versa. In short, you must either surrender Christ and heaven or make up your mind that you are willing to suffer every kind of persecution and torture in the world. Briefly, anyone who wants to have Christ must put in jeopardy his body, life, goods, reputation, and popularity in the world. He dare not let himself be scared off by contempt, ingratitude, or persecution.

The reason is this: the devil is a wicked and angry spirit. He will not and cannot stand seeing a man enter the kingdom of God. And if the man undertakes to do so, he blocks the way himself, arousing and attempting every kind of opposition he can summon. If you want to be God's child, therefore, prepare yourself for persecution, as the wise man says.¹⁷ Paul says in 2 Timothy 3:12: "All who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted." And Christ Himself says (John 15:20): "The disciple should not be better off than his master. If they persecuted Me, they will also persecute you." There is no other way out, and therefore the statement is: "Blessed are those who are persecuted for the sake of the kingdom of heaven," to let us know how to console ourselves. Otherwise this would look outwardly like a troubling and unhappy situation, and it wears us down to be sitting constantly amid danger to life and property. But when faith takes over, we can lift ourselves up above this and think: "Nevertheless Christ has said that I am blessed and well off. Because He has said so, I let it be my comfort and pleasure. The Word will make my heart great, yes, greater than heaven and earth. What are all my persecutors in comparison with this Man or His Word? If there are one or two persecuting us, there are many more (2 Kings 6:16) defending us, cheering us up, consoling us, and blessing us—yes, 10,000 angels over against one of them, together with all the saints, who act in concert with Christ and with God Himself." Hence we must not be so coarse and cold, letting this Word lie around, but blow it up and magnify it, pitting it against every persecution. Then we shall see and learn that we should despise all our suffering as nothing at all when compared with this great consolation and eternal blessing.

But it is significant that He should add the phrase: "for righteousness' sake," to show that where this condition is absent, persecution alone will not accomplish this. The devil and wicked people also have to suffer persecution. Rascals often get into each other's hair, and there is no love lost between them. So one murderer persecutes another, and the Turk battles against the Tartar; but this does not make them blessed. This statement applies only to those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake. So also 1 Peter 4:15 says: "Let none of you suffer as a murderer or a thief or a wrongdoer." Therefore bragging and yelling about great suffering is worthless without this condition. So the godless monks have deceived the poor people whom they have led away to be punished, consoling them with the statement that with their death they were paying for their sins. Beware of any death that is supposed to pay for your sin, for it belongs in the abyss of hell. First there must come righteousness and the death of Christ, the Lord.

See to it, therefore, that you have a genuine divine cause for whose sake you suffer persecution, and that you are really convinced of it so that your conscience can take a stand and stick by it, even though the whole world should stand up against you. The primary thing is that you grasp the Word of God firmly and surely so that there can be no doubt or hesitation there. Suppose that the Emperor, the bishops, or the princes were to forbid marriage, freedom in the choice of food, the use of both kinds in the Sacrament, and the like, and were to persecute you for these things. Then you would have to see to it that your heart is convinced and persuaded that the Word of God has made these things free and unprohibited, that it even commands us to take them seriously and to stake our lives upon them. Then you can have the confidence to say: "This cause does not belong to me but to Christ, my Lord. For I have not concocted it out of my own head. I have not assumed or begun it on my own or at the advice or suggestion of any man. But it has been brought and announced to me from heaven through the mouth of Christ, who never deludes or deceives me but is Himself sheer Truth and Righteousness. At this Man's Word I will take the risk of suffering, of doing and forsaking whatever I should. All by itself, His Word will accomplish more to

comfort and strengthen my heart than the raging and threatening of all the devils and of the world can accomplish to frighten me.”

Who cares if a crazy prince or foolish emperor fumes in his rage and threatens me with sword, fire, or the gallows! Just as long as my Christ is talking dearly to my heart, comforting me with the promises that I am blessed, that I am right with God in heaven, and that all the heavenly host and creation call me blessed. Just let my heart and mind be ready to suffer for the sake of His Word and work. Then why should I let myself be scared by these miserable people, who rage and foam in their hostility to God but suddenly disappear like a puff of smoke or a bubble, as the prophet Isaiah says (Is. 51:12, 13): “I, I am He that comforts you; who are you that you are afraid of man who dies, of the son of man who is made like grass, and have forgotten the Lord, who made you, who stretched out the heavens and laid the foundations of the earth?” That is to say: “He who comforts you and takes pleasure in you is almighty and eternal. When it is all over with them, He will still be sitting up there, and so will you. Why, then, let the threatening and fuming of a miserable, stinking bag of worms concern you more than this divine comfort and approval? Be grateful to God and happy in your heart that you are worthy of suffering this, as the apostles went forth (Acts 5:41) leaping for joy over the fact that they were disgraced and beaten down.”

You see, these words are a great blessing to us if only we receive them with love and thanks, since we have no shortage of persecution. But our great advantage is that our enemies themselves cannot condemn our cause and must acknowledge—no thanks to them!—that it is right and true. What is wrong is the fact that we are teaching it, for they refuse to learn or accept it from us. Such a thing is unprecedented and unheard of. What we suffer on this account, therefore, is a holy and blessed suffering, as they themselves must testify. This is no longer a human persecution, but a truly demonic one, when they say that we must not and dare not call it the Word of God but must keep our mouth shut and not preach unless first we go and fall at the pope’s feet, asking for approval from him and from his masks.

So let us be all the more willing and happy to suffer everything they can do against us, since we have the strong and certain comfort and the great and glorious satisfaction that their own mouth confirms our teaching and our cause. In addition, we hear the wonderful and delightful promise here that we shall be well rewarded in heaven and that we should be happy and rejoice over this, as people who do not have to yearn for heaven but already have it. All they do by their persecution is to further this, actually driving and chasing us to heaven. Now tell me whether these simple, short words do not encourage you as much as the whole world can, and provide more comfort and joy than all the suffering and torture our enemies can inflict on us. We should not listen to them with only *half* an ear, but take them to heart and ponder them.

This applies to persecution with deeds and fists, involving person or property, when Christians are seized and tortured, burned, hanged, and massacred, as happens nowadays and has happened before. There is, in addition, another kind of persecution. It is called defamation, slander, or disgrace, involving our reputation and good name. In this way Christians have to suffer more than others. Now Christ discusses this.

11. *Blessed are you when men revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on My account.*

This, too, is a great and severe persecution and, as I have said, the real suffering of Christians, that they endure bitter slander and poisonous defamation. Though other people must also suffer persecution, violent and unjust treatment, still men are willing to let them keep their reputation and good name. So this is not yet really Christian suffering, which requires not merely all sorts of tortures and troubles, but more; their good name must be spit upon and slandered, and the world must boast loudly that in murdering the Christians it has executed the worst kind of criminal, whom the earth could no longer carry, and that it has done God the greatest and most acceptable service, as Christ says (John 16:2). Thus no name has ever appeared on earth so slanderous and disreputable as the name “Christian.” No nation has ever experienced so much bitter opposition and attack by wicked and poisonous tongues as have the Christians.

Right now they are proving this in the slander, defamation, lies, deceit, vicious tricks, and wicked misinterpretations they have perpetrated against the dear Gospel and its preachers, such that one would die many times rather than endure these poisonous, malicious darts (Eph. 6:16). Along comes the pope with his thunderbolts, damning us to the ninth hell as the children of the devil. In the same way his retinue, the bishops and princes, rage and roar with such terrible blasphemies and slanders that our whole body trembles and we would soon tire and give up if we did not have a comfort stronger and more powerful

than all their malice and rage. Thus we let them rage and blaspheme. They will only plague themselves, and their poisonous hatred and insatiable envy will give them a burning pain. But we are content and courageous. If they want to rage and storm, we can still laugh and be joyful.

Therefore I say it again: Anyone who wants to be a Christian should learn to expect such persecution from poisonous, evil, slanderous tongues, especially when they cannot do anything with their fists. He should let the whole world sharpen its tongue on him, aim at him, sting and bite. Meanwhile he should regard all this with defiant contempt and laughter in God's name, letting them rage in the name of their god, the devil, and being firmly persuaded, as we have said above, that our cause is the right cause and is God's own cause. This they themselves have to confirm; even though they condemn us, they have to say it is the truth. Besides, before God our heart and conscience are sure that our teaching is right. We are not teaching on the basis of our own brains, reason, or wisdom, or using this to gain advantage, property, or reputation for ourselves before the world. We are preaching only God's Word and praising only His deeds. Our enemies, on the other hand, brag about nothing but their own deeds, merits, and holiness. They persecute us for refusing to join them in this.

They do not persecute us for being adulterers, robbers, or thieves. In fact, they can tolerate the most desperate scoundrels and criminals in their midst. But they are raising such a hue and cry because we refuse to approve their teaching and life, because we praise nothing but the Gospel, Christ, faith, and truly good works, and because we do not suffer for ourselves but suffer everything for the sake of Christ, the Lord. Therefore we will sing it to the end with them. No matter how hard their head, ours is still harder. In short, they must let that Man alone, whether they like it or not.

12. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven.

These are really sweet and comforting words. They should gladden and encourage our hearts against all kinds of persecution. Should not the dear Lord's Word and comfort be dearer and more important to us than that which comes from a helpless bag of worms, or the rage, threats, excommunication, curses, and lightning of the miserable pope, even though he deluged us with the very dregs and the whole hell of his wrath and cursing? For I hear my Lord Christ telling me that He is truly delighted, and commanding me to be happy about it. In addition, He promises me such a wonderful reward: the kingdom of heaven shall be mine and everything that Christ has, together with all the saints and all Christendom—in short, such a treasure and comfort that I should not trade it for all the possessions, joy, and music in the whole world, even though all the leaves and all the blades of grass were tongues singing my praises. This is not a Christian calling me "blessed," nor even an angel, but the Lord of all the angels, before whom they and all the creatures must kneel and adore. With all the other creatures, therefore, with the leaves and the grass, they must cheerfully sing and dance in my honor and praise.

And those who slander and curse me, what are they by comparison but nits and lousy paunches—if you will pardon the expression—so shameful that there is no name for them. If every creature, the leaves and the blades of grass in the forest and the sand on the shore, were all tongues to accuse and destroy them, what would all that be in comparison with a single word of this Man? His voice sounds clear enough to fill heaven and earth and to echo through them, silencing the slobbering coughs and the hoarse scratching of His enemies.

You see, that is how we should learn something about using these words for our benefit. They are not put here for nothing, but were spoken and written for our strengthening and comfort. By them our dear Master and faithful Shepherd, or Bishop, arms us. Then we shall be unafraid and ready to suffer if for His sake they lay all kinds of torment and trouble upon us in both words and deeds, and we shall despise whatever is offensive to us, even though contrary to our own reason and heart.

For if we cling to our own thoughts and feelings, we are dismayed and hurt to learn that for our service, help, counsel, and kindness to the world and to everyone we should get no thanks except the deepest and bitterest hatred and cursed, poisonous tongues. If flesh and blood were in charge here, it would soon say: "If I am to get nothing else out of this, then let anyone who wants to, stick with the Gospel and be a Christian! The world can go to the devil for help if that is what it wants!" This is the reason for the general complaint and cry that the Gospel is causing so much conflict, strife, and disturbance in the world and that everything is worse since it came than it was before, when things moved along smoothly, when there was no persecution, and when the people lived together like good friends and neighbors.

But here is what it says: "If you do not want to have the Gospel or be a Christian, then go out and take the world's side. Then you will be its friend, and no one will persecute you. But if you want to have the Gospel and Christ, then you must count on having trouble, conflict, and persecution wherever you go." Reason: because the devil cannot bear it otherwise, nor will he stop egging people on against the Gospel, so that all the world is incensed against it. Thus at the present time peasants, city people, nobles, princes, and lords oppose the Gospel from sheer cussedness, and they themselves do not know why.

So this is what I say in reply to these idle talkers and grumblers: "Things neither can nor should run peacefully and smoothly. How could things run smoothly, when the devil is in charge and is a mortal enemy of the Gospel? There is good reason for this, too, since it hurts him in his kingdom, where he can feel it. If he were to let it go ahead unhindered, it would soon be all over and his kingdom would be utterly destroyed. But if he is to resist it and hinder it, he must rally all his art and power and arouse everything in his might against it. So do not hope for any peace and quiet so long as Christ and His Gospel are in the midst of the devil's kingdom. And woe upon the peaceful and smooth situation that used to be, and upon those who would like to have it back! This is a sure sign that the devil is ruling with all his might and that no Christ is there. I am worried that it may be this way again and that the Gospel may be taken away from us Germans all too soon, which is just what these rioters are struggling for now."

But we have the assurance that it is not our fault when there is trouble. It would give us heartfelt joy if everything went right. We have done our share. We have been teaching, warning, pleading, beseeching, and giving in, even to our enemies, offering them peace, and doing everything we should do. We have given help and counsel with all our might, at our own risk and disadvantage, tolerating what we should. Yet all we accomplish is shameful and poisonous persecution, slander, and abuse from men who will not stop till they have cooled their rage in our blood. Since the situation will never be different, we let them go ahead with their threatenings, fury, and blasphemy, and hold on to the comfort we have heard. We are sure that they cannot accomplish what they desire until they first topple Christ from heaven and make a liar out of Him, with all that He has said.

For so men persecuted the prophets who were before you.

"When this happens," He wants to say, "you are not alone. Look around, count back to all the holy fathers that ever lived before you, and you will find that their lot was the same. Why should you expect any special treatment? Should He forsake His method for your sake? He had to put up with it when His dear fathers and prophets were persecuted and killed, slandered, and ridiculed by everyone, and made the mockery of the world." As we see from the Scriptures, it had become a common and proverbial expression that if someone wanted to refer to a prophet, he called him a "fool." So in the history of Jehu (2 Kings 9:11), they said of a prophet: "Why did this mad fellow come to you?" And Isaiah shows (Is. 57:4) that they opened their mouths and put out their tongues against him. But all they accomplished by this was to become a terrible stench and a curse, while the dear prophets and saints have honor, praise, and acclaim throughout the world and are ruling forever with Christ, the Lord. "This is what you should expect for yourselves, too," Christ says, "that you will receive the same reward that they did, a reward more abundant and glorious than you can believe or dare to wish. For you are members of the same company and congregation."

What a dear and wonderful Preacher and faithful Master! He leaves out nothing that will help to strengthen and console, whether it be His Word and promise or the example and testimony of all the saints and of Himself. And all the angels in heaven and all the creatures support this. What more would you want and need? With such comfort, should we not put up with the anger and spite of the world and the devil for His sake? What would we do if we did not have a righteous and divine cause, if we had no splendid sayings and assurances like these and still had to suffer, as other people do who have no comfort? In the world it is impossible to avoid all suffering. And for the sake of the Gospel, as we have said, there must be some suffering; it reinforces the faithful and advances them to their promised comfort, joy, and bliss, and it punishes and damns the wicked despisers and enemies of the Gospel.

So far Christ has been equipping and preparing His Christians to live and suffer in the world, especially those who are to hold public office in Christendom. Even apart from this, however, every Christian should be ready at all times to take a stand, by himself if necessary, to confess his Lord and to represent his faith, always being armed against the world, the devil, the sects, and whatever else may be lined up against him. Now He goes on. He commits the office to them and teaches them how to carry it

out; later on He will also put into their mouths what and how they are to preach. These are the elements that go in to make a Christian perfect: that in his person he lives properly and suffers in all sorts of ways on this account and that he properly administers and carries out his office, in which he is to serve and help other people. So now He adds:

13. *You are the salt of the earth; but if the salt has lost its taste, how shall its saltness be restored? It is no longer good for anything except to be thrown down and trodden underfoot by men.*

By the word “salt,” as we have said, He points out what their office is to be. Salt is not salt for itself, it cannot salt itself. But it is used to salt meat and other things in the kitchen so that they keep their taste, stay fresh, and do not rot. “So,” He says, “you are also salt”—not the kind that belongs in the kitchen but the kind for salting this flesh, that is, the whole world. This is indeed a splendid office and a great and glorious honor, that God should call them His salt and should tell them to salt everything on earth. But for this a man must be ready, as He has already taught them, to be poor, miserable, thirsty, and meek, and to suffer all sorts of persecution, shame, and slander. Without this the man will never be the kind of preacher who knows how to salt, but will be only a salt without bite, useless.

It seems presumptuous and overambitious to say that before God poor fishermen or other poor wretches should be called “the salt of the earth” and should take it upon themselves to seize and salt everything human on earth. Reason and nature cannot do it. It gets tired of it, since it cannot endure the continuous disgrace, shame, and misfortune; and it would soon say: “Let the devil salt the world in my place.” Hence our holy fathers, the bishops, monks, and hermits have been acting shrewdly when they neglected preaching and paid attention to other things or isolated themselves from human society. They saw that it costs too much to run the constant risk of losing life, property, and reputation; and they thought to themselves: “We will turn it over to other people, and meanwhile we will sneak off into a corner and serve God with enjoyment.”

It is a hard job to be an apostle or a preacher and carry out this kind of office, yes, an impossible one, judging according to flesh and blood. But they must be people who do it gladly for the sake of God and the Lord Christ. He does not want to compel anyone or drive him with commandments. For the state of being a Christian is one that requires only willing hearts. Anyone who does not heartily want it had better leave it alone. But this is our consolation: When we are in trouble and the world and the devil are glaring at us and acting as cruelly as possible, then He says to us: “You are the salt of the earth.” When the Word shines into¹⁸ a man’s heart so that he can depend on it and lay uncontested claim to the title “God’s salt,” then let anyone who refuses to laugh be as angry and cruel as he pleases. With His single word I can be more defiant and boastful than they with all their power, swords, and guns. For since He acknowledges my right to the title and testifies to it through His Word, all the angels in heaven, even sun and moon together with all the creatures, must say “Yes” to it and stand by us, in opposition to the world and the devil. Even if this were not so, we would still have enough in His single word, in the fact that He names and baptizes us this way. They must let that stand, and we will certainly have a place of honor before them as long as Christ and His Word abide.

Now this salting process is easy to understand. One must get up and say: “Everything that is born and lives on earth is useless, it is rotten and corrupt before God.” He says bluntly and plainly: “They shall be a salt of the earth,” that is, a salt to everything that the world is. From this it must follow that everything in the world bearing the name “flesh” or “man” must be denounced and thoroughly salted. Thus we condemn the sanctity, wisdom, and worship which the whole world has thought up for itself, apart from the Word of God and without holding to Christ alone, as the devil’s invention, which belongs in the abyss of hell. This is a harsh proclamation. It makes us disagreeable to the world, and it earns for us the enmity of men and a punch in the teeth.

The world could tolerate it if we proclaimed Christ and all the articles of faith correctly. But if we want to seize it and salt it by showing that its wisdom and sanctity are worthless, indeed, blind and damned, this it cannot and will not tolerate. It accuses the preachers of doing nothing but criticizing and biting, of causing revolutions and discord, and of maligning the clergy and good works. But what can we do? Salting has to bite. Although they criticize us as biters, we know that this is how it has to be and that Christ has commanded the salt to be sharp and continually caustic, as we shall hear. St. Paul is always rebuking the whole world and criticizing everything it praises and does¹⁹ without faith in Christ. And Christ says (John 16:8): “When the Holy Spirit comes, He will convince the world.” That is to say: “He

will attack everything He finds in the world, without exception or discrimination. He will not rebuke some and praise others, or punish only the thieves and criminals. He will throw everything on one pile, one with another—great, small, pious, wise, holy, or whatever—in short, everything that is not Christ.” There is need for the Holy Spirit to come and to send preachers into the world, to uncover and to punish, not the outwardly gross sins like adultery and murder, which the world can know and punish by itself, but the things it regards as the most precious and its highest asset, the claim to piety, holiness, and the service of God.

So it is a mistake when some wiseacres maintain now that it is enough for a preacher to tell everyone what is right and simply to preach the Gospel, but not to touch the pope, the bishops, the princes, and other stations or persons, since this causes unrest and discord. But what He means is this: “If you want to preach the Gospel and help people, you must be sharp and rub salt into their wounds, showing the reverse side and denouncing what is not right, like the Masses, monkery, indulgences, and all their works and ways, so that these scandals are eliminated and no longer deceive people.” Therefore we must keep up this salting, be on our guard, and leave no room for such things to come back or to sneak in secretly. This is just what will happen if the ministry of salting is neglected, as it used to be in Christendom, when the rotten doctrine of men was in complete charge and ruined everything; this would not have happened if the salt had remained. There would have been no shortage of sound doctrine; for by the grace of God the Scriptures, the Gospel, the Sacrament, and the pulpit had remained in the church, if only the bishops and preachers had done what they should to use these means for salting whatever belonged to the old Adam.

That is why Christ is exhorting and warning the disciples so diligently here, to be sure that this salting is never neglected. He says: “If the salt has lost its taste, how shall its saltiness be restored?” “Salt that has lost its taste” means salt that has lost its teeth and its sharpness, salt that no longer seasons or bites. This happens when the ministry is neglected in Christendom. Preachers no longer rebuke the people or show them their misery and incapacity or press for repentance and self-knowledge. They permit them to go along as if they were pious and all right. Thus they let their self-made sanctity and self-chosen worship take root so deeply that the true doctrine of faith is destroyed, Christ is lost, and everything is ruined, utterly and hopelessly.

He saw this and predicted the future danger, the injury and decay of Christendom with the neglect of this ministry of salting or denouncing. Instead of it, a swarm of factions and sects would arise, each one insisting that his favorite toy is the true teaching and worship of God, even though it is altogether worldly and carnal and the product of our own brain and reason. We use it to tickle ourselves, and so we actually decay in it, like wild, stinking, rotten meat, on which salting and denouncing would be wasted.

From this you see how important this is, and why Christ has good reason for discussing it here before everything else and commanding it so zealously. Without it, Christendom cannot stand, and proper understanding and life are no longer possible. Thus there is no greater injury or decay in Christendom than when the salt, which should season and salt everything else, has itself lost its taste. Yet this can happen so easily. For it is a poison that tastes sweet and appeals to the old Adam. He does not like to live dangerously, risking life and limb or suffering persecution, shame, and slander. This makes our bishops and clergy the smartest people on earth. Nevertheless, they are not good enough even to be called salt that has lost its taste, but they are the very devil himself. They do not pay attention to their bishoprics; they are the worst kind of persecutors themselves. They preach in a manner calculated to keep them out of trouble and to gain for them money and property, honor and power.

Anyone who is supposed to criticize the whole world—emperors, kings, princes, wise men, learned men—and say that their way of life is damned before God, has to stick his neck out. But if I am hypocritical and say that everything is all right with them, I get off scot free and keep their favor and acceptance. In the meanwhile I flatter myself that I intend to preach the Gospel, too. Still I have become salt that has lost its taste; for I am letting the people stick in the old delusion of their own flesh, till finally they go to the devil, with me in the lead.

Thus there are many temptations and hindrances for this ministry on both the right and the left side, the temptation of keeping quiet either to escape harm and persecution or to gain popularity, property, or pleasure. Besides, We are weak, lazy, and listless. Therefore we let ourselves be distracted, and we get tired when we see that things do not progress as we would like, when it all seems useless and the people despise our rebukes and even become the worse on account of them.

We must be well armed against all this, therefore, and look at nothing but the commandment of Christ. He entrusts this ministry to us and wants us to open our mouths vigorously, to denounce what must be denounced, heedless of our own danger, inconvenience, advantage, or pleasure, and of other people's malice and contempt. Our consolation is in the fact that He makes us His salt and will sustain us in our salting. He commands us to do that salting with good cheer, regardless of whether the world refuses to tolerate it and persecutes us. Nor should we despair, even though it seems to us that we are getting nowhere. Our pleasure and satisfaction should be whatever He commands us to do. Let Him determine what and how much He wants to accomplish through us. If people refuse to hear or accept it, we are salt nonetheless and have discharged our responsibility. Then we can stand before the judgment seat of God honorably and cheerfully. We can testify that we have spoken out faithfully to every man and have hidden nothing under the bench, leaving them without the excuse that they did not know any better or had not been told.

But those who let themselves be scared off and muzzled for the sake of favor, popularity, or possessions will have to hear it said of them: "This was our preacher, and he never said anything about it." And He will not let them off if they say: "But Lord, they refused to listen." To this Christ will rejoin: "Do you not know that I commanded you to salt, that I warned you earnestly to do so? Should you not have feared My Word more than them?" This should really put the fear of the Lord into us. Listen to the sentence He pronounces on all the salt that has lost its taste, when He says:

It is no longer good for anything except to be thrown out and trodden underfoot by men.

That is to say: "Even here on earth their lot will not be good. Christ will utterly reject them as men who belong to Him no longer and who will never be His preachers or members of Christendom. They will be completely cast out and deprived of any fellowship with all the saints in heaven. Of course they may still keep the name and enjoy the highest esteem among people as the best preachers and holiest men on earth." That is how it was with the papacy in the heyday of its piety and holiness, when it had not yet grown to be what it is now, a secular imperialism and a spiritual demonocracy. Then the pope himself was preaching and governing the churches. He had everything in fine working order, all organized with prescribed rules and regulations, the way St. Gregory did, as well as some before and since.²⁰ The whole world thought of this as the finest government and the holiest worship possible. Still it was all useless, because there was no salt there to check it by the Word of God and denounce it as our own self-devised sanctity. Yet the whole world gave its praise, approval, and support to the presumptuous and false trust that this was really a blessed life and a holy class. So it praises and exalts St. Gregory himself. Though I agree that he was a holy man, still his teaching did not achieve any good results. Nevertheless it all appears so lovely that if they could now restore and reform the old situation, no one would dare to preach a word against it, lest he be called the worst heretic that ever lived.

Now, this is one element in the warning: "If the salt has lost its taste, it is no longer useful." The other element sounds even more terrible. He pronounces the sentence upon it that we should let it be "thrown out and trodden underfoot by men." The real salt is the true exposition of Scripture, which denounces the whole world and lets nothing stand but the simple faith in Christ. When this is gone, then it is all over, and all the rest of our teaching and rebuking is worthless. For God has already rejected and condemned both the doctrine and the life, both the teacher and the pupil. In short, without this article of faith, that we are justified and saved only through Christ and that apart from Him everything is damned, there is no defense or restraint, no boundary or limit for every heresy and error, every sect and faction, with everyone thinking up and broadcasting some peculiar idea of his own. This was the situation under the pope. No monk could have a dream without dragging it into the pulpit and making it into a special act of worship. No lie was too shameful to be accepted so long as someone had the audacity to take it into the pulpit. Finally things came to such a pass that not only Christ was lost but God, too, and they practically stopped believing any of the articles of faith. Indeed, I might say that for a hundred years there have been few popes who believed a single article. This is the situation now in the German lands. Among those who have lost the article about Christ one schism and error after another has arisen. One denies the Sacrament; another denies Baptism and other articles; many have become completely epicurean, believing nothing at all, like the popes and their cardinals in Rome. And so they finally become nothing but swine and cattle, and that is how they die.

This is why I have always admonished, as Christ is doing here, that the salt should remain salt and not lose its taste, that is, that we properly teach the chief article of faith. Where this is gone, no other part can stay right, and everything is lost. There can be no faith or understanding any more, and no one can teach or counsel correctly. In brief, a person has to let everyone's feet trample over him. As we have said, there is no bacchanal or jackass too coarse to gain a great following of believers if he can just think up something new. What is there that the miserable monks have not brazenly dared to preach? They have duped the people with their brother-hoods, little prayers, rosaries, and with the mangy hoods which they put on the dead to promise them heaven.²¹ What is that but to let everyone's feet trample over you and to be at the mercy of every preacher of lies? The reason for this is the fact that the devil has conquered the heart and utterly destroyed it with his rotten, damnable doctrines and superstition. Christ is gone, and the knowledge of Christ is lost.

If I keep the conviction that only Christ is my Righteousness and Holiness, no monk will ever delude or beguile me with his cowl, his rosary, or any of his other works or man-made baubles. Faith makes me a judge over every class and way of life that men can think up, and I can condemn anything claiming to show me something else that avails before God. If I neglect this treasure and let it slide in order to look for other ways to be pious, to reconcile God, and to atone for sin, then I am a ready victim for all the various snares and traps of the devil, and have become his obedient servant. Then someone comes along who preaches to me: "If you want to be pious and serve God, put on a cowl, pray this many rosaries every day, light this many little candles to St. Anne." And I fall for it like a blind man, like everyone's fool and prisoner. I do whatever I am told, and I cannot avoid even the slightest mistake.

Here Christ Himself has predicted and warned that it would be this way. There has never been a person who knew how to be on guard against this. If we do not keep watch and take care to retain this article, we, too, shall eventually retain no article properly and purely. We shall not stop erring and splitting into sects till it is all over, till preaching and teaching become completely useless and we are nothing but swine and cattle. Alas, that is how it is already among the great crowd, as a result of our contempt and ingratitude for the Gospel.

14. *You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hid.*

15. *Nor do men light a lamp and put it under a bushel, but on a stand, and it gives light to all in the house.*

Here is the second part of the ministry which He entrusts to His dear apostles. They are to be called a "light of the world" and are to be one; that is, they are to instruct souls and guide them to eternal life. Thus He subjects the whole world to the apostles, through whom alone it should and must be enlightened; and He concludes that it, together with everything it can do, is all sheer darkness and blindness. Or if it had a light to enlighten it without this, as it supposes, why would He need the apostles for this? You see, is this not a superb and splendid ministry, an honor above every honor? All the people in the world—kings, princes, lords, learned men, wise men, holy men—have to sit down while the apostles stand up, have to let themselves be accused and condemned in their wisdom and sanctity as men who know neither doctrine nor life nor the right relation to God.

Now along comes Master Pope with his masks, the bishops. They lay claim to the title "vicegerents of Christ and of the apostles." They have the audacity to lord it over Christ's Word and to depose the apostles by slobbering that it was not enough for the apostles to preach and for the Holy Spirit to shine through them, but that we must hear and heed the decrees of the holy fathers, the councils, and the popes, who have taught much more and better. But we should know that Christ is not some sort of juggler who does not know what He is saying. Because He calls them a "light of the world," their teaching alone must be authoritative and adequate to enlighten the whole world. Therefore no other light is necessary; indeed, anything apart from their teaching is sheer darkness. Others may shine far with their lanterns, but these are merely human regulations to govern certain outward affairs which everyone understands and could discover and make up for himself without their help. So the right name for them is not "light of the world" but "law of God,"²² since they are people who take it upon themselves to regulate God Himself and His Christendom with their laws, as though they were so much better than the apostles. They snuff out the light of the apostles with their blind doctrine, which cannot give proper criticism or instruction to any man's conscience, as is evident in all the books put out by the pope and all the universities. Thus they cannot be called either "salt" or "light." At their best they condemn the coarse, outward evils that have already been condemned by secular law and the light of reason. But they pay no attention to the truly hard

knots and the main problems, like unbelief and false sanctity; in fact, they themselves are in them over their ears. Therefore their teaching is tasteless salt, as well as darkness and blindness. The highest things they can find to salt and enlighten are matters like eating meat or fish, dressing or behaving one way or another.

It is, therefore, exclusively the ministry of the apostles to condemn the real inward evil correctly, and then to heal, console, and comfort all the poor and distressed consciences, leaving no one without condemnation for his evil and instruction and encouragement for the good. Christ installs and ordains them as preachers who alone deserve to be heard, without competition from any schismatic spirits introduced by the devil. Such people want to be known as “salt” and “light.” They even lord it over Christ and scream: “The teaching of faith is a trifle! You must go far beyond that, torture yourself, suffer, and let yourself be crucified.” If you look it over from every side, this is merely instruction about our own actions, without ever pointing to unbelief or condemning the really proud vices that cling to the instruction, which they themselves elevate as “salt” and “light.” They do not stick to the calling and command which He gives to the apostles here when He says: “You shall be the light.” Our only aim is to create the confidence and the declaration that Christ has ordained and anointed us to do this salting and shining, on the basis of God’s command and our ministry.

This is necessary for another reason as well. Christ does not want this ministry to be performed in secret or only in one place, but publicly throughout the world, He indicates to them what they should expect from the world when He says: “A city set on a hill cannot be hid. Nor do men light a lamp and put it under a bushel.” That is to say: “Anyone who is supposed to be a light must be sure that he does not sneak off into a corner, but stands up publicly and fearlessly.” As we have said before, those who are called to be apostles and to shine have this tendency. They do not like to step forward, but they let themselves be scared off by threats and danger and persecution, or fooled by friendship, acceptance, popularity, and wealth. Thus they do not step forward and open their mouth, but they sneak off into a corner, hide behind a hill, and put their whistles into their pockets.²³ Take our clergy, sitting in the ministry. They have the command to stand up before Christendom and to shine publicly with their teaching. Instead, they hide it under a bench. In fact, they do even worse, for these are the very people who persecute the Word and try to extinguish the light by egging on emperors, kings, and the whole world against it. Meanwhile they sit in the house and want to be the only ones who govern the church, to control pulpit, Baptism, Sacrament, and everything that pertains to the calling and the ministry. This is what the apostles predicted: that shepherds would become wolves (Acts 20:29) and that the Antichrist would “take his seat in the temple of God and exalt himself against everything called God.” (2 Thess. 2:4).

On the other hand, there are the schismatic spirits. They have no calling to the ministry, and they would do well to stay home in the corner. Instead, they push themselves in everywhere and try to be the only ones that shine, with everyone listening to them and watching them. All they really want is to be famous, and they preach only so long as they have a following and need fear no danger. But just make them stand up like real preachers, who have been commissioned for the ministry and keep on shining in public without letting wind and weather frighten or silence or extinguish them. Then they would soon make themselves scarce, and you would not find anyone at home. So the dear office of the ministry must get it from both sides. Either those who should perform it neglect it, or those who have not been commissioned for it want to perform it. Thus it never gets the attention it deserves except when Christ grants it the kind of people whom He is describing here and whom He has already prepared, as we heard earlier.

This is what He intends to say now: “If you want, to be My preachers, you really have to be ready to take your place publicly and to stand up before the world as though you were on a high mountain. You have to be willing to be seen and heard openly, holding nothing back that you ought to preach nor hiding it under a bench. Your love for a particular person dare not cause you to keep quiet or to speak out. But since you are the light, you must shine freely and publicly without regard to honor or shame, riches or poverty, disfavor or popularity, death or life. And you must know that you are serving Me, Me who appointed you to be the light.” Those are the people He needs, people who will not let themselves be bent either to the right side or to the left. As Psalm 45:6, 7 says about the office of the ministry: “Your royal scepter is a scepter of equity; you love righteousness and hate wickedness.” That is the virtue and the glory of the Gospel and of its preachers. No other teaching is so dangerous. They all preach what people

enjoy hearing and what reason can accept; they do not have to be afraid that someone will persecute them. But this teaching meets universal opposition, because its intention is to step forward and to show up the worthlessness of the world's light and teaching. Therefore the world tries in all sorts of ways to extinguish this light or to shove it over into a corner or to put it under a bushel. It wants us to forget about our doctrine or to recant and let ourselves be twisted and turned the way it chooses. But we will not let ourselves be driven from our stand this way. We will remain as a city on a hill, a light on a candlestick in the house. Surely He who has made us the light will also preserve us as the light. Therefore He now concludes:

16. *Let your light so shine before men that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven.*

See the earnestness with which He puts the exhortation. He would not have to do this if there were not great urgency and need. It is as though He were saying: "They will try to darken your light because they cannot stand it. But be bold and courageous against them. If you just keep yourselves from crawling under a bushel and if you discharge your ministry faithfully, I will see to it that they do not succeed in putting it out." For this much is sure: So long as a Christian preacher holds on and sticks to his business, despising the world's abuse and persecution, the ministry will abide and the Gospel cannot fail; for some will always stand firm and abide, as indeed there must always be some that abide, until Judgment Day.

The statement "that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven" is in accordance with St. Matthew's way of speaking; he usually talks this way about works. Neither in his Gospel nor in those of the other two evangelists, Mark and Luke, do we find such a great emphasis upon the profound doctrine of Christ as we do in St. John and St. Paul; instead, we find them talking and exhorting about good works. Of course, it is appropriate that in Christendom both should be preached, yet each in keeping with its nature and value. First and highest is the proclamation about faith and Christ, then comes the emphasis upon works. The evangelist John discussed the chief article thoroughly and powerfully, and hence he is properly regarded as the highest and foremost evangelist. For this reason, Matthew, Luke, and Mark considered and emphasized the other issue, to make sure that it was not forgotten. On this issue, then, they are better than John, while he is better than they on the other one.

But you dare not look at the statements and instructions about works in a manner that separates faith from them, the way our blind theologians mutilate them. You must always connect them with faith and incorporate them in it, making them a result and a concomitant of faith, praised and called "good" for its sake, as I have often taught. Here, too, when He says, "that they may see your good works," you must not merely think of the sort of faith-less works that the good works of our clergy have been until now, but of the sort of works that faith performs and that are impossible apart from faith. What He calls "good works" here is the exercise, expression, and confession of the teaching about Christ and faith, and the suffering for its sake. He is talking about works by which we "shine"; but shining is the real job of believing or teaching, by which we also help others to believe.

What He means, therefore, is the highest and best kind of works, works whose necessary consequence it must be, as He says here, "that the heavenly Father is honored and praised." For this teaching or preaching deprives us of every claim to holiness, and it says that we have nothing good in us to brag about. In addition, it instructs the conscience about its relation to God, showing it His grace and mercy and the whole Christ. That is the real revelation and praise of God and at the same time the real sacrifice and worship. These are the works that should be first and foremost. They should be followed by those pertaining to our relations with our neighbor in what are called "works of love," which shine, too, but only insofar as they are ignited and sustained by faith.

Now you can draw the conclusion for yourself that Matthew does not have in mind the ordinary works that people should do for one another out of love, which he talks about in Matthew 25:35 ff. Rather is he thinking principally about the distinctly Christian work of teaching correctly, of stressing faith, and of showing how to strengthen and preserve it; this is how we testify that we really are Christians. The other works are not such a reliable criterion, since even sham Christians can put on the adornment and cover of big, beautiful works of love. But the true teaching and confession of Christ is impossible without faith; as St. Paul says (1 Cor. 12:3): "No one can say, 'Jesus is Lord,' except by the Holy Spirit." No sham Christian or schismatic spirit can understand this teaching. How much less can he truly preach it and confess it! Even though he might perceive the words and imitate them, still he does not hold to them or

keep them pure. His preaching always betrays the fact that he does not have it straight. He slobbers all over it by stealing the honor from Christ and claiming it for himself.

Thus the most reliable index to a true Christian is this: if from the way he praises and preaches Christ the people learn that they are nothing and that Christ is everything. In short, it is the kind of work that cannot be clone in relation to one or two people, remaining hidden like other works. It has to shine and let itself be seen publicly, in front of the whole world. That is always why it alone is persecuted, for the world can tolerate other works. This also entitles it to be called a work through which our Father is recognized and praised. The other and less important works are not entitled to this, since they remain purely on the human level and belong to the Second Table of the Decalog.²⁴ The works we are talking about now deal with the first three great commandments, which pertain to God's honor, name, and Word. In addition, if they are to endure, they have to be verified and purified through persecution and suffering. They also have to be slandered before the world to keep them pure of any self-esteem or presumptuousness and to make them all the more praiseworthy before God, since this is really a slander of His honor and praise. That is also why they stand so firmly and why God defends them so powerfully, leading them through despite the raging and persecution of the world. Therefore we should also give these works a position of pre-eminence as the most important, followed by the others, which involve our relations with people. Thus both will have their due. First we should constantly teach and emphasize faith, and then we should live according to faith. In this way everything we do will be done in faith and from faith, as I have always taught.

17. Think not that I have come to abolish the Law and the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them.

Having given the apostles a serious command and having commissioned them to the ministry, the Lord Christ now takes the next step. He Himself starts salting and shining as an example to teach them what they should preach. He also attacks the doctrine and the life of the Jews, to rebuke and reform their delusions and deeds. As I have said, He does not discuss the great chief doctrine of faith here. Instead, He begins from the bottom by clarifying and commending the Law, which their Pharisees and scribes had completely obscured and distorted. For it is also necessary to clarify and to correct the teaching about God's commandments.

But it is a sharp and intolerable salt when he attacks and condemns such people as these for not teaching or living correctly, conceding nothing good or right to them—the very best and holiest people, irreproachable, who are teaching God's commandments and performing holy acts of worship every day. In this way He gave them an opportunity for a shrill denunciation of Him and for the accusation that He wanted to abolish and destroy the Law which God had given. Similarly, the pope and his mob are denouncing us and accusing us of heresy for prohibiting good works. He foresaw this accusation against Him and this interpretation of His teaching. Hence He explains from the outset that He has no intention of abolishing the Law, but had come for the very purpose of correcting and confirming the teaching of the Law in opposition to those who were weakening it by their teaching.

Such a clarification was necessary on account of their great renown and on account of their excellent reputation. If anyone took it upon himself to denounce them, they would immediately create a fuss and throw dust in his eyes by insisting that they alone are the people of God, with so many prophets and holy fathers: "Who are you, that you should be wise enough to criticize everyone else, as though our fathers and we had all been wrong, we who have and preach the Law of God?" That is exactly what the whole world is yelling at us now. It accuses us of condemning the holy fathers and the entire church, which is infallible because it is governed by the Holy Spirit. "Because you are criticizing our teaching and life," they say to Christ, "this is an indication that you are condemning the Law and the Prophets, the fathers and the whole nation." To this Christ answers: "No. Certainly I have no intention of destroying the Law or the Prophets. I am more respectful toward them and more scrupulous and serious in my observance of them than you are, so much so that heaven and earth could pass away before I would let an iota or a dot perish or be useless. Indeed, I will go on to say that if anyone despises or departs from the very smallest commandment in his teaching, he will be thrown out of the kingdom of heaven for this minor offense, even though he might keep everything else. Thus we are in agreement that Moses and the Prophets must be taught and enforced rigidly, but the issue is this: since both of us have the obligation and the desire to teach the Law, it has to be determined which of the two sides is correctly citing and interpreting Scripture

or God's Law. This is the point at issue, and here I have to salt and denounce. With their glosses the Jews have distorted and corrupted the Law, and I have come to set it straight." Right now, too, both we and our opponents, the pope and the other sects, are appealing to the same Scripture and laying claim to one Gospel and Word of God. We have had to attack the doctrine of the pope, which has corrupted Scripture for us with its stench and filth.

He is not denying that they are God's people and that they have the Law, the fathers, and the prophets. Nor are we condemning or denying that under the pope there were Christians or Baptism or the Gospel, but we are saying: "What we have is the right Baptism and Gospel." We protest against having to accept and approve the way they smear it all up, the way they interpret and distort it by defiling the pure doctrine with the foul and wormy, yes, the demonic addition of their cowls, tonsures, indulgences, purgatory, and sacrificial masses. This is where we set to work with our salting, to get rid of this stench and to fumigate it. So it is clear that the very dissolvers and destroyers of Law and Scripture decorate themselves with lovely titles like "Scripture" or "Gospel" or "Christian Church" and that under this pretext they have imported their maggots and corrupted everything and made it useless. And then they yell at us for attacking the Christian Church, the holy fathers, and good works!

Now He says: "I have come not to destroy the Law but to fulfill it." That is: "I do not intend to bring another law or a new law, but to take the very Scriptures which you have and to emphasize them, dealing with them in such a way as to teach you how to behave." What the Gospel or the preaching of Christ brings is not a new doctrine to undo change the Law, but, as St. Paul says (Rom. 1:2), the very same thing that was "promised beforehand through the prophets in the Scripture." From our opponents, therefore, we accept the very same Scriptures, Baptism, and Sacrament that they have; and we do not intend to propose something new or better. All we are doing is insisting upon their proper preaching and administration and upon the elimination of anything that does not harmonize with them.

St. Augustine interprets the word "fulfill" in a twofold manner.²⁵ According to him, "fulfilling the Law" means, first, "supplementing its deficiencies" and, second, "carrying out its content in works and in life." But the first interpretation is mistaken. All by itself, the Law is so rich and perfect that no one need to add anything to it; for the apostles themselves had to prove the Gospel and the proclamation about Christ on the basis of the Old Testament. Therefore no one, not even Christ Himself, can improve upon the Law. What can you make up or teach that is higher than what the First Commandment teaches (Deut. 6:5): "You shall love God with all your heart"? He does indeed go beyond Law and doctrine when He gives His grace and Spirit to enable us to do and keep the Law's demands, but that is not "supplementing" the Law. And so He is not talking about that here, but about that fulfilling which takes place through teaching; similarly, by "abolishing" He does not mean acting contrary to the Law, but teaching in such a way as to subtract from it.

What is said here, therefore, is not different from what St. Paul says (Rom. 3:31): "Do we, then, overthrow the Law by this faith? By no means! On the contrary, we uphold the Law." He does not intend to bring another doctrine, as though the former one were no longer in force. He intends, rather, to preach it, to emphasize it, to show its real kernel and meaning, and to teach them what the Law is and what it requires, in antithesis to the glosses which the Pharisees have introduced, the shells and husks which they have been preaching. Similarly we can say to our papists: "We have no intention of abolishing your Gospel or of preaching any other way. All we want to do is to clean it off and polish it, as a mirror that has been so darkened and spotted by your filth that only the name 'Gospel' is left, but nothing by which anyone can see." Thus the Jewish teachers retained the text of the Law, but they so corrupted it with their additions that neither its proper understanding nor its proper use was left.

18. *For truly, I say to you, till heaven and earth pass away, not an iota, not a dot, will pass from the Law until all is accomplished.*

That is to say: "I want it to be taught and held pure and whole, without the least subtraction." This is an indication that He found a far different situation, one in which neither doctrine nor life was in good condition. Therefore, as we shall see, He must take up both of these and salt them through to purify them. We have to teach the same way; we do not permit a single letter to be subtracted from the Gospel, but we say that it all has to be taught, believed, and kept pure. Thus He indicates that He is going to preach a sharp sermon. He will not let them get away with the accusation that He intends to abolish the Law. Instead He will turn the attack back upon them by proving that they have weakened and abolished the Law

with the glosses they have smeared over it. Our mob of papists have done the same with the Gospel and Scripture. They have completely ignored that most important doctrine, the righteousness of faith through Christ. They have removed one kind from the Sacrament and have concealed the words of the Sacrament. In fact, they have had the audacity to take the commandments which Christ lays down here and to preach them as bits of good advice rather than as necessary commandments, in direct opposition to the word and stipulation that heaven and earth have to pass away before even the least of these could be left unobserved. Now He immediately passes serious judgment upon such preachers:

19. *Whoever, then, relaxes one of the least of these commandments and teaches men so, shall be called least in the kingdom of heaven; but he who does them and teaches them shall be called great in the kingdom of heaven.*

“I will make this very strong,” He says. “Not only will I not abolish them. But if any preacher relaxes or ignores the tiniest part, he should know that he is no preacher of Mine, but is damned and excluded from the kingdom of heaven.” The phrase “shall be called least in the kingdom of heaven” means simply that he shall not be in the kingdom of heaven, but that, as he considers it a trifle to despise God’s command, so he also shall be despised and rejected.

The preachers of the Gospel must all be ready to make the same claim before the whole world, and we challenge our opponents to show us one passage or article of Scripture which we abolish or do not preach correctly. At the Diet of Augsburg they themselves had to testify that our confession is purely Scriptural and does not conflict with any article of faith. All they are shouting about is the fact that we do not also hold to the additional things that have been decreed for them by the councils and the popes; we are supposed to be damned because we want no part of their foul maggots and tawdry human baubles. Nevertheless we have always expressed our willingness to get along with them. We still could, too, if they would grant this much: that these things are free and optional, neither necessary for salvation nor contrary to the Gospel; that a person may participate in them or not as he pleases, as he may in any other free and nonobligatory thing that neither helps nor hinders us, the way a person takes part in the activities during a carnival. But this concession they will not make. So we cannot do otherwise. For the sake of their worthless and useless rot, we cannot surrender Christ our Savior, who through His dear suffering and death has shown and given us more kindness than the pope, Francis, Dominic, or any saint. If they let us keep Him, we would be willing to observe everything that they would impose upon us, and do so better than they do themselves.

Since they are not satisfied with this, but want to make us forsake Christ and pure doctrine which they themselves cannot criticize, we repudiate them. Christ condemns and rejects them, both their doctrine and their life, as men who not only relax God’s Word and commandment but absolutely nullify it by such shameless teachings as these: that it is not necessary to love God with all your heart; that a person is honoring his parents if he decides to enter a monastery or gives the church the money he might have used to support his parents; that a man may desert his betrothed to enter a monastery. In short, everything that the Lord demands here on the basis of God’s command they have made nonobligatory, as if these were merely bits of good advice or works of supererogation.

From all this you can tell what wonderful Christian teachers and holy people these men are! They brashly dare to abolish and abrogate all of God’s commandments, and do so with impunity. Of us, meanwhile, they demand with violent threats that we acknowledge the necessity of their man-made trifles. When we refuse to accept and support these, they attack us with horrible edicts and every kind of fury. Figure out for yourself what Christ will say to all this, since here He pronounces the severe judgment that a man shall have no part in His kingdom if he breaks even the least commandment while teaching and keeping all the others exactly. Where do you think they belong but in the deepest fire of hell? Never has there arisen such a shameful race on earth who dealt so impudently with the Word of God against their own better knowledge, while they still laid claim to the title “Christian leaders.” So beware of them. Let no one be scared by their damnation, persecution, and madness. Here we have the assurance that those who teach God’s Word purely and truly and cling to it shall be great before Christ in the kingdom of heaven in spite of the fact that this mob may curse them to the lowest hell.

I shall not go into the question now of how the Law is to be fulfilled so that no iota or dot of it is lost, though at the same time we teach that no man can fulfill it. I have said that here Christ is not talking primarily about life, but about doctrine. He is not dealing with the great chief doctrine of what He is and

what He gives us. We cannot be justified or saved through the teaching of the Law, which only brings us to the knowledge of ourselves, the knowledge that by our own ability we cannot properly fulfill an iota of it. Once we have become Christians through Baptism and faith, we do as much as we can. Still we can never take our stand before God on this basis, but we must always creep to Christ. He has fulfilled it all purely and perfectly, and He gives Himself to us, together with His fulfillment. Through Him we can take our stand before God, and the Law cannot incriminate or condemn us. So it is true that all must be accomplished and fulfilled even to the smallest dot, but only through this one Man. About this we have said enough elsewhere.

20. *For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.*

Here you see Him taking hold. He does not speak in generalities against plain people, but against the best people in the whole nation, the elite and the paragons of virtue, who shone like the sun in comparison with the others. In the whole nation no class was so highly praised and no titles so highly honored as that of the Pharisees and scribes. If you wanted to call a man holy, you would have to call him a Pharisee, just as among us the Carthusians or hermits have this reputation. Undoubtedly the disciples of Christ themselves supposed that there was no greater holiness to be found than the holiness of these men, and nothing was farther from their mind than that He would attack these people. He did not venture to call them by name right away. Instead of accusing certain individuals among them, He accused the entire class, condemning not particular vices or sins but all their righteousness and holy living. He goes so far as to exclude and reject them from the kingdom of heaven, to sentence²⁶ them straight to hell-fire. It is as if He were to say of our time: "The priests and monks and those who are called 'spiritual,' all of them without exception, are damned to hell eternally, with all their works and ways, even when these are at their best." Who could hear or bear such a sermon?

Note first that while He concedes that they have a righteousness and that they lead an upstanding and honorable life, He so utterly rejects it that if it does not improve, it is already condemned and everything it can accomplish is lost. Note, secondly, that He is talking about people who would like to get to heaven and who take the other life seriously. This the great rude mass does not care about; they do not ask about God or the Word of God, and what we say about the Gospel is preached for nothing to them. But it is preached to the others, to teach them that such righteousness is a false righteousness that must be salted and corrected, a deception both to themselves and to others, and a road that leads away to hell. It is also intended to illumine for them the real piety which the Law demands, as Christ will now show.

21. *You have heard that it was said to the men of old, "You shall not kill; and whoever kills shall be liable to judgment."*

Here He begins the correct explanation of several of the Ten Commandments, and He shows that all the Pharisees and scribes did in teaching, explaining, and interpreting them was to take the words as they stood and to apply them merely to coarse outward deeds. In the Fifth Commandment, to give one example, all they saw was the word "kill," which they took to mean "strike dead with the hand." This was all they taught people, as though this commandment forbade nothing beyond this. Thus they gave themselves a magnificent way out: they would not be guilty of murder if they handed someone over to another person to be killed. When they delivered Christ to the Gentile Pilate, they did not want to defile their hands with blood and wanted to stay pure and holy. They even refused to go into the judge's house (John 18:28), and yet it was they alone who were bringing on His death and compelling Pilate against his will to kill Him. They pretended to be completely pure and innocent, and they even objected to the apostles (Acts 5:28): "You intend to bring this man's blood upon us." It is as though they were to say: "It was not we but the Gentiles who killed Him." So the story is told in 1 Samuel 18:17 that King Saul did not like David and would have liked to kill him; but since he wanted to be holy, he decided not to kill him himself, but to send him among the Philistines to be killed there, so that his hand would remain innocent.

Look at this beautiful Pharisaic holiness! It can purify itself and stay pious as long as it does not kill with its own hand, though its heart may be crammed full of anger, hate, and envy, of hidden and evil schemes of murder, and though its tongue may be loaded with curses and blasphemies. That is the kind of holiness our papists have. They have become past masters at this business. To keep their holiness from being condemned and themselves from being bound by Christ's Word, they have generously helped Him by deducing twelve counsels from His Word. These Christ did not command as necessary, but left them

up to the free choice of each individual, to observe them as good advice if he wants to merit something more special than other people. It is a completely superfluous and dispensable bit of instruction.

If you ask them what their reasons are for deducing these counsels from Christ's Word or how they prove them, they say: "Why if this were to be taught as it stands, that would impose too heavy a burden on Christian people." That is exactly what the theologians at Paris have written against me publicly and impudently.²⁷ A lovely reason indeed! It is a heavy burden for a Christian to be friendly to his neighbor and not to let him suffer need, to treat him the way everyone wants to be treated. Because it seems to them to be too much of a burden, they have to say that it was not commanded, but left to everyone's free choice to do or not as he pleases, without burdening the man who cannot or will not do it. That is the way to reach into Christ's mouth, to lord it over His Word, and to make it mean anything you please. But He will not let Himself be fooled this way, nor will He cancel the judgment that He has pronounced here when He says: "Whoever does not have a better piety, will be shut out of heaven and damned." Or, as follows later: "A man shall be liable to the hell of fire if he says to his brother, 'You fool.'" From this it is easy to figure out whether this was recommended or commanded.

They have also found a little gloss to support their lies. They say: "It is indeed a command that we should hold back anger and rancor in our heart, but not the signs of anger." That is what we call in German "to forgive but not to forget," to plan that you will not get angry nor do anything wrong, but that you will deny your neighbor any kindness and show him not a single good word or marks of friendship. Now ask God Himself and Christ why He did not deny His kindness to those who were crucifying Him, blaspheming Him, and shamefully ridiculing Him, but prayed for them and said (Luke 23:34): "Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do." They were the most despicable kind of scoundrels, and He could well have been angry with them and punished them. If He had wanted to be angry with us, His blasphemous and idolatrous enemies, He would not have shed His blood for us and died for us, but would have stayed up there in heaven and said, in keeping with this gloss: "I will forgive, but I will not forget." We would all have remained the devil's property, and no man could have escaped hell. In short, this is an abominable and damnable gloss, and it is a sin and a shame that anyone in Christendom should have the effrontery to teach something like this, in opposition to such a clear and obvious text. They have smeared up all their books with these lies, and now they are making an impudent effort to defend them. This is to help us to see and recognize Pharisees and hypocrites, as Christ describes them here and elsewhere. With their special works they make a show of their great sanctity, but they show no hesitation in transgressing the commandments of God and teaching others to do the same.

Anger is indeed necessary sometimes, but only in those whose responsibility it is, and only if it does not go beyond the punishment of sin and evil. Thus when you see another man sinning and you warn and urge him to stop it, such anger is Christian and brotherly, yes, even fatherly. You see pious parents punishing their children, not in order to hurt or harm them, but to keep them from mischief and evil. That is also the way the government must be angry. Here it applies that there should be no anger in the heart, and yet there must be signs and marks of anger; for the voice is sharp, and the fist is rough, but the heart remains sweet and friendly, free of any malice. In other words, it is an anger of love, one that wishes no one any evil, one that is friendly to the person but hostile to the sin, as everyone can learn even from nature. But it is not right to use this as a screen for hiding and decorating the malice and envy of our heart against our neighbor, the way these sanctimonious scoundrels do and teach.

Now, in considering this commandment, Christ wants to say: "You have heard from the Pharisees that Moses commanded and that of old it was taught (Ex. 20:13): 'You shall not kill.' You use this to flatter and decorate yourselves, acting as though you faithfully taught and obeyed the laws of God which Moses taught and which the men of old received. You stand up and insist: 'Here is Moses. He says, "You shall not kill." ' You are stuck on that word, and you refuse to allow any interpretation beyond the way it sounds in its coarsest sense. Thus simple-minded people have to say: 'So it is. That is the way it reads in the book.' Thus your constant harping and your worthless glosses obscure the words and make it impossible to see what they contain and mean." Do you suppose that He is talking only about the fist when He says: "You shall not kill"? What does the word "you" mean? Not just your hand or foot or tongue or any other organ, but everything you are in body and soul. When I say to someone, "You should not do that," I am not addressing only his fist but his total person. Even if I were to say, "Your fist should

not do this,” I would not mean just the hand but the total person to whom the hand belongs; for the hand would do nothing by itself if the whole body with all its organs did not co-operate.

“You shall not kill,” therefore, is equivalent to saying: “You may find as many ways to kill as you have organs. You may use your hand, your tongue, your heart; you may use signs and gestures; you may use your eyes to look at someone sourly or to begrudge him his life; you may even use your ears if you do not like to hear him mentioned.—All this is included in ‘killing.’ Your heart and everything about you would be happy if he were already dead. Meanwhile your hand may be still, your tongue quiet, your eyes and ears muffled. Still your heart is full of murder and homicide.”

22. But I say to you that everyone who is angry with his brother shall be liable to judgment; whoever says to his brother, “Raca!” shall be liable to the council, and whoever says, “You fool!” shall be liable to the hell of fire.

See, this is the true light. It shows the real meaning of this commandment, and it makes their miserable gloss look shameful, like a dark lantern in contrast with the brightness of the sun. Now it shines so differently that they are astonished and say (Matt. 7:29): “That is teaching with authority,” not as their scribes. His exposition is clear enough and has often been discussed elsewhere. Still on account of the text, we have to emphasize the words a little. He says first: “Everyone who is angry with his brother shall be liable to judgment”; that is, he deserves the same punishment that is inflicted upon a murderer, namely, the sentence of death. He repeats the very words of the text He has just quoted (Lev. 24:17): “He who kills a man shall be put to death.” Now since a man who is angry with his brother comes under the same sentence, he also deserves the name “murderer.” By the second and third clauses, “whoever says to his brother, ‘Raca!’ or ‘You fool!’ is liable to the council and to the hell of fire,” He means the same as “liable to judgment,” namely, that such a person is liable to execution.

He mentions three items to show that the punishment becomes greater and more stringent as the sin progresses and breaks out further. He is using the language of the courtroom when a criminal is supposed to be punished. For example, if a man has committed murder, he is first liable to the judgment; that is, he is hauled up before the court, indicted, and a charge of murder is placed against him. This is the first level, or step, toward death; but the sentence has not yet been passed, and he still has a chance to defend himself and get off. But when, in the second step, the sentence of death has been passed upon him, then he is liable to the council. Then people take counsel about him to decide the punishment he is to receive; this means that he is even closer to death and cannot escape. When, in the third step, the sentence of death has been passed and everything has been decided, he is handed over to the executioner, who takes him away and performs his official function. With these three steps He shows how a man sinks deeper and deeper into punishment, just as a man who has been sentenced to be executed draws closer and closer to death. Thus it is as if He had said: “Whoever is angry in his heart, already deserves death before God. But whoever goes further and says, ‘Raca!’ or, ‘You fool!’ has already had his sentence pronounced upon him.” In other words, whoever is angry with his brother is already damned to the hell of fire. But whoever says, “Raca!” deserves to go still deeper into hell; and deeper yet, whoever kills with his words and fists as well. So there is only one punishment and damnation; but this becomes more stringent and severe, in accordance with the level and the virulence of the sin.

“Raca” is usually taken to represent the many ways in which we can show anger against our neighbor—when we refuse to talk to him or to look at him, when we laugh up our sleeve over his bad luck, or when in some other way we show that his complete ruination would make us happy. There are many of these poisonous and malicious worms who are bitterly and treacherously attacking us now, both in public and in secret. There is nothing that would make them as happy as hearing that we had all been exterminated. Yet they pose as holy Christian people!

The other term, “You fool!” means not only the attitudes we have been mentioning, but also all of the words that come out of a malicious and poisonous heart which is hostile to its neighbor. Otherwise, if they come out of a kindly and motherly heart, that is not a sin. Then it is permissible to scold and rebuke with words, as St. Paul calls his Galatians “foolish” (Gal. 3:1) and Christ says to His disciples (Luke 24:25): “O foolish men and slow of heart to believe.” What is more, we also have to get angry and put on a stern and unfriendly face. All this is a godly anger and vexation. It is directed at the wrong and not at the person, and it is intended to help our neighbor. In other words, such anger is necessary and indispensable in any house, in any position in life²⁸ or in government, indeed, in any pulpit. If father and mother, judge, and

preacher held back their mouths and their fists and did nothing to curb or punish evil, the wickedness of the world would destroy the government and the church and everything. So the command here is to “hate the deed, but love the doer,” as the lawyers say—if they only made the right use of it.²⁹

23. *So if you are offering your gift at the altar, and there remember that your brother has something against you,*

24. *leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift.*

He delivers a long sermon on this commandment, which seems to be an easy text. But this vice is very widespread and common, especially among people who are high and mighty and wise, like the people at the courts of kings, lords, and princes. Whoever amounts to something and is in a position to do something on earth, becomes involved in this. Yet this dare not be called by name, since it puts on a very good front and gets itself all polished and shined with a show of sanctity. In this way many people deceive themselves and others. They do not see that in their heart they hate their neighbor or bear a secret grudge against him. Yet they want to give the appearance of being pious, of serving God; and as He says here, they go to the altar and offer a sacrifice, supposing that everything is all right with them. This is how it works. There is a decorative and beautiful screen called “zeal for righteousness,” a virtue which loves justice, which hates wickedness and cannot bear it.³⁰ Thus the sword and the government were ordained to administer righteousness and to punish wickedness, just as father and mother and master and mistress have to get angry and punish. Now along comes a pious scoundrel. He puts on his little mantle and says that he is doing it out of love for righteousness and that he has a just and appropriate cause for doing so. At the present time certain princes and others are crammed full of poison, hatred, and envy against our supporters. So saturated are they with this that they have no conscience about it, and the whole issue is a matter of “indulgences” and “shrines.” They protect themselves beautifully with the screen of heresy-hunting, making it a great virtue, a holy zeal, and a love for truth. At bottom there is nothing but a shameful hatred and a poisonous spite, which has no other way of manifesting and expressing itself.

With the exception of our dear lord the emperor personally, who has not received any better information about us, none of our opponents has or knows any reason to hate us and oppose us except sheer envy and malice. This I know and dare to say: They are not acting this way on account of any crimes that we have committed or because we are such rascals or scoundrels or because we have done them any harm. They know, too, and have had to admit that our doctrine is completely true. So poisonous are they, nevertheless, that they would tolerate a world full of nothing but desperate scoundrels rather than us and our supporters.

Many people who are otherwise fine, respectable, learned, and upstanding become filled with secret anger, envy, and hate, and are embittered by it. Still they never become aware of it, and their conscience is satisfied that what they are doing is in pursuit of their office or in obedience to righteousness. Their screen is so lovely and delusive that no one dares to speak of them as anything but pious and upstanding people. The ultimate result is a sin against the Holy Spirit and hardened hearts, which become confirmed and obdurate in this poisonous vice. There are two aspects to this wickedness. In the first place, the heart is full of anger, hate, and envy. But in the second place, it refuses to admit that this is sin and malice, but wants it to be called virtue; this amounts to slapping God across the mouth and calling Him a liar in His words.

You see, that is why Christ warns everyone so diligently to be on the lookout here and not to be fooled by this hypocrisy and pretense. It is incredible that such a simple bit of instruction can be so far-reaching and strike such great people. By the words “if you are offering your gift at the altar” He makes it clear that He is talking about people who serve God and claim to be His true children, who have a reputation as paragons of virtue. What is wrong with them, then? Nothing at all, except that their heart is crammed full of hate and envy! My friend, what is the use of continual fasting and praying, of giving away everything you have for God’s sake (1 Cor. 13:3), of whipping yourself to death, and of doing twice as many good works as all the Carthusians put together if meanwhile you ignore the commandments which God wants you to obey? Does it not bother your conscience to slander and defame other people and at the same time to offer a great sacrifice? That is the same as bringing on war, murder, and bloodshed—and then paying a thousand guildens to have Masses said for the souls of those who were killed; or stealing a large amount of

money—and then giving alms for God’s sake. In this way they deceive God as well as themselves with their pretty pretense, and they imagine that now He has to consider them real living saints.

Therefore He says now: “If you intend to serve God and to offer a sacrifice, but are guilty of harming someone or of being angry with your neighbor, you should know immediately that God wants no part of this sacrifice. Lay it right down, drop everything, and go straight to your brother to be reconciled.” With the term “sacrifice” He is referring to every possible work done in the service or to the praise of God, since at that time offering a sacrifice was the best possible work. He rejects it completely, demanding that you leave it unless your heart tells you beforehand that you are reconciled with your neighbor and unless you are unaware of any anger against him. “If this is so,” He says, “come and offer your sacrifice.” He appends this to avoid the impression that He wants to reject or despise such a sacrifice, which was not an evil deed, but one that God had ordered and commanded; what was evil and what ruined it was their disregard and contempt for His other and higher commandments. That amounts to abusing sacrifices to harm your neighbor.

Another and more serious abuse of sacrifice is trying to be saved through it, using it as atonement for sin and as a foundation for our confidence and trust before God; we have discussed this elsewhere. In itself it is a good work. It is not right to despise or neglect any of the other works of public worship, like praying and fasting, where they are intended and used properly (that is, not in order to merit heaven) and where the heart is right with its neighbor. In this way the condition of both faith and love is pure and right. But if you pray and fast and at the same time you gossip about your neighbor or defame and slander people, your mouth may be speaking holy words and eating nothing, but meanwhile it is polluting and defiling itself with your neighbor contrary to God’s commandment.

In the prophet Isaiah, therefore (Is. 58:3–7), He denounces and forbids the fasting with which they punished their bodies and made a pretense of great devotion; and He says: “Behold, in the day of your fast you seek your own pleasure and oppress all your debtors. You fast only to quarrel and to fight and to hit with wicked fist. Fasting like yours this day will not make your voice to be heard on high.” He goes on to teach them about the meaning of proper fasting: “This is a fast that I have chosen. Release those who are in unjust bondage to you, and let those whom you are oppressing go free. Share your bread with the hungry; when you see the naked, cover him.” Here you see that all He cares about is love to the neighbor.

25. *Make friends quickly with your accuser, while you are going with him to court, lest your accuser hand you over to the judge, and the judge to the guard, and you be put in prison;*

26. *truly, I say to you, you will never get out till you have paid the last penny.*

In the preceding verses He was preaching against the man who injured his neighbor or became angry with him. Now He talks about how the injured party should behave. He stays with the analogy He had used earlier, that is, the procedure in a courtroom with two parties opposed to each other, one party as the accuser and the other party as the accused, and with the judge pronouncing sentence and punishing the guilty party. What He wants to say is that while a man who injures another should in a friendly way become reconciled with him, the injured party should also be willing to be reconciled and to forgive. This, too, is a delicate problem, where it is easy for many people to cover up and decorate their malice by saying that they are willing to forgive but not to forget. They can always use the excuse I have mentioned, that it is all right to be angry at wickedness. Hence they suppose that they have good reason and justification for doing so.

That is why He issues another warning here and shows that this commandment not only forbids wrath, but also requires a person cheerfully to forgive and forget injury that he has suffered. That is what God has done with us and continues to do when He forgives sin: He expunges it from the record and no longer remembers it. Still it is neither necessary nor possible for a man to forget it in the sense that he never thinks of it again, but in the sense that your heart is just as friendly toward your neighbor as it used to be before he injured you. If the stump remains in your heart and you are not as friendly and kind toward him as you used to be, that is not forgetting or even cordially forgiving. You are still the scoundrel who comes before the altar with his sacrifice and tries to serve God even while his heart is crammed full of anger, envy, and hate. But very few people pay any attention to this at all. They all walk around in their beautiful mask; they fail to see the relation of their heart to this commandment, which summarily rejects any anger or ill will against the neighbor.

Of course, as we have said, anger is sometimes necessary and proper. But be sure that you use it correctly. You are commanded to get angry, not on your own behalf, but on behalf of your office and of God; you must not confuse the two, your person and your office. As far as your person is concerned, you must not get angry with anyone regardless of the injury he may have done to you. But where your office requires it, there you must get angry, even though no injury has been done to you personally. For example, a pious judge gets angry with a criminal, even though personally he wishes him no harm and would rather let him off without punishment. His anger comes out of a heart where there is nothing but love toward his neighbor. Only the evil deed is punishable and must bear the anger; without it there would be no anger or punishment. But if your brother has done something against you and angered you, and then begs your pardon and stops doing wrong, your anger, too, should disappear. Where does the secret spite come from which you continue to keep in your heart? The deed that caused your anger is gone, and in its place have come other deeds, which show that the man is converted and has become a completely different person, a new tree with new fruits. Now he gives you his love and his highest esteem, he blames and reproaches himself on your account. If you do not give him another chance and cordially forgive him, you must really be a scoundrel before both God and the world; and you deserve the sentence which Christ threatens here.

27. You have heard that it was said, "You shall not commit adultery."

28. But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart.

29. If your right eye causes you to sin, pluck it out and throw it away; it is better that you lose one of your members than that your whole body be thrown into hell.

30. And if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away; it is better that you lose one of your members than that your whole body go into hell.

In this pinch of salt directed against the teaching of the Pharisees, He discusses two subjects, adultery and divorce. They had interpreted adultery the same way they interpreted the Fifth Commandment, and had taught that this was only a prohibition of actual adultery. The ardor of the heart with its evil lusts and love, as well as the obscene language and vulgar gestures this produced, they did not think of as sinful or as harmful to their sanctity, just so long as they did good works and were diligent in their sacrifices and prayers. Thus instead of teaching God's commandments, they distorted them; instead of making people pious, they only made them worse, opening the door to every kind of sin and immorality. But here you are listening to another Master. He turns their sanctity into sin and shame, illuminating this commandment and arguing that when a man leers at a woman or cracks shady jokes or even thinks about her lustfully, this is an adultery of the eyes or the ears or the mouth, and above all an adultery of the heart.

Look at what the condition of this people must have been and what kind of people Christ must have faced. Not only the great and common mob, but even their superiors, teachers, and rulers permitted such things and committed them themselves. They made adultery easier, and yet they wanted a reputation for piety as long as they did not actually commit overt adultery. It is easy to figure out how pious and chaste people can remain in their works if they are permitted to go so far that their heart is brimming over with lust and that they express this to one another in all sorts of signs, words, and gestures. What other outcome can this have than the act itself, as soon as there is an opportunity? Now, is a man so much more pious if he cannot do what he would like to do, but incessantly burns with desire for it in his heart? When he is lying in jail, a scoundrel can still wish that his master were dead and that he could have the opportunity to do the killing himself. Nevertheless, is it wrong to call him a murderer, or should we call him a pious man?

But you may say: "If it is true that it is possible to commit adultery even with a glance, what can we do? Men and women have to live together and have dealings with one another every day. Should a person run away from the world or pluck out his eyes and ears or have his heart torn out?" Answer: Here Christ is not forbidding us to live together, to eat and drink, and even to laugh and have fun. That is all innocuous, provided this one thing is absent, "to look at her lustfully." Of course, the Jews try to help out by saying that it is not sinful for a person to love someone else with thoughts and signs, just as they do not regard it as sinful to get angry with your neighbor and to hate him in your heart; so that one should not condemn the whole nation, with so many holy people, as though they were nothing but murderers and adulterers. Therefore they twist the meaning³¹ of these commandments to suit themselves and say that they should not be interpreted so strictly; as our theologians have said, "These may be good bits of advice for perfect

people, but no one is bound by them.” So far off have they gone on this question that a great dispute and doubt has arisen as to whether cohabitation with a whore outside of marriage is a sin. In fact, respectable people in Italy nowadays think that it is honorable and even holy if a person goes this far and no farther. On the other hand, there are some people who have tightened it entirely too much and who want to be so holy that they forbid even a glance, and have taught that all companionship between men and women should be avoided. This is where you get those outstanding saints who have run away from the world into the wilderness and into the monasteries, isolating themselves from all seeing and hearing, from all contact and association with the world.

In opposition to both of these, Christ forbids the manipulation of God’s commandment, as well as any advice that would give rein to immorality and wickedness. He says clearly and candidly that whoever looks at a woman lustfully is an adulterer; and in addition He sentences him to hell-fire by saying (Matt. 18:9): “It is better for you to pluck out your eye than for your whole body to be cast into hell.” He does not want the kind of saints that runs away from human society. If this were to become prevalent, the Ten Commandments would become unnecessary. If I am in a desert, isolated from human society, it is no credit to me that I do not commit adultery or that I do not murder or steal. Meanwhile I can imagine that I am holy and that I have done even more than is required by the Ten Commandments, which God gave precisely in order to teach us the proper way of living in the world with our neighbor.

For we are not made for fleeing human company, but for living in society and sharing good and evil. As human beings we must help one another to bear all kinds of human misfortune and the curse that has come upon us. We must be ready to live among wicked people, and there everyone must be ready to prove his holiness instead of becoming impatient and running away. On earth we have to live amid thorns and thistles (Gen. 3:18), in a situation full of temptation, hostility, and misfortune. Hence it does not help you at all to run away from other people, for within you are still carrying the same old scoundrel, the lust and evil appetite that clings to your flesh and blood. Even if you are all alone, with the door locked, you still cannot deny your father and mother; nor can you discard your flesh and blood and leave them on the ground. You have no call to pick up your feet and run away, but to stay put, to stand and battle against every kind of temptation like a knight, and with patience to see it through and to triumph.

Christ is a real Teacher, therefore. He does not teach you to run away from people, nor to move away, but to get hold of yourself and to discard the eye or the hand that offends you, that is, to get rid of the cause of your sin, the evil appetite and lust that clings to you and proceeds from your own heart (Matt. 15:19). Once you are rid of this, it is easy to be in human society and to enjoy human company without sinning. Hence He says clearly, as we have heard: “If you look at a woman lustfully, you have committed adultery with her in your heart.” He does not forbid looking at her; for He is talking to people who have to live in human society in the world, as the preaching in this chapter, both before and after, amply demonstrates. But He does want us to distinguish between looking and lusting. You may look at any woman or man, only be sure that you do not lust. That is why God has ordained for every person to have his own wife or husband, to control and channel his lust and his appetites. If you do not go any further than this, He approves it, He even pronounces His blessing upon it, and He is pleased with it as His ordinance and creature. But if you do go further, if you refuse to be content with what God has given you for your desires, and if you leer at others, you have already gone too far and have confused the two, so that your looking is corrupted by your lusting.

When a man does not look at his wife, on the basis of the Word of God, as the one whom God gives him and whom He blesses, and when instead he turns his gaze to another woman, this is the principal cause of adultery, which then is almost inevitable. Soon the heart follows the eyes, bringing on the desire and appetite that I ought to reserve for my wife alone. Flesh and blood is curious enough anyway. It soon has its fill and loses its taste for what it has, and it gapes at something else. With the devil’s promptings, a person sees only his wife’s faults, losing sight of her good and laudable qualities. As a consequence, every other woman seems more beautiful and better to my eyes than my own wife. Indeed, many a man with a truly beautiful and pious wife lets himself be hoodwinked into hating her and taking up with some vile and ugly bag.

As I have pointed out more fully in my other discussions of marriage and married life,³² it would be a real art and a very strong safeguard against all this if everyone learned to look at his spouse correctly, according to God’s Word, which is the dearest treasure and the loveliest ornament you can find in a man

or a woman. If he mirrored himself in this, then he would hold his wife in love and honor as a divine gift and treasure. And if he saw another woman, even one more beautiful than his own wife, he would say: "Is she beautiful? As far as I am concerned, she is not very beautiful. And even if she were the most beautiful woman on earth, in my wife at home I have a lovelier adornment, one that God has given me and has adorned with His Word beyond the others, even though she may not have a beautiful body or may have other failings. Though I may look over all the women in the World, I cannot find any about whom I can boast with a joyful conscience as I can about mine: 'This is the one whom God has granted to me and put into my arms.' I know that He and all the angels are heartily pleased if I cling to her lovingly and faithfully. Then why should I despise this precious gift of God and take up with someone else, where I can find no such treasure or adornment?";

Thus I could look at all women, talk with them, laugh, and have a good time with them, without experiencing any lust or desire and without letting any of them seem so beautiful or desirable to me that I would be willing to transgress the Word and commandment of God. Though I might be tempted by flesh and blood, I would not have to consent or let myself be overcome; but I would have to battle against it like a knight and conquer through the Word of God, living in the world in such a way that no evil could corrupt me and no allurements could seduce me into adultery. But because a person does not give this Word of God a glance or a thought, it is easy for him to get tired of his wife and to despise her; he finds his love drawn to another, and his lust and appetite for her are irresistible. For he has not learned the art of looking at his wife correctly, according to the beauty and adornment with which God has clothed her for him. He cannot see beyond what his eyes see, that his wife seems to have a poor shape or other faults, while another one seems prettier and better. Thus you understand when it is a sin and when it is not a sin to look at a woman, namely, that you should not look at another woman the way a man should look only at his wife.

Yet we should not make the bowstring too taut here, as if anyone who is tempted and whose lust and desire for another woman are aroused would be damned for it. I have often said that it is impossible to be alive and to have flesh and blood without any sinful and evil inclination, whether in this or in all the other commandments. Theologians have therefore made this distinction, and I am willing to let it stand: "If an evil thought is involuntary, it is not a mortal sin."³³ If someone has injured you, your heart will inevitably feel it, get excited, and in its excitement want to get even. As long as it does not make up its mind and go on to do violence, but resists the urge, this is not a damnable sin. It is the same in this case. It is impossible to keep the devil from shooting evil thoughts and lusts into your heart. But see to it that you do not let such arrows (Eph. 6:16) stick there and take root, but tear them out and throw them away. Do what one of the ancient fathers counseled long ago: "I cannot," he said, "keep a bird from flying over my head. But I can certainly keep it from nesting in my hair or from biting my nose off."³⁴ So it is not in our power to prevent this or some other temptation and to keep the thoughts from occurring to us. Just be sure that you let it go at that and do not let them in, even though they knock on the door. Keep them from taking root, for they may make you sin voluntarily and purposely. It is still sin nonetheless, but it is included in our common forgiveness; for we cannot live in the flesh without a great many sins, and everyone must have his devil. Thus St. Paul complains (Rom. 7:17, 18) about the sin that dwells in him and says he knows that nothing good dwells in his flesh.

This argument and inquiry has come from some: "Is it sinful for a man and a woman to desire each other for the purpose of marriage?"³⁵ This is ridiculous, a question that contradicts both Scripture and nature. Why would people get married if they did not have desire and love for each other? Indeed, that is just why God has given this eager desire to bride and bridegroom, for otherwise everybody would flee from marriage and avoid it. In Scripture, therefore, He also commanded man and woman to love each other, and He shows that the sexual union of husband and wife is also most pleasing to Him. Hence this desire and love must not be absent, for it is a good fortune and a great pleasure, if only it continues as long as possible. Without it there is trouble: from the flesh, because a person soon gets tired of marriage and refuses to bear the daily discomfort that comes with it; and from the devil, who cannot stand the sight of a married couple treating each other with genuine love and who will not rest until he has given them an occasion for impatience, conflict, hate, and bitterness. Therefore it is an art both necessary and difficult, and one peculiarly Christian, this art of loving one's husband or wife properly, of bearing the other's faults and all the accidents and troubles. At first everything goes all right, so that, as the saying goes, they are

ready to eat each other up for love.³⁶ But when their curiosity has been satisfied, then the devil comes along to create boredom in you, to rob you of your desire in this direction, and to excite it unduly in another direction.

This much in brief regarding lust and desire. But what shall we say about the way Christ pulls the bowstring taut when He commands us to pluck out our eye and cut off our hand if they offend us? Are we supposed to cripple ourselves, to make ourselves lame and blind? In that case we would have to take our own life, and everyone would have to commit suicide. If we are supposed to throw away everything that offends us, first we have to tear out our heart. But that would be nothing else than the abolition of everything in nature and of all the creatures of God. Answer: Here you see clearly that in this chapter Christ is not saying anything about the secular order and its affairs. The phrases which the Gospel employs again and again—phrases like “denying yourself” (Matt. 16:24), “hating your soul” (John 12:25), “renouncing all” (Luke 14:33)—have nothing to do with secular affairs or the imperial government. Nor should they be interpreted according to the Saxon code of law, when the lawyers talk about plucking out eyes or cutting off hands, or similar matters.³⁷ Otherwise, how could this life and this secular realm continue? All this is said in relation to spiritual life and spiritual affairs. Not outwardly, physically, or publicly before the world, but in your heart and in the presence of God—that is where you throw away your eye and your hand, deny yourself, and forsake all. He is not giving lessons in the use of the fist or the sword, nor in the control of life and property. He is teaching about the heart and the conscience before God. Therefore we must not drag His words into the law books or into the secular government.

He talks this way about castration in Matthew 19:12, where He enumerates three classes of castrates or eunuchs. The first and second classes are those who either were born that way or were castrated by the hands of men. They are called “castrates” by the world and the jurists, too. But the third class are those who have castrated themselves for the sake of the kingdom of heaven. They are another kind of castrate; they are called eunuchs not outwardly, in their body, but spiritually, in their heart, not in a worldly sense, but as He says, “for the sake of the kingdom of heaven.” With the secular area He has nothing to do. Here, too, we should tear out our eyes, hands, and heart spiritually, and let it all go so that it does not offend us. Yet we should live in this secular sphere, where we cannot get along without any of these things.

Here is what this means: If you feel that you are looking at a woman with an evil desire, pluck out that eye or that look, since it is forbidden by God—not out of your body but out of your heart, from which your lust and appetite proceed (Matt. 15:19). Then you have really plucked it out. For if the evil desire has been removed from your heart, then your eye will not sin or offend you. You will look at that woman now with the same physical eye but without lust, and it will seem to you that you have not seen her at all. You no longer have the eye which Christ is discussing, the one that was there before and is called the eye of lust or desire, although your physical eye remains unimpaired. He says the same thing with regard to the eunuchs. A heart that has resolved to live chastely without marriage, if it has the grace it needs, has made itself a eunuch for the sake of the kingdom of heaven; it does not have to do any harm to the organs of its body. In short, it is the kind of castrating and plucking out that neither a hand nor a hangman can do, but only the Word of God in the heart.

Some fools transfer these and similar statements from the spiritual to the outward, secular sphere, as if Christ’s teaching were opposed to the secular realm and even to the natural order and the creation. Some were so coarse in their foolishness that they became impatient and despaired in their conflict with flesh and blood. They helped themselves along, until the bishops in the councils had to forbid it.³⁸ All this comes from a misunderstanding. They do not distinguish Christ’s realm and doctrine from that of the world. Their understanding of castration continues to be outward, and all they think of is the way the world uses and means the term. But Christ Himself excludes and eliminates this understanding. He makes a distinction and contrast between those who have been castrated by nature or by human hands (whether their own or someone else’s) and those who have been castrated neither by human hands nor by nature. Thus He clearly shows that He is talking only about spiritual castration, where the integrity of the body and of all its organs is unimpaired, but where it does not have the same sort of sexual desire that others do. No hands can cut this out of flesh and blood, even though a person were to be deprived of his natural organs. They say that such eunuchs or castrates are more ardent and loving toward women than anyone else, which is why great kings³⁹ have liked to have such people as chamberlains, for their great fidelity and love to women.

But it seems that at other times, too, Christ used this expression (Matt. 18:8, 9): “If your eye offends against you,” or, “If your hand or foot offends against you.” Elsewhere in the Gospel they are applied to other issues, and He uses them as a proverb. He applies them as a familiar comparison to sin in general and says that we should not give in to opportunities and temptations to sin. But here He applies and interprets it with reference to a special case, namely, adultery, commanding us to pluck out the eye that is about to offend us by evil desire. Adultery is usually brought on by looking; it enters the heart through the eyes, unless the temptation is resisted. He interprets the same words with reference to another kind of offense in Matthew 18:8, 9 where He calls it an offending eye or hand for a preacher or teacher or master or tyrant to try to mislead you from the truth and from the right doctrine. He tells you to pluck it out and throw it away so that you may say: “Yes, you are my eye or my hand, my master or my ruler. But if you try to turn me away from the truth to a false faith or to evil works, I refuse to follow you.”

31. *It was also said, “Whoever divorces his wife, let him give her a certificate of divorce.”*

32. *But I say to you that everyone who divorces his wife, except on the ground of unchastity, makes her an adulteress; and whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery.*

Here you get a good picture of the violence they did to the commandment in order to provide themselves with enough room and freedom to transgress it and yet to avoid the charge of sin. All that really mattered was that a person was not too flagrant in committing overt acts of adultery. If he had developed an aversion to his wife and wanted to get rid of her and if he had acquired a desire for another woman, he was permitted to desert his wife and to have an affair with another woman whom he liked better. If this woman already had a husband, it was a simple matter to make him give her up and put her away without it being said that he had been forced to do so. Among them it was also a minor matter if a man took another woman to bed with him and thus made her his wife, for they would have liked to have more than one wife anyway. So far, in fact, had the situation progressed that in matters of marriage and divorce everyone acted pretty much as he pleased, without being ashamed or having a bad conscience about it. For this reason Christ also takes up this matter of divorce. He salts and rebukes the scandalous way they abuse the permission of divorce, and He instructs their consciences on the kind of procedure in this question which is proper and which does not go beyond or against the commandment. He touches on it only very briefly here; later on (Matt. 19:3–9) He discusses it in greater detail.

What is the proper procedure for us nowadays in matters of marriage and divorce? I have said that this should be left to the lawyers and made subject to the secular government. For marriage is a rather secular and outward thing, having to do with wife and children, house and home, and with other matters that belong to the realm of the government, all of which have been completely subjected to reason (Gen. 1:28). Therefore we should not tamper with what the government and wise men decide and prescribe with regard to these questions on the basis of the laws and of reason. Christ is not functioning here as a lawyer or a governor, to set down or prescribe any regulations for outward conduct; but He is functioning as a preacher, to instruct consciences about using the divorce law properly, rather than wickedly and capriciously, contrary to God’s commandment. Here, therefore, we will not go beyond an examination of their situation and a consideration of the proper behavior of people who lay claim to the name “Christian.” The non-Christians are no concern of ours, since they must be governed, not with the Gospel, but with compulsion and punishment. Thus we shall keep our ministry clear and not claim any more right than we are authorized to have.

In Deuteronomy 24:1 we read: “When a man takes a wife and marries her, if then she finds no favor in his eyes because he has found some indecency in her, he should write her a bill of divorce and send her out.” But immediately (Deut. 24:4) it adds the prohibition that if later on the same man would like to have her back, he “may not take her again to be his wife.” They were quick to learn this law and eager to abuse it. As soon as a man got tired of his wife and developed a desire for another, he immediately discarded and dismissed her, though Moses had permitted this only on the grounds that “he found some indecency in her” which prevented them from staying together. They had taken many liberties on this question, till they themselves saw that what they were doing was no credit to them and that frequently it was quite frivolous. Therefore they asked Christ, Matthew 19: “Is it lawful to divorce one’s wife for any cause?” His answer to them is a severe sermon, the likes of which they had never heard before, coming to the same conclusion as He did here: Except for the cause of fornication, both he who divorces a woman and he who pays court to a divorced woman are guilty of adultery and are making her guilty of adultery, too, if she takes another

man; for if she did not have a man again, she could not be guilty of adultery. So He not only rebukes them for their frivolity in the question of divorce, but He teaches them not to get a divorce at all, or if they do get one, to remain unmarried on both sides. And He comes to the conclusion that divorce is always an occasion for adultery.

They asked (Matt. 19:7): “Why, then, did Moses permit such divorces?” He answers (Matt. 19:8): “For your hard hearts Moses allowed you to divorce your wives. It is still not a good thing to do; but since you are such wicked and unmanageable people, it is better to grant you this much than to let you do worse by vexing or murdering each other or by living together in incessant hate, discord, and hostility.” This same thing might even be advisable nowadays, if the secular government prescribed it, that certain queer, stubborn, and obstinate people, who have no capacity for toleration and are not suited for married life at all, should be permitted to get a divorce. Since people are as evil as they are, any other way of governing is impossible. Frequently something must be tolerated even though it is not a good thing to do, to prevent something even worse from happening.

So it is settled now. Those who want to be Christians should not be divorced, but every man should keep his own spouse, sustaining and bearing good and ill with her, even though she may have her oddities, peculiarities, and faults. If he does get a divorce, he should remain unmarried. We have no right to make marriage a free thing, as though it were in our power to do with as we pleased, changing and exchanging. But the rule is the one Christ pronounces (Matt. 19:6): “What God has joined together, let no man put asunder.” The only source of trouble here is the fact that marriage is not thought of on the basis of the Word of God, as His work and ordinance, and that His will is ignored. He has given every man his spouse, to keep her and for His sake to put up with the difficulties involved in married life. To them it seems to be nothing more than a purely human and secular state, with which God has nothing to do. Therefore they tire of it so quickly; and if it does not go the way they would like, they immediately want a divorce and a change. Then God so arranges things that they are no better off as a consequence. A person who wants to change and improve everything and who refuses to put up with any inadequacies, but insists on having everything clean and comfortable, will usually get in exchange something twice as uncomfortable or ten times as uncomfortable. This is a general rule, not only in this matter but in all others as well.

So it must be on earth. Daily there have to be many troubles and trials in every house, city, and country. No station in life is free of suffering and pain, both from your own, like your wife or children or household help or subjects, and from the outside, from your neighbors and all sorts of accidental trouble. When a person sees and feels all this, he quickly becomes dissatisfied, and he tires of his way of life, or it makes him impatient, irritated, and profane. If he cannot avoid this trouble or get rid of it, he wants to change his station in life, supposing that everyone else’s station and condition are better than his own. After changing around for a long time, he discovers that his situation has progressively deteriorated. A change is a fast and easy thing, but an improvement is a rare and doubtful thing. This was what the Jews found out, too, as they divorced and changed their marriage partners.

In this area, therefore, we should do what we have always taught and exhorted: If you want an undertaking of yours to be blessed and successful, even a temporal undertaking like getting married or staying home or accepting a position, lift up your voice to God, and call upon the One who owns it and who has to grant it. It is no small gift from God to find a wife who is pious and easy to get along with. Then why not ask Him to make it a happy marriage? For your initial desire and your curiosity will not give you either happiness or stability, unless He adds His blessing and success and helps you to bear the occasional troubles. Those who do not do this, therefore, who rush into things on their own as though they did not need God’s help, and who do not learn how to make certain allowances—they get exactly what they deserve. They have sheer purgatory and the torments of hell inside them, and that without any help from the devil. They do not bear their trouble patiently. They have selected only what seems to be just right to them, and they have tried to abolish and annul the article called “forgiveness of sin.” Therefore their reward is a restless and impatient heart; thus they have to suffer double trouble and have no thanks for it. But we have said enough about this elsewhere.

But you ask: “Then is there no legitimate cause for the divorce and remarriage of a man and his wife?” Answer: Both here and in Matthew 19:9 Christ sets down only one, called adultery; and He cites it on the basis of the Law of Moses, which punishes adultery with death (Lev. 20:10). Since it is only death that can dissolve a marriage and set you free, an adulterer has already been divorced, not by men but by God

Himself, and separated not only from his wife but from this very life. By his adultery he has divorced himself from his wife and has dissolved his marriage. He had no right to do either of these, and so he has brought on his own death, in the sense that before God he is already dead even though the judge may not have him executed. Because it is God that is doing the divorcing here, the other partner is set completely free and is not obliged, unless he chooses to do so, to keep the spouse that has broken the marriage vow.

We neither commend nor forbid such divorces, but leave it to the government to act here; and we submit to whatever the secular law prescribes in this matter. To those who really want to be Christians, we would give this advice. The two partners should be admonished and urged to stay together. If the guilty party is humbled and reformed, the innocent party should let himself be reconciled to him and forgive him in Christian love. Sometimes there is no hope for improvement, or the reconciliation of the guilty one and his restoration to good graces is followed only by his abuse of this kindness. He persists in his flagrant and loose behavior and takes it for granted that he is entitled to be spared and forgiven. I would not advise or prescribe mercy for a person like that; rather I would help to have such a person flogged or jailed. For one oversight is still pardonable, but a sin that takes mercy and forgiveness for granted is intolerable. Anyway, as we have said, we know that no one should be compelled to take back a public prostitute or an adulterer if he does not want to do so or is so disgusted that he cannot do so. We read (Matt. 1:19) that although Joseph was a pious man, he was not willing to take Mary, his betrothed wife, when he saw that she was pregnant; and he is praised for being “resolved to divorce her quietly” instead of registering a complaint against her and having her executed, as he had a right to do.

An additional cause for divorce is this: when one spouse deserts the other, that is, when he runs away out of sheer peevishness. For example, if a pagan woman were married to a Christian man, or as happens sometimes nowadays, if one spouse is an Evangelical and the other is not, is divorce legitimate in such a case? Paul discusses the matter in 1 Corinthians 7:13–15 and comes to this conclusion: if the one partner consents to remain, the other partner should keep him; even though they may not be one in matters of faith, the faith should not dissolve the marriage. If it happens that the other partner simply refuses to remain, then let him go; you have no duty or obligation to go with him. But it sometimes happens now that one of these good-for-nothings deserts his wife without her knowledge or consent, leaving his house and home, wife and children, and staying away two or three years or as long as he feels like staying away. When he has sown his wild oats and squandered his property, he decides he would like to return home and pick up where he had left off. And now the other partner should be obliged to wait for him as long as he feels like staying away and then to take him back?! Such a good-for-nothing should not only be barred from his house and home, but also banished from the country. If he refuses to come after a summons and a decent interval of waiting, the other partner should be set completely free. Such a person is much worse than a heathen and an unbeliever (1 Tim. 5:8); he is less tolerable than a wicked adulterer, who fell once but can still improve and be as faithful to his wife as he had been before. But this person treats marriage just as he pleases. In his wife and children he does not recognize the obligations of domestic life and duty, but takes it for granted that he will be received if the notion takes him to return. This is how it should be: Whoever wants to have a wife and children must stay with them; he must bear the good and the ill with them as long as he lives. If he refuses to do so, he should be told that he must; otherwise he will be separated from wife, house, and home permanently. Where these causes are not present, other faults and foibles should not be a hindrance to marriage, nor a reason for divorce, things like quarrels or other trouble. But if there is a divorce, says St. Paul, both partners should remain unmarried.

This much in brief on what the text says about this business; elsewhere I have written enough about it.⁴⁰ As I have said, the best way to prevent divorce and other discord is for everyone to learn patience in putting up with the common faults and troubles of his station in life and to put up with them in his wife as well, knowing that we can never have everything just right, the way we would like to have it. Even the condition of your own body can never be any different or better. You have to put up with the many kinds of filth and discomfort that it causes you every day; and if you were to throw away everything about it that is impure, you would have to start with the belly, which you need to nourish you and to keep you alive.

Now, you can stand it when your body emits a stench before you realize it, or when it festers and becomes pussy and completely pollutes your skin. You make allowances for all this. In fact, this only increases your concern and love for your body; you wait on it and wash it, and you endure and help in every way you can. Why not do the same with the spouse whom God has given you, who is an even

greater treasure and whom you have even more reason to love? For the love among Christians should be the same kind of love as that of every member of the body for every other one, as St. Paul often says (Rom. 12:4, 5; 1 Cor. 12:12–26), each one accepting the faults of the other, sympathizing with them, bearing and removing them, and doing everything possible to help him. Hence the doctrine of the forgiveness of sins is the most important of all, both for us personally and for our relations with others. As Christ continually bears with us in His kingdom and forgives us all sorts of faults, so we should bear and forgive one another in every situation and in every way. Whoever refuses to do this, may God grant him no rest and make his misfortune or plague ten times as bad.

33. *Again you have heard that it was said to the men of old, “You shall not swear falsely, but shall perform to the Lord what you have sworn.”*

34. *But I say to you: Do not swear at all, either by heaven, for it is the throne of God,*

35. *Or by the earth, for it is His footstool, or by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the great king.*

36. *And do not swear by your head, for you cannot make one hair white or black.*

37. *Let what you say be simply “Yes” or “No”; anything more than this comes from evil.*

This text has also been stretched by many glosses, and all sorts of delusions and errors have been drawn from it. It has puzzled many great theologians, who could not understand the blunt prohibition of any swearing whatever, and the command to be satisfied with yes and no. So tautly have some of them stretched their consciences as to doubt whether an oath of nonaggression is legitimate upon release from captivity, or an oath to bind a peace treaty with the Turks or infidels.⁴¹ Now, it is undeniable that Christ Himself and St. Paul often swore. Besides, Scripture praises those who swear by His name (Deut. 6:13). Here, too, therefore, a distinction is necessary for the correct understanding of the text.

We have heard often enough that Christ has no intention here of interfering in the order of the secular realm, nor of depriving the government of anything. All He is preaching about is how individual Christians should behave in their everyday life. Therefore swearing should be thought of as forbidden in exactly the same sense as killing or looking at a woman and desiring her was forbidden earlier. Killing is right, yet it is also wrong. Desiring a man or a woman is sinful, and it is not sinful. That is to say, we must make the proper distinction here. To you and to me it is said: “If you kill, you do wrong; if you look at a woman with desire, you do wrong.” But to a judge He says: “If you do not punish and kill, you shall be punished yourself.” And to a husband or wife He says: “If you do not cling to your spouse, you do wrong.” So both regulations stand: “You should kill” and “You should not kill”; “You should have a woman” and “You should not have a woman.” For you must not get angry or kill or look at a woman with desire unless you have a word or command from God to do so. On the other hand, for you to get angry when God commands you to, or for you to have a wife according to the Word of God, is right in both cases; for what God says to you and commands you to do is vastly different from what you do on your own.

You should understand the prohibition of swearing in the same way as you understand those. Here He forbids you to “swear at all.” Earlier He issued such a complete prohibition of killing that even anger in the heart was wrong, and He commanded such an isolation from men and women that it was wrong even to look at them or to think about them with desire. Preaching would be harmful if we used it to interfere with government or with matrimony and said to a judge: “You shall not get angry, and you shall not show or express your anger”; or to a married couple: “You shall not look at each other or be in love with each other.” On the contrary, we must teach the exact opposite here and say: “You, judge, shall get angry and wreak punishment; and everyone shall have and love his spouse.” What does Christ mean, then, when He says that it is wrong to desire a woman and to have anger in the heart? The answer, as we have said above, is this: He means the woman that God has not given you and the anger that is not demanded of you; these you shall not have. But in the event that it is demanded of you, then it is no longer your anger but God’s anger, and no longer your desire but the desire which God has given and ordained; for here you have a word of God that you shall love your own spouse and not desire any other. The same is true in the case of swearing; you must determine whether or not you have a word of God for it.

His rigid emphasis upon the prohibition here was said in opposition to their false teachers, who preached that even taking an unnecessary oath and swearing without a word of God was not sinful. Indeed, as Christ shows here, they had developed a distinction between oaths that were valid and those that were not, thus allowing people to swear freely. For example, if someone were to swear by heaven or

by Jerusalem or by his head, those would be little oaths and not very binding—just so long as he did not invoke the name of God. So far had they progressed in this that a mere yes or no meant nothing, and they maintained that it did not matter if they failed to do something which they had not sworn to do. This was just like their teaching on the question of killing. It was not sinful if you nursed a secret anger and spite, or if you hated your wife, had no desire or love for her, but desired another woman and proved this with your glances, your jokes, and in other ways.

He began His sermon against such impure saints and said: “If you do not change and become pious, you will not enter the kingdom of heaven. It will not do to proceed in the matter of swearing as you do, making it right and valid wherever and whenever you please. But this is the command: ‘Do not swear at all, neither by the temple nor by Jerusalem nor by your head, as little as by God Himself.’ But in your dealings with each other, say yes and no, and let it go at yes and no. It is an abuse of the name of God to go beyond this to oaths and swearing, as if a mere yes and no were not valid or binding without the addition of the name of God.” Another abuse is frivolous swearing, as is so common now, attaching the name of God to practically every word. All this must be strictly forbidden, just as there should be no cursing with God’s name.

For cursing, like swearing, can be either good or bad. In Scripture we read that holy people have often cursed. Thus Noah curses his one son Ham (Gen. 9:25). The patriarch Jacob pronounced a malediction and curse upon his three sons, Reuben, Levi, and Simeon (Gen. 49:3–7). Moses did the same against Korah (Num. 16:15 f.). Indeed, in the Psalter, Christ harshly curses His Judas,⁴² and in the Gospel He curses the false teachers (Matthew 23). And in Galatians 1:9 Paul curses any teacher who preaches otherwise, even if it were an angel from heaven, as ἀνάθεμα, that is, banished and cursed by God; it is as if we were to say: “May God hold them back and destroy them utterly and give them neither grace nor success.” Thus the time may come when it is wrong not to curse. Certainly it would be wrong for us now to bespeak success and the blessing of God upon the venomous schemes and spiteful plans of the pope, the bishops, and the princes, who oppose the Gospel, seek the blood of pious people, and try to pit one German land against another. It is not our Christian duty to do this, but rather to say: “Dear Lord, curse and destroy and throw all their schemes to the abyss of hell.” Therefore no one can pray the Lord’s Prayer correctly without cursing. For when he prays: “Hallowed be Thy name, Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done,” he must put all the opposition to this on one pile and say: “Curses, maledictions, and disgrace upon every other name and every other kingdom! May they be ruined and torn apart, and may all their schemes and wisdom and plans run aground.”

The distinction, however, is in the fact that no one should curse or swear on his own, unless he has a word of God telling him to do so. As we have said, where it is done with the authorization of a word of God, it is all right to swear, to get angry, or to desire a woman. But “the authorization of a word of God” means a command that I do it for His sake in the execution of my office or an order through those who are in office. To give an illustration: If you should happen to be imprisoned by the government and were required to swear an oath of nonaggression, or if a prince demanded an oath of allegiance, or if a judge demanded an oath from a witness—then it would be your duty to take the oath. For there the word stands (Rom. 13:1): “You shall obey the government.” God has so ordained and constituted the earthly realm that one person must bind himself to another, so that all dubious questions may be adjusted, confirmed, and decided by the use of an oath, as the Epistle to the Hebrews says (Heb. 6:16).

But you say: “Yes, but here we read a different word, spoken by Christ: ‘You shall not swear.’ ” The answer is the same as the one we gave earlier with regard to killing and getting angry. You should not do it on your own behalf. But here it is not you that is swearing, but it is the judge who is ordering you to do so. It is tantamount to his doing it himself, and now you are the judge’s mouth. Now, Christ is neither prohibiting nor prescribing anything for the government here, but He is letting this realm take its own course as it should and must. What He is forbidding is unauthorized, capricious, or habitual swearing. Similarly, when He forbids you to draw your sword, He does not mean that you should disobey the government if your territorial prince needs you or summons you to go to war. Then you are obliged to slash away with your sword. For your hand and sword are no longer on their own, but have been subordinated to the government; and you are not doing this yourself, but your prince is doing it, whom God has authorized. We say the same about similar cases. If it should happen that we sign a treaty or pact with our enemies or the Turks, then the emperor and the princes could both give and receive an oath—

even though the Turk swears by the devil or Mohammed, whom he regards and worships as his god, the way we worship our Lord Christ and swear by Him.

So here is one cause for which it is right to swear, when it is necessary to take an oath out of obedience to the government, as a confirmation of the truth or as a means of preserving something for the sake of peace and harmony. The other cause is love. Even though an oath may not be required by the government, it may be necessary for the good of our neighbor. In this way love may also get angry and critical when it sees a neighbor sinning or straying, as Christ teaches in Matthew 18:15–17. It cannot treat evil as a laughing matter or as a praiseworthy thing. Similarly, I may show love to another man's wife, helping her in her need or distress. Such love is not carnal and forbidden love, but Christian and brotherly love. Its source is not my own lust or impertinence, but my neighbor's need; and it is authorized by a word of God which says (Lev. 19:18): "You shall love your neighbor as yourself."

Accordingly, if I see someone in spiritual need and danger, weak in his faith or despondent in his conscience or erring in his understanding, I must not only console him; but to comfort his conscience, I must also take an oath and say: "This is the truth and the Word of God, just as surely as God lives and Christ died." Here an oath is necessary, indeed indispensable. For it establishes the true teaching, it instructs and comforts the erring and timid conscience, and it liberates it from the devil. Therefore you may swear here by the highest and holiest thing possible. This is the way Christ and Paul swore, calling God to witness. Thus an oath is in place in every proclamation of threats or of promises that comes from a Christian preacher, whether he is bringing fear to the hardened heart or comfort to the timid.

Similarly, in exonerating a neighbor or rescuing his reputation from the attacks of evil and venomous mouths, it is permissible to say: "By God, you are doing him an injustice." All this is the proper use of God's name, for the glory of God, for the cause of truth, and for the good and the salvation of the neighbor. Here you have a word and a command of God hovering over you, commanding you to love your neighbor, to rebuke the disorderly, and to comfort the sorrowful. Because it is a matter of command, it cannot be wrong. Indeed, the very command urges you to swear, and you do wrong if you fail to do so. In short, in the cases where you do have a word of God, may God give you the grace to swear, to rebuke, to get angry, and to do everything you can. But where it would transgress or exceed the Word of God, where it would be neither a matter of divine command nor a matter of your neighbor's need or benefit, you should not do any of these things. God does not want anything at all on your own initiative without His Word, regardless of what it is, even if you knew how to raise the dead. Much less will He tolerate the abuse of His name by invoking it where it is neither necessary nor beneficial, or by throwing it around at home and everywhere else all the time. Nowadays some people have to add an oath to every word, most of all in the taverns; it would be a good idea if this were strictly forbidden and punished. Thus you have a proper and clear interpretation of this item, and no one has to torture himself unnecessarily over this text and make a purgatory out of it where there is none.

Now, Christ says: "I say to you, Do not swear at all, either by heaven or by the earth or by the city of Jerusalem." It is evident from this that they greatly respected and honored the city and even swore by it. He substantiates this when He calls it a "city of God," and elsewhere it is also called "the holy city" (Is. 52:1). But the reason for its being called "holy" was the presence of the Word of God, through which God Himself dwelt there. This great respect for the city was a fine custom, one that was undoubtedly originated by good people; thus the prophet Isaiah praises it gloriously, not on its own account but on account of the Word. In the same way it is proper to call every city "holy" if it has the Word of God, and to make the claim that God is certainly present there.

But the statement: "You shall not swear by your head, for you cannot make one hair white or black," applies to His creation as such, not to our use of the creation. He does not mean to say that it is wrong to powder our hair and make it black or any other color, but that it is beyond our power to bring out a hair that is white or black or to keep it from changing one way or another. When it has grown out, of course, it can be clipped off or singed. To some extent it is possible to make use of one creature in changing another creature, but it is impossible to make any contribution to its being created in one way rather than in another. Thus He makes even our heads a sanctuary, something that does not belong to our work or power, but is the gift and creation of God.

His conclusion, "Let what you say be simply yes or no," is obviously addressed to those who have neither authorization nor need for swearing. As we have said, no one should swear on his own authority at

all. But the addition of these two elements, either a command or a necessity, means that you are no longer swearing on your own authority. You are not doing it on your own behalf, but on behalf of him who demands it of you—your government or your neighbor's need or God's commandment.

38. *You have heard that it was said: "An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth."*

39. *But I say to you, Do not resist one who is evil. But if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also;*

40. *And if anyone would sue you and take your coat, let him have your cloak as well;*

41. *And if anyone forces you to go one mile, go with him two miles.*

42. *Give to him who begs from you, and do not refuse him who would borrow from you.*

This text has also given rise to many questions and errors among nearly all the theologians who have failed to distinguish properly between the secular and the spiritual, between the kingdom of Christ and the kingdom of the world.⁴³ Once these two have been confused instead of being clearly and accurately separated, there can never be any correct understanding in Christendom, as I have often said and shown. So far, all we have been hearing is the way Christ directed His sermon against the Pharisees, who were misleading the people in both doctrine and life and were misinterpreting and distorting God's commandment in such a way as to produce only counterfeit saints. It is the same today. Among the preachers there is always a group—if not a majority!—of such Jewish saints, whose teaching deals only with the sin and the piety that are manifest in outward works.

In the preceding sections He criticized and rejected their teaching and false interpretation. Now He considers the passage which the Law of Moses (Ex. 21:24) addresses to those who were charged with governmental authority and with the sword of punishment. It was a matter of obligation and necessity for them to take an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth. Thus it was as grievous a sin for them if they failed to use the sword of punishment with which they were charged as it was for the others to seize the sword and avenge themselves without authorization. According to the preceding sections, similarly, the man who refused to live and stay with his lawful wedded wife sinned just as much as the man who lived with another woman out of wedlock. They had taken this text, distorted it, and confused it by applying it to themselves, though it was addressed only to the government. They took it to mean that every individual had a right to wreak vengeance on his own behalf, taking an eye for an eye. There was the same confusion in their use of other passages. They applied to themselves that right to get angry which was appropriate and obligatory for the government. They removed desire and appetite from its context in matrimony. And so, too, they had perverted swearing for their own frivolous and abusive purposes, rather than for the purpose of showing love to those in need.

Now Christ comes along to demolish this perverted idea and false interpretation. He is not tampering with the responsibility and authority of the government, but He is teaching His individual Christians how to live personally, apart from their official position and authority. They should not desire revenge at all. They should have the attitude that if someone hits them on one cheek, they are ready, if need be, to turn the other cheek to him as well, restraining the vindictiveness not only of their fist but also of their heart, their thoughts, and all their powers as well. In other words, what He wants is a heart that will neither be impatient nor wreak vengeance nor disturb the peace. Such a righteousness is different from the one they taught and maintained. Still they wanted to deck themselves out with what they found in Moses, claiming that revenge and self-defense were proper against violence, since the text reads: "Eye for eye, tooth for tooth."

This saying has been the undoing of many people; not only Jews but even Christians have stumbled on it. For it seemed to them that it was too strict and severe to forbid any resistance to evil at all, since we have to have law and punishment in society. Some have cited the contrary example of Christ (John 18:22, 23). When He was struck on one cheek before the priest Annas, He did not offer the other one; instead He declared His innocence and rebuked the high priest's servant. That seems to be a violation of this text.

On that basis they said it was not necessary to turn the other cheek to an assailant, and they gave the text a helping hand by saying that it was enough for a person to be ready in his heart to offer the other cheek. They said the right thing, but they interpreted it the wrong way. They supposed that offering the other cheek to an assailant meant saying to him: "See, take this cheek, too, and hit me again," or throwing your cloak to the man who wants to take your coat. If that were the meaning, we would finally have to surrender everything, house and home, wife and children. We say, therefore, that all it does is to proclaim

to every Christian that he should willingly and patiently suffer whatever is his lot, without seeking revenge or hitting back.

But the question and argument still remain. Must a person suffer all sorts of things from everyone, without defending himself at all? Has he no right to plead a case or to lodge a complaint before a court, or to claim and demand what belongs to him? If all these things were forbidden, a strange situation would develop. It would be necessary to put up with everybody's whim and insolence. Personal safety and private property would be impossible, and finally the social order would collapse.

To answer this, you must always pay attention to the main point, which is, that Christ is addressing His sermon only to His Christians and seeking to teach them the kind of people they should be, in contrast to the carnal ideas and thoughts that still clung to the apostles. They imagined that He would institute a new realm and empire and set them up in it to rule as lords and to conquer their enemies and the wicked world. Thus flesh and blood has always expected to find its own dominion, honor, and advantage in the Gospel, and an escape from all suffering. The pope has longed for this, too, and his realm has developed into nothing more than a secular dominion, so dreadful that the world has had to submit to him.

Now, too, we see the whole world seeking its own advantage in the Gospel. This has brought on the rise of so many sects, whose only aim is their own advancement and aggrandizement, together with the extermination of others. So it was with Münzer and his peasants, and more recently with others, too.⁴⁴ Even real Christians are sometimes tempted this way. They see that the world at large, and particularly their own government, is being so poorly managed that they feel like jumping in and taking over. But this is wrong. No one should suppose that God wants to have us govern and rule this way with the law and punishment of the world. The Christians' way is altogether different. They neither deal with such things nor care about them. They are perfectly content to leave these things to the care of those who are authorized to distribute property, to do business, to punish, and to protect. As Christ teaches (Matt. 22:21): "Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's." For we have been transferred to another and a higher existence, a divine and an eternal kingdom, where the things that belong to the world are unnecessary and where in Christ everyone is a lord for himself over both the devil and the world, as we have said elsewhere.

It is the duty and obligation of those who participate in this earthly regime to administer law and punishment, to maintain the distinctions that exist among ranks and persons, to manage and distribute property. This way everything will be in good shape, and everyone will know what he is to do and to have; no one will meddle in another man's office or pry into his affairs or take his property. That is what lawyers are for, to teach and manage such matters. But the Gospel does not trouble itself with these matters. It teaches about the right relation of the heart to God, while in all these other questions it should take care to stay pure and not to stumble into a false righteousness. You must grasp and obey this distinction, for it is the basis on which such questions can be easily answered. Then you will see that Christ is talking about a spiritual existence and life and that He is addressing Himself to His Christians. He is telling them to live and behave before God and in the world with their heart dependent upon God and uninterested in things like secular rule or government, power or punishment, anger or revenge.

Now, if someone asks whether a Christian may go to court or defend himself, the answer is simply no. A Christian is the kind of person who has nothing to do with this sort of secular existence and law. He belongs to a kingdom or realm where the only regulation should be the prayer (Matt. 6:12): "Forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors." Here only mutual love and service should prevail, even toward people who do not love us, but who hate us, hurt and harm us. It is to these Christians that He says they should not resist evil, that they should not even seek revenge, but that they should turn the other cheek to an assailant.

A related question is this: May a Christian be a secular official and administer the office and work of a ruler or a judge? This would mean that the two persons or the two types of office are combined in one man. In addition to being a Christian, he would be a prince or a judge or a lord or a servant or a maid—all of which are termed "secular" persons because they are part of the secular realm. To this we say: Yes; God Himself has ordained and established this secular realm and its distinctions, and by His Word He has confirmed and commended them. For without them this life could not endure. We are all included in them; indeed, we were born into them even before we became Christians. Therefore we must also remain in them as long as we are on earth, but only according to our outward life and our physical existence.

There is no getting around it, a Christian has to be a secular person of some sort. As regards his own person, according to his life as a Christian, he is in subjection to no one but Christ, without any obligation either to the emperor or to any other man. But at least outwardly, according to his body and property, he is related by subjection and obligation to the emperor, inasmuch as he occupies some office or station in life or has a house and home, a wife and children; for all these are things that pertain to the emperor. Here he must necessarily do what he is told and what this outward life requires. If he has a house or a wife and children or servants and refuses to support them or, if need be, to protect them, he does wrong. It will not do for him to declare that he is a Christian and therefore has to forsake or relinquish everything. But he must be told: "Now you are under the emperor's control. Here your name is not 'Christian,' but 'father' or 'lord' or 'prince.' According to your own person you are a Christian; but in relation to your servant⁴⁵ you are a different person, and you are obliged to protect him."

You see, now we are talking about a Christian-in-relation: not about his being a Christian, but about this life and his obligation in it to some other person, whether under him or over him or even alongside him, like a lord or a lady, a wife or children or neighbors, whom he is obliged, if possible, to defend, guard, and protect. Here it would be a mistake to teach: "Turn the other cheek, and throw your cloak away with your coat." That would be ridiculous, like the case of the crazy saint who let the lice nibble at him and refused to kill any of them on account of this text, maintaining that he had to suffer and could not resist evil.

Do you want to know what your duty is as a prince or a judge or a lord or a lady, with people under you? You do not have to ask Christ about your duty. Ask the imperial or the territorial law.⁴⁶ It will soon tell you your duty toward your inferiors as their protector. It gives you both the power and the might to protect and to punish within the limits of your authority and commission, not as a Christian but as an imperial subject. What kind of crazy mother would it be who would refuse to defend and save her child from a dog or a wolf and who would say: "A Christian must not defend himself"? Should we not teach her a lesson with a good whipping and say: "Are you a mother? Then do your duty as a mother, as you are charged to do it. Christ did not abrogate this but rather confirmed it."

This is what is told about many of the holy martyrs. When they were called to arms even by infidel emperors and lords, they went to war. In all good conscience they slashed and killed, and in this respect there was no difference between Christians and heathen.⁴⁷ Yet they did not sin against this text. For they were not doing this as Christians, for their own persons, but as obedient members and subjects, under obligation to a secular person and authority. But in areas where you are free and without any obligation to such a secular authority, you have a different rule, since you are a different person.

Just learn the difference between the two persons that a Christian must carry simultaneously on earth, because he lives in human society and has to make use of secular and imperial things, the same way that the heathen do. For until he has been transferred bodily from this life to another one, his flesh and blood is identical with theirs; and what he needs to provide for it does not come from the spiritual realm but from the land and soil, which belongs to the emperor. Now, with this distinction of the boundary between the province of the Christian person and that of the secular person you can neatly classify all these sayings and apply them properly where they belong, not confusing them and throwing them into one pot, the way the teaching and the administration of the pope have done.

So much for the person who has obligations toward other persons under the secular law, the law of fathers and mothers, lords and ladies. But what if only your own person is involved and an injury or injustice has been done to you? Is it right to use force in guarding and defending yourself against this? The answer is no. Here even the secular and imperial law teaches: "Striking back makes a quarrel, and the one who strikes back is in the wrong."⁴⁸ By this action you will be interfering in the judge's office and usurping his right for yourself, for it is his duty to punish. So it is in other cases. The fact that someone has stolen or robbed from you gives you no right to steal or rob from him and to take something from him by force. Our natural inclination is to take swift vengeance, before a person has a chance to turn around. This should not be. But if you are unwilling or unable to stand it, you can always take him to court and get what is coming to you there.

It is permissible for you to use orderly procedure in demanding and obtaining your rights, but be careful not to have a vindictive heart. Thus it is proper for a judge to punish and execute, and yet he is forbidden to have any hatred or vindictiveness in his heart. It is a common circumstance that people abuse

their office to gratify their own whims. Now, where this is not the case and you are simply seeking to use the law for your protection and self-preservation against violence and malice, rather than for your vindictiveness or malevolence, you are not doing wrong. When the heart is pure, then everything is right and well done. The danger here is that the wicked world, along with our flesh and blood, always seeks its own advantage and yet puts on a lovely front to hide the scoundrel within.

Thus you are not forbidden to go to court and lodge a complaint against injustice or violence, just so long as you do not have a false heart, but one that remains as patient as it was before, one that is doing this only to maintain the right and to avoid the wrong, out of a genuine love for righteousness. Earlier I cited the example of the saintly Joseph.⁴⁹ He lodged a complaint with his father against his brothers when they had done something wrong and had acquired a bad reputation for it. For this the Scriptures praise him. He was not prompted by an evil, talebearing, or quarrelsome heart, as they supposed in their hostility to him, but by a friendly and brotherly heart, interested only in their good, because he did not like to see them acquiring a bad reputation. Therefore this cannot be called vindictiveness or malice, but rather helpfulness, as well as distress over their recriminations.

In the parable in the Gospel about the servant whose master forgave him his entire debt, but who refused to forgive his fellow servant a small debt, we read that the other servants were indignant and registered a complaint with their master (Matt. 18:31). They were not being vindictive or talking pleasure in his trouble. They kept their fists, their hearts, and their mouths quiet; they did not curse him or slander him or carry slanderous reports to others. But they brought the matter to the attention of their master, whose business it was to punish. They sought what was right, but they did so with a fine Christian heart, as people who had the obligation to be faithful to their master. That is how it ought to be, whether in a household or in a city. If a pious servant or a faithful subject sees someone doing a wrong or an injury to his master, he should report it to him and prevent the injury. Similarly, if a pious citizen sees violence and harm being done to his neighbor, he should help to defend and protect him. This is secular business, all of which Christ has not forbidden but confirmed.

Certainly we are not compelled or obliged to let every insolent person run rampant all over the place and to take it silently without doing anything about it—not if we can follow orderly procedure in defending ourselves. Otherwise, however, all we can do is to suffer if someone treats us unjustly and violently. We must not sanction a wrong, but we must testify to the truth. In opposition to violence and malice, we certainly may appeal to the law. Thus, before the high priest Annas, Christ Himself appealed to the law and asked for justice (John 18:23); nevertheless He let Himself be struck, offering not merely His other cheek but His whole body.

So you see, you have excellent and clear instructions here regarding the proper behavior in both of these cases. The long-winded and dangerous glosses that people used to look for have become unnecessary. What is necessary is the right distinction between the two, rather than a confusion of them. Each should move in its own sphere, and yet both should be effective. A Christian may carry on all sorts of secular business with impunity—not as a Christian but as a secular person—while his heart remains pure in his Christianity, as Christ demands. This the world cannot do; but contrary to God's command, it misuses every secular ordinance and law, indeed, every creature.

Thus when a Christian goes to war or when he sits on a judges bench, punishing his neighbor, or when he registers an official complaint, he is not doing this as a Christian, but as a soldier or a judge or a lawyer. At the same time he keeps a Christian heart. He does not intend anyone any harm, and it grieves him that his neighbor must suffer grief. So he lives simultaneously as a Christian toward everyone, personally suffering all sorts of things in the world, and as a secular person, maintaining, using, and performing all the functions required by the law of his territory or city, by civil law, and by domestic law. In other words, a Christian as such does not live for the things that are visible about this outward life. They all belong to the imperial government, which Christ has no intention of overthrowing. Nor does He teach us to escape from it or to desert the world and our office and station, but to make use of this rule and established order. Yet while we keep our obligation to this rule and established order, inwardly we live by another rule, which does not hinder it nor even deal with it, but which is willing to put up with it.

This distinction enables us to take up this text and to apply each of its parts. A Christian should not resist any evil; but within the limits of his office, a secular person should oppose every evil. The head of a household should not put up with insubordination or bickering among his servants. A Christian should not

sue anyone, but should surrender both his coat and his cloak when they are taken away from him; but a secular person should go to court if he can to protect and defend himself against some violence or outrage. In short, the rule in the kingdom of Christ is the toleration of everything, forgiveness, and the recompense of evil with good. On the other hand, in the realm of the emperor, there should be no tolerance shown toward any injustice, but rather a defense against wrong and a punishment of it, and an effort to defend and maintain the right, according to what each one's office or station may require.

But you may say: "All right. But still Christ says here in plain words: 'Do not resist evil.' It sounds obvious that this is being absolutely forbidden." Answer: Yes, but pay attention to whom He is saying this. He is not saying: "No one should ever resist evil"; for that would completely undermine all rule and authority. But this is what He is saying: "You, you shall not do it." Now, who are these "you"? They are the disciples of Christ, whom He is teaching about their personal lives, apart from the secular government. As we have said often enough, being a Christian is something quite different from holding and administering a secular office or position. Therefore He intends to say: "Leave the resistance of evil, the administration of justice, and punishment to the one who holds a position in the secular realm, as the lawyers and the laws instruct you to do. But to you, My disciples, whom I am not teaching about ruling outwardly but about living before God, I say: You shall not resist evil. You shall put up with all sorts of things and maintain a pure and friendly heart toward those who treat you unjustly or roughly. If someone takes your coat, you shall not seek revenge. Rather, if there is nothing you can do to prevent it, you shall let him take your cloak as well."

He states two ways by which one may suffer an injustice or have his property taken away from him. In the first place, it can happen purely by force and violence without any question of legality, as when someone is struck across the mouth or openly robbed; this is what He means by "being struck on the cheek." Secondly, it can happen not by overt violence but under the pretext and with the support of the law. Thus a person may seek an injunction against you before the law as if he had a good claim against you, when what he really wants is to make you surrender your own property. This is what Christ calls "taking your coat" before the court, when someone denies you the right to your own property; then you must not only suffer injustice innocently, but you must also be adjudged guilty as though you were in the wrong. It is not the law that is doing you injury or injustice, for it has been instituted to defend the pious. But there are rogues and rascals sitting on judges' benches and holding public office. They are supposed to administer justice. And yet, if you are beyond the reach of violence, they will turn and twist and misuse the law to support their own whims. Here the world shows its mastery every day. Nowadays nothing is so common as making right wrong and wrong right by all sorts of clever artifices and queer tricks.

But most often this happens to pious Christians. The world hates them regardless, and it takes pleasure in tormenting them. Therefore Christ tells them beforehand that in the world they ought to expect this sort of thing and ought to yield to suffering. Especially if it happens on account of that which makes them Christians, that is, on account of the Gospel and the spiritual realm, they should be prepared to take punishment and to lose everything. We have to suffer anyway, since as individual persons we have no power or defense against the government if it should set itself against us. But where this is not the case and you can use the law to defend and protect yourself against some violence to you or yours, then it is your right and your duty to do so.

42. *Give to him who begs from you, and do not refuse him who would borrow from you.*

He points to three ways that the Christians should suffer with regard to their temporal possessions: they should let them be taken away from them, they should be happy to lend them, and they should give them away. Here the current teaching⁵⁰ did not go beyond the secular and imperial law, which does not tell you to give your property away to someone else or to let him take it away from you. It only teaches you how to manage and do business with your property so that you get a good return on it by your buying, selling, and trading. Now, Christ is not preaching about this. He leaves the division of property and business to the teaching of reason. But He points to the three things that a Christian ought to have beyond all this: he should let things be taken away from him, either by force or under the pretext of the law; he should be happy to give them away; and he should be happy to lend them. Here again we must distinguish between secular law and the teaching of Christ. According to secular law you may use your possessions, do business with them, buy them and sell them. Thus we read that the holy patriarchs had business dealings with money and property just as other people do,⁵¹ just as everyone must do if he is to live in

human society and support his wife and children. All this belongs to a life where the stomach has its rights, too; and it is just as necessary as eating and drinking.

But Christ teaches you in addition that you should still be willing to let everything be taken away from you, and do so gladly, doing good or contributing or lending where you can, and submitting to violence not only with regard to your property but also with regard to your life, as was said in the preceding text. Especially should you be willing to do so for the sake of the Lord Christ, if you are threatened on account of the Gospel. In such a case you should be willing to surrender not only your coat but your cloak as well, not only your property and reputation but even your very life. Where this is the case, you need not hesitate; for that matter, it is quite rare that there is another case. In other cases, involving secular affairs and the secular realm, you have the opportunity to appeal to judges and to the law if you have suffered injustice or violence, and to seek redress through them. But if you cannot secure justice or protection, then you have to suffer, just as even the non-Christians have to suffer.

But here we must be careful not to give rogues and rascals the chance to take advantage of this doctrine and to declare: “The Christians have to stand for anything. Therefore it is all right to lay hands on their property, to take it and steal it. A Christian has the obligation to throw the door open on everything he has, to give or lend as much as any impudent scoundrel may ask for without demanding it back.” That was how that miserable apostate, Emperor Julian, made fun of this text.⁵² He took whatever he wanted from the Christians, saying that he wanted to pay them in their own coin. No, my dear fellow, you have it wrong. It is, of course, true that Christians should be ready to put up with anything. But when you come before the judge or fall into the hands of the executioner, watch and see what you will have to put up with from him! A Christian has to be ready to endure whatever you and everyone else may do to him, but he is not obliged to let your whims run riot all over him if he can prevent it by appealing to the law and by seeking the help of the government. Although the government may refuse to protect him or may itself become guilty of violence, he is not obliged to keep quiet on that account as though he had to sanction such procedure.

So it is here, too. He should be willing to lend and give to everyone who asks him. Yet if he knows that this is a scoundrel, he is not obliged to give it to him. Christ is not telling me to give what I have to any scoundrel that comes along and to deprive my family of it or others who may need it and whom I am obliged to help, and then to suffer want myself and become a burden to others. He is not saying that we should give and lend to everybody, but “to him who begs from us,” that is, to the one who really needs it, not to the one who develops a whim that he would like to take something from us by force; such people are well off enough already, or they want to support themselves at other people’s expense, without working. Therefore it is important to be careful here and to ascertain what sort of people there may be in a city, who there is poor and badly off and who is not, rather than to let in any vagrant or tramp who is not in need and could very well support himself. There are plenty of such people roaming around the country nowadays, whom I would call Squire Filth. They would like to take advantage of this teaching and use it to have a good time with other people’s possessions until they are all used up, wandering around from one place to another. Such people should be turned over to the police and taught something different, instead of deceiving pious folk with their mischief.

This is what St. Paul teaches in 2 Corinthians 8:13: He is asking the Corinthians for a contribution to the poor Christians in the famine, but he does not mean that on account of it “others should be eased and you burdened,” that is, that they should have toil and trouble and be in want themselves in order to let their possessions make the other people happy. In 2 Thessalonians 3:6–13 he gives the Christians this command: they should keep away from those who live in idleness, and each one should do his work in quietness, eating his own bread and not burdening other people; and he concludes that “if anyone will not work, let him not eat.” Therefore, whoever is able to work should know it is God’s command that he do something to support himself, rather than burdening other people. There are still plenty of needy people, and there is plenty of lending and giving to do anyway; as the Scriptures say (Deut. 15:11): “The poor will never cease out of the land.” Therefore we should not do our lending and giving in such a way that we fling our gifts away into the wind and do not look to see who is getting them. First we should open our eyes to determine who it is—whether he is “begging,” as Christ says here, that is, whether he is in need and is asking properly, or whether he is a fraud or a scam.

For this you need to employ your secular person, to be prudent in your contacts with other people, to recognize the poor, and to see the kind of people with whom you are dealing and those to whom you should or should not give. Then if you see that it is a genuine seeker, open your hand and lend it to him if he can pay you back. But if he cannot, then give it to him free, and call the account square. There are pious people who would like to work and to support themselves, with their wife and children, but who can never prosper and must occasionally get into debt and difficulty. For the benefit of such people every city should have its common treasury and alms, and it should have church officials to determine who these people are and how they live, so as not to let any of the lazy bums become a burden to other people.

43. *You have heard that it was said, "You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy."*

44. *But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you,*

45. *So that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven; for He makes His sun rise on the evil and on the good and sends rain on the just and on the unjust.*

46. *For if you love those who love you, what reward have you? Do not even the tax collectors do the same?*

47. *And if you salute only your brethren, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same?*

48. *You, therefore, must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect.*

The statement that Christ quotes here does not appear in any single place in the Old Testament, but is scattered here and there throughout the Book of Deuteronomy, where it talks about the enemies of Israel among the surrounding Gentiles, like Moab, Ammon, and Amalek.⁵³ Although it does not expressly say that they should hate their enemies, still this follows from statements like the one in Deuteronomy 23:6, that they should never do anything good for the Ammonites, the Moabites, and their other enemies, nor ever wish them good fortune or success. This was indeed a great concession and a generous grant to the Jews, and one which they used to good advantage. But here as elsewhere they misunderstood this, going to extremes and misusing it to gratify their own whims. Hence Christ has to reinterpret it and show them what the Law really meant. They had neglected this and had laid emphasis only upon the statements that sounded as if they supported their position. Thus they provided backing for their own crookedness.

Here again you must note the distinction, and primarily the fact that He is speaking only about what Christians as Christians should do, and in particular what they should do on account of the Gospel and their Christianity. My reply to someone else's hate or envy, slander or persecution should not be more hatred and persecution, slander and curses, but rather my love and help, my blessings and my prayers. For a Christian is the kind of man who knows no hatred or hostility against anyone at all, whose heart is neither angry nor vindictive, but only loving, mild, and helpful. That is how our Lord Christ is, and His heavenly Father Himself, to whom He points here as the pattern.

Now the question arises: What is to be said about the fact that the Scriptures often talk about holy men cursing their enemies, even about Christ and His apostles doing so? Would you call that blessing their enemies? Or how can I love the pope when every day I rebuke and curse him—and with good reason, too? The answer, put as simply as possible, is this: I have often said that the office of preaching is not our office but God's. But whatever is God's, that we do not do ourselves; but He does it Himself, through the Word and the office, as His own gift and business.⁵⁴ Now, it is written in John 16:8 that it is the office and work of the Holy Spirit to convince the world. But if He is to convince it, He cannot act the hypocrite or play the flattering gentleman and say what it would like to hear. He must rebuke it vigorously and attack it—the way Christ pronounces "Woe!" upon His Pharisees (Matthew 23); the way Paul says to Elymas (Acts 13:10):⁵⁵ "You son of the devil ... full of all villainy!"; the way Stephen reads a hard and sharp text to the high priests (Acts 7:51–55); and especially the way St. Paul (Gal. 1:8) puts it all on one pile and calls everyone ἀνάθεμα, that is, excommunicated and cursed and sentenced to the abyss of hell, who does not preach the pure teaching about faith.

You see, that is how God's Word proceeds. It challenges the whole world. It reaches into the mouth of the lords and the princes and of everyone else, denouncing and cursing their whole way of life, something that is not proper for you or me to do as individual Christians except in our office and our teaching position. In Psalm 2:10, 11 David dares to do this. He tells all the kings and lords to think, to humble themselves, to fall at the feet of the teaching about Christ, and to let themselves be rebuked and instructed. Otherwise they will be damned instantly and turned over to the devil. I would not dare to do that. But that

is the way God's Word proceeds. It hammers the great and mighty mountains with its thunder and lightning and storms, so that they smoke. It shatters everything that is great and proud and disobedient, as Psalm 29 says. But on the other hand, it is also like a fruitful rain, sprinkling and moistening, planting and strengthening whatever is like the poor, parched plants that are weak and sickly.

Now, it is wrong for someone who is not a teacher and preacher, commissioned to administer the Word of God, to rush in, snapping and snarling and cursing. But whoever has been commissioned with this office, must administer it. And it is wrong for him to neglect it or to be so seared that he refuses to open his mouth and to denounce what should be denounced, irrespective of personal considerations. For example, now we have to say to our bishops that they are tyrants and villains, who flagrantly oppose both God and the law with their violent and capricious dealings. Now when I do this, I am not doing it on my own, but by virtue of my office. Otherwise, as far as my own person is concerned, I ought not to wish or say anything evil to any man on earth; rather I ought to wish everyone well and speak and act kindly toward him. It is not in this way that I am the enemy of the pope, the bishops, and all the enemies who persecute us and continually torment us. From my heart I am perfectly willing to let them have whatever temporal goods, power, and prestige God gives them; and I would do my best to help them keep it all. Indeed, I would be even happier if they were also as rich in spiritual goods as we are, and lacked nothing. And it would be our heart's delight if by surrendering our own body and life we could bring them to this, rescue them from their blindness, and save them from the power of the devil.

But they simply refuse to have this, and they cannot tolerate or accept any of the good things that we offer them. Therefore we must also let them go their own way, and say: "If we have to make a choice of which should perish, whether the Word of God and the kingdom of Christ or the pope with all his mob, then rather let him go to the abyss of hell, in the name of his god the devil, just so that the Word of God may abide!" If I must bless and praise one of them and curse and damn the other one, then I will bless the Word of God but curse them with everything they have. For I must place the Word of God above everything else. To keep it and to stay with Christ, who is my highest Treasure in heaven and on earth, I must be willing to risk my body and life, the popularity of the world, my goods, my reputation, and all my happiness. For one of these two things has to happen: either the Word of God will abide and conquer them; or at least they will be unable to suppress it, even if they refuse to accept all its grace and goodness and salvation.

In this way a Christian can easily handle the situation and his relations toward both his enemies and his friends. So far as his neighbor's person is concerned, he will love and bless everyone. But on the other hand, so far as God and His Word are concerned, he will not put up with any transgression. He must give this precedence over everything else and subordinate everything else to it, irrespective of any person, be he friend or foe; for this cause belongs neither to us nor to our neighbor, but to God, whom it is our duty to obey before anything else (Acts 5:29). Consequently I say to my worst enemies: "Where it is only my own person that is involved, there I am very willing to help you and to do everything good for you, in spite of the fact that you are my enemy and that all you ever do for me is to harm me. But where it is the Word of God that is involved, there you must not expect any friendship or love that I may have for you to persuade me to do something against that, even if you were my nearest and dearest friend. But since you cannot endure the Word, I will speak this prayer and benediction over you: 'May God dash you to the ground!'⁵⁶ I shall willingly serve you, but not in order to help you overthrow the Word of God. For this purpose you will never be able to persuade me even to give you a drink of water." In other words, our love and service belong to men. But they belong to God above all; if this is hindered or threatened, love and service are no longer in place. For the command is: "You shall love your enemy and do him good." But to God's enemies I must also be an enemy, lest I join forces with them against God.

Thus He has refuted this idea also against the delusion of the Jews, who gave a crooked twist to Scripture⁵⁷ by maintaining that they were permitted to hate their enemies. He has interpreted the Law to mean that they were to have no enemy at all whom they should hate, in spite of the fact that Moses had told them not to establish or to maintain friendly relations with certain alien heathen, whom not they but God Himself had specifically designated as His enemies. But that they were to regard as their enemies anyone whom they chose, and that they were to curse, persecute, and torment such people—that was not what Moses meant to say. Solomon correctly understood and interpreted Moses, and he says (Prov. 25:21): "If your enemy is hungry, give him bread to eat; and if he is thirsty, give him water to drink," a

statement which St. Paul also cites (Rom. 12:20). Hating your enemy is proper to a public person and to an office that has been divinely established. But the commandment (Lev. 19:18): “You shall love your neighbor as yourself,” applies to the common crowd and to each individual in particular.

Look at how high He puts the target. Not only does He denounce those who do harm to their enemies, but He also refuses to call those “pious” who neglect to do them good when they need it. He says first: “Love your enemies.” But “to love” means to be goodhearted and to wish the best, to have a heart that is friendly, kind, and sweet toward everyone, not one that makes fun of misery or misfortune. He also wants us to express this by our words, as He says: “Bless those who curse you.” Thus we should not speak a single harsh word against them, however terrible their abuse, slander, scolding, and curses may be, but only speak to them kindly and wish them well. This is the source of that beautiful Christian saying which some pious people use. When they hear that someone has done them wrong or has played some ugly trick upon them, they say: “May God forgive him!” They are concerned and sympathetic, and all they want is to keep this from bringing any harm to him in his relation to God. That is really a good tongue in response to the evil tongues of others, with both the mouth and the heart demonstrating nothing but love.

In the third place, He wants this kind of heart to become manifest in deeds as well, in all kinds of friendly and cordial works. He says: “Do good to those who hate you.” This is really a very rare virtue. It is the kind of teaching that does not suit the world at all; nature finds it impossible to recompense all sorts of evil with nothing but good, not to be overcome by evil nor by shameful ingratitude but to overcome evil with good, as St. Paul says (Rom. 12:21). For this reason He had laid down the condition earlier (Matt. 5:20) that whoever wants to be a disciple of Christ and to enter the kingdom of heaven must have a righteousness that is different, one that is better than that of the Pharisees and the Jewish saints.

The fourth item, however, “Pray for those who spitefully abuse you and persecute you,” applies more directly to our doctrine and faith than to our person and life. The fact that they persecute us is due to the Word of God: they claim that they are right and that we are wrong. Then it is our duty to pray and to commend our cause to God, for on earth there is no law or judge to vindicate us. Our persecutors are actually in competition not with us, but with God Himself; it is with His kingdom that they are interfering; they are doing the greatest injury not to us but to God Himself; and it is His wrath and condemnation that they have incurred. When we see all this, we should have pity on them and pray for them to be rescued from their blindness and their terrible doom. No one can do us any harm without doing it first to a far greater lord, namely, to the High Majesty in heaven Himself.

Yet all this is valid only in so far as it goes on apart from one’s official responsibility and does not interfere with it. As I have always said, it is necessary carefully to distinguish the teaching that pertains universally to each individual person from the teaching that pertains to persons in an office, whether it be spiritual or secular, whose task it is to punish and to resist evil. Therefore, even though personally they may be gentle, yet administering justice and meting out punishment is their official work; and it has to go on. It would be wrong if their pity moved them to neglect this; for that would be tantamount to helping, strengthening, and encouraging the evil. It is as if I were to say to our enemies, the pope, the bishops, the princes, and all the rest, who are persecuting the Gospel and trampling its poor adherents underfoot: “Gentlemen, may the dear God reward you! You are pious people and holy fathers”; or as if I were to keep quiet, pay them homage, or kiss their feet. No, dear brother, this is what I ought to say: “I am a preacher. I have to have teeth in my mouth. I have to bite and salt and tell them the truth. And if they refuse to hear, then in the name of God I have to excommunicate them, lock them out of heaven, consign them to the fire of hell, and turn them over to the devil.”

Now, whoever has this office of rebuking and denouncing, let him perform it. But apart from that office, let everyone stick to this teaching: You shall not denounce or curse anyone, but you shall wish him everything good and show this in your actions, even though he may act badly; thus you will disclaim all right to mete out punishment, and you will assign it to those whose office it is. Such a person will eventually find a Judge that will not spare him, even though you may not take vengeance or even seek it. God will not let any violence go unpunished, but He Himself will take vengeance on our enemies and will send home to them what they have deserved by the way they have treated us. As He Himself says (Deut. 32:35): “Vengeance is Mine, I will repay.” On the basis of this, St. Paul admonishes the Christians (Rom. 12:19):⁵⁸ “Never avenge yourselves, but leave it to the wrath of God.” These words are not only instruction but also consolation, as if He were to say: “Do not take it upon yourselves to avenge

yourselves on one another, or to speak curses and maledictions. The person that does you harm or injury is interfering with an office that is not his. He is presuming to inflict punishment or injury upon you without the command of God, indeed, contrary to it. Now, if you do the same, then you, too, are interfering with the office of God and sinning against God as gravely as this man has sinned against you. Therefore keep your fist to yourself. Leave it in the charge of His wrath and punishing, for He will not let it remain unavenged, and His punishment is more severe than you would like. This man has not assailed you but God Himself, and has already fallen into His wrath. He will not escape this. No one ever has. So why get angry with him when the anger of God, immensely greater and more severe than the anger and punishment of the whole world, has already come upon him and has already avenged itself more thoroughly than you ever could? Besides, he has not injured you one tenth as much as he has injured God. When you see him lying under this severe condemnation, why so many curses and threats of vengeance? Rather you should take pity on his plight, and pray for him to be rescued from it and to reform.”

As a confirmation and illustration of this teaching He cites two examples. He says in the first place: “So that you may be the sons of your Father who is in heaven; for He makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good and sends rain on the just and on the unjust.” It is as if He were to say: “If you want to be called true children of the Father in heaven, then let His example move you to live and act the way He does. But what does He do? He makes His sun rise every day, and He sends rain on the pious and on the wicked alike.” Thus by mentioning these two things, the sun and the rain, He has summarized in a few words all the earthly blessings that God grants to the world. If it were not for these two things, or even one of them, the whole world would long since have become a wasteland, desolate and destroyed. If the sun did not rise every day, there could be no daily work; the animals, along with the trees, the plants, and the grass would all perish from the frost. Therefore the sun alone is the source of the incalculable blessing that fills the world and provides nourishment for all who seek it, whether human or animal, as well as of the heat and warmth by which everything stays alive, grows, and propagates itself, instead of perishing. In other words, the benefits that God bestows through the sun every hour and every moment are innumerable. Yet where is there someone who acknowledges this or is thankful for it?

Nevertheless, though God gives, produces, and preserves everything through the sun, still we must have rain as well. If the sun kept on shining all the time, finally everything would dry up and wither away on account of the heat, and no food or grain could grow for man or beast. Therefore He has tempered it with the rain, to revive it all and to preserve its moisture and strength. Now, in these two there are included the four items that belong to life, the items that the philosophers call the “primary qualities”—cold and warm, dry and moist.⁵⁹ There must not be one member of these pairs without the other. If there were nothing but cold, or nothing but heat, there would be no life. Now, the sun brings two of these items, the heat and the dryness, and the rain also brings two, that it is cold and moist. Thus to the whole world, to His enemies as well as His friends, God gives body and life and everything it needs and uses, generously and freely every day. Indeed, He rains most copiously on a desert, a wild forest, or an ocean, where it is utterly useless, while He sends only scant showers where pious people live. And He gives the best kingdoms and countries and people and money and goods to the worst scoundrels, while to the pious He hardly gives enough bread to eat.

Everywhere throughout the wide world, God is displaying these examples to us, as if He wanted to admonish us by them and to say to us: “Don’t you know what sort of man I am, and what sort of good I am doing for you? Ask the sun and the moon and the rain about it, ask everything that is cold or wet or warm or dry. Then you will see that I show innumerable benefits not only to My Christians but even more to the wicked people, who are not grateful to Me but repay Me with their intense persecution of My Son and of the pious Christians.” Thus you must be ashamed of yourself when you look at the sun, which preaches this to you every day, ashamed even when you are in a field and you look at a little flower or at the leaf of a tree. For this is written all over the leaves and the grass. There is no bird so small, indeed, no fruit or berry or grain so tiny, that it does not show this to you and say: “For whom do I bear my beautiful fruits and berries? For the vilest rogues and rascals on earth.” How you must reproach yourself, then, for your lack of love toward God, your failure to do any favors for your neighbor, and your refusal to show at least some regard for others, when He is continually doing you so much good by means of all the creatures?

There is not a single man on earth who has to put up with one per cent of what He has to suffer every day from evil men. Not only are His possessions and all His creatures misused for sinful and shameful ends; but also the very men who have these possessions in the greatest abundance—kings, lords, and princes—hate Him and His Word as much as they do the devil himself. If they could, they would gladly exterminate it in one fell swoop. They incessantly fume against it with nothing but abuse, curses, and slander, and besides they batter it with their fists. So there is no one on earth that is the object of more hatred and envy, of more vicious tricks, than are His Christians. Now, this is what He has to put up with daily from the whole world. Still He is so faithful that daily He sends the sunshine and His other superabundant blessings upon people who do not deserve even to have a blade of grass or a moment of sunshine, but to be showered with incessant hell-fire and to be pelted with thunderbolts and hailstones, spears and bullets. He really ought to be called a faithful Father for letting such desperate scoundrels have all those possessions, lands, servants, and good weather, for letting them act like the lords of all and the squires of His domain! Why, even the sun and the moon, together with all the creatures, have to serve them, letting themselves be misused in opposition to God by the whims and the wickedness of such people. Now, if we want to be sons of the Father, we ought to let this sublime example move us to live likewise.

The other example is that of the relation among the criminals and murderers themselves. They, too, know the art of sticking together and of backing one another up. They will even put their bodies, their possessions, and their very lives at one another's disposal; and yet their only aim is to do harm to other people, to rob and murder, and this only for the sake of temporal and uncertain possessions. "Therefore," He means to say, "you surely ought to be ashamed of yourselves. You call yourselves Christians and sons of God, and you want to get to heaven. You have such a good and faithful Father, who promises and gives you everything good. And yet you are no more devout than robbers and murderers; you are just like all the criminals on earth." For there have never been people so bad that they did not practice love and friendship toward each other. Otherwise how could their business continue? Even the devils in hell cannot live in opposition to one another, or their kingdom would soon be destroyed, as Christ Himself says (Matt. 12:25, 26).

Do you see now how pious you are if you are friendly and kind only to your friends? You are just about as pious as the thieves and the scoundrels, as the whores and the criminals, or as the devil himself. Yet in your smugness you go around supposing that you are all right, you preen yourself and brag just as though you were an angel. Thus our schismatic spirits now brag about the great love they have in their midst, which makes it obvious that the Holy Spirit is with them. But what is it that they do? They love their own schismatic rabble; but meanwhile they hate us poisonously and murderously, though we have never done them any harm. From this it is obvious what sort of spirit they really have! Yet they have a right to brag that there is as much love among them as among scoundrels, criminals, and murderers, or as much as among the devils. On this basis, no man on earth would be called wicked. There is no one so desperately bad that he does not need to have someone for a friend. How, otherwise, could he live in human society if all he did were to snarl and snap at everyone? Now, if you want to draw the conclusion, "He loves his friends, therefore he is pious and holy," you would finally have to make the devil and all his followers pious as well. Therefore the conclusion Her intends to draw here, in opposition to the Pharisaic saints, is that everything they teach about love and the like is all wrong. He instructs them to turn the page and to look at the Scriptures correctly if they want to be the people of God, to see correctly and to show love toward their enemies. In this way they could prove that their love was genuine and that they were God's children, as He shows His love to the ungrateful and to His enemies.

Moses himself had clearly said this, for example, in Exodus 23:4: "If you meet your enemy's ox or his ass going astray, you shall bring it back to him"; and again (Ex. 23:5): "If you see it lying under its burden ... you shall help it up." Here they should have discovered that they had an obligation to love their enemies, too, if they had really looked at the text instead of gliding over it, the way our blind theologians skim over the surface of the Scriptures. For since the command here is to pick up and help an ass or an ox that belongs to an enemy, it means that they should do so all the more when danger threatens the enemy himself in his person or property, wife or children. In other words, this is what it says: "You shall not desire harm for your neighbor but prevent it, and, if possible, help him and promote his advantage. In this way you can finally move him, and by your kindness you can overcome and soften him. Thus all he can

do is to love you in return, because he sees and experiences nothing evil in your treatment of him, but only pure love and sheer goodness.”

With this teaching and these examples Christ now concludes this chapter: “You, therefore, must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect.” Here our sophists have spun out many dreams about perfection and have applied them all to their orders and classes—as if only priests and monks were in a state of perfection, the one higher than the other, the bishops higher than all the others, and the pope the highest of all. By this means the word “perfection” becomes completely inapplicable to the ordinary Christian way of life, as if such people could not be called perfect or be perfect. But you hear Christ talking here not to bishops, monks, and nuns, but in general to all Christians who are His pupils, who want to be called the sons of God, and who do not want to be like the publicans and criminals as are the Pharisees and our clergy.

How does it come about that they are perfect? The answer—in brief, because elsewhere I have discussed it in more detail ⁶⁰—is this: We cannot be or become perfect in the sense that we do not have any sin, the way they dream about perfection. Here and everywhere in Scripture “to be perfect” means, in the first place, that doctrine be completely correct and perfect, and then, that life move and be regulated according to it. Here, for example, the doctrine is that we should love not only those who do us good, but our enemies, too. Now, whoever teaches this and lives according to this teaching, teaches and lives perfectly.

But the teaching and the life of the Jews were both imperfect and wrong, because they taught that they should love only their friends, and they lived accordingly. Such a love is chopped up and divided, it is only half a love. What He wants is an entire, whole, and undivided love, where one loves and helps his enemy as well as his friend. So I am called a truly perfect man, one who has and holds the doctrine in its entirety. Now, if my life does not measure up to this in every detail—as indeed it cannot, since flesh and blood incessantly hold it back—that does not detract from the perfection. Only we must keep striving for it, and moving and progressing toward it every day. This happens when the spirit is master over the flesh, holding it in check, subduing and restraining it, in order not to give it room to act contrary to this teaching. It happens when I let love move along on the true middle course, treating everyone alike and excluding no one. Then I have true Christian perfection, which is not restricted to special offices or stations, but is common to all Christians, and should be. It forms and fashions itself according to the example of the heavenly Father. He does not split or chop up His love and kindness, but by means of the sun and the rain He lets all men on earth enjoy them alike, none excluded, be he pious or wicked.

THE SIXTH CHAPTER

1. *Beware of practicing your charity before men in order to be seen by them; for then you will have no reward from your Father who is in heaven.*
2. *Thus, when you give alms, sound no trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, that they may be praised by men. Truly, I say to you, they have their reward.*
3. *But when you give alms, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing,*
4. *so that your alms may be in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.*

SO far the Lord Christ has been denouncing the false teachings and interpretations of Scripture which had led people to refrain from sinning with their fists while their hearts remained completely impure within, and He has been demonstrating and emphasizing the true interpretation of the Scriptures and the Law. Now He goes on from their teaching to denounce their life as well. He attacks their good works, and He refuses to concede that they have anything good either in their teaching or in their works. This in spite of the fact that, as holy people, they taught the Scriptures every day, that they did good works, and that they had a reputation as the finest kernel of the whole Jewish people and the holiest people on earth. The whole world had to look to them as the mirror and pattern according to which they should live, just as the only place to look for true doctrine and life until now has been among our clergy, the priests and monks. Yet now they are being rebuked by the Gospel; and everyone sees that neither their teaching nor their life has been right, but that they have been misleading and deceiving both themselves and the people.

Now, a sermon is really a vexing thing if it comes into the world in order to deprive these holy people of their claims to everything right and good, and it earns the opposition and the intolerance of the world. But this does not embarrass the Holy Spirit. He goes right ahead with His denunciation of both teaching and life, in keeping with His office, wherever He may come. Both need to be denounced. It is true that

where teaching is not right, there it is impossible for life to be right and good either, since life must let itself be controlled and directed by teaching. Whatever is done and accomplished on such a basis will be only a bypath and a detour, aggravated by the fact that the teaching persists in the impression and the notion that it is a true and divine teaching that points and leads to heaven, and that the works keep the title “good works,” though they pay attention only to the action of the hands. Thus they imagined that their life was satisfactory and good if only they did the works, contributed alms generously, fasted, and prayed, regardless of how their heart stood in relation to God. In addition, they were polluted by the filthy habit of doing it all only to have the people see them and give them honor and glory for it. That is why Christ here rebukes and completely rejects it.

First of all, He denounces their alms-giving, which is still the best among all the outward works. It simply means helping the poor and needy; and it includes not just giving a piece of bread to a beggar at the door, but all sorts of kind deeds and good works done to a neighbor. The little word “alms” is derived from the Greek word ἐλεημοσύνη, which means mercy, just as we also generally speak of “works of mercy.” Therefore the Scriptures give these works higher praise than they do to all the others, even to the works in relation to God, like sacrificing, praying, and the like. Thus Christ Himself says (Matt. 9:13) on the basis of the prophet Hosea (Hosea 6:6): “I desire mercy, and not sacrifice.” So also in Isaiah 58 He rebukes them and says they caused Him anguish because they fasted and whipped their bodies, and He demands these works instead: they should do good to the poor, feed the hungry, and clothe the naked. But how is it, then, that here He is denouncing the Pharisees for doing precisely these good works?

Answer: He is not denouncing the work itself, but their purpose and aim in doing it. In itself the work would be good; but they ruined it by smearing their filth all over it, because by it they were seeking only their own glory and honor before the people and were not doing it for the sake of God or their neighbor. Therefore He pronounces a short and severe judgment, that all such alms, regardless of how great or abundant or expensive they may be, are useless and valueless.

It is incredible how common this blasphemy and vice is in the world, especially among the best people, and how few people there really are who do good works without seeking the honor or favor of the world this way. Take all the alms ever given in the whole papacy, and just count how many you will be able to find that were not given with this intention in mind. Alas, the world will never learn what real almsgiving is. That is how we are all inclined. If the praise of the people, their honor, gratitude, and favor were not forthcoming, every one of us would soon pull his hand back. What if the pope had said to the princes and the donors, “Gentlemen, I will not give you a heller for all your foundations and alms”? How much do you imagine they would have donated for churches and other institutions then? Not a stone would have been hauled or laid in place. We can see that now. We are teaching correctly and urging these works on the basis that they should be given for God’s sake, out of a pure and simple heart, and not for the sake of increasing our own honor or merit. Therefore nobody wants to give a heller nowadays. In former days, when they had praise and honor for it, the alms, endowments, and wills came down like snow. Of course, their notion that they were earning heaven by this did have a great deal to do with it. Still this was not the main reason; but as Christ says here, the main reason was the fact that this was something great and praiseworthy in the eyes of the people. Otherwise they would have paid no attention to it, and they would not have done it for the sake of God and the kingdom of heaven.

As we have said, this is evident from the fact that no one responds now when the people are seriously appealed to and urged to do good works and when such works are described as most precious, as something highly pleasing to God and to all the angels in heaven, as something that will receive a hundredfold reward. What is missing in our appeal? Simply this, that such works are no longer supposed to win praise and honor, gratitude and reward from the world. Because the head has been cut off, the body refuses to follow any longer. But if the head were to come back to life, then everything would soon be back in full swing, the way it used to be. This is the way it used to be. If a rich prince gave a great sum of money to a monastery, everybody would come and say, “Thank God!” and then promise to earn it by means of their prayers and services. This had to be proclaimed from all the pulpits, and the whole world had to say, “Oh, what a wonderful work!” That was the situation everywhere throughout the papacy, even though there may have been a few whom God found to be upright. You see, this is a sure sign that this sort of thing was being done only as a means of earning gratitude, honor, and praise.

Additional evidence to support this comes from the fact that such saints quickly become angry and take their gifts back if they feel that the recipients are ungrateful or contemptuous toward them. If this had not been their motivation in giving, such a response would not cause them to become angry or to stop. They would keep right on and say: “This was not my reason for beginning, and it will not be my reason for stopping. I intend to go on doing it for the honor and pleasure of God, even though no man may give me a good word for it.” But you may come shuffling along this way: “I have done so much for him, and he has forgotten it already. People are so ungrateful!” Or you may say: “I would be happy to take my heart out of my body and give it to him. But since I see that this kindness would be wasted on him and that he is such a thankless fellow, so that all my toil and trouble would be in vain, he can go to hell before I give him a heller or a crust of bread.” Look, there the scoundrel is already peeking out! By your very words you betray your real motivation for doing it, namely, to have people worship and celebrate you and honor you as a god. We can see this now in the case of some of our bigwigs.¹ They can rage and stir up a fuss if they do not continually hear expressions of gratitude and other things they want to hear. Unless they do, they will even turn against princes and lords and make accusations against everybody.

You see what a shameful distortion of good works this is, and how common a fault it is throughout the world that nobody does anything good without such motivation. The world cannot get rid of this crazy idea, and it cannot endure or overcome ingratitude. This is also where the monks came from. They ran away into the desert because they were so weak that they could not stand the thought of being in the world, helping everyone and doing good, and then of being rewarded for this with nothing but contempt and malice, insults and ingratitude. But what sort of devil is it that tells you to do these works on the ground that by them you will earn the popularity of the world, which is uncertain and can quickly collapse and change, rather than to look for a better motivation, namely, God? For then they can never be lost, and He will richly reward you, both here and hereafter. Therefore it serves you right for being such a scoundrel and having no other purpose than to be worshiped by the people and to make a god of yourself! So He can very easily let the world and the devil take care of you. They will take your divinity away from you and throw it into the filth, which is exactly where it belongs. Since you have the effrontery to seat yourself on God’s throne and to lay claim to the glory that belongs only to Him, it is fitting for Him to cast you down again so that complete disgrace is all the thanks you get in place of your stolen honor. It is really disgraceful, the way the world carries on: it may be pious or it may be wicked, but either way it is worthless. Either it tries openly to be a devil with its wicked works, or it tries to be God Himself with its good works. And both of these are intolerable. Therefore no one can do a truly good work unless he is a Christian. If he does it as a man, then he is not doing it for the glory of God, but for his own glory and advantage. On the other hand, if he claims that it is for the glory of God, that is a lie that smells to high heaven.

For this reason Christ now intends to teach about the right way of giving alms, and He says: “When you give alms, do not have a trumpet sounded or a loud shout raised before you, so that a whole city has to know about it and talk about it. (So it is among us, when a charitable contribution is being made and all the bells have to be rung.) But when you give alms, do it in such a way that your left hand does not know what your right hand is doing.” This is the self-same thing that St. Paul says in Romans 12:8 and elsewhere (2 Cor. 9:7): “He who contributes, let him do it with singleness.” But “contributing with singleness” means that by making the contribution one does not seek his own glory or popularity, gratitude or reward, and is not concerned about whether any human being is grateful or not. But he contributes freely what he wants to contribute, just the way God grants His gifts every day and causes His sun to shine, regardless of the thankful or the unthankful, just as if He did not see anybody. A heart is truly single in its motivation if it neither seeks nor desires nor looks at anything except the will of God and the glory of God.

Such sincere almsgiving is not to be found among worldly people; their contributing is the kind that gives with the right hand and grasps with the left hand. This is what is called “givers, takers,” a phrase the children use to taunt each other, the kind of giving that expects to acquire ten times as much, contributing a drop of water and then getting a cask of wine back. Worldly people make their contributions in order to have a glory that is immensely greater than all the money and property in the world. They want to buy you for a trifle and to hold you as their perpetual prisoner—your body and your life and everything you have—along with God Himself. For that reason Christ says: “When you are giving alms with your right hand,

be careful that you do not try to take more with your left hand. Hold it behind your back, and do not let it know anything about what is going on.” Then you may be said to be “contributing with singleness,” not to be taking or to be giving in such a way as to make the other person owe you ten times as much as you gave him, or to make him celebrate and adore you as an idol. That is the way our young squires proceed now. If they have rendered a service to someone with a gulden or two, they imagine that they have bought him and that he is so deeply obligated to them that he has to call all their words and actions golden and dare not say a word to them except what they would like to hear. My friend, if you can sell your trifles for such a price, you are really quite a salesman!

Everyone should therefore know how to protect himself against this vice and should be careful lest he become one of these people. It remains unnoticed by most people; it even manages to deceive those who suppose that they are very pious and full of good works, who thus become twice as wicked as the others. Therefore God hates this vice especially. It is more tolerable to Him if you openly rob your neighbor and do him wrong than if you make this kind of contribution, which shamefully corrupts a good work by letting you make yourself an idol and letting you bind and imprison your neighbor more tightly than anything else could. But that is the way it goes. Where the true doctrine lies helpless and yet everyone lays claim to great piety, the consequence is these good works, which have nothing but a vain pretense and which do twice as much harm as overt wicked works.

But someone may say: “When He says that almsgiving should be secret, what are we to make of this? Will it be prohibited now for anyone to have it announced and reported to the people who are supposed to get and receive it?” The answer is no. For you must see what Christ’s purpose is in speaking. He is looking at the heart and the motivation, to find out whether the purpose of your gift or endowment is to seek your own honor and glory; if so, then it is worthless before God, even though it may be of help to many poor people. But giving alms in secret means that the heart is not ostentatious or desirous of gaining honor and reputation from it, but is moved to contribute freely regardless of whether it makes an impression and gains the praise of the people or whether everyone despises and profanes it. Thus it counts as a gift given in secret and before God alone, even though it may be given publicly before the whole world. For it is concealed by the singleness of a heart that does not ask or worry, but leaves it for God to decide, whether its reward will be gratitude or ingratitude, good or evil. Thus I myself do not see it, though others may. This is how I and others must proceed in our ministerial office. We must not bother ourselves about whether we are pleasing the people or not. In fact, we have to expect to get contempt, ingratitude, persecution, and all sorts of trouble as our reward. If any good work is to endure and to be found acceptable, not like the sham works of the hypocrites, you will have to expect this sort of treatment as a test and a probation.

In short, whoever wants to be a Christian must make up his mind neither to undertake nor to discontinue any good work on the basis of what other people think, but only as a means of serving God through his office or station, his money or goods, or whatever other possessions or abilities he may have, doing what he can to His glory although he may never merit any thanks for it on earth at all. It is impossible for a pious man to be adequately rewarded here even for the very smallest work that he does; even being crowned with gold and receiving an entire kingdom would not be enough. Therefore he should limit his ambition to getting what he needs to eat and drink in exchange for his work, expecting no reward from the world. It is not worthy to repay or reward a good work, or even to recognize and honor a real Christian; even if it knows him, it is not pious enough to thank him. Now, since his work is not undertaken for the world’s sake, it should not be discontinued for its sake either; but it should be commended to God. He will reward it profusely, not in secret but in public, in the presence of the whole world and all the angels.

Where this insight and understanding is absent, there no really good works are possible. Instead, a person becomes impatient, disturbs his own peace, and lets himself be overcome by the shameful ingratitude of the world. Thus this good work is destroyed and disappears, appears, and it becomes clear that he was doing it not out of regard for God but out of regard for the people. For that matter, if I had not known this, I would have given the world its walking papers long ago and let it go to the devil rather than to let it hear a single word from me. But the important thing here is not the world, but our dear Father in heaven. Because of our love for Him and because of His glory and honor we shall preach and do good. The rest of the world hates Him, it shamefully despises and blasphemes Him, and it does everything

possible to oppose Him and vex Him. We console ourselves with the fact that He still lives even when the whole world is destroyed; since He has declared and promised that He will duly reward and repay, He will not lie to us. So try it, and you will find that it will not fail you. Let this be a general introduction on what attitude a Christian ought to have in his heart toward almsgiving and all other good works.

5. *And when you pray, you must not be like the hypocrites; for they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, that they may be seen by men. Truly, I say to you, they have their reward.*

6. *But when you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.*

In addition to almsgiving or doing good to our neighbor, praying is another work that is appropriate to the Christian. Just as the necessities of this life require us to do good to our neighbor and to sympathize with him in his need—after all, that is why we live together on earth, so that we might serve and help one another—so the constant threat to us in this life from every kind of inevitable danger and unavoidable need requires us to call upon God continually and to seek His help, both on our own behalf and on behalf of everyone else. But true almsgiving is a rare thing in this world. Not only is there so much ordinary robbing and stealing going on everywhere in the world that no one does anything good for his neighbor, but goes on scratching on his own manure pile without asking how his neighbor is getting along. But even if they do good works, they are only looking out for their own advantage. Thus the world is made up of nothing but robbers and thieves, both on the right and on the left, both physically and spiritually, both in bad works and in good works.

In the same way, praying is a rare work, which no one does but Christians. At the same time it was very common in the world. It was especially common among the Jews, as Christ shows here, in their synagogues and on street corners. And it is a common thing now in all these churches, monasteries, and convents. Day and night they are muttering and bawling with their singing and reading, and they fill the whole world with it. There is no shortage of praying; and yet if you put it all together, it is not worth a heller. Here Christ is denouncing and repudiating all their praying, in spite of the fact that they were practicing it so zealously, though only in order to make an impression on people and to get a reputation for piety. How much more damnable is the praying of our clergy! All they want to accomplish by it is to fill their own belly, and not one of them would say an Our Father if it did not bring him some money. Even when they have done their best, they have mumbled or chanted a sackful of words without feeling them or understanding them or believing them, as though they were bells or organs. In this way they have acquired a glorious reputation for being the only people who pray, while the other people are too occupied with secular affairs to be able to pray or serve God, so that they have to pray in our stead and we have to make lords of them by our money and goods.

Here we shall not go into the matter of how necessary prayer is, because of ourselves we ought to feel this. For we live in flesh and blood that is crammed full of wickedness of every sort. In addition, the world is always with us and against us, bringing all our misery and sorrow and trouble upon us. Besides, there is the devil everywhere around us, stirring up innumerable sects, factions, and corruptions, and driving us into unbelief and despair. Thus there is never any end to this, and there is no rest for us. We are surrounded by the kind of enemies who will not stop until they have knocked us down, and as individual poor men we are much too weak to withstand so many enemies. For that reason God says in the prophet Zechariah (Zech. 12:10) that He will give to those who are His own “the Spirit of grace and supplication” to preserve them while they are on the field of battle and to guard and protect them against that wicked and pernicious spirit. Therefore it is the particular work of Christians, who have the Spirit of God, not to be lax and lazy, but incessant and constant in their praying, as Christ teaches elsewhere (Luke 18:1).

But here the emphasis is on the fact that it must be a genuine prayer and not a piece of hypocrisy, as their prayers were and as our own used to be. Therefore, in instructing them how to pray correctly, Christ begins by showing them how they should go about it: they are not supposed to stand and pray publicly on the streets, but they should pray at home, in their own room, alone, in secret. This means that, above all, they should rid themselves of the false motive of praying for the sake of the appearance or reputation or anything of that sort. It does not mean that prayer on the street or in public is prohibited; for a Christian is not bound to any particular place and may pray anywhere, whether he is on the street or in the field or in church. All it means is that this must not be done out of regard for other people, as a means of getting glory or profit. In the same way He does not forbid the blowing of a trumpet or the ringing of a bell at

almsgiving for its own sake, but He denounces the addition of a false motivation when He says: “in order to be seen by men.”

Nor is it a necessary part of this commandment that you have to go into a room and lock yourself in. Still, it is a good idea for a person to be alone when he intends to pray, so that he can pour out his prayer to God in a free and uninhibited manner, using words and gestures that he could not use if he were in human company. Although it is true that prayer can take place in the heart without any words or gestures, yet such things help in stirring up and enkindling the spirit even more; but in addition, the praying should continue in the heart almost without interruption. As we have said, a Christian always has the Spirit of supplication with him, and his heart is continually sending forth sighs and petitions to God, regardless of whether he happens to be eating or drinking or working. For his entire life is devoted to spreading the name of God, His glory, and His kingdom, so that whatever else he may do has to be subordinated to this.²

Nevertheless, I say, outward prayer must also go on, both individual prayer and corporate prayer. In the morning and in the evening, at table and whenever he has time, every individual should speak a benediction or the Our Father or the Creed or a psalm. And in assemblies the Word of God should be employed and thanks and petitions voiced to God for our general needs. This must necessarily be done in public, with a special time and place set aside for such assemblies. Such prayer is a precious thing and a powerful defense against the devil and his assaults. For in it, all Christendom combines its forces with one accord; and the harder it prays, the more effective it is and the sooner it is heard. At the present time, for example, it is of real benefit as a defense and a barrier against the many tricks which the devil might otherwise perpetrate through the members of his body. Thus it is certain that whatever still stands and endures, whether it is in the spiritual or in the secular realm, is being preserved through prayer.

But elsewhere I have often taken up and discussed the component parts and the characteristics which every real prayer has to possess,³ and therefore I shall only summarize them briefly here. They are as follows: first, the urging of God’s commandment, who has strictly required us to pray; second, His promise, in which He declares that He will hear us; third, an examination of our own need and misery, which burden lies so heavily on our shoulders that we have to carry it to God immediately and pour it out before Him, in accordance with His order and commandment; fourth, true faith, based on this word and promise of God, praying with the certainty and confidence that He will hear and help us—and all these things in the name of Christ, through whom our prayer is acceptable to the Father and for whose sake He gives us every grace and every good.

Christ indicates this by His use of one word when He says: “Pray to your Father who is in secret”; and later on He makes it even more explicit when He says: “Our Father who art in heaven.” For this is the same as teaching that our prayer should be addressed to God as our gracious and friendly father, not as a tyrant or an angry judge. Now, no one can do this unless he has a word of God which says that He wants to have us call Him “Father” and that as a father He has promised to hear us and help us. To do this, one must also have such a faith in his heart and a happy courage to call God his Father, praying on the basis of a hearty confidence, relying upon the certainty that the prayer will be heard, and then waiting for help.

But all these component parts were missing from the prayers of those Pharisees, who did not think beyond the question of how the work was to be done in order to give the impression that they were holy people who enjoyed praying; similarly, all that our monks and priests think of is how to use prayer as a means of filling their belly. So completely have they forgotten the necessity of this faith for proper prayer that it seems foolish or presumptuous to them for a person to claim with certainty that his prayer is pleasing to God and will be heard by Him. Although they kept on praying, therefore, they regarded it all as completely a risk; and thus they angered God terribly by their unbelief and their abuse of His name, contrary to both the First and the Second Commandment.

Learn, therefore, that there can be no real prayer without this faith. But do you feel weak and fearful? Your flesh and blood is always putting obstacles in the way of faith, as if you were not worthy enough or ready enough or earnest enough to pray. Or do you doubt that God has heard you, since you are a sinner? Then hold on to the Word and say: “Though I am sinful and unworthy, still I have the commandment of God, telling me to pray, and His promise that He will graciously hear me, not on account of my worthiness, but on account of the Lord Christ.” In this way you can chase away the thoughts and the doubts, and you can cheerfully kneel down to pray. You need not consider whether you are worthy or unworthy; all you need to consider is your need and His Word, on which He tells you to build. This is

especially so because He has set before you the manner of praying and put into your mouth the words you are to use when you pray, as follows here. Thus you may joyfully send up these prayers through Him and put them into His bosom, so that through His own merit He may bring them before the Father.

7. *And in praying do not heap up empty phrases as the Gentiles do; for they think that they will be heard for their many words.*

8. *Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask Him.*

9. *Pray, then, like this: Our Father who art in heaven, hallowed be Thy name.*

10. *Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.*

11. *Give us this day our daily bread;*

12. *And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors;*

13. *And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For Thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory, forever. Amen.*

Earlier He had denounced their false motivation in prayer, namely, the fact that they sought their own glory and profit among people, even in a work which was aimed at God alone, calling upon Him and asking for His help in our need and temptation. Now He goes on to denounce the false manner of their prayers, that is, the fact that they supposed praying meant using many words and babbling. He calls it the manner of the Gentiles, a reckless and worthless prattle, the sort of thing that would come from people who supposed that they would not be heard otherwise. For He saw very well that this would develop and that the same sort of abuse would continue in Christendom that existed among them already in those days: that prayer would become a mere work, to be judged on the basis of its size and length, as though this made it a precious accomplishment; and that instead of true prayer there would be mere jabbering and babbling, which did not belong to the experience of the heart. As we can see, this is what has happened to the inmates of the monasteries and the cloisters and to our whole clergy, whose way of life seems to have involved no other work than beating themselves and wearing themselves out every day with so many hours, as well as singing and reading their canonical hours at night. The more of this they could do, the holier and greater an act of worship did it seem. Yet amid all this, there was not a single one who spoke a genuine prayer from his heart; but they were all laboring under the gentile delusion that prayer meant making both God and oneself tired with yelling and murmuring, as though He neither could nor would listen any other way. And all they achieved by this was a useless waste of time; like asses, they simply punished themselves with their praying.

For this reason they themselves have said that there is no harder work than prayer. And of course, this is true if the aim is to turn prayer into a work or a chore which the body is forced to undertake, reading or singing for so many hours in a row. Therefore any day laborer would prefer to work at threshing for an entire day to just moving his mouth for two or three hours in a row or staring straight at a book.

In short, their prayers have not been the sighs or petitions of their hearts, but merely the slave labor of their mouths or their tongues. Even though a monk may have been reading or muttering his canonical times for forty years, he has not prayed from his heart for a single hour during all those years. They never think of this as an opportunity to present a need to God; all they think of is their own obligation to do this, and God's to pay attention to all this trouble and toil.

But the Christian's prayer is easy, and it does not cause hard work. For it proceeds in faith on the basis of the promise of God, and it presents its need from the heart. Faith quickly gets through telling what it wants; indeed, it does so with a sigh that the heart utters and that words can neither attain nor express. As Paul says (Rom. 8:26), "the Spirit prays." And because He knows that God is listening to Him, He has no need of such everlasting twaddle. That is how the saints prayed in the Scriptures, like Elijah, Elisha, David, and others—with brief but strong and powerful words. This is evident in the Psalter, where there is hardly a single psalm that has a prayer more than five or six verses long. Therefore the ancient fathers have said correctly that many long prayers are not the way. They recommend short, fervent prayers, where one sighs toward heaven with a word or two, as is often quite possible in the midst of reading, writing, or doing some other task.⁴

But the others, who make it nothing but a work of drudgery, can never pray with gladness or with devotion. They are glad when they are finally through with their babbling. And so it must be. Where there is no faith and no feeling of need in a petition, there the heart cannot be involved either. But where the heart is not involved and the body has to do all the work, there it becomes difficult drudgery. This is

evident even in physical work. How difficult and dreary it is for the person who is doing something unwillingly! But on the other hand, if the heart is cheerful and willing, then it does not even notice the work. So it is here, too: the man who is serious in his intentions and takes pleasure in prayer neither knows nor feels any toil and trouble; he simply looks at his need, and he has finished singing or praying the words before he has a chance to turn around. In other words, prayers ought to be brief, frequent, and intense. For God⁵ does not ask how much and how long you have prayed, but how good the prayer is and whether it proceeds from the heart.

Therefore Christ says now: “Your heavenly Father knows what you need before you ask for it.” It is as if He would say: “What are you up to? Do you suppose that you will talk Him down with your long babbling and make Him give you what you need? There is no need for you to persuade Him with your words or to give Him detailed instructions; for He knows beforehand what you need, even better than you do yourself.” If you came before a prince or a judge who knew your case better than you could describe it to him and tried to give him a long-winded account of it, he would have a perfect right to laugh at you or, more likely, to become displeased with you. Indeed, as St. Paul says (Rom. 8:26), “We do not know how we are to pray.” Therefore when He hears us, whatever He gives us is something in excess of our understanding or our hopes. Sometimes He lets us go on asking for something which He does not give right away, or perhaps does not give at all, knowing very well what is necessary and useful for us and what is not. We ourselves do not see this, but finally we have to admit that it would not have been good for us if He had done His giving on the basis of our petition. Therefore we must not go into a long harangue to give Him instructions or prescriptions about what He should do for us and how He should do it. He intends to give in such a way that His name might be hallowed, His kingdom extended, and His will advanced.

But you may say: “Since He knows and sees all our needs better than we do ourselves, why does He let us bring our petitions and present our need, instead of giving it to us without our petitioning? After all, He freely gives the whole world so much good every day, like the sun, the rain, crops and money, body and life, for which no one asks Him or thanks Him. He knows that no one can get along for a single day without light, food, and drink. Then why does He tell us to ask for these things?”

The reason He commands it is, of course, not in order to have us make our prayers an instruction to Him as to what He ought to give us, but in order to have us acknowledge and confess that He is already bestowing many blessings upon us and that He can and will give us still more. By our praying, therefore, we are instructing ourselves more than we are Him. It makes me turn around so that I do not proceed as do the ungodly, neither acknowledging this nor thanking Him for it. When my heart is turned to Him and awakened this way, then I praise Him, thank Him, take refuge with Him in my need, and expect help from Him. As a consequence of all this, I learn more and more to acknowledge what kind of God He is. Because I seek and knock at His door (Matt. 7:7), He takes pleasure in giving me ever more generous gifts. You see, that is how a genuine petitioner proceeds. He is not like those other useless babblers, who prattle a great deal but who never recognize all this. He knows that what he has is a gift of God, and from his heart he says: “Lord, I know that of myself I can neither produce nor preserve a piece of my daily bread; nor can I defend myself against any kind of need or misfortune. Therefore I shall look to Thee for it and request it from Thee, since Thou dost command me this way and dost promise to give it to me, Thou who dost anticipate my every thought and sympathize with my every need.”

You see, a prayer that acknowledges this truly pleases God. It is the truest, highest, and most precious worship which we can render to Him; for it gives Him the glory that is due Him. The others do not do this. Like pigs, they grab all the gifts of God and devour them. They take over one country or city or house after another. They never consider whether they should be paying attention to God. Meanwhile they lay claim to holiness, with their many loud tones and noises in church. But a Christian heart is one that learns from the Word of God that everything we have is from God and nothing is from ourselves. Such a heart accepts all this in faith and practices it, learning to look to Him for everything and to expect it from Him. In this way praying teaches us to recognize who we are and who God is, and to learn what we need and where we are to look for it and find it. The result of this is an excellent, perfect, and sensible man, one who can maintain the right relationship to all things.

Having denounced and rejected these false and useless prayers, Christ now proceeds to introduce an excellent and brief formula. It shows how we are to pray and what we are to pray for. It includes all sorts

of needs which ought to impel us to pray and of which we can daily remind ourselves with these short words. There is no excuse for anyone now, as though he did not know how or what to pray. Hence it is a very good practice, especially for the common man and for children and servants in the household, to pray the entire Lord's Prayer every day, morning and evening and at table, and otherwise, too, as a way of presenting all sorts of general needs to God. But since the Lord's Prayer has been adequately expounded in the Catechism and elsewhere,⁶ I will leave it at that and add no further comments here.

As has often been said, however, this is certainly the very best prayer that ever came to earth or that anyone could ever have thought up. Because God the Father composed it through His Son and placed it into His mouth, there is no need for us to doubt that it pleases Him immensely. At the very beginning He warns us to remember both His command and His promise, in the word "Our Father." He it is who demands this glory from us, that we should put our petitions to Him, as a child does to its father. He also wants us to have the confidence that He will gladly give us what we need. Also included is the reminder that we should glory in being His children through Christ. And so we come, on the basis of His command and His promise, and in the name of Christ, the Lord; and we present ourselves before Him with all confidence.

Now the first, second, and third petitions deal with the highest benefits that we receive from Him. In the first place, because He is our Father, He should receive from us the glory that is due Him, and His name should be held in high esteem throughout the world. By this petition I pile up on one heap every kind of false belief and worship, all of hell, and all sin and blasphemy. And I ask Him to put a stop to the blasphemous belief of the pope, the Turk, the schismatic spirits, and the heretics, all of whom desecrate and profane His name or seek their own glory under the pretext of His name. This is indeed only a brief phrase, but its meaning extends as far as the world and opposes all false doctrine and life.

In the second place, once we have His Word, true doctrine, and true worship, we also pray that His kingdom may be in us and remain in us; that is, that He may govern us in this doctrine and life, that He may protect and preserve us against all the power of the devil and his kingdom, and that He may shatter all the kingdoms that rage against His kingdom, so that it alone may remain. And in the third place, we pray that neither our will nor any other man's will, but His will alone may be done, and that what He plans and counsels may succeed and overcome all the schemes and undertakings of the world, as well as anything else that may set itself against His plans and counsels, even though the whole world were to mass itself and rally all its strength to defend its cause against Him. These are the three most important elements.

In the other four petitions we meet the needs that apply to our own daily life and to this poor, weak, and temporal existence. Therefore our first petition here is that He may give us our daily bread—that is, everything necessary for the preservation of this life, like food, a healthy body, good weather, house, home, wife, children, good government, and peace—and that He may preserve us from all sorts of calamities, sickness, pestilence, hard times, war, revolution, and the like. Our next petition is this: that He may forgive us our debts and not look upon the shameful and thankless⁷ way we misuse the benefits with which He daily provides us in such abundance; that this may not prompt Him to deny us these benefits or to withdraw them or to punish us with the disfavor we deserve; but that He may graciously pardon us, although we who are called "Christians" and "children of God" do not live as we should. The third of these petitions is brought on by the fact that we are living on earth, amid all sorts of temptation and trouble, with attacks from every side. Thus the source of the hindrance and the temptation we experience is not only external, from the world and the devil, but also internal, from our own flesh. Amid so much danger and temptation, we cannot live the way we should; nor would we be able to stand it for a single day. We ask Him, therefore, to sustain us in the midst of this danger and need so that it does not overcome and destroy us. And our final petition is that He would ultimately deliver us completely from all evil, and when the time comes for us to pass out of this life, that He would bestow upon us a gracious and blessed hour of death. In this brief compass we have laid all our physical and spiritual needs into His lap, and each individual word has summarized an entire world of meaning.

But in the text there is a small addition with which He concludes the prayer, a sort of thanksgiving and common confession, namely this: "For Thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory, forever." These are really the titles and names that are appropriate to God alone, for these three things He has reserved for Himself—to govern, to judge, and to glory. No one has a right to judge or to rule or to have sovereignty except God alone, or those whom He has commissioned with it, those through whom, as His servants, He

maintains His rule. In the same way, no man may exercise judgment over another, or become angry at him and punish him, unless he has the office to do so on God's behalf. For this is not a right innate in men, but one given by God. These are the two things that He names here: "the kingdom," that is, the sovereignty by which all authority is His; and then "the power," that is, the consequence of His authority, its execution, by which He can punish, subject the wicked to Himself, and protect the pious. For he who punishes is doing so in God's stead; all administering of justice, all protecting and preserving, is derived from His power. Therefore no one should wreak vengeance or exact punishment on his own; for it does not lie within his official capacity or ability, and it does not do any good either. As He says (Rom. 12:19): "Vengeance is Mine, I will repay"; and elsewhere He threatens (Matt. 26:52): "All who take the sword for vengeance will be punished by the sword."

In the same way "the glory," or honor or praise, belongs only to God. No one may boast of anything, his wisdom or holiness or ability, except through Him and from Him. When I honor a king or a prince and call him "gracious lord" or bend my knee before him, I am not doing this to him on account of his own person but on account of God, to one who is sitting in majesty in God's stead. It is the same when I show honor to my father and mother or to those who are in their stead. I am not doing this to a human being but to a divine office, and I am honoring God in them. Wherever there is authority and power, therefore, the glory and the praise belong to Him. And so His kingdom, power, and glory prevail throughout the world. It is He alone that is ruling, punishing, and being glorified in the divine offices and stations, like those of father, mother, master, judge, prince, king, and emperor. The devil is opposing this through his minions. He himself is seeking to exercise the authority and power, to wreak the vengeance and exact the punishment, and to monopolize all the glory. That is why the petitions for His name, His kingdom, and His will are foremost here; for they alone must prevail, and all other names, kingdoms, powers, and wills must be shattered. Thus we acknowledge that He is supreme in all three of these areas, but that the others are His instruments, by which He acts to accomplish these things.

14. *For if you forgive men their trespasses, your heavenly Father also will forgive you;*

15. *But if you do not forgive men their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses.*

This is a remarkable addition, but a very precious one. Someone may well wonder why He should append this addition to this particular petition: "Forgive us our debts." He could just as well have appended some such item to one of the others, and He could have said: "Give us our daily bread, as we give it to our children"; or, "Lead us not into temptation, as we do not tempt anyone"; or, "Deliver us from evil, as we save and deliver our neighbors." Yet the only petition that has an addition of this sort is this one, and it gives the impression that the forgiveness of sins is accomplished and merited by our forgiving. Then what would become of our doctrine that forgiveness must come only through Christ and must be received in faith?

The answer to the first part of the question is this: by putting the petition this way and connecting the forgiveness of sin with our forgiving, He had the special purpose of making mutual love a Christian obligation, and the continual forgiveness of the neighbor the primary and foremost duty of Christians, second only to faith and the reception of forgiveness. As we live in faith toward Him, therefore, so also we should live in love toward our neighbor. We should not bring annoyance or injury upon one another, but keep in mind always to forgive one another even though we have been injured, as is inevitable in this life; we should know that otherwise we shall not be forgiven either. Where anger and ill will are an obstacle, this spoils the whole prayer and prevents one from being able to pray or to wish any of the preceding petitions either. You see, this means we must establish a firm and strong bond that will hold us together. When we plan to come before God in prayer for what we are to obtain, we must not be disunited or divided into schisms, factions, and sects, but we must be tolerant toward one another in love and remain of one mind. When this is the case, the Christian man is perfect; he believes correctly, and he loves correctly. Whatever other faults he may have, these are to be consumed in his prayer, and it is all forgiven and remitted.

But how is it that by these words He establishes such a close connection between forgiveness and our works when He says: "If you forgive your neighbor, you will be forgiven," and vice versa? That does not seem to make forgiveness dependent upon faith. Answer: As I have often said elsewhere, the forgiveness of sins takes place in two ways: first inwardly, through the Gospel and the Word of God, which is received by faith in the heart toward God; second, outwardly through works, about which 2 Peter 1:10 says in its

instructions regarding good works: “Dear brethren, be zealous to confirm your calling and election.” He means to say that we should confirm our possession of faith and the forgiveness of sin by showing our works, making the tree manifest by means of its fruit and making it evident that this is a sound tree and not a bad one (Matt. 7:17). Where there is a genuine faith, there good works will certainly follow, too. In this way a man is pious and upright, both inwardly and outwardly, both before God and before men. For this follows as the fruit by which I assure myself and others that I have a genuine faith; this is the only way I can know or see this.

In this passage, similarly, the outward forgiveness that I show in my deeds is a sure sign that I have the forgiveness of sin in the sight of God. On the other hand, if I do not show this in my relations with my neighbor, I have a sure sign that I do not have the forgiveness of sin in the sight of God but am still stuck in my unbelief. You see, this is the twofold forgiveness: one inward in the heart, clinging only to the Word of God; and one outward, breaking forth and assuring us that we have the inward one. This is how we distinguish works as outward righteousness from faith as inward righteousness, but in such a way that the inward has precedence as the stem and root from which the good works must grow as fruit. Outward righteousness, however, is the witness of this, and as Peter says, its “certification,” an assurance that the other is really present. Whoever lacks the inward righteousness does not do any of the outward works. On the other hand, where the outward signs and proofs are lacking, I cannot be sure of the inward, but I am deceiving both myself and others. But if I look and find myself gladly forgiving my neighbor, then I can draw this conclusion and say: “I am not doing this work naturally, but by the grace of God I feel different from the way I used to be.”

Let this brief answer suffice against the idle talk of the sophists. But it is also true that this work, as He discusses it here, is not a mere work like the others, which we do of ourselves; for it does not ignore faith. He takes the work and puts a promise on top of it, so that it might quite appropriately be called a sacrament, a means of strengthening faith. For example, Baptism, too, should be regarded as a work that I do when I baptize or am baptized. But since the word of God is present in it, it is not a mere work that amounts to something or accomplishes something of itself, but a divine word and sign upon which faith depends. In the same way, our prayers as our own work would not amount to anything or accomplish anything; but what makes it amount to something is the fact that it proceeds on the basis of His commandment and promise. For that reason it may well be regarded as a sacrament and as a divine work rather than a work of our own.

The reason I say this is that the sophists pay attention to the works we do on our own, apart from the word and promise of God. Therefore, when they hear and read statements like these, making mention of works, they have to say that man merits this by his action. But the Scriptures teach us otherwise. We should not look to ourselves but to the word and promise of God, clinging to it by faith. Then if you do a work on the basis of this word and promise, you have a sure indication that God is gracious to you. In this way your own work, which God has now taken to Himself, is to be a sure sign of forgiveness for you.

Now God has provided us with various means, ways, and channels, through which to take hold of grace and the forgiveness of sin: first, Baptism and the Sacrament; also, as I have just said, prayer; also absolution; and our forgiveness throughout. Thus we are abundantly taken care of, and we can find grace and mercy everywhere. Where would you look for it any closer than with your neighbor, with whom you live every day and toward whom every day you have ample reason to practice this forgiveness? It is inevitable that you should be offended, deeply and often. It is, therefore, not only in the church or in the presence of the priest, but in the very midst of our own life, that we have a daily sacrament or baptism, one brother with another and everyone at home in his house. For if you take hold of the promise through this work, you have the very thing that you receive in Baptism. How could God have endowed us more richly with His grace than by hanging such a common baptism around our necks and attaching it to the Lord's Prayer, a baptism that everyone discovers in himself when he prays and forgives his neighbor? Now, no one has any reason to complain or to make the excuse that he cannot get around to it, or that it is too sublime and distant for him, or that it is too difficult and expensive; for it has been brought home to him and his neighbor and planted on his very doorstep, in fact, put into his very bosom.

So you see that if you look at it not on the basis of the work itself but on the basis of the word that is attached to it, you find in it a wonderful and precious treasure. Now it is no longer your work, but a divine sacrament and a great and powerful comfort that you can attain to the grace of being able to forgive your

neighbor, even though you may not be able to come to the other sacraments. This should prompt you to do this work gladly and from the heart and to thank God that you are worthy of such grace. You ought to pursue this even to the end of the world and spend everything you have for it, as we used to do for those fake indulgences. Whoever refuses to accept this must really be a shameful and accursed man, especially if he hears and acknowledges this grace and still remains so bent and stubborn that he refuses to forgive. By such a refusal he simultaneously loses both Baptism and the Sacrament, along with everything else. For they are all linked together, and whoever has one should have them all or keep none of them. Whoever is baptized should also receive the Sacrament; whoever receives the Sacrament must also pray; and whoever prays must also forgive. If you do not forgive, you have a terrible sentence here: your sins will not be forgiven either, even though you are in a Christian company and are enjoying the Sacrament and other benefits; in fact, your sins will damage and damn you all the more on account of this.

In order to arouse us even further in the direction of doing this, Christ has used kind and friendly words, saying, “If you forgive men their trespasses,” rather than saying “their malice and wickedness” or “their insolence and viciousness.” He uses “trespass” to designate the kind of sin that is committed more from weakness or ignorance than from malice. Now, why should He minimize and underemphasize the sin of our neighbor this way? After all, we often see many people sinning deliberately, out of sheer viciousness and a malicious will. He does it in order to put your anger to rest and to soften you so that you are glad to forgive. He is more interested in making your heart sweet and friendly than in making the sin as great as it really is in itself. For in the sight of God it is and should be great enough to be worthy of eternal damnation and to lock the gates of heaven, even though it is only a tiny sin or a failing, as long as the sinner does not confess it and beg your pardon for it.

But He does not want you and me to look at the sin this way. It is not up to us to punish the sin but to forgive it. This is the way you ought to think: although your neighbor has acted against you out of malice,⁸ still he is confused, captivated, and dazzled by the devil. Therefore you should be pious enough to take pity on him for being overpowered by the devil. As far as the devil is concerned, then, this may be called a great and unforgivable sin, since he has put the man up to it. But as far as the man himself is concerned, it should be called a trespass and a fault. This is what Christ Himself has done toward us by praying on the cross (Luke 23:34): “Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do.” That minimized our sin and underemphasized it, though in itself it was the very greatest sin that had ever taken place on earth. For what greater sin can there be than this shameful torture and murder of God’s only Son?

Yet you must treat this mistake and fault in such a way that the neighbor who has sinned against you confesses it, asks for forgiveness, and decides to improve. Elsewhere⁹ I have said that there are two kinds of sin: one kind is confessed, and this no one should leave unforgiven; the other kind is defended, and this no one can forgive, for it refuses either to be counted as sin or to accept forgiveness. When Christ talks about forgiveness or the keys in Matthew 18:18, therefore, He puts the two side by side, loosing and binding, to make this clear. It is impossible to loose a sin which a person refuses to acknowledge as a sin that needs to be forgiven; such a sin should be bound to the abyss of hell. On the other hand, those sins that are confessed should be loosed and elevated to heaven. This provision in the Office of the Keys also applies to the relation of every Christian with his neighbor. He should be ready to forgive everyone that injures him. And yet, if someone refuses to acknowledge the sin and to stop it, but persists in it, you cannot forgive him—not on your account but on his, because he refuses to accept the forgiveness. But as soon as he owns up to being guilty and requests forgiveness, everything must be granted, and the absolution must follow right away. Since he is punishing himself and desisting from his sin, so that there is no longer any sin about him, I should let the matter of his sin drop. But if he holds on to it and refuses to drop it, I cannot take it from him but must let him remain stuck in it; for he himself has changed a forgivable sin into an unforgivable one. In other words, if he refuses to confess, his conscience must be burdened as heavily as possible, without any sign of grace; for he stubbornly insists upon being the devil’s own. On the other hand, if he confesses his sin and begs your pardon but you refuse to forgive him, you have loaded the sin upon yourself, and it will condemn you as well.

By referring to a sin as a “trespass,” therefore, Christ means that it should be confessed; He does not mean to deny that it is wrong. Nor is He making it your duty to approve of it as if it were the right kind of behavior. Rather, you should treat it as right or good only on the condition that it has become forgivable, so tiny as to be called only a fault. Then you can say to your neighbor: “I cannot approve of it, and it is

still wrong. Nevertheless, because you make your confession and because your heart is different now and you have no resentment against me, I will gladly make the concession of calling it a fault and an oversight, and I will refrain from any anger.”

Now, if you take this attitude toward your neighbor, God will likewise treat you with that kind of sweet and friendly heart. That great and grave sin that you have committed against Him and are still committing, He will make so tiny that He will call it only a fault if you confess it and ask for forgiveness; for He is more inclined to forgive than we can imagine Him to be. To bribe God into having this kind of heart toward you, you would certainly be willing to surrender your body and life and to travel to the end of the world, the way people used to travel in the days of the papacy, torturing themselves for it with many kinds of works. But now such a heart is being offered to you here, presented and granted completely free, as are Baptism, the Gospel, and all His blessings. You receive more than you could ever acquire with all your works and the works of all men combined. Here you have a sure promise, one that neither deludes nor deceives you, that, however many or great all your sins may be, in His sight they are to be as tiny as mere everyday human weaknesses, which He will not count or remember as long as you have faith in Christ. Other Sacraments have their source and their power in Christ, the Lord. In the same way our prayer is heard, and we have certain forgiveness, not because we have deserved it, but because He has won it all for us and bestowed it upon us. Thus He always remains the only Mediator, through whom we have everything; even that forgiveness which is conditional upon our work of forgiving avails only through Him.

Now you see why Christ attached this addition to the prayer. He did so to establish the closest possible bonds between us and to preserve His Christendom in the unity of the Spirit (Eph. 4:3), both in faith and in love. We must not let any sin or fault divide us or rob us of our faith and of everything else. It is inevitable that there be friction among us every day in all our social and business contacts, where things are said that you do not like to hear and things are done that you cannot stand. This gives rise to anger and discord. We still have our flesh and blood about us, behaving in its own way and easily letting slip an evil word or an angry gesture or action, which is an affront to love. Therefore there must be continual forgiveness among Christians, and we continually need forgiveness from God, always clinging to the prayer: “Forgive us, as we forgive.” That is, unless we are the kind of ungodly people who are always more ready to see a speck in our neighbor’s eye than the log in our own (Matt. 7:3) and throw our own sin behind us. If we were to look at ourselves every day from morning till evening, we would find ourselves so infested that we would forget about other people and be glad that we have a chance to pray.

16. *And when you fast, do not look dismal, like the hypocrites, for they disfigure their faces that their fasting may be seen by men. Truly, I say to you, they have their reward.*

17. *But when you fast, anoint your head and wash your face,*

18. *That your fasting may not be seen by men but by your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.*

As He has denounced their almsgiving and their praying, so now He denounces their fasting. For these three good works include just about all the rest. The first means that we do all kinds of good works toward our neighbor; the second means that we are concerned about all sorts of needs, both public and private, and that we bring these before God; and the third means that we discipline our body. As they had shamefully misused both almsgiving and praying by seeking not God’s glory but their own praise through it, so they misused and perverted fasting. It was not a means of controlling or disciplining their own bodies or of praising and thanking God, but a device for having people look at them, talk about them, admire them, and say in astonishment: “Oh, what wonderful saints these people are! They do not live like other, ordinary people. They go around in gray coats, with their heads hanging down and a sour, pale expression on their faces. If such people do not get to heaven, what will become of the rest of us?” It is not His intention to reject or despise fasting in itself, any more than He rejects almsgiving and praying. Rather He is supporting these practices and teaching their proper use. In the same way it is His intention to restore proper fasting, to have it rightly used and properly understood, as any good work should be.

The origin of fasting among the Jews was in the prescription of Moses (Lev. 23:27) that they should fast for approximately fourteen days in a row during the Feast of the Atonement in the autumn. That was the common fast that they all observed at the same time. In addition, the Pharisees had their own special fast, by which they did something more and acquired a holier reputation than the others. The common fast

was not appointed as a means for them to be seen by other people, since it was kept by the entire nation. Whatever is common to all cannot become the special boast of one. This is why they had to undertake many special fasts, to give the impression that they were much higher and more spiritual than ordinary people. Hence their boast in the Gospel against Christ (Matt. 9:14): “Why do the disciples of the Pharisees fast so often, but your disciples do not fast?” In addition they made use of distinctive gestures and marks to let it be known when they were fasting. They disfigured their faces, they did not wash or dress up, they wore a sad and gloomy look, and they affected such deep seriousness that people had to talk and sing about it.

Now Christ comes along to demolish such fasting and to teach the exact opposite when He says: “If you want to fast, then fast in such a way that you do not wear a sad expression. Wash and anoint your face so that you seem to be merry, happy, and cheerful, like a person on a holiday. That way no one will be able to tell the difference between your fasting and your festivities.” It was the custom of the Jews to sprinkle themselves with perfumes and to anoint their heads so that their whole body was fragrant when they were having a celebration or when they wanted to be cheerful. If you fast in this way, so that it is a matter between you and your Father alone, then you have fasted rightly, and it is pleasing to Him. This does not make it wrong to wear poor clothes on a fast day or to go without washing, but it rejects the motivation when you do this for the sake of acquiring a reputation, and when you use special gestures to make people stare. We often read that when people were fasting, they put on sackcloth and strewed ashes on their heads, the way the king of Nineveh did together with the whole city (Jonah 3:5, 6). But that was another kind of fasting, which they learned from their need and misery.

From the Jews we took over our great season of fasting in Lent.¹⁰ At first we kept fourteen days, too; but then we became holier and stretched it out to four weeks, and then finally extended it to forty days. But even that was not enough, so that as additional fast days we set aside two days of every week throughout the year, Friday and Saturday. Finally there were the four golden fasts or compulsory fasts. Now, all these were only the general fasts. Over and above them, Advent found some special saints of its own, who made it into a fast. On top of this, there were the monastic observances in the monasteries and the particular saints that everyone selected in excess of the general fasts. The end result of all this was that none of this seemed to be of any value unless each one set up his own fast in addition.

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Now, if you put all this fasting together on one pile, it is not worth a heller. The ancient fathers may have meant it well and have observed the fasts properly, but the filth soon overwhelmed¹¹ and ruined it and made it worthless. And that was just what it deserved. As it was a mere human plaything to have these many special fasts, so it soon degenerated into shameful abuse. For I really dare say that in what they termed “fasting” in the papacy I never saw a genuine fast. How can I call it a fast if someone prepares a lunch of expensive fish, with the choicest spices, more and better than for two or three other meals, and washes it down with the strongest drink, and spends an hour or three at filling his belly till it is stuffed? Yet that was the usual thing and a minor thing even among the very strictest monks. But it was the holy fathers, the bishops, the abbots, and the other prelates who were really strict in their observance, with ten and twenty courses and so much refreshment at night that several threshers could have lived on it for three days. It may well be that certain prisoners or poor and sick people were compelled to fast on account of poverty, but I know of no one who fasted for the sake of devotion, and still less now. But now these dear papists of mine have all become good Lutherans, and none of them thinks about fasting any more. Meanwhile the poor pastors on our side have to suffer hunger and trouble, and they have to observe a genuine fast every day in place of such people.

Thus this kind of fasting has turned out to be a great deal worse than the fasting of the Jews and Pharisees. They at least fasted honestly and truly, except that they sought to enhance their own reputation

by means of it. But under the name of fasting ours has become nothing more than feasting. It is no fast at all, but a mockery of God and of the people. In addition, they have added the disgraceful idea that there is a distinction among the kinds of food and that some of these are forbidden. They call it fasting if you abstain from eating meat; but meanwhile you may eat the finest fish with the most expensive sauces and spices and the strongest wine! That is why I have advised, and still do, that such fasting be trampled underfoot as a mockery and a reproach to God. It irks me that some people should practice and permit this mockery in Christendom, deceiving God with the mask of saying that such a life of gluttony and guzzling and belly-filling should be called a fast and a good work.

Now, this disgraceful deception is so coarse and impudent that it does not need the Scriptures for a rebuke; any peasant, even a seven-year-old child, can grasp and understand this. But the disgrace has been compounded with an even more disgraceful abuse, one that ruins even genuine fasting. Fasting has become a means of seeking great merit before God, of atoning for sin, and of reconciling God; in absolution, therefore, they have imposed this fasting as an act of penance. That is what I call fasting in the name of all the devils, hitting Christ in the mouth and trampling Him underfoot. If there has to be some sort of abuse and if some evil has to be done, I would rather let a man guzzle himself into a drunken stupor. If I have to look at filth, I would rather see a gorged pig than a saint like this, even if he fasts most strictly on bread and water. This abomination still fills the teachings and the books of all the monks, the bulls of all the popes, and all the pulpits. Even when they are doing their very best, this is the only kind of fasting about which they know anything. I will not discuss the extravagant way they exalt the gross and shameful lie about fasting to which we have referred, and the way they have used it to establish and maintain the idolatry of the saints. Yet no one has been found to say a single word against these abuses. Therefore I still say that never in my whole life have I seen a fast in the entire papacy that was really a Christian fast. All I have ever seen was disgraceful feasting and gluttony instead of genuine fasting, together with sheer idolatry and hypocrisy designed to deceive God and to fool¹² the people. Therefore let us learn here what it really means to fast.

There are two kinds of fasts that are good and commendable. One could be called a secular or civil fast; it is ordered by the government as any other governmental ordinance or command is, and it is not required as a good work or as a divine service. I would like to see something like this, and I would lend it my counsel and support, if the emperor or the princes would issue an order that for one or two days a week there should be no eating or selling of meat. This would be a good and useful ordinance for the country, so that everything is not gobbled up as it is now, until finally hard times come and nothing is available. I would also be glad if at certain times, once a week or as often as might seem best, there were no evening meal, except a piece of bread and something to drink, to keep everything from being used up with the kind of incessant guzzling and gobbling that we Germans do, and to teach people to live a little more moderately, especially those who are young, sturdy, and strong. But this should be a completely secular arrangement, subject to the authority of the government.

In addition to this fast there should also be a general spiritual fast for us Christians to observe. It would be a good arrangement to observe a general fast for a few days before Easter, before Pentecost, and before Christmas, to distribute the fasts over the year. But on no account dare it be done for the purpose of making it an act of worship or a means of meriting something and reconciling God. But let it be an outward Christian discipline and exercise for the young and simple people, by which they can learn to keep track of the seasons and to make the proper distinctions throughout the year, the way the four Ember weeks have been observed for everyone to keep.¹³ For certain seasons have to be distinguished and set aside as fasts and festivals for the sake of the common herd, to preach and commemorate the principal events and deeds of Christ. This would not be regarded as a special divine service, but only as a memorial day, for dividing up the entire year and determining what season it is. In this sense I would be willing to condone fasts on every Friday evening throughout the year, setting it aside as a distinctive day. But I neither could nor would introduce such fasting unless it had been agreed upon harmoniously beforehand. You see, in this way the Christian Church would have plenty of fasting to do, and no one would have the right to accuse us of despising and completely rejecting the practice of fasting.

But even this is not the real Christian fasting that Christ has in mind, the fasting appropriate to each individual which, if it is to be worthy of being called true Christian fasting, involves more than merely abstaining from food in the evening. This is only a part of it, and the smallest part at that. True fasting

consists in the disciplining and restraining of your body, which pertains not only to eating, drinking, and sleeping, but also to your leisure, your pleasure,¹⁴ and to everything that may delight your body or that you do to provide for it and take care of it. To fast means to refrain and hold back from all such things, and to do so only as a means of curbing and humbling the flesh. This is how Scripture enjoins fasting, calling it “afflicting the soul” (Lev. 16:29), “afflicting the body,”¹⁵ and the like, so that it stays away from pleasure, good times, and fun. Such was the fasting of the ancient fathers. They neither ate nor drank anything all day, they walked around sorrowful all day, and they withheld everything from their bodies, to the limit of natural endurance.

Such fasting is not a very frequent thing nowadays, particularly among our clergy, among the monks and the priests. The Carthusians claim to lead the strictest lives, and they do not observe it. They observe part of it for the sake of appearances, when they go around in clothes made of horsehair. But still they gorge their bellies full of the best food and drink, and they have a soft life without a care in the world. No, it will not do for you to quibble and deceive. Fasting means humbling your body and withholding from it whatever pleases and gratifies it. And even if they really did fast correctly, the devilish misuse of basing their holiness upon this and of trying to get something special from God by it would still be there.

Even if our fasting is the very best possible, we must not rely upon it. For there may be a secret scoundrel lurking behind it, an enemy of faith or love. Thus in the passage quoted above (Is. 58:3, 4),¹⁶ the prophet Isaiah denounces the kind of fasting by which they tortured their bodies but simultaneously tormented and troubled their debtors. So it was that Christ rejected the fasting of the Pharisees, not because they did not really fast, but because by their fasting they sought to enhance their own reputation and glory.

It takes many things, therefore, for fasting to be a truly good work and one pleasing to God. He wants nothing at all to do with you if by your fasting you court Him as if you were a great saint, and yet meanwhile you nurse a grudge or anger against your neighbor. If you want to fast right, see to it first that you are a pious man, one who both believes and loves correctly; for this work deals not with God or our neighbor, but with our own body. But nobody wants to do this. Therefore I have a right to say that I have never seen any real fasting. All there has been is a fasting that goes halfway or part way, and nothing but deception. To make an impression, someone will skip a meal but go right on tickling his body every day. One exception now may be certain pious preachers and ministers in the villages and elsewhere, who are compelled to fast from necessity and to suffer scorn, ridicule, and all sorts of trouble. No one gives them so much as a piece of bread. They do not have any fun or fancy clothes or easy times. They are the ones who wander around in the world, people whom no one knows, “of whom the world is not worthy,” as the Epistle to the Hebrews says (Heb. 11:38).¹⁷ But the Carthusian monks go around in their hairshirts, and our sectarian vermin in their gray coats. At these people we are supposed to gaze with our mouths open and say: “Oh, what holy people they are! How terrible and difficult it must be for them to go around in such dingy and shabby clothes!” And yet they never stop swilling and stuffing their belly full.

You see, what I call the real fasting of Christians means that you punish your whole body and compel it, as well as all five senses, to forsake and do without whatever makes life comfortable. This may be either voluntary or compulsory, provided that you willingly accept it. You may eat either fish or meat, but no more than your real need requires, to keep your body from being injured or incapacitated and yet to hold it in check and to keep it busy so that it does not become idle or lazy or lewd. But I will not take it upon myself to prescribe this sort of fasting, nor will I impose it upon anyone else. Here everyone has to take a look at himself and judge his own feelings. We are not all alike, and so no one can set up a general rule. Everyone must impose or adjust the fasting in relation to his own strength and to his feelings about how much his own flesh requires. For this fasting is directed only against the lust and the passions of the flesh, not against nature itself. It is not confined to any rule or measure, to any time or place. If necessary, it should be practiced continually, to hold a tight rein on the body and to get it used to enduring discomfort, in case it should become necessary to do so. It should be left up to the discretion of every individual, and no one should take it upon himself to apportion it by rules, as the pope has done. It is likewise impossible to apportion praying, but it must be left free, according to what each individual’s devotion or need may suggest or require. Almsgiving cannot be legislated or forced either, to whom or when or how much we are to give.

This is as far as the general rule for all Christians goes. Everyone is commanded to live a moderate, sober, and disciplined life, not for one day or one year, but for every day and always. This is what the Scriptures call “sobriety,” or sober living.¹⁸ In this way, though they may not all be able to observe the high fasts, they will at least do this much. They will be moderate in eating, drinking, sleeping, and in all the necessities of their body. They will do as much of these things as their need requires, not as much as their greedy appetite or whim requires; and they will not live here as though the purpose of life were only eating and drinking, dancing and having a gay time. But if their weakness sometimes causes them to go too far, let that be included in the article entitled “the forgiveness of sins,” together with other daily trespasses.

But above all, you must see to it that you are already pious and a true Christian and that you are not planning to render God a service by this fasting. Your service to God must be only faith in Christ and love to your neighbor, simply doing what is required of you. If this is not your situation, then you would do better to leave fasting alone. The only purpose of fasting is to discipline the body by outwardly cutting off both lust and the opportunity for lust, the same thing that faith does inwardly in the heart.

Let this discussion suffice with regard to fasting. Now we also have to look at the words that Christ appends to all three of these items—almsgiving, praying, and fasting: they are to be in secret, and then our Father, who sees in secret, will reward them openly. This statement of assurance is necessary for Christians who are upright in their performance of these works. In the world they certainly see their works slandered and covered up and concealed in such a way that no ungodly person can see them; and if he does see them, he will not admit it, even with his eyes open. Take our own case as an example. No one sees the good that we achieve and accomplish by the grace of God. The whole world does nothing but denounce us as people who despise and forbid praying, fasting, and all good works, who are the cause of misfortune and unrest. But they shall not see our prayer, whether public or private, even though they hear it and stand right next to us as we are doing it. In fact, they would like to attack us in public, while we are doing good and helping to keep the peace. God has so ordained it, as Scripture says (Is. 26:10), that no wicked person shall see the majesty of God, that is, everything that God says and does. As Isaiah also says (Is. 6:10): “Harden the heart of this people, and make their ears heavy, and shut their eyes; lest they see with their open eyes, and hear with their ears, and understand with their hearts, and are converted.”

That is the way it is with us, too, in both our doctrine and our life. I am sure that our Gospel is not hidden in itself, but broadcast so widely that they all see and hear it. Otherwise they would not rage against it so furiously. Nevertheless they cannot see it, and they have to call it not “Gospel,” but “damned heresy.” Similarly, they do not see its fruits in us, the good works that we show even toward them as our enemies, humbling ourselves utterly before them, offering them peace and every good thing, and faithfully praying for them. Yet they cannot bring themselves to admit this, but this very fact causes them to persecute us with even greater cruelty. For the same reason they do not see our fasting either, the way our preachers willingly endure hunger and trouble in order to serve the people. But when they have a good, fat collation, at which they fast with three or four courses, that is something precious and very saintly! Likewise our praying must be regarded as worthless in comparison with their babbling and howling in the churches.

You see, the whole of the Christian life has to be hidden and remain hidden this way. It cannot achieve great fame or put on much of a display or show before the world. So let it go at that. Do not worry about the way it is hidden, covered up, and buried, and the way no one sees it or notices it. Be content with the fact that your Father up there in heaven sees it. He has sharp eyes and can see a very long distance, even though it may be concealed by big, dark clouds and buried deep in the earth. Consequently the life of all Christians is intended for the eyes of God alone, and that is how it all comes out. We could live any way we pleased, and we could do as well as possible. Still what we did could not make the world satisfied or content or thankful, and it does not really deserve our help and kindness. Therefore we must give the world its walking papers again and send it home to the devil. With our confident declarations we must defy it and sing:

Let the world go or let it come,
It has no sense, the world is dumb.¹⁹

It is enough that our action is intended to satisfy and to glorify the One who sees it. God willing, the world will not make us start or stop anything with its thanks or its abuse, its anger or its laughter. We cannot

make it any different from the way it has always been. Then why should we strive after its honor or its gratitude, which we cannot obtain? No, this we will commend to the scoundrels who wear rosaries around their necks, who howl day and night in the choir, who devour nothing but fish and stinking oil, and who do nothing but lost works. Let them have the honor and glory of the world. They deserve each other and they belong together, like cattle and stall, at the rear of the devil. As the works are, so the one who applauds the works should be, so that one villain may praise another.

One part of the consolation is in our knowledge that the world is not worthy of us, but that we have another One in heaven, who sees us and our works. The other part is in His statement: “Your Father who sees in secret will reward you openly.” Not only will it be seen, it will be rewarded—and not secretly but openly, for the whole world to see it, together with its own eternal ignominy. Therefore let Him handle it. He will not leave it back there in the darkness, but He will bring it to the light of day; and He will do so on earth, in the sight of the people, as Psalm 37 teaches and consoles us (Ps. 37:5, 6): “Commit your way to the Lord; trust in Him, and He will do it well. He will bring forth your vindication as the light, and He will make your cause so clear that it will shine like the dear sun at noonday.” Look how shamefully the dear martyrs were murdered, and yet now they shine forth so brightly that by comparison the whole world is nothing but a stench. Thus before our own time John Hus was condemned in an abominable fashion that was unheard of before, and they supposed that his name was obliterated forever. Yet now he is shining forth with such glory that his cause and his teaching have to be praised before the whole world, while the pope’s cause lies ignominiously in the manure.

So let us be shoveled under now and stay in hiding. The time will come when God will pull us out for our cause and our way of life to shine before the eyes of the whole world even in this life, but still more gloriously on that day. Then some poor man will step forward with his fruit and his good works, and he will put the whole papacy and the world to shame. He will be sheer light and brilliance; they will be nothing but filth. We have to cling to the Word of Christ, and we must not let it bother or annoy us that now the world besmirches us and casts us off into darkness. We must look to Him and do everything for His sake. For the work and the Word of God cannot remain in obscurity. It must come forth into the light, regardless of how deeply it is covered up and buried. Whenever I have looked at the papacy, I myself have been amazed at how the devil has managed to use the abominations of the pope to throw the dear Gospel into a manure pile and a puddle, how he has buried it so deeply under the perversion of Masses, purgatory, and innumerable other things that it seemed impossible to me for the truth ever to come out from under all this. Still it had to come out, precisely when it was down the deepest and when they were thinking that they would remain in control forever.

That is what happened to Christ Himself. They had put Him under the ground, and they thought He was buried so deep that no one would ever sing or speak His name again. But just then He flashed forth, and by His Word He began to shine so brilliantly that it destroyed them. This ought to make us feel safe, too; for we have His Word that though our teaching and our works may be hidden now, they must come to the light and be praised in the presence of all the world—that is, unless God Himself stays in the dark.

You see, this is the promise given to us for our comfort and our admonition. We should exercise ourselves in genuine good works, without worrying because the world takes no notice of them. For the world is too blind to notice them. It does not recognize the Word and the works of God any more than it recognizes God Himself. It will never attain to the vision of how marvelous a baptized child is, or a Christian who receives the Sacrament and who gladly hears the Word of God. It must always look at these things as merely a waterbath or a piece of bread, or useless palaver. In the same way it fails to see what a man is doing when he properly fasts or prays. Therefore we commend it to the One who can see it, and we hope that He will bring disgrace upon the blind and crazy saints whose great and glittering performance now obscures the life and the works of Christians.

19. *Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal,*

20. *But lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust consumes and where thieves do not break in and steal.*

21. *For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also.*

So far He²⁰ has denounced their false interpretation of the Decalog, purifying and cleansing their confused and obscured teaching. Then He went on to teach about genuine good works, in opposition to the

glitter of their false good works. Thus He has taught the right understanding of the Decalog and the right performance of works. Now He begins His warning against the temptations that are an obstacle to this teaching, a warning that continues almost to the eighth chapter. He will do this with the immense skill of a good teacher, who skips nothing that serves to keep us in the right teaching and life.

First of all He takes up that great and beautiful vice called greed. Whenever the Gospel is taught and people seek to live according to it, there are two terrible plagues that always arise: false preachers who corrupt the teaching, and then Sir Greed, who obstructs right living. Now that the Gospel is being preached again, the people have become much greedier than they were before. They scrimp and scrape as if they were practically dying of hunger. They used to go around as if they were blind and transfixed, they used to let the preachers tell them any kind of silly notion, and they contributed their dues in piles. They did not see how much it was, and they did not complain. Now that their eyes are opened and they know how they ought to live and what genuine good works are, they watch their pfennigs so closely and they are so greedy that you would think every one of them wanted to take all the property in the world for himself. The only way I can account for this or explain where it came from is that it must be a plague from the devil himself. He tries to obscure the light of the Gospel by inserting this shameful vice. The Gospel gives us the consolation not only that we shall live forever hereafter, but also that we shall have enough to eat here, as Psalm 8 declares (Ps. 8:5–8): Christ shall be a King and Lord over the whole world, and in His hand He will have sheep and oxen and all the animals on earth, so that He will not let us starve to death. We know all this, and yet we ourselves are stuck deeper in greed and anxiety about our temporal nourishment than we used to be. We are always short of money and running out of funds, and for the glory of God we cannot give one tenth as much as we used to stuff into the jaws of the devil.

Christ taught the same thing in many other places and predicted it. For example, when He sent out His apostles to preach. He was concerned and He warned them mainly about two things of which they were to beware, false teaching and greed. And He severely forbade them to take any provisions with them for the trip or to be worried about what they were to eat and to drink (Matt. 10:9, 10). As I have said, there are two most dangerous and corrupting forces in Christendom: spiritually, it is the false teaching that corrupts faith; physically, it is the greed that corrupts its fruit. Once doctrine and life have begun to go in the right direction, therefore, preaching and warning are necessary to stay on the right track and not to be diverted from it by a false interpretation of Scripture; furthermore, to be on the lookout lest greed secretly sneak into us and take over. Then we shall not have our aim only on temporal things and on having enough here, as if that were everything. This is a dangerous vice that sticks to a person. It can put on a good front and make a fine impression that deceives even Christians, so that no one can feel secure against it. People look at their lot in the world, at the affliction that the world is continually inflicting upon them when it begrudges them so much as a crust of bread. On account of the world they almost have to die of hunger. Thus the poor preachers now are compelled to endure trouble and want. They undergo such temptation that they begin to think about acquiring and accumulating something to enable them to remain in the world. Finally they fall into worldly care and greed, they neglect their ministries on account of this, and some of them even surrender the Gospel completely.

You see, that is why Christ begins now to preach many words against the great idol Mammon, drawing a most ugly kind of picture of him to put people on their guard against him. The first thing He says is: “Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust corrupt and where thieves break in and steal.” The treasures on earth He assigns to three trustees—rust, moths, and thieves. These are miserable watchmen to put in charge of treasures! But God has wisely ordained that wherever there is a treasure, there must be such fellows to watch it, just as there are usually sparrows or rats or mice near the grain. And that is just what we deserve; for we do not use our money and property rightly, and in our miserable greed we scrape up everything for ourselves, while no one gives or grants anything to anyone else.

But by “moths and rust” He does not refer merely to the ones that consume clothing or iron or brass. By “mice and rats” He does not mean only the ones that are caught in traps. And He does not apply the name “thieves” only to the ones that secretly rob the money boxes. He is also talking about huge living moths and public thieves. There are, for instance, the great braggarts and bigwigs²¹ at court, who can clean out a prince’s granary and treasury and finally strip him of everything he has. And in the cities there are not only the people who break into a citizen’s house, but also the ones who cleverly and secretly suck out

a city's resources with their usury and their swindles in the market and wherever else they can. In short, wherever there is money and property, there must also be moths and thieves that are after it. Wherever people live together in the world, it is all full of such rats and mice. An unfaithful courtier or official who does nothing but devour a prince's money or property while there is some to devour—what is such a man but “rust or moth”? There are many of these hypocrites now, with their heavy, unnecessary, and vain expenses every day. They are impoverishing the princes, and it does not matter to them whether a prince is prospering or going to ruin, just so long as they can be masters of his money and run things the way they please.

In all the cities and villages, similarly, everything is full of rats and moths, big ones and little ones, secret ones and open ones—shoemakers, tailors, butchers, bakers, brewers, bartenders, and other craftsmen, workmen, and day laborers. For that matter, any householder who has a lazy and unfaithful servant, what does he have but a weevil that is devouring more of his goods than if he had the floor full of rats and mice?

Now you see what a fine god Mammon is. The best guards and courtiers he can assemble are moths and rust. Though someone may have been accumulating great treasures for a long time, these parasites have to devour so much that the one who ought to use it never has a chance to enjoy it or to take pleasure in it. Have the fortunes of great lords and princes ever been invested wisely? Usually they have been wasted in war or fed to these miserable maggots or squandered or destroyed in some other useless way. Therefore those who do not have many treasures are the best off, for they do not have many rats to feed and do not have to be afraid of thieves.

What then? Is it wrong to have any treasures at all? Is this a general condemnation of everyone that gathers treasures on earth? Surely that cannot be the case. For if everyone were to behave the way you and I do, by tomorrow no one would have any house or home left! The lords and the princes have to get and store provisions for their land and people. That is why God created gold and silver and gave them mines. So we read in Scripture (Deut. 17:16, 17) that Moses taught the king not to have too many horses or too much gold or silver. This concedes that he may gather treasures in moderation. Such was King Solomon's boast about himself (Eccl. 2:8). The patriarch Joseph collected so much that he subjected all of Egypt to the king—its corn, money, property, cattle, and finally the very bodies of the people as the king's vassals (Gen. 47:14–26). Thus Abraham had many sheep and much gold and silver, with which he carried on his business (Gen. 13:2). What shall we say, then, about Christ's clear prohibition of gathering treasures? For that matter, you have to say that He Himself had a fund—since Judas carried the money box and the money (John 12:6)—and that He always had a reserve on hand, so that the disciples never lacked anything when He sent them forth, as they themselves said (Luke 22:35). Then why does He forbid it here, and why does He say that they should take along no purse or bag or sandals (Luke 10:4)?

Answer: We have already said often enough that in this sermon Christ is giving instructions to the individual or the Christian man and that a sharp distinction must be made between the Christian and the man of the world, between a Christian person and a secular person. For a Christian as such does not bear the title male or female, young or old, lord or servant, emperor or prince, peasant or townsman, or anything else that can be named as belonging to the world. He does not have a “person” or mask, and he should not have anything or know anything in the world but be satisfied with his treasure in heaven. Whoever does not distinguish carefully here but imitates our sophists and fanatics in mixing everything up and confusing it, cannot correctly understand any of these sayings.

Of course, a prince can be a Christian, but he must not rule as a Christian; and insofar as he does rule, his name is not “Christian” but “prince.” The person is indeed a Christian, but his office or his principedom does not involve his Christianity. Insofar as he is a Christian, the Gospel teaches him not to do injury to anyone, neither to punish nor to take revenge, but to forgive everyone and to put up with any injury or injustice that may be done him. That, I say, is the Christian's duty. But it would not make for a good administration if you were to preach that sort of thing to the prince. This is what he has to say: “My status as a Christian is something between God and myself. It has its own directions about how I should live in relation to Him. But above and beyond this I have another status or office in the world: I am a prince. The relation here is not one between God and this person, but between me and my land and people.” The issue here is not how you should live in relation to God, what you should do and what you should tolerate for yourself. That applies to you as a Christian person who is not involved with land and people. But this is

not the business of your princely person, which should not do any of these things but should think about the administration of the government, the maintenance and protection of justice and peace, and the punishment of the wicked.

So you see that each status or office is properly distinguished from the other; and yet they are combined in one person and, so to speak, are contradictory. At one and the same time, the same person is supposed to tolerate everything and not to tolerate it, but in such a way that what is distinctive about each office is applied to it. That is, as has been said above: If it involves me as a Christian, I should tolerate it; but if it involves me as a secular person—an obligation not between God and me, but between me and my land and people, whom I am commanded to help and protect with the sword that has been placed in my hand for that purpose—then my duty is not to tolerate it, but the opposite. Thus every human being on earth has two persons: one person for himself, with obligations to no one except to God; and in addition a secular person, according to which he has obligations to other people. In this life we have to have social relations with one another. Take a husband or the head of a household, for example, with his wife and his children. Although he is a Christian, this does not mean that he has to stand for it if the members of his family raise a rumpus or cause trouble in the house. Rather he must resist wrongdoing and punish it, to make them behave properly. Once you correctly understand this distinction, Christ's teaching is easy to understand. For here and in all His sermons He is not talking about the way a secular person should work and live, but about the way you should live uprightly before God as a Christian, as one who does not have to be bothered about the world, but who should direct his thoughts exclusively to another life.

This is what I say in comment on this text: That person of mine which is called "Christian" should not worry about money or save it, but should give its heart to God alone. But outwardly I may and I should use temporal goods for my body and for the needs of other people. As far as my secular person is concerned, I may and I should accumulate money and treasures—yet not too much, so that I do not become a greedy belly that seeks only its own benefit and can never be satisfied. A secular person has to have money, grain, and supplies for his land, his people, or the others that belong to him. If it were possible to govern the way the patriarch Joseph did in Egypt (Gen. 47:14), filling all the storehouses and granaries with provisions, administering the country in such a way as to provide for all its need, and using the supplies to help the people, to give them a loan or a gift when they needed it, that would certainly be a great prize and a fine and Christian way to use temporal goods. For whatever a prince accumulates, he accumulates not for himself but as a universal person, indeed as a universal father of his entire land. We dare not all be beggars. Everyone should earn enough to support himself without being a burden on other people, and to be able to help others as well. Thus one should contribute to others in time of need.

For this reason every city should store away as much as possible for the common need, and in addition every parish should have a common treasury for the poor. That would not be wrong. It would be a way of laying up Christian treasures. This is not the kind of treasure that is gathered to gratify greed and lust, the kind the world gathers. Thus our priests used to collect money with no other purpose than to enjoy it and to play with their guildens the way little girls do with their dolls. But when there was an emergency and other people needed help, then there was nobody home. Such treasures as these belong to the devil, and in opposition to them Christ is saying here that you should not lay up treasures on earth, that is, for yourself and for your own pleasure, and make your heart a greedy adherent of temporal Mammon; but you should search for and lay up another treasure in heaven. In your outward and secular life you may lay up as much as your relation with God and your honesty permits, not for your own pleasure and greed but for the need of other people. Whoever lays up treasure this way will obtain blessing and indulgence besides, as a pious Christian.

But there are some people so greedy that they keep on scratching and cannot stop. They will not let anyone else enjoy it, and they cannot even get any pleasure out of using it themselves. Such people will get what is described here. Moths, rust, and thieves will consume it; as it was gained, so it will be lost. On the other hand, it often happens that even where the accumulating had been good, the consuming takes place this way. That is the best treatment that temporal goods can expect on earth anyway. Now, if this is what happens to people who lay up their treasures properly, how much more will it happen to people who seek nothing but the money, not the use or benefit or fruit of the money! The benediction pronounced over it here is this: Moths and rust shall come over it and consume it, and it shall be stolen. Thus no one succeeds if he is greedy and grabs everything for himself this way. If a farmer has a big harvest, he still

dare not use it, and he does not take pleasure in it. He has to bury it, so that it is of no use either to him or to anyone else. Otherwise the worms will gnaw at it and chew it up, or it will be taken over by the mercenaries and the bigwigs²² at court. They will keep it from being invested more profitably.

With these words Christ is trying to talk some sense into us, to keep us from becoming so greedy for Mammon; and He talks about him with such scorn and contempt that He could not have made him look any more ridiculous. What sort of god is it that is not even capable of defending himself against moth and rust? He has to put up with their gnawing and destroying every day, and he has to lie there as easy pickings for anyone. Everything that comes along can devour him, and every thief can rob him. It is frustrating to have a god that governs the whole world and yet is the helpless victim of moth, rust, and thieves. We ought to be ashamed of ourselves for being the sort of people that cling to such a rusty treasure and put all their confidence in it. “Since you know this,” He wants to say, “do not set your hearts upon it, and do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth. But be content with whatever God gives you here, and remember that it is in constant danger of being lost or taken from you.” There is no other way out, especially for the person who intends to be a Christian and to confess or preach his Lord. As a person who has challenged the world and all the devils, he always has to anticipate that people will snap at him and reject him. If he is to follow through on this challenge, he must be courageous enough to despise all their treasures and goods and to be sure of another and a better treasure.

That is why Christ says: “Lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven.” That is to say: “Let the world have its rusty treasures, which are waiting for someone to rob and steal them. All they are good for is to give the world something to enjoy and trust. But you who are not of the world, who belong to heaven because you have been redeemed for it by My blood, and who therefore have another and an eternal possession prepared and set aside for you—do not let your hearts be enthralled here. If you occupy an office or a status that requires you to deal with earthly treasure, do not cling to it or serve it. Rather take it as your goal to acquire those treasures which have been set aside for you in heaven. Those are genuine treasures. Neither moth nor rust can touch them, and they are secure against anything that can devour and steal. They have been set aside in such a way that they never lose their freshness or wholeness, and they are guarded in such a way that no one can break into them.”

Whoever wants to be a Christian should take delight in this stimulating argument. It would certainly delight any greedy belly and make his heart laugh if you were to show him the sort of treasure that no rust could corrode and no thief could steal. But the world will not pay attention to this, because this is not what it sees or what it is looking for. It keeps on clinging to the gold and silver that glitters in its sight, though it certainly knows and realizes that this is not secure for a single hour against rust and thieves. These are not the people to whom we are preaching. Whoever refuses to stick to the Word of Christ and to be guided by the invisible treasure, let him go his way. We will not drag anyone in by the hair. But wait and see when it comes time for you to depart. Then summon the treasure you have laid up, the one you have made your reliance. Just see what you have in it then and what help it can give you!

The outcome is the one described in Psalm 76:5: “All the rich men sank into sleep, and they found nothing in their hands.” When it came time for the rich bellies that had served Mammon to die, they found nothing whatsoever. It is really terrible that those who have served Mammon all their life and who have wronged and harmed many other people on his account, and who have despised the Word of God, should be unable to make use of him in time of need. Then their eyes are opened for the first time. They catch sight of another world, and they go groping around for the supplies they have stored up. But they cannot find a thing, and their passing is ignominious and empty. In their anxiety and fear they forget about what they have laid up, and they do not find anything in heaven either. What happens to them is just what Christ describes in Luke 12:16–21. A rich man once had a great and glorious harvest, so that he decided to pull down his barns and build larger ones. He counted on having good days, and he said: “My dear soul, now you have great supplies laid up for many years. Eat, drink, and be merry.” You see, that is the peasant’s song that all the greedy bellies sing. But what comes next? “Fool! This night your soul is to be taken away from you; and the things you have prepared, whose will they be?” Thus he lost the real treasure; and he had to surrender the property he had accumulated, and surrender it so pitifully that he did not even know who would get it.

That is the way of the world. Only seldom are great fortunes accumulated in a God-pleasing manner. Therefore they cannot be spent either to provide genuine enjoyment or to give someone some help. Instead

they have to be dissipated in such a way that no one knows where they have vanished. This has often been my experience, particularly in the case of certain canons who were successful and wealthy and who left great fortunes. After their death such a fortune quickly disappears or is distributed among people who do not feel the least bit grateful to them for it, but who squander it heedlessly and waste it miserably. And if a war breaks out, then the devil really has a chance to do what he pleases. The hotheads get their hands on the money, even though it was never meant for them, and they use it to inflict all sorts of misery on the people.

If someone has been saving for a long time, therefore, and he is asked who will get his savings, he has to answer that he does not know. Frequently it does not turn out the way he had planned. A man is a silly fool if he makes all his confidence and his happiness depend upon this, torturing himself all his life with cares and worries and yet not knowing for whom he has been accumulating it. Still people refuse to pay attention to this. Human blindness and wickedness are too great, and the world insists upon being the world and upon suffering, just in order to serve its rusty treasure. When it has served for a long time and has angered God, this is its ultimate reward: God cannot help, and He leaves them out in the cold, adding insult to injury. It refuses to let anyone prevent this, just as fire cannot be prevented from burning or water from putting a fire out. So just let the world go, and remember the preaching which you have heard as a Christian. It has told you where you should plan to have and find your treasure, where it will be secure for you, and where it will remain forever without ever being transferred to somebody else. Meanwhile you make use of secular possessions, and you let them come and go at will as something temporary. If in doing this you accumulate a fortune in a godly and honest way, then He will also see to it that it remains, if it ought to remain, and that it does not get lost but is well spent and does a great amount of good.

Now Christ concludes with a proverb, saying: "Where your treasure is, there will your heart be also." This is equivalent to what we Germans say about a greedy belly: "Money is his heart";²³ that is, if only he has money, that is his joy and his comfort, in other words, his god. On the other hand, when he has nothing, that is death for him; then there is no heart, no joy, no comfort. What He means is this: "Keep watch on your own heart, and test it. And be assured that your heart will be in the same place where your treasure is." As the common saying has it, "What is dear to a man, that is his god." It is to this that his heart draws him; he thinks about it day and night; he goes to sleep with it, and he wakes up with it, whether it is money or property, pleasure or fame. So take a look at your own heart, and you will soon find out what has stuck to it and where your treasure is. It is easy to determine whether hearing the Word of God, living according to it, and achieving such a life gives you as much enjoyment and calls forth as much diligence from you as does accumulating and saving money and property.

I can draw the conclusion that money and property are not my heart's treasure, provided that my heart has this attitude, and, if necessary, proves that it has: that I would be willing to lose not only my money and property, but even my neck, before I would desert or despise the Gospel or do injury and violence to my neighbor for my own benefit. Though I still may be accumulating some savings, I gladly risk their loss or destruction in order to aim for another treasure in heaven, the one that is hidden in the Word of God.

But then again, you may have another attitude. Regardless of all preaching, teaching, and admonishing you go along supposing that you have enough and can live in style. You do not ask whether or not it is an injustice to your neighbor for you just to keep what you have, and to make your calculations in such a way that with one pfennig you make two or even ten. And you say: "Let God worry about His Word with its preachers and about the world with its laws!" Then you can realize that your treasure is not in heaven above, but that it is still stuck with the moths and the rust. You would be willing to bring upon yourself the wrath of both God and the world rather than to surrender or give up even a pfennig of this for its sake. Nowadays peasants, townspeople, and noblemen everywhere are so impudent in their talking and living that for the sake of a heller they dare to stand up against God and His sovereignty over the world. Thus this saying remains true and actually convicts them, since they refuse to hear or to be told. It cannot come out any other way, even though we spend a long time worrying about it and wish we could see it come out some other way. Once they have been told, it is best to let them go their own way and to give them as much scorn and ridicule as they give us. For God says in the Second Psalm (Ps. 2:4, 5) that He knows how to laugh, and to laugh in such a way that it will cause them to cry bitterly; as it says, "He will speak to them in His wrath, and terrify them in His fury."

22. *The eye is the lamp of the body. So if your eye is sound, your whole body will be full of light;*

23. But if your eye is a villain, your whole body will be full of darkness. If, then, the light in you is darkness, how great will the darkness itself be!

This is a warning not to let ourselves be deceived by the lovely color and appearance in which the villain greed can be dressed up and disguised. As I have said, among all the physical vices there is none that is more deceptive to people or more harmful to the Gospel and its fruit. This is the kind of fellow that does everything he can get away with to keep the Gospel from being preached and preserved among the people. And even when it is preached, those preachers who have succumbed to greed are worthless. Thus greed wrecks both the people who are supposed to listen and the people who are supposed to preach. Those whose duty it is to support the preachers refuse to do so; as far as they are concerned, the preachers can starve. When the preachers see this, they want to make sure that they do not have to live at the mercy of the people, and thus they become more dangerous enemies than the others. When a peasant becomes greedy and contributes nothing to the support of the Gospel, a preacher can still be provided for, if only very meagerly. But when the preachers themselves succumb to it, they lose their taste for the Gospel. They are not willing to suffer anything or risk anything for its sake. They try to figure out how to keep their belly well supplied, and they will preach whatever is pleasing to their audience and financially profitable to them.

For that reason St. Paul calls this particular vice “idolatry,” or the worship of idols (Eph. 5:5; Col. 3:5), because it is in direct conflict with faith, which is the true worship or honoring of God. Such a person makes Mammon and the helpless pfennig his god and lord. What it wills, he does; and so he lives and preaches. He is completely its property and its prisoner, and he no longer cares about the Word of God or risks a hell on its account. All that Christ can do about it is to denounce this vice and to issue a warning about it to anyone that is willing to be warned. That is really necessary, for even godly people have a hard time to keep from being taken in by it. But the others go along smugly, as if they had been drowned by it, and they ignore whatever may be preached or said to them. The Jews were such fellows, too, drowned in their own greed. Christ had to keep denouncing them for it; and the prophets had to conclude their sermons about faith with nothing but an outcry and a denunciation of greed, directed against the preachers and the false prophets as well as against the common crowd.²⁴ But it did not accomplish anything, except in the case of the few who were preserved in the faith, on whose account Christ had to preach, and we all still do, letting the others go their own way, since they want to belong to the devil.

Christ used this saying more than once as a proverb,²⁵ applying it not only to greed but also to other issues, especially to doctrine. In their doctrine the schismatic spirits and the lying preachers insist that they are completely sincere and earnest and that their object is the glory of God and the salvation of souls. No one boasts or swears as much as they do. To such people He presents this warning: “Watch yourself. Let your eye be sound and not a villain. That is, let your opinions and your boasts be of the right kind, with no hidden villainy behind them. And do not deceive yourself with false notions and ideas.” It is people like this that the devil usually bewitches. They are just like a man sleeping and dreaming. He is so enthralled that he cannot see that he is dreaming. As far as he thinks or knows, all this is really happening. He feels nothing as certainly as he feels this, so sure is he of it. And yet it is all just a dream, which vanishes quickly and is all gone when he wakes up. Although sometimes it seems to him that this is a dream or that he is dreaming about a dream, yet he is so enthralled that he cannot get himself loose or recover control of his senses.

In the same way such people are enthralled, who feel so sure that their position is the unadulterated truth that they are willing to pledge everything to back it up. And yet these are just the vain dreams and ideas of crazy people. It is dangerous, therefore, not to maintain the Word of God pure and simple but to let yourself be led away from it to human ideas, which look fine and can quickly take you captive. Once you do become involved with them, you cannot work your way out of them. So far as you know, they are the genuine Word of God. You insist upon it so vigorously that nothing can persuade you to let go of it, as is evident from the fact that some people have even lost their necks for it.

But this is not the place to emphasize this. Here He is applying the saying to the common vice of greed. Although it is a coarse and an external thing, yet there is no vice in matters of doctrine that can dress itself up this way and wear such a beautiful disguise. No one will dare to call it greed, but will look at it and praise it for its vigorous opposition to the vice and for its mildness, gentleness, and mercy. Such a person himself does not see that his own heart is deceiving him and that it has been drowned in greed.

Hence we must examine the text a little further and use some rather obvious examples to illustrate it, so that we can learn to be on our guard. It is impossible to imagine the many ways in which this villain can twist²⁶ and manipulate himself. Among Christians, too, this is a common temptation. It is incredible how few people are free of it; for among the heathen and others it takes a coarse form and is easily recognizable.

When Christ says now, “The eye is the lamp of the body,” this is an allusion drawn from the natural body. If this were without eyes, no sun would help it, even though it were to shine a hundred times as brightly as it does. Therefore the body has no other light to lead and direct it except the eye. Because it enables you to see, you do not have to be afraid that you will accidentally miss the bridge and drive into the Elbe or land in the hedges and the bushes or run into a fire or a spear; for the light protects you from danger and harm. But when the man who has no eyes has to go somewhere, he stumbles over sticks and stones until he falls down and breaks his neck or falls into the water and drowns; for he has no light, but total darkness. “So it is,” He wants to say, “in the Christian way of life, especially with greed. See to it that your spiritual body has an eye, that is, a sound insight and a good understanding, so that you know about your faith and your life and do not deceive yourself with the darkness of false ideas.”

For example, you may have an idea like this: “I intend to work and accomplish something so that I can earn enough to support myself with my wife and children in a godly and honest way. And if God makes it possible for me to use it in serving and helping my neighbor as well, I shall gladly do so.” You see, this is the light or spiritual eye from the Word of God, showing you what is appropriate to your station and pointing out to you how you should administer it and live in it. Since the body lives here, it is right and necessary that everyone should do something to support himself and to maintain a household. But be careful that this eye does not become a villain and deceive you. Be sure that you are doing this from a single motivation and with the one purpose of working and doing what your station requires to satisfy your needs and those of your neighbor, and that you are not using it as a pretext to seek something else, namely, the gratification of your own greed. Flesh and blood is a master at abusing such a light and using it as a disguise. But perhaps you have managed to get a means of support that you enjoy, and all you think about is how to keep it and enlarge it, so that if you have one gulden, you would like to have ten more. That, you see, is the competition of the other eye, the villain, which is not concerned only about getting a means of support and the necessities, but also about gratifying its greed. And yet it can put on the lovely disguise that it is not being greedy but is merely doing what God has commanded and is accepting what God gives.

Now, no one can see into your heart and judge you, but you yourself must take care that your eye is not a villain. It can happen very quickly, and it is very attractive, especially in view of the profits and earnings it brings. Love is thirsty and is never satisfied, and nature is inclined that way as it is. So the whores and the rascals conspire, and things go the way they should. As the saying goes, “The opportunity makes the thief,” or “Money makes villains.” That is why Christ warns His own so diligently. The world is one big whorehouse, completely submerged in greed. We, too, have to live in it, being tempted by these examples and allurements. Therefore we are in great danger and have to be very careful not to let the devil ride us.

“Now, if your eye is sound,” Christ says, “your whole body is light.” That is, all your activity and life, your outward conduct in your office and social station, is all upright. It proceeds according to the Word of God and from the correct motives. This makes it shine like the sun before God and man and gives it a good standing before the whole world. Everything you do is worthwhile, and you can use temporal possessions with a good conscience as something you have earned in an honest and God-pleasing manner. On the other hand, if your eye is a villain, you do not behave according to God’s commands and your office, but you step out of line. All you think about is the gratification of your lust and love for money. Then your whole body is dark, and everything you do is damned before God and lost, even though the world may speak of you as a pious man. For in its outward relations and life the body lets itself be led around like a blind man, and the only way it can move or live is the way the eye directs it.

In this way He seeks to warn us and to require of every man’s conscience that he watch the condition of his mind and heart. He must not tell himself the lovely lie that he has a good, honest reason and a genuine right to be so grasping and greedy. He must not try to deceive God,²⁷ to keep Him from noticing the villain. It is as if Christ were saying: “You can dress up all you please; but if you succeed in deceiving

God, then you have deceived a man who is wise, intelligent, and experienced besides. But see to it that you are not deceiving yourself and that your light does not become a villainous eye, which will darken and damn your whole life before God. For His vision is clear and sharp, and He will not let you fool Him with the paint you have smeared on.” And He concludes the warning with a threat, to frighten people away from too facile a use of that lovely but fictitious motivation: “If then, the light in you is darkness, how great will the darkness itself be!”

That is to say: “Of course you can think up lovely ideas. You can say that you do not intend to make money greedily, the way the others do, but to do it in a way that is defensible in the sight of God and the world, and that therefore you cannot be accused of being greedy. Yet you go on living this way, and you make a light of your own for yourself in your heart. But make sure that this light is not darkness, too. Not only do you have unadulterated greed in your heart, but you try to cover it up with this light and to keep it from being called greed. This makes your darkness a double darkness, much worse than it was before.”

Under the papacy, for instance, there was a great darkness that completely blacked out the light of Christian teaching. All they taught was how works remove sin and bring salvation. But then they went on to defend this, to claim that it was the genuine divine teaching, and to maintain that anyone was a heretic and an opponent of divine worship and good works if he dared to deny it. It really becomes pitch dark when such darkness and error is decorated with the name of truth, and the darkness becomes worse with the addition of such light. If a person knows the devil and recognizes him as such, and then makes a god out of him, that is putting darkness on top of darkness and yet claiming that it is shiny and bright, indeed that it is the sun itself.

Now, Christ reasons this way: “If the opinion and teaching that you regard as light is really darkness, how great will the other darkness be, namely, the darkness that comes along when you practice this teaching and live according to it?” Applying it to this case, a man who has been overwhelmed by greed and who scrapes and scratches already has darkness in his heart. But if he goes on to pretend that it should not be called greed and gets rid of his conscience in order to avoid being denounced, that is really a thick darkness doubled. If a fool claims that he is a smart man, and disavows any foolishness, then he deserves the name “great big fool.” Or if an ugly hag claims that she is beautiful and dresses up in her tawdry finery, she only makes herself blacker and more disgraceful. As a matter of fact, all men are inclined that way. No one wants to have his sin denounced, but they all create a disguise in order to appear praiseworthy and precious. And so out of a single sin they make two.

When this happens in spiritual matters, it really does murderous damage. It is hard to be moderate here. When people first come upon the Gospel, they often become overgenerous in their contributions; on the other hand, once they apostatize from the Gospel, their greed becomes incessant. Until now it was the usual thing that when people began to give, it fairly snowed with gifts for churches, services, and religious institutions. Thus in days gone by emperors and princes voluntarily donated whole territories as endowments for such purposes.²⁸ But now, by contrast, hardly anyone gives a hells. Everyone is so greedy and selfish that you would think he were afraid of starving.

This is the way the monks, priests, and canons have acted until now. They could never get their fill of contributions. If one of them had gathered two, three, or four fiefs, he would have wanted twice as many. And yet they all carried the same screen: “Though I personally would be satisfied with one benefice, parish, or bishopric, still I have to consider what is required for the dignity of my rank as a prince, a nobleman, or a prelate.” This opens up all the doors and windows, and he can take and grasp whatever he can get—everything, of course, for the sake of the dignity of his rank! But now the light is burning: he must not be accused of acting in order to gratify his greed but only in order to preserve the dignity of his rank. It is so easy to find a little excuse to light the devil’s path. And if there is no other solution, one will have to resort to saying: “I intend to accumulate my money in order then to endow Masses and services or to give alms for the support of the poor.” This really kindles a bright and beautiful light. Even as he kills himself grabbing, a man can go right on saying: “My intentions are good. And I have really fooled that old simpleton, our Lord God, and kept Him from seeing or noticing my clever tricks. I will get into His heaven before He realizes what is going on.” But I have also seen many people who have piled up so much that the guldens were just lying around by the thousands. Yet with all their possessions they finally died, and no one knew what had become of it all. It was greed that acquired it, and greed that got to keep it. It was devoured by rust and moths, and it was never properly used.

I mention this as an example to point out how skillfully Sir Greed can dress up to look like a pious man if that seems to be what the occasion requires, while he is actually a double scoundrel and liar. God does not care if you embark on a splendid career as a knight, and this will not persuade Him to enjoy the greed that you oppose to His commandment when you live as though you wanted to grasp everything for yourself. You cannot show off how magnificent and proud you are, and then say that you have done it for God's sake and for the honor of the church and that you intend to pay for it with benefices and services. This would be as if someone pried open your house door and your treasure chest and took what he found, and then said that he intended to give part of it as alms. Oh, what a precious offering that would be! Here is the rule: If you want to give something to God, give from what is your own. He says (Is. 61:8): "I hate the offering that comes from robbery." If you have something, give what you please; if you have nothing, then you are excused. But if you are greedy and grasping in order to be able to give, and you claim that is why you are doing it, you are being frivolous; for this is a light that you yourself have ignited from the dark lantern, to fool God and the people.²⁹

In this way I could go through all the social stations, pointing out the decorations and the polish that give to greed the name of a virtue, and to Mammon the praise and honor of a god. But who can recite everything that the peasant does at the market or the citizen in the city or the nobleman in his office and on his lands? The one example that I have cited makes it evident enough and visible that the darkness is so thick you can feel it. The other cases can easily be judged on this basis. What about the bigwigs³⁰ among the nobility? They are planning now to carry on practically every kind of business, including iron and nails. But we are not supposed to use the word "greed" to designate this sort of thing. Since God has given it, everyone has a right to look for a means of support wherever he can, "in order to maintain the dignity of his rank." This, too, is a little light that blinds them so completely that they cannot see anything at all. Even in secular law it is decreed that everyone should carry on his business in such a way that others can still get along and support themselves.³¹ But now there is no room for anyone next to these griffins and lions, who monopolize every kind of business. And meanwhile they want to be called pious and honorable people.

As we have said, who could imagine all the tricks of this sort which people in every station and trade are mastering and using? What is the world but a big, wide, and turbulent ocean of inexhaustible wickedness and villainy, all made to look beautiful and good? This is especially true now in this latter time, and it is a sign that the world cannot last much longer and is on its last legs. As the saying goes, "There is no fool so stingy as an old fool."³² There is so much greed everywhere that hardly anyone can get anything to eat or to drink on account of other people, even though God gives enough of everything. But that is a reward for the ingratitude and contempt shown toward the Gospel. As I have said, apostasy from the Gospel must make a man so possessed by the devil that he simply cannot be greedy enough. And on the other hand, whoever really has the Gospel in his heart becomes mild. Not only does he stop scratching, but he also gives everything away and is willing to risk whatever he can and should.

Well, then, we still have to let the world remain the world. Although it may be greedy and selfish for a long time, it must finally forsake everything and leave something for us. Or even if we have to endure poverty and suffering at its hands, still, like Isaac and Jacob among their brothers, we have received our fair portion. We have made it possible for them to gain worldly possessions as well as complete freedom from the regulations and annoyances of the papacy. They do what they please. This is Ishmael's portion, the bottle of water that Abraham hung around his neck when he let him go (Gen. 21:14). But we have another portion, called a spiritual possession and a heavenly blessing, and so we are well taken care of. We are perfectly willing to let them have the great possession that they have, and we would not take it if they threw it at us. On the other hand, they want no part of the spiritual possessions that we have. So we shall hold our ground, and the inheritance that belongs to us forever. Let them strut around with their portion, which will disappear today or tomorrow. Let them deprive themselves of our inheritance on this account, though we would still be happy to let them have some. But if they deprive us of their portion, we always have so much that we can quickly regain the loss.

But let us heed the warning and not go along with the world when it succumbs to the false light, the villain's eye, which extinguishes the true light and turns it into a double darkness. See to it that greed does not take you in with a sweet suggestion and lovely deception like this: that you intend to advance yourself or your children into a higher and more honorable rank and that you want to provide for them generously

only in order to improve and exalt their social position. The more you get, the more you will want; and you will always be aiming for something higher and better. No one is satisfied with his position in life. The citizen would like to have a position as a knight, the nobleman would like to be a prince, and the prince would like to travel in imperial style. But if you would like to travel in Christian style, then beware of this idea as the most wretched darkness. If God blesses you and gives you success, do your job in such a way that your neighbor next to you may also be able to make a living and may enjoy your help when you give him a hand. For when you let the villain's eye deceive you, you have already let the Word of God be lost and expelled by that other light. Thus one thick darkness is added to another, to make you so blind and stubborn that you are beyond help.

24. No one can serve two masters; for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and Mammon.

This is a horrible judgment that He pronounces here upon greedy people, and primarily upon His Jews. Like our priests and clergy, they were the real greedy bellies; yet they claimed to be doing God a great and holy service. What He wants to say is: "You think that you are all right and that you are serving God with great sincerity. And yet at the same time you are greedy scoundrels, who are doing everything for the sake of Mammon even while you are serving God. But here is the rule: No one can serve two masters at the same time. If you want to be servants of God, you cannot serve Mammon." He is referring to two masters that are opposed to each other, not to those that govern together. There is no contradiction involved if I serve both God and my prince or emperor at the same time; if I obey the lower one, I am obeying the highest one as well, since my obedience moves in an orderly fashion from the one to the other. When the head of the family sends his wife or children to the servants with orders what the servants are to do, there is only one master, not several, and all the orders come from one master. But "two masters" means two that are opposed to each other and that issue contradictory orders, the way God and the devil do. God says: "You shall not be greedy, and you shall not have any other gods." But the devil contradicts this and says: "You may be greedy and serve Mammon."

Reason itself teaches that serving two opposing masters at the same time is an intolerable situation. Still the world is quite skillful at doing it, what we call in German "carrying water on both shoulders"³³ or "blowing hot and cold at the same time." Sometimes a nobleman will serve one prince and accept remuneration from him, but will doublecross him and betray him to another and accept money there, too. Then he will watch to see how the weather comes out, whether there will be rain here and sunshine there. So he will betray and doublecross both of them. But such people do not serve anybody, and even reason has to say that they are traitors and villains. Suppose you had a servant who accepted wages and remuneration from you but kept looking with one eye at someone else without caring about your affairs. And suppose that something went wrong today or tomorrow and he scampered off to the other master and left you sitting there. How would you like that?

That is why it is correct to say that whoever wants to be a loyal servant and to do his work faithfully dare not adhere to two masters but must say: "This is the master that feeds me, and I will serve him as long as I am with him. I will work for his best interests, and I will not be diverted to somebody else." But if he wants to filch something here and steal something there, that is business for the executioner. The hens that eat at home but lay their eggs elsewhere deserve to be killed. The Jews also had the idea that God should regard them as great saints and be satisfied so long as they sacrificed in the temple and slaughtered their calves and cows. Meanwhile they did their grasping wherever they could. They even set up shop and erected their money-changing tables in front of the temple and in it, to make everything convenient so that no one would have to leave without having made his sacrifice.

It is in opposition to these people that Christ now sets down the maxim that no one should make up his mind to be the servant of both God and Mammon. Since to serve God means to cling to His Word alone and to subordinate everything else to it, you cannot continue this service in the way in which He has instituted it if you want to be greedy for Mammon. If you want to live according to His Word and continue in it, you must immediately repudiate Mammon. This much is sure: as soon as a preacher or minister becomes greedy, he becomes useless, and his preaching becomes worthless. He has to be cautious; he does not dare to denounce anyone; he lets the donations come in till they stuff up his mouth; he has to let the people do as they please; and he refuses to anger anyone, especially the great and powerful. Thus he neglects his duty and his office, which require him to denounce the wicked. Similarly, any burgomaster or

judge or other official who wants to pay attention to his office and wants to have it run properly must not give much thought to getting rich or making any profit from it. But if he is the servant of Mammon, he will let himself be bought off with presents, till he becomes blind and no longer sees how people live. He will think: "If I punish this person or that one, I will make enemies, and it may cost me what I have." Though he may have a fine position and occupy the office that God has commanded and given him, still he cannot carry it out and exercise it. All this is accomplished by Mammon, who has taken possession of his heart.

Such is the way of the world everywhere now. It imagines that Mammon is a mere trifle and not very dangerous, while it deceives itself into accepting the sweet and lovely idea that it can serve God nonetheless. But this is a miserable disease, with which the devil blinds a person to keep him from perceiving his official duty any longer and to ensnare him in greed, simply by making him worry that otherwise people will not give him honor, gifts, and donations. Christ makes His judgment so strict, as we have pointed out, to keep anyone from deceiving himself with such thoughts and supposing that it does not really matter very much. He makes it clear that whoever fails to do his duty as he should on account of Mammon—money or pleasure, popularity or favor—will not be acknowledged by God as His servant but as His enemy, as we shall hear presently. But whoever wants to be found in the service of God and to do his duty properly, should make up his mind to stand up like a man and to despise the world and its Mammon. This does not spring up from within, however, but comes down as a gift from heaven. It is a response to the petition that the God who has given and assigned this office to you may press it down (Luke 6:38) and also give you the capacity to carry it out, persuading you that there is nothing nobler or better on earth for you to have and to do than the service that you are to do for Him. You need not worry very much about whether you suffer a loss on account of this or get into difficulty. You can console yourself with the realization that you are serving a greater Master, one who can easily requite you for your loss. This is certainly better than losing the eternal treasure for the sake of a tiny temporal possession that cannot help you anyway. If you are to choose a master, would you not much rather serve the living God than a helpless and dead scamp?

That, you see, is what every Christian does when he has the Word of God. He honors and keeps it, regardless of whether this irritates the world or whether it costs him his success. This is his attitude: "There is my wallet and money bag, my house and home. But here is my Christ. Now, if I have to forsake and surrender one of them, I will let it all go in order to keep my Christ." That is what Christ means with the words: "No one can serve two masters." Eventually they will come into conflict, and one will have to yield to the other. Therefore it is vain for you to persuade yourself of the idea that you will keep them both as your masters, but you simply have to make up your mind to forsake one of them.

Thus the emphasis here is on the little word "serve." It is no sin to have money and property, wife and children, house and home. But you must not let it be your master. You must make it serve you, and you must be its master. As it is said of a fine, upstanding gentleman: "He is master of his money"—not its subject and its prisoner, as a stingy, greedy belly is, who would be willing to surrender the Word of God and everything else, doing nothing and saying nothing, rather than to take any chances with his money. That is the heart of a woman or a child or a slave. Such a person despises and forsakes the eternal treasure for the sake of that scabby Mammon, which he can neither use nor enjoy. Meanwhile he goes his own smug way, supposing that he can get around to the Word of God any time, and grabbing whatever he can. He cannot miss a single heller, for God's sake! Eventually he sinks deeper and deeper into greed, he gets farther and farther away from the Word of God, and finally he becomes completely hostile to it.

This is harsh language and a very outspoken judgment when Christ says here: "Either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other." That is the same as saying: "The miserable love of Mammon makes people enemies of God." Thus some of our priests say, even in public: "Such a teaching would be fine, except that it is dangerous."³⁴ It arouses hostility—and with good reason, according to them, since it is asking for it. But Mammon is a wonderful god! He does not do any damage either in the kitchen or in the wallet. Thus love and friendship come to a parting of the ways here over the words: "He will hate the one and love the other." For there are two masters who oppose each other, and one heart is too small for both of them, just as one house is too small for two owners. When the conflict comes, therefore, and you have to serve one and be devoted to him, you will have to anger the other and let him go. So it is that a lover of money and property inevitably becomes an enemy of God.

This is the precious fruit of serving Mammon. It is especially evident, now that greed has gained such complete control. There is a major epidemic of greed among the nobles, the peasants, the townspeople, the priests, and the laymen. What great holiness and what beautiful virtue, to take the best part of man away from God and to give it to Mammon! The object of your highest devotion is certainly the thing to which your heart has attached its love and desire, the thing for which your whole body and all your organs yearn. As Christ said earlier (Matt. 6:21): "Where your treasure is, there will your heart be also." What a person loves, that he will certainly pursue, that he will enjoy talking about, that will occupy all his heart and his thoughts. Therefore St. Augustine says: "Whatever I love, that is my god."³⁵ From this you see what kind of people they are whom Christ terms "enemies of God." They make a great show of serving Him as if they were His dearest friends, but fundamentally all they are is genuine demonic saints, who hate God cordially and persecute Him, His Word, and His work.

For hating the Word of God is really hating God. This is how it works. You denounce a man for his unbelief and greed, and you hold the First Commandment up to him (Ex. 20:3): "You shall have no other gods before Me." That is, "You shall not attach your heart, your desire, and your love to anyone else but Me." And he refuses to hear that denunciation or to stand for it. He starts ranting and raving against it, until in his heart there is bitterness and venomous hatred against the Word and its preachers. That is why the text of the Ten Commandments contains the threat (Ex. 20:5): "I am a jealous God, visiting the sins of the fathers upon the children of those who hate Me." He is talking about these very same greedy bellies and Mammon-servers, for Scripture calls greed "idolatry," or the worship of idols (Eph. 5:5; Col. 3:5). And yet, as we have said, they lay claim to titles like "the greatest of saints" and "enemies of idolatry and heresy"; and they absolutely disclaim the title "haters of God." But they are convicted by their inability to hear or see the Word of God when it attacks their greed, and by their insistence that they get off without any denunciation. The more they are denounced and threatened, the more they deride and mock, doing whatever they please to spite God and everyone else.

Now, is that not a horrible disease and an abominable sin, one that should terrify us so that we hate Mammon from the heart, make the sign of the cross against him and run away as from the devil? Who would not be terrified to fall into this and to hear this judgment spoken over him? He will be called "God's enemy," one who not only despises God but even wishes that God and His Word did not exist, just so that he could have the freedom to do as he pleases and wills, to insult God and vex Him. Figure out for yourself what the fate of such a person will be. He is saddling himself with a man who will eventually prove to be too heavy for him.

As the text says, they already have punishment enough in the fact that they are such pathetic people, whose heart and desire, whose love and joy are concentrated on the privy, when they ought to be in heaven with the things of God. What could be more shameful for a human being than to turn his trust away from God, who gives him every good thing and who deserves his devotion, and to take a position behind the devil, where he can enjoy his stench and his hell? In fact, he becomes so completely involved in the wickedness of hell that he not only despises the Word of God, but opposes it with the murderous wish that there were no God. This is the gratitude that God gets from these greedy bellies to whom He daily gives body and life, sun and moon, and all their treasures. But what their reward will be, they will find out. They already have part of it in being forced continually to eat the devil's stench and filth.

That is the first part of the text, referring to Mammon: "Either he will hate the one and love the other." The second part refers to God: "Or he will be devoted to the one (namely, God) and despise the other." He does not simply say here: "He will love the one"; but to show what love does and accomplishes, He uses the word "be devoted." Anyone who intends to love God and His Word will not have an easy time of it. It will often hit him between the eyes, and the love will often become the kind that the devil sours and embitters for him. Hence we need the ability to hold tight and to be devoted to the Word of God. We dare not let ourselves be torn loose from it, even though our own flesh and the example of the whole world, as well as the devil, set themselves against it and make up their minds to take it away from us. Anyone who can oppose so many enemies all by himself and win must really be a man with the bravery of a knight! Indeed, he must be aglow with the fire of love, burning so brightly that he can let everything go—house and home, wife and children, reputation and property, body and life—and can despise it and stamp on it, just to keep a treasure that he still cannot see and that the world despises, but that is presented merely in the Word and believed by the heart.

He does not mean by this that it is wrong to have and to acquire money and property, or if someone does have it, that he should throw it away, as some fools among the philosophers and some crazy saints among the Christians have taught and done. He lets you get rich; but He does not want your love to cling to your riches, as David taught and as he proved by his own example, saying (Ps. 62:10): "If you acquire riches, do not set your heart upon them." This is an attitude that can keep Ms heart free right in the very midst of the money and property that God has given, something the world cannot do. And if his riches try to seduce his heart and entice it away from the Word of God, as the beautiful guldens and the shiny silver goblets and the jewels smile attractively at him, then he can trample them underfoot and be as contemptuous of them as the world is devoted to them while it despises the heavenly treasure. In other words, as Mammon's master, a man must make him lie at his feet; but he must be subject to no one and have no master except the Word of God. Now, this is preached to the little flock who believe in Christ and who regard His Word as true. It is meaningless for the others.

25. Therefore I tell you, do not be concerned about your life, what you shall eat or what you shall drink, nor about your body, what you shall put on. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing?

The Lord expands and enlarges His vigorous sermon against this dangerous vice, because, as we have said, it usually intrudes violently alongside the Gospel and attacks not only the world but also the Christians. It is especially fierce against those who are supposed to preach the Word of God and who are surrounded by all sorts of dangers on its account. They suffer contempt and oppression from the world, and as far as the flesh is concerned, they would have reason enough to be concerned. Anyone who wants to be a Christian and to confess his Lord arouses the hostility of the devil, his enemy. The devil is a prince of this world (John 16:11), who therefore opposes and attacks Him, not through the Word and faith, but through that which is subject to the devil's own kingdom and authority. Now our good-for-nothing body, our flesh and blood, is still in his kingdom. He can really plague this, he can throw it into jail, he can deprive it of food and drink and clothing. And so this danger continually surrounds us, together with everything we have. Meanwhile flesh and blood is trying to figure out how much it can get for its security and how it can avoid danger. This is the origin of the temptation called "concern about making a living"; of course, the world does not regard it as a temptation but as a virtue, and it praises the people who set their sights on great property and honor.

Listen now to what serving Mammon means. It means being concerned about our life and our body, about what we should eat and drink and put on. It means thinking only about this life, about how to get rich here and how to accumulate and increase our money and property, as though we were going to stay here forever. The sinful worship of Mammon does not consist in eating and drinking and wearing clothes, nor in looking for a way to make a living and working at it; for the needs of this life and of the body make food and clothing a requirement. But the sin consists in being concerned about it and making it the reliance and confidence of your heart. Concern does not stick to clothing or to food, but directly to the heart, which cannot let a thing go and has to hang on to it. As the saying goes, "Property makes a person bold." Thus "being concerned" means clinging to it with your heart. I am not concerned about anything that my heart does not think about, but I must have a heart for anything about which I am concerned.

You must not tighten this text too much, however, as if it prohibited any kind of concern at all. Every office and station involves taking on certain concerns, especially being in charge of other people. As St. Paul says about spiritual offices in Christendom (Rom. 12:8): "He who rules, let him be careful." In this sense the head of a household has to be concerned about whether his children are being brought up properly and whether his servants are doing their duty; if he neglects this, he does wrong. Similarly it is the concern of a minister or preacher to carry on his preaching and to administer the Sacrament properly, to comfort the sorrowing and the sick, to denounce the wicked, and to pray for needs of every kind; for he has the command to wait upon souls and to guide them. Thus princes and others in government have to be concerned about the proper administration of the secular realm, as their office requires. And subjects, in turn, should be concerned about loyally showing and performing their obedience. Servants should be concerned about serving their masters well and saving them from any damage.

Christ is not talking here about this sort of concern. This is an official concern, which must be sharply distinguished from greed. It is not concerned for its own sake but for the neighbors sake; it does not seek its own interests (1 Cor. 13:5), but even neglects them and forgets them in order to serve somebody else. Therefore it may be called a concern of love, something divine and Christian, not a concern devoted to its

own advantage or to Mammon, militating against faith and love, and even interfering with the official concern. The man whose money is dear to him and who is on the lookout for his own advantage will not have much regard for his neighbor or for the office that involves his neighbor. This has been evident until now in our clergy. They were not the least bit concerned about how to take proper care of souls. They concentrated everything on making the world bring them enough donations. Whoever did not bring them any money was simply left standing; none of them would even say an Our Father for somebody else without being paid for it. But a pious preacher is concerned about properly carrying out the duties of his office for the good of souls. It does not bother him that he is not getting very much for it, in fact, that he has to endure all sorts of things for it, letting serpents bite him and bearing the hostility of the world and the devil. He leaves in God's hands the matter of where he will get his food, and he comforts himself with the prospect of another treasure in another life, a treasure so great that all the misfortune he has to suffer here is too tiny even to be compared with it (Rom. 8:18). It is for this treasure that he is doing all this.

Christ has forbidden this greedy concern and worship of Mammon as an idolatry that makes men enemies of God. Now He goes on with many statements, examples, and illustrations, intended to make greed so repulsive to us and to give it such an odious appearance that we will feel like spitting on it. First of all He says: "Is not life more than food? That is, you can and you must entrust your life, your body, and your soul to God. It does not lie within your power to preserve this for a single hour. What fools you are, then, if you do not entrust the needs of your body to Him, too, for Him to provide you with food and drink! It would be the greatest foolishness imaginable to be scrupulously concerned about getting food and drink but to be unconcerned about getting body and life or preserving them for an hour. That would be like being concerned about the beautiful decoration of your house but not knowing who was going to live there, or being concerned in the kitchen about the preparation of a big, expensive meal but not having anybody to eat it." That is how we behave in our greed: we are concerned about the little things, and we never think of the big things. Such concern is really unnecessary and superfluous, in fact, foolish. Even though we were to be deeply concerned about our body and its life, this would not accomplish a thing, since it does not lie within our power even for a moment, any more than grain growing in a field where we did not do the planting, or silver in a mine where we did not put it.

We have to get rid of care, then, throughout all of our lives, since these are being preserved every hour by God, and that without any thought or action on our part. So what is the point of our foolish concern about the little things, as though He neither could nor would give us food and shelter? We should be ashamed of ourselves, giving anyone a chance to say that we are this foolish. Yet foolish is the only word for the way we live, especially the great, rich bellies. All they are ever concerned about is having their kitchens filled and their pantries generously stocked, and yet they have no tables or guests. Or they have many luxurious beds all made up, but with no one to sleep in them. Now, if a shoemaker did nothing all his life but fill his shop with lasts, without even giving a thought to where he would get the leather for making a shoe, he would be called crazy and foolish and would be driven out of the country.

Thus, you see, Christ is showing us what foolish people we are, to make us want to spit on ourselves. Yet we go along in our blindness, although it is obvious that we should not be concerned about our body and life. Even if we were concerned, that in itself would have to make us become Christians and think: "You see, not even for a moment do I have my life in my own hands. Now, since I have to entrust my body and life to God, why should I have any doubts and concerns about my belly and about how it is to be fed for a day or two?" It is like having a rich father who would be willing to give me a thousand guildens, and then not trusting him to give me a groschen when I need it.

26. *Look at the birds of the air: they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they?*

27. *And which of you by being anxious can add one cubit to his stature?*

Here He cites an analogy and a comparison in support of His admonition. With ridicule and derision He scoffs at our miserable greed and concern for our bellies, to rescue us from it, to point out to us what we really are, and to make us thoroughly ashamed of ourselves. We are something much higher, nobler, and better than the birds. We are lords not only over the birds but over all living creatures, and everything was given to us for our use and created for our sakes. Still we do not have enough faith to rely upon being provided for with all these things that God has given and supplied for us. Nevertheless He daily supplies nourishment and food to the smallest birds—and even to the littlest worms, which are the tiniest among

our servants—without any concern or thought on their part at all. They do not gather anything, and they do not lay up provisions. They do not sow, and they do not reap what has been sown.

Now is it not a crying shame that we cannot entrust our bellies to God without concern or greed, we to whom He has given and supplied all creatures and for whom He lets so much grow every year that we have enough to sow and much more to reap? If anyone has a reason for being concerned and for harvesting, it is the little birds. They cannot do any sowing, and when summer is approaching, they might think: “You see, now the whole world is sowing its grain in order to harvest it in the summer. Then or in the autumn, everyone will be harvesting and gathering. But we do not have a solitary grain to sow or to reap. Where will we find food for the rest of the year, especially in the cold winter, when everything has been gathered in and nothing is left in the fields?” What would we men do for a single summer if we did not have anything to sow? In fact, if we could not count on having supplies for a two-week period, how desperate the whole world would become, as if we were all starving! Now summer and winter the little birds keep on flying in the air, singing and frolicking, without a worry or concern in the world, even though they do not know where their next meal is coming from. But we greedy bellies are so wretched that we cannot stop worrying, even if we have our barns and granaries filled and see the grain growing abundantly in the fields.

You see, He is making the birds our schoolmasters and teachers. It is a great and abiding disgrace to us that in the Gospel a helpless sparrow should become a theologian and a preacher to the wisest of men, and daily should emphasize this to our eyes and ears, as if he were saying to us: “Look, you miserable man! You have house and home, money and property. Every year you have a field full of grain and other plants of all sorts, more than you ever need. Yet you cannot find peace, and you are always worried about starving. If you do not know that you have supplies and cannot see them before your very eyes, you cannot trust God to give you food for one day. Though we are innumerable, none of us spends his living days worrying. Still God feeds us every day.” In other words, we have as many teachers and preachers as there are little birds in the air. Their living example is an embarrassment to us. Whenever we hear a bird singing toward heaven and proclaiming God’s praises and our disgrace, we should feel ashamed and not even dare to lift up our eyes. But we are as hard as stone, and we pay no attention even though we hear the great multitude preaching and singing every day.

Look at what else the dear little birds do. Their life is completely unconcerned, and they wait for their food solely from the hands of God. Sometimes people cage them up to hear them sing. Then they get food in abundance, and they ought to think: “Now I have plenty. I do not have to be concerned about where my food is coming from. Now I have a rich master, and my barns are full.” But they do not do this. When they are free in the air, they are happier and fatter. Their singing of Lauds and of Matins to their Lord early in the morning before they eat is more excellent and more pleasant. Yet none of them knows of a single grain laid away in store. They sing a lovely, long Benedicite and leave their cares to our Lord God, even when they have young that have to be fed. Whenever you listen to a nightingale, therefore, you are listening to an excellent preacher. He exhorts you with this Gospel, not with mere simple words but with a living deed and an example. He sings all night and practically screams his lungs out. He is happier in the woods than cooped up in a cage, where he has to be taken care of constantly and where he rarely gets along very well or even stays alive. It is as if he were saying: “I prefer to be in the Lord’s kitchen. He has made heaven and earth, and He Himself is the cook and the host. Every day He feeds and nourishes innumerable little birds out of His hand. For He does not have merely a bag full of grain, but heaven and earth.”

Now Christ says: “Every day you see before your very eyes how the heavenly Father feeds the little birds in the field, without any concern on their part. Can you not trust Him to feed you as well, since He is your Father and calls you His children? Shall He not be concerned about you, whom He has made His children and to whom He gives His Word and all creatures, more than about the little birds, which are not His children but your servants? And yet He thinks enough of them to feed them every day, as if they were the only thing He is concerned about. And He enjoys it when they fly around and sing without a care in the world, as if they were saying: ‘I sing and frolic, and yet I do not know of a single grain that I am to eat. My bread is not baked yet, and my grain is not planted yet. But I have a rich Master who takes care of me while I am singing or sleeping. He can give me more than all my worries and the worries of all people could ever accomplish.’ ” Now, since the birds have learned so well the art of trusting Him and of casting their cares from themselves upon God, we who are His children should do so even more. Thus this is an

excellent illustration that puts us all to shame. We, who are rational people and who have the Scriptures in addition, do not have enough wisdom to imitate the birds. When we listen to the little birds singing every day, we are listening to our own embarrassment before God and the people. But after his fall from the word and the commandment of God, man became crazy and foolish; and there is no creature alive which is not wiser than he. A little finch, which can neither speak nor read, is his theologian and master in the Scriptures, even though he has the whole Bible and his reason to help him.

To this first analogy He now attaches a saying based upon our experience, which shows that our concern is useless and unavailing. “Who is there among you,” He says, “who can add one cubit to his stature, even though he may be concerned about it? If the only way for a man to grow up were for him to be concerned about it, how tall would any of us grow? Or what good does it do a little dwarf to worry himself to death about becoming taller? What do you accomplish with your concern about your food and clothing, about where your food and clothing are coming from, as if it lay in your power to make your body as big and as tall as you pleased? The length and width of your body with all its members has been allotted to you; you cannot do anything about it, and He dares you to make it taller by a hair’s breadth. What a fool you are then! You are concerned about something that does not lie within your power, whereas God has already allotted its duration and size to you and has specified how long your body and life is to endure. And you cannot trust Him to provide you with both food and clothing as long as you have to live here!”

28. *And why are you anxious about clothing? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they neither toil nor spin;*

29. *Yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these.*

30. *But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which today is alive and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, will He not much more clothe you, O men of little faith?*

Here you have another example and analogy; according to it, the little flowers in the field, which cattle trample and eat, are to become our theologians and masters and to embarrass us still further. Just look at them grow, all adorned with lovely colors! Yet not one of them is anxious or worried about how it should grow or what color it should have, but it leaves these anxieties to God. And without any care or effort on its part God dresses it up in such lovely and beautiful colors that, as Christ says, King Solomon in all his glory was not so beautiful as one of these—indeed, no empress with all her ladies-in-waiting, with all her gold, pearls, and jewels. No king He could name was so rich or so glorious or so beautifully adorned as was Solomon. But with all his magnificent pomp and splendor, the king is nothing when compared with a rose or a pink or a violet in the field. In this way our Lord God can adorn anyone whom He chooses to adorn. That is really an adornment, a color that no man can make or match, an adornment that no one could or would surpass. Though they were to be covered with pure gold and satin, they would still say: “I prefer the adornment of my Master up there in heaven, who adorns the little birds, to that of all the tailors and embroiderers on earth.”

Now, since He dresses and adorns so many flowers with such a variety of colors, and each has its own coat, more splendid than all the adornment in the world, why is it that we cannot have faith that He will dress us as well? What are the flowers and the grass in the field when compared with us? And what were they created for except to stand there for a day or two, to let themselves be looked at, and then to wither and turn into hay? Or as Christ says, they are “thrown into the oven” to be burned and to heat the oven. Yet our Lord God regards these tiny and transient things so highly that He lavishes His gifts upon them and adorns them more beautifully than any earthly king or other human being. Yet they do not need this adornment; indeed, it is wasted upon them, since, with the flower, it soon perishes. But we are His highest creatures, for whose sakes He made all things and to whom He gives everything. We matter so much to Him that this life is not to be the end of us, but after this life He intends to give us eternal life. Now, should we not trust Him to clothe us as He clothes the flowers of the field with so many colors and the birds of the air with their lovely feathers? He is speaking satirically, in order to describe how abominable our unbelief is and to make it look as ridiculous as possible. But it is the devil himself and the disastrous fall we committed that make it necessary for us to watch a whole world filled with birds and flowers opposed to us, denouncing our unbelief by their own example and appearance, and acting as our most sublime theologians. They sing and preach to us and smile at us so lovingly, just to have us believe. And yet we go right on letting them preach and sing, while we remain as greedy and selfish as ever. But to our

eternal shame and disgrace each individual flower is a witness against us to condemn our unbelief before God and all the creatures until the Last Day. Now He closes this sermon for His Christians.

31. *Therefore do not be anxious, saying, “What shall we eat?” or, “What shall we drink?” or, “What shall we wear?”*

32. *For the Gentiles seek all these things; and your heavenly Father knows that you need them all.*

Every day you see these illustrations before your very eyes, how God nourishes and feeds everything that lives and grows from the earth, clothes and adorns it so beautifully. Now let these illustrations persuade you to lay aside your anxiety and your unbelief and to remember that you are Christians and not heathen. Such anxiety and greed are appropriate to heathen, who do not know God or care about Him. It is really idolatry, as St. Paul says (Eph. 5:5; Col. 3:5) and as Christ said earlier, when He called it the service of Mammon. Baptized or not, therefore, no greedy belly can be a Christian; but he has certainly lost Christ and has become a heathen. The two are intolerable to each other—being greedy or anxious and being a believer—and one has to eliminate the other. Now, for Christians who hear and know the Word, nothing is more disgraceful before God and all the creatures than to be likened to heathen. They do not believe that God feeds them and gives them all things; and thus they fall away from God, deny the faith, and pay no attention either to His Word or to these obvious examples. This is a harsh judgment, one that certainly ought to alarm everyone. For the choice is clear: either a Christian must reflect and then forsake his greedy anxiety, or he must know that he is not a Christian but ten times as bad as a heathen.

“Since you are Christians,” He says, “you dare not doubt that your Father is well aware of your need for all this, of the fact that you have a belly that needs food and drink and a body that needs clothing. If He did not know it, you would have reason to be concerned and anxious about how to provide for yourselves. But since He does know it, He will not forsake you. He is faithful and willing to take special care of you Christians, because, as has been said, He cares for the birds of the air as well. So forget your anxieties, since you cannot accomplish anything by them. It does not depend upon your anxiety but upon His knowledge and concern.” If nothing grew in the field unless we were anxious about it, we would all have died in our cradles; and during the night, while we are lying asleep, nothing could grow. Indeed, even by worrying ourselves to death we could not make a single blade of grass grow in the field. We really ought to see and understand that God gives everything without any anxiety on our part, and yet we are such godless people that we refuse to give up our anxiety and our greed. Though it is up to Him to be concerned, as a father is concerned for his children, we refuse to leave it to Him.

33. *But seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things shall be yours as well.*

As I have said, the Lord saw very well that among the outward and coarse vices there is none that opposes the Gospel and holds back the kingdom of God as terribly as does greed. As soon as a preacher makes it his aim to get rich, he stops performing his office the way he should. The concern about making a living traps his heart, the way a “snare” does, to use St. Paul’s designation (1 Tim. 6:9). He cannot teach or denounce in the right places or in the right manner. He is concerned about losing popularity and friendship among those from whom he can get it. Thus he lets himself be seduced into keeping quiet and into seducing other people as well, not through heresy but through his own belly, which is his idol. Whoever wants to do his duty as a preacher and perform his office faithfully must retain the freedom to tell the truth fearlessly, regardless of other people. He must denounce anyone that needs to be denounced—great or small, rich or poor or powerful, friend or foe. Greed refuses to do this, for it is afraid that if it offends the bigwigs³⁶ or its good friends, it will be unable to find bread. So greed puts its whistle into its pocket and keeps quiet.

It is the same way with the common crowd. Though they are not preachers, they should listen to the Word of God and help to advance the kingdom of God, each individual in his own life and station. But they refuse to take any chances or to suffer any need for the sake of the Gospel. Above all, they see to it that they have plenty and that their belly is taken care of, regardless of whether there is enough for the Gospel or not. So they scrape and scratch, getting along as well as they can. They give the preachers nothing; in fact, they deprive them of what they do have. Thus the devil has his way, and no one wants to preach or to listen any more, with the result that both the doctrine and its fruit disappear from the hearts of the people and the kingdom of God collapses entirely. All this is done by no one else but that abominable and demonic Mammon.

That, you see, is the reason for this long sermon, in which Christ, the Lord, gives a faithful warning to those that are His. To provide a better preventive against this, He prescribes a good and potent medicine here, called “seeking the kingdom of God.” Taking this medicine makes anxiety unnecessary, but it makes it possible for us to have enough, in fact, a treasure greater and more excellent than the one that Mammon can give us or than anything we can ever get with our anxiety.

But it is important for the heart to realize what the kingdom of God is and what it grants. If we could be persuaded to give this some thought and if in our hearts we were to measure and weigh how much greater and more precious a treasure this is than Mammon or the kingdom of the world, that is, than everything on earth, then we would spit at Mammon. If you had the wealth and the might of the King of France and of the Turkish Emperor, what more would you have than a beggar at the door has with his crumbs? All that is really necessary is something to fill the belly every day. More than this no one can do, even if he has all the goods and all the glory in the world. The poorest beggar has as much of this as the mightiest emperor; and he may even get more enjoyment and benefit out of his crumbs than the emperor does out of a magnificent, royal repast. That is all there is to it, and no one gets any more out of it. It lasts only a brief and tiny while, and then we have to surrender it all. We cannot use it to extend our physical existence by a single hour when our hour comes. Hence it is a poor and miserable kingdom, indeed, a foul and stinking one.

By way of comparison, what is the kingdom of God or of Christ, the Lord? Figure it out for yourself, and tell me what the creature is in comparison with its Creator, and the world in comparison with God. If heaven and earth were completely mine, what would I have in comparison with God? Not as much as a drop of water or a grain of dust in comparison with the whole ocean! In addition, this is the kind of treasure that cannot vanish or diminish or shrink. No human heart or understanding can measure or grasp how great it is or how long it endures. And for the sake of this filthy and mortal kingdom of the belly I am supposed to be shameful enough to discard and surrender God and His kingdom, which is divine and imperishable and which gives me eternal life, righteousness, peace, joy, and salvation? In it I shall have for eternity everything that I am seeking and desiring here for a time, and it will all be infinitely more glorious and abundant than what I can get here on earth, even with great sorrow, anxiety, and labor. But before I can get it and take possession of it, I have to go away and surrender everything. What great folly and shameful blindness for us not to see this! What stubborn wickedness, that the world, possessed by the devil, refuses to be told or to pay attention when this is being preached!

By these words, therefore, Christ would like to wake us up and say: “If you want to have the right sort of anxiety and concern about always having plenty, then seek for the treasure called ‘the kingdom of God.’ Do not be anxious about the temporal and perishable treasure which moth and rust consume (as He said earlier). You have a much different treasure in heaven, which I am pointing out to you. If you are anxious about that and seek it and if you keep in mind what you have in it, you will soon forget about the other one. This is the kind of treasure that will sustain you forever, and it cannot perish or be taken away. Because the treasure you cling to is an enduring one, you will endure, too, even though you may not have a single heller from the world.”

What the kingdom of God is has often been stated. To put it most briefly, it does not mean outward things like eating and drinking (Rom. 14:17) nor other works that we can do. Rather, it means believing in Jesus Christ. In this kingdom He is the Head and the only King, in whom and through whom we have everything; whoever abides in it cannot be harmed by any sin, death, or misfortune, but has eternal life, joy, and salvation. Here he begins in this faith, but on the Last Day all will be revealed, and he will be eternally perfected in it.

Now, what does it mean to “seek” this kingdom? What is the method of reaching it, and what way or path leads to it? Here one points in one direction, another in another direction. This is what the pope teaches: “Run to Rome and get an indulgence, confess and do penance, read or hear Mass, put on a cowl, and discipline yourself with long services and a strict, ascetic life.” We used to run in every direction we were told to run, like crazy and foolish people. We all wanted to seek the kingdom of God, but all we found was the kingdom of the devil. For there are many ways, but they are all departures from that one way of believing in Christ and practicing and applying the Gospel, to which faith clings. This involves growing and being strengthened at heart through preaching, listening, reading, singing, meditating, and every other possible way. And it involves blossoming out in fruits, to advance it and to lead many other

people to it. Thank God, that is what we are doing now; and there are many others as well, both preachers and other Christians, who are zealous in practicing this. For this they are willing to risk everything they have, and they would be ready to lose it rather than to surrender the Word.

Though they boast that they are the servants of God and the brides of Christ, none of the monks, nuns, or priests either do or understand this. They all miss the one right way, and they neglect the Gospel. They do not know God or Christ and His kingdom. If you want to know it and find it, you must not seek for it on the basis of your own ideas. You must hear His Word, as the foundation and cornerstone, and see where He directs you and how He interprets it. Now, this is His Word about His kingdom (Mark 16:16): “He who believes and is baptized will be saved.” The Word was not spun out of our own heads, nor did it grow out of any human heart. It fell from heaven and was manifested by the mouth of God, to give us certainty and to keep us from missing the right path. Now when both the preachers and the hearers proceed as they should in the diligent use of Word and Sacrament, when they consistently apply this in their lives to make it known among the people, and when they bring in the young people and teach them, then they are really seeking and promoting the kingdom of God and taking it seriously.

Now, what does He mean by adding “and His righteousness”? This kingdom has a righteousness of its own, but a righteousness different from that in the world, since it is a different kingdom. Thus it refers to the righteousness that comes from a faith that is busy and active in good works. It means that I take the Gospel seriously, that I listen to it or use it diligently, and that then I actually live in accordance with it instead of being an idle fellow or a hypocrite, who lets it come in through one ear and out through the other. The Kingdom proves its presence in deed and in power, as St. Paul says (1 Cor. 4:20): “The kingdom of God does not consist in talk but in power.” That is what we call the Gospel with its fruits—doing good works, fulfilling your station or office diligently and faithfully, and undergoing all sorts of suffering for the Gospel. He uses “righteousness” here in a general sense for the whole life of a Christian in relation to God and man, including both the tree and its fruit, not in the sense that it is completely perfect. It is continually progressing, as He shows here by telling His disciples to keep on seeking it, since they have not yet obtained it (Phil. 3:12) or learned it or lived it perfectly. For our condition in the kingdom of Christ is half sin and half holiness. What there is in us that belongs to faith and to Christ is completely pure and perfect, since it is not our own but Christ’s, who is ours through faith and who lives and works in us. But what is still our own is completely sinful. Yet under Christ and in Him it is concealed and blotted out through the forgiveness of sins; and daily it is put to death through the same grace of the Spirit, until we have died to this life altogether.

You see, it is a quality of the righteousness of this kingdom to act sincerely, without any hypocrisy. For it is set in opposition to those who know how to talk and boast about the Gospel but do not live according to it. Preaching the Word of God, doing good to everyone, and suffering all sorts of misfortune is a difficult business; but that is why it is called “the righteousness of God.” The world cannot stand doing good only to suffer evil for it. This does not belong to the world’s realm, where it is wrong for the man who does right to be punished or to suffer violence; such a person should be rewarded with gratitude and good things. But our reward is laid away for us not on earth but in heaven (Luke 6:23), and that is where we shall find it. Anyone who knows this and wants to act accordingly will have enough to do, without having to look for other ways; and he can forget about the greed and the anxiety of Mammon, too. He will become so soured on the world that his life and his temporal possessions will not mean much to him any more, and he will become so tired that every hour he will be looking forward to death and hoping for it.

So much for the admonition by which He directs our attention away from temporal possessions to the eternal treasure, and tells us that these possessions are not worth our attention in comparison with the ones we have in heaven. To this admonition He now adds a promise and a consolation, to keep us from thinking that since we have to suffer so much from a world that denies and begrudges us everything and since every hour we are expecting to have it all taken away from us, He wants to give us nothing at all on earth and to let us starve. We should know that here, too, we shall have what we require for the necessities of this life. That is why He says: “If you just seek the kingdom of God first, then all these things shall be yours as well.” That is, you shall receive food and drink and clothing as a bonus, without any anxiety of your own. In fact, it will come by the very fact that you are not anxious about such things and that you risk everything for the sake of the kingdom of God, and in such a way that you will not know where it came

from, as our experience teaches us every day. God has enough in the world to feed those that are His. For He feeds all the birds and worms, and He clothes the lilies of the field, as we have heard; in fact, He gives generously even to scoundrels and lets things grow for them. Reluctantly, the world has to let us eat and drink with it.

Now, if we realize this, if we have the Word of God and use it, and if each individual does what he should, what more do we want? We have plenty to eat and to drink and to wear, and we get as much to fill our stomach as even a king or an emperor does. Of course, in keeping with his rank, he has to have more, and his must be grander. But that does not mean that he enjoys it any more. My bread feeds me as well as his royal repast, and my clothes cover and warm me as well as his gold and silver garments. How would it be possible for a person to starve to death who serves God with fidelity and furthers His kingdom? After all, He gives the whole world more than enough. The earth would have to run out of bread or the heavens would have to run out of rain before a Christian would die of starvation; indeed, God Himself would have to starve to death first. Now, since He has created and given so superabundantly and given such a sure promise that He will give enough and will do so before we look around or become aware of it, why plague yourself with this terrible anxiety and greed? Everywhere, but especially in the Psalter, Scripture is full of statements like these (Ps. 33:19): "He feeds the pious in time of famine"; and (Ps. 37:19, 25): "I have never seen a pious man beg for bread." He will not let your situation make a liar out of Him. Just believe! If the present world of noblemen, peasants, and city people refuses to do this, He can find other people or other means through which to give, and to give more than they can ever take away from you.

34. *Therefore do not be anxious about tomorrow, for tomorrow will be anxious for itself. Let the day's own trouble be sufficient for the day.*

"Let this be your concern," He says, "how to retain the kingdom of God. And get rid of the other concerns so completely that you are not even concerned about tomorrow. When tomorrow comes, it will bring its own concerns along." As we say, "Do not cross your bridges until you come to them."³⁷ Our concern accomplishes nothing anyway, even though we are concerned for only one day at a time. Experience shows that two or three days often pass by faster than today. If God is kindly disposed to a man and gives him success, he can often accomplish more in one hour without care and anxiety than another man in four whole days with great care and anxiety. Whereas the one has dragged on with his anxiety and made it tedious for himself, the other has disposed of it in an hour. Thus no one can accomplish anything except when the hour comes that God gives as a free gift without our anxiety. It is vain for you to try to anticipate and with your concern to work out what you think are great schemes.

Our Lord God knows the art of secretly shortening and lengthening times and hours for us, to make one hour become two weeks for someone, and vice versa. Thus with long labor and sorrow one person accomplishes no more than another person with short and easy work. This is evident every day. There are many people who work steadily and hard but barely make ends meet, while there are others who have arranged and ordered their affairs so well that without any particular effort everything goes along smoothly, and they prosper. God works it all this way to keep us from supposing that our anxiety necessarily brings His blessing. But we refuse to wait for God to add these good things to us. Instead we insist on finding them for ourselves before God gives them.

Look at what happens amid the busy digging and hunting in the mines. Often it develops that where there are the greatest prospects for ore and where it seems that everything will turn to gold, there nothing is found, or it is suddenly cut off and vanishes from your grasp. On the other hand, in places that seem to be a total loss and that are neglected, quite by surprise there will often be a rich find. One man has invested everything he has, and he gets nothing; another man begins as a beggar, and he becomes a lord. Later on, those who have accumulated many thousands of guldens may become beggars before ten years are up. Only seldom do such great fortunes last until the third heir.³⁸ In other words, the formula for good fortune and blessings should be: "Not by my seeking, but by His generosity; not by finding, but by chance." We would like to make things come out the way we planned them, but it does not work out that way. For this is what He thinks: "You will not get it that way; at least you will not hold on to it and enjoy it very long." I myself have known many people whose pockets bulged with guldens and who could not be bothered with groschens, but eventually they would have been glad to find that many hellers.

Now, since you see that it is pointless and that your anxiety is useless, why not give it up and think instead about how to get the kingdom of God? He wants to be generous to you, but not on account of your

being concerned or even on account of your working. It is not such concern that gains and accomplishes anything, but rather the concern that is part of your office. The kingdom of God requires you to do what you are commanded to do, to preach and to promote the Word of God, to serve your neighbor according to your calling,³⁹ and to take whatever God gives you. The best possessions are not the ones that come from our planning, but the ones that come by chance and from His generosity. The things that we have acquired or planned to keep by being anxious will probably be the first to collapse and be ruined. This is what often happens to the rich bellies; by their great anxiety they often ruin their grain and other supplies. It is a great gift of grace that God does not make it our concern how the grain is growing in the field, but gives it to us while we are lying asleep. Otherwise we would ruin it with our anxiety, and we would get nothing.

Therefore He says now: “Why be concerned about more than the present day and take on the troubles of two days? Be content with the trouble that the present day lays upon you. Tomorrow will bring you another one.” He calls it a “trouble” or a plague laid upon us that we have to make a living in the sweat of our face (Gen. 3:19) and endure all sorts of other accidents, worries, misfortunes, and dangers every day. Daily in this life we must see and expect such trouble, when something is stolen from you or you suffer some other damage or when you get sick or when your servants do. Suffer such sorrow, anguish, and trouble, and receive it with joy. Be content with that, for it is enough for you to bear. Forget about your anxiety, which only increases and aggravates the trouble. From these examples you can see that God never used anyone’s anxiety to make him rich; in fact, many people have the deepest kind of anxiety, and still they have nothing. What He does is this: when He sees someone fulfilling his office diligently and faithfully, being concerned to do so in a God-pleasing way, and leaving the concern over its success to God, He is generous in His gifts to such a person. It is written (Prov. 10:4): “The hand of the diligent makes rich.” He wants nothing to do with the lazy, gluttonous bellies who are neither concerned nor busy; they act as if they just had to sit and wait for Him to drop a roasted goose into their mouth. He commands you to get an honest grip on your work, and then He will be present with His blessing and give you plenty. Let this be enough regarding this sermon.

THE SEVENTH CHAPTER

1. *Judge not, that you be not judged.*

2. *For with the judgment you pronounce you will be judged, and the measure you give will be the measure you get.*

In the preceding chapter we heard the Lord Christ follow His instruction regarding truly good works with a long sermon of warning against greed as a great hindrance to the kingdom of God in both doctrine and life, and as a deadly threat to Christendom. Now He begins a further warning, directed against another great and dangerous vice, called “self-centered wisdom,” which judges and criticizes everyone. Where these two vices are in command, there the Gospel cannot remain. Greed produces either silence in the preachers or contempt and inattention for the Gospel in the hearers. But if you add self-centered wisdom to it, everyone will strive to be the best preacher and his own master, listening to no one and learning from no one. So it happens that sects and schisms arise to adulterate and corrupt the Word, to keep it from remaining pure, and thus once more to ruin the Gospel and its fruit. This is what He terms “judging” or passing judgment here. Whatever a person does himself, that he likes; but whatever other people do has to stink. A lovely and charming virtue indeed! It belongs to that wonderful man called Master Smart Aleck.¹ Neither God nor the world likes him, and yet he is all over the place.

To keep this sermon from becoming a stumbling block and being misunderstood as if it forbade any judgment or criticism at all, it should be clear, on the basis of what has already been said so often, that here Christ is preaching only to His disciples. He is not talking at all about the judgment or punishment that takes place in the world. In the household, for example, the mother and father have to judge among the children and the servants, have to administer punishment, even corporal punishment, when they refuse to behave. If a prince or a judge wants to administer his office properly, he cannot avoid judging and punishing. This is all part of the secular realm, which is not our concern here and which we will therefore permit to act the way it should and must act. What we are discussing here is another kingdom, one which in no way weakens or annuls the other, namely, spiritual life and existence among Christians, where it is forbidden for one to judge and condemn another. The devil always mixes into such judging to do his work. He gives each individual a high estimate of himself and the opinion that his cause must be the best

and must be the only one to prevail, while he criticizes and undermines whatever does not measure up to his standards.

Although such behavior is the highest kind of foolishness and wrong even in secular affairs, we can put up with it, since it is so obvious that it does not fool anyone. Thus some whore will imagine that she is prettier than anyone else, and what she sees in others will not please her. Or some young fool will fancy himself to be so handsome and clever that there is nobody like him. Among wise and learned people it is the usual thing for no one to concede that what another one knows or does amounts to anything; everyone will act as if he were the only one who can do everything better, and he will spare no one in his criticism. Everyone sees and understands this, and yet this Master Smart Aleck is all over the place. He is so smart that he knows how to bridle a horse by the tail, though the rest of the world has to bridle it by the mouth.

But real trouble and woe arise when this invades spiritual affairs and when the devil plants his seed in Christ's kingdom, so that it takes root both in doctrine and in life. The result in the area of doctrine is this: Although a man may have the assignment and commission from God to preach the Gospel, others arise, even among his pupils, who claim to know it ten times as well as he does. Thus it is the plague and misfortune of the Gospel to have everyone judging it, becoming a doctor of it on his own, and presuming to be a master in doctrine. This is what happened to Moses, when Korah and his mob rebelled against him and said (Num. 16:3): "Why do you exalt yourselves above the people of God? Are they not all holy? Shall God speak only through Moses and Aaron?" And nowadays they say: "Do we not have as much right to have the Spirit and to understand Scripture as others do?" Right away a different doctrine is served up, and sects are started. Then the judging and the criticizing begin, and particularly the shameful slandering, one party venomously accusing and misrepresenting the other, as we are experiencing right now. This brings on the deadly damage of dividing Christendom and undermining pure doctrine everywhere.

Christ worried about this, and not only worried, but also predicted that it would happen. The world refuses to be changed, even if we preached ourselves to death. Wherever the Gospel arises, therefore, the factions and sects must follow, to spoil it and put it down. The reason is that the devil must sow his seed among the good seed (Matt. 13:25); and wherever God builds a church, he builds his chapel or tabernacle next to it.² Satan always wants to be in the midst of the children of God, as Scripture says (Job 1:6). Christ intends this as a warning to His apostles and loyal preachers. They must maintain a diligent watch against this vice and be careful not to let it intrude itself and cause schisms and dissension, especially in doctrine. It is as if He were to say: "If you want to be My disciples, let your understanding and your ideas in doctrine all be the same. Let no one claim to be the master who knows something new or better, judging or condemning the others. Concentrate on what I command you to preach, not on who is to do the preaching. And preserve harmony among yourselves, so that one does not despise the other or start something new."

You must understand this in such a way that it does not take away the right of the man in the public ministry of preaching to judge matters of doctrine as well as of life. Indeed, it is incumbent on him in his office to rebuke publicly whatever does not square with true doctrine, for the very purpose of preventing sects from coming in and taking hold. When he sees that life is wrong, he must likewise denounce it and resist it. He is put there to oversee this, and he will have to give account of it (Heb. 13:17). In fact, whenever any Christian sees his neighbor doing wrong, he has the duty of admonishing him and restraining him, which is impossible without judging and passing judgment. But this is all done on the basis of an office or a commission, which Christ, is not discussing here, as we have said often enough. What is forbidden is that everyone may go ahead on the basis of his own ideas and make a doctrine and spirit of his own, imagining that he is to be Master Smart Aleck, who is supposed to correct everybody and to criticize him, though he has no commission to do anything of the sort. These are the people that the Lord is denouncing here. He does not want anyone to undertake or to do anything on the basis of his own ideas and without a commission, especially not the task of judging other people.

Now, this is what I mean by judging in matters of doctrine. It is one of the most terrible, most abominable, and most dangerous vices on earth. It is the source of all the schismatic spirits. And the monks, the priests; and all the others in the papacy were stuck in it, everyone claiming that what he did was the best, and judging others; but there is no point in discussing that now. The other kind of judging or passing judgment deals with matters of life, when one person criticizes and condemns the life and works

of someone else and is not pleased with what anyone else does. This vice is very widespread and common. Now, as in matters of doctrine we should be of one accord, with one mind and understanding and faith, so we have the command to be of one mind and heart in our external affairs. Of course, this cannot be uniform in the same way that faith is. Since there are many stations in society, their works must be dissimilar and varied. Then, too, in this varied life there are also various kinds of faults; for example, some people are odd or short-tempered or impatient. This is inevitable in Christendom, since our old Adam is not dead yet and the flesh continually strives against the Spirit (Gal. 5:17).

What is needed here is the virtue called tolerance and the forgiveness of sins, by which one person bears with another, pardons him, and forgives him, as St. Paul teaches in beautiful words (Rom. 15:1): “We who are strong ought to bear with the failings of the weak and not to please ourselves.” This is the same thing that Christ says here: “Judge not.” There are some in Christendom whose gifts are greater and better, and there must be, especially among the preachers. But such people should not put on a superior air or take the attitude that they are better than those people who do not have these gifts. In the spiritual sphere, therefore, no one should lord it over others. Outwardly there ought to be some difference. A prince should have a higher and a better position than a peasant, a preacher should be more learned than an ordinary manual laborer. A lord cannot be a servant, a lady cannot be a maid. Yet in all these distinctions of position the hearts should have the same attitude and pay no attention to the dissimilarity. This happens when I make allowances for my neighbor, even though he may occupy a lower station and have fewer gifts than I. When he is a groom taking care of a horse, I am just as pleased with his work as with my own work when I preach or govern land or people, though my work is better and accomplishes more than his. I must not look at the outward masks we wear, but at the fact that he lives in the same faith and the same Christ as I, that he has grace, Baptism, and the Sacrament as much as I, though my work and my office are different and higher. For it is the same God (1 Cor. 12:6) accomplishing and giving all this. He is as pleased with the tiniest as with the very biggest.

What is prevalent in the world, however, is the exact opposite of that commendable and beautiful virtue about which St. Paul speaks (Rom. 15:1). Everyone is pleasing to himself. A man will come along in the name of the devil, unable to look at his own vices, but only at other people’s. This clings to all of us by nature, and even though we are baptized, we cannot get rid of it. We love to beautify and decorate ourselves and to see what is good in us, tickling ourselves with it as if it belonged to us. In order to maintain our exclusive claim to beauty, we ignore and leave out of sight the good there is in our neighbor. If we notice the least little pimple on him, we fill our eyes with it and so magnify it that on its account we see nothing good, though the man may have eyes like a hawk and a face like an angel. That would be like seeing someone in a garment all of gold except perhaps for a seam or a white thread drawn through it, and then acting shocked, as if it were worthless on that account. Meanwhile I would be precious in my own sight on account of the gold patch sewn on my shabby smock frock. So it is that we overlook our own vices, which are all over us, while we fail to see anything good about other people. Now, once this natural inclination appears among Christians, then the judging begins. Then I am ready to despise and condemn a man as soon as he stumbles a little or makes some other mistake. He treats me the same way, giving me the same measure I give him, as Christ says here. He searches out and he criticizes the worst things he can find about me. By such behavior love is suppressed, and all that remains is a biting and a devouring back and forth, until they have consumed each other and lost their Christianity.

The same thing happens if you look at someone else’s life but refuse to look at yourself. You soon find something about him to displease you, and he finds the same in you. Thus the heathen complain that in their circles no one sees what he is carrying on his own back, but that the one following him sees it very well;³ that is, no one sees his own inadequacies, but he quickly sees those of others. Now, if you proceed on the basis of what you see this way, the only consequence must be slander and judging back and forth. The devil cooks this up in Christendom, and he is so successful at it that finally nothing is left but continual judging in matters of life as well as in matters of doctrine. Though the kingdom of Christ is a united, harmonious, and peaceful kingdom both in doctrine and in life, this divides it and replaces it with sectarianism, arrogance, and contempt.

This warning, therefore, is highly necessary. Once we have discharged our office—be it public preaching and rebuking or brotherly admonishing, as Christ teaches it in Matthew 18:15–17—we can learn from this warning and get used to tolerating, concealing, and adorning our neighbor’s transgressions.

If I see something in him that does not please me very much, I should pull back and take a look at myself. There I will find many things which do not please other people either and which I want them to pardon and tolerate. This will soon relieve the itch that tickles itself and enjoys someone else's transgressions, and Master Smart Aleck will toddle along and stop passing judgment. Thus you will be happy to square things with the other person. First you will say: "Lord, forgive me my debt"; and then you will say to your neighbor: "If you have sinned against me, or if I have sinned against you, let us forgive each other." But if you see that he is the kind of coarse person who will not stop unless you rebuke him, then go to him and tell him so by himself, as we have often pointed out on the basis of Matthew 18:15; this may cause him to improve and desist. This should not be called passing judgment on him and condemning him, but admonishing him in a brotherly way to improve. Such admonition should proceed in a fine and peaceable fashion, according to God's commandment. Otherwise, if you are tickled and if you poke fun at your neighbor and ridicule him, you only make him bitter and stubborn against you. By withdrawing your love from him and finding enjoyment in his sin, you become much worse than he and twice as big a sinner. You also fall under the judgment of God by your condemnation of one whom God has not condemned. Thus you load an even heavier judgment on yourself, as Christ warns here, and you deserve even greater condemnation from God.

You see, the source of all this abominable evil, as St. Paul says, is the fact that we are pleasing to ourselves (Rom. 15:1). We play around and tickle ourselves with our gifts as though they belonged to us, but we see nothing about someone else except his frailties. Thus we become completely blind, and our eyes are not clear enough to see either our neighbor or ourselves. Though we should begin by looking at our own wickedness and seeing our own inadequacies,⁴ we do not do so. We look at ourselves through rose-colored glasses, and so we think we are beautiful when we see some gift in ourselves that our neighbor does not have. By this we ruin the gift itself. We also fail to see the good things about our neighbor, though we could always find just as many of those as we now see faults. We should also be pleased with these good things and put up with whatever failings he may have in addition, as we are pleased with ourselves and really know how to put up with a great deal.

In other words, it is the worst kind of vice and the most demonic kind of pride for us to commend ourselves and pat ourselves on the back if we see or feel some special gift in ourselves. We do not thank God for it, but we become so proud and contemptuous of others and so preoccupied with it that we do not pay attention to whatever else we are doing, and imagine that we are in fine shape. We steal and rob God of His glory this way, and we make ourselves an idol, without seeing the trouble we cause by all this. Even without that, we would have enough trouble on our minds from looking at what the Apocalypse says to a bishop who let himself think that he was more learned and better than others (Rev. 3:17): "You say, I am rich, I have prospered, and I need nothing; not knowing that you are wretched, pitiable, poor, blind, and naked." If it is true that your gift is greater than somebody else's, this is as it must be, because your office is different, higher, and greater. But when you go on to use your gift as a mirror in which you admire yourself, you spoil it completely and make this sublime ornament filthier than everybody else's faults. The richer your gifts, the more abominable the perversion if you make them an idol. This is just like mixing poison with a fine malmsey. You have really accomplished something if after judging someone else on account of a small fault you then fall, with your conceit, into the grave sin of ingratitude to God. Thus you replace Him with yourself in your own heart, and you meddle into His jurisdiction, where just one sin is graver than the sins of all other men. You become arrogant toward your neighbor and so completely blind in everything that you can no longer know or see God or your neighbor or even yourself.

What do you accomplish with this judging except to call down the judgment of God upon yourself? You give Him the right to say to you: "I did not grant this gift to you so that you could despise your neighbor with it and serve yourself, but so that you could serve your neighbor in his poverty and weakness, and serve Me. Now you go ahead without even thanking Me for it, as if it had grown up in your own heart. You use My very gift to oppose Me and your neighbor and to make yourself a tyrant, a jailer, and a judge against your neighbor, whom your love should prompt you to tolerate, to help, and to lift up when he falls." What answer can you give Him when He talks to you that way, as He has warned you here that He will, except that you deserve this judgment for making a great log out of the little speck that you see in your neighbor's eye, as Christ says here (Matt. 7:3)?

I shall not discuss the fact that this miserable judging makes you damnable not only on account of the deed itself, but also because the person who does the judging is usually stuck deeper in sin and vices than other people. If he went back and read his own diary and account book, telling how he has lived since his youth, he would hear a story that would make him shudder and that he would like to suppress from other people. Now everyone would like to pretend that he is pious and to forget the whole past and to criticize and condemn some poor man for sinning just once. Such a person brings double trouble on himself. He ignores his previous life, he forgets what he used to be like, and he does not think how sad he would have felt if people had ridiculed and condemned him. That is one sin, that he is ungrateful and forgets the forgiveness of sins, grace, and all the kindness of God. The other is that he has lost his piety and is renewing the guilt of all his former sins by using his piety as a mirror in which he admires himself, thus becoming seven times as bad as he used to be (Luke 11:26).

You do not imagine, do you, that God is unable to spread out an account book before your very nose and to cite not only your transgressions and the sins of your youth (Ps. 25:7), but also your whole life, which you thought was very precious, as the monks think about their cloister life? How will you stand before Him then and answer for blaspheming and crucifying His Son daily with your Masses and other idolatry? This is what happens when we forget what we used to be like. Then it is easy to judge other people. But the command is: "Hans, take hold of your own nose, and reach into your own bosom. If you are looking for a villain on whom to pass judgment, you will find there the biggest villain on earth. You will just as soon forget about other people and gladly let them alone. You will never find as much sin in another person as you will in yourself. If you see a great deal of another person, you see one year or two. But when you look at yourself, you see your whole life, especially the serious blemishes that nobody else knows about. And then you must be ashamed of yourself."

That, you see, would be a good cure for this shameful vice. You would stop pleasing yourself and pray God to forgive you and others. Secondly, though you see something bad in your neighbor, you should not despise and condemn him on account of it. Instead you should look at his good qualities and use your own good qualities to help him, by covering up for him, by making him look good, and by giving him your advice, knowing that even if you were the holiest and most pious man on earth, you would become the worst man by judging someone else. God did not give you your gifts for you to tickle yourself with them, but for you to help your neighbor with them when he needs it, and thus by your strength to bear his weakness, by your piety and honor to cover up his sin and to conceal his shame, as God through Christ has done for you and still does every day.⁵ If you refuse to do that, if you insist upon flattering yourself and despising others, you should know that while someone else may have a speck in his eye as far as you are concerned, by comparison you have a log in your eye as far as God is concerned (Matt. 7:3).

Thus you see why Christ is speaking out so harshly against this vice and pronouncing such a severe sentence: "Whoever judges will be judged." This is as it should be. By meddling into God's judgment and condemning one whom God has not condemned, you are giving Him just cause to do the same to you in turn. He will condemn you and all your works to hell, in spite of all your piety. He will elevate to a position of honor the neighbor whom you have judged and condemned, even making him a judge over you and having him find ten times as much in you that is damnable as you have found in him. So you have done very well indeed. You have angered and alienated both God and your neighbor. Thus you lose both the grace of God and the Christian life simultaneously, and you become worse than a heathen who knows nothing about God.

3. *Why do you see the speck that is in your brothers eye, but do not notice the log that is in your own eye?*

4. *Or how can you say to your brother, "Let me take the speck out of your eye," when there is the log in your own eye?*

5. *You hypocrite, first take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your brothers eye.*

As a way of giving us an earnest warning to guard against this vice, He uses an extreme example to describe it. He pronounces this sentence: Everyone who judges his neighbor has a big log in his eye, while the one who is being judged only has a little speck; by the very fact that he is condemning others he himself is ten times as liable to judgment and condemnation. This is really a grim and terrible sentence. Where are the schismatic spirits now, the Master Smart Alecks, who know so much about lording it over the Gospel and criticizing it? All they can do is to judge us and other people, even when there is nothing

wrong or when they discover a speck in us and gleefully blow it up. That is how the papists are slandering us now. When they do their best and look for just cause to judge and condemn us, the worst they can find is the fact that some of our supporters have taken possession of church properties.⁶ Or they accuse us of not fasting and of anything else that gives the impression of involving some transgression. But they fail to notice their own log, the fact that they are persecuting the Gospel, murdering innocent people on account of it, and, for that matter, acting as the greatest robbers and thieves of monasteries and church properties. What do the pope, the bishops, and the princes refrain from robbing? While they do what they please with all the church properties, they claim that everyone else is an uncanonical bishop and maintains his bishopric as a thief and a robber, not in a godly and honorable way. And all this is supposed to be just fine and not to be called stealing or robbing! And when we do not fast or strictly keep their style of “righteousness,” which they themselves do not keep—this alone is supposed to be wicked, while all their sin and shame is godly and honorable. That is the way of the world everywhere; the log judges the speck, and the big villain condemns the little one.

Now, it is true that we are not free of transgressions; in fact, no Christian will advance so far that he will be without a speck. St. Paul himself could not advance that far, as he complains in Romans 7:15. And daily all Christendom must pray: “Forgive us our debts,” and must confess the article of the Creed that reads: “the forgiveness of sins.” But these log-bearers and speck-judges refuse to stand for this article. They insist on having everything so pure that there is no inadequacy or fault in it. As soon as they see something wrong, they move right into their judging and condemning, as if they were so holy that they did not need forgiveness of sins or prayer. They want to reform the Lord’s Prayer and extinguish the principal article of the Creed. They are all full of demons and of blindness, while they mourn over other people’s specks. The same thing happens among us when we lose our senses. Those who are full of vices and wickedness cannot stop watching and condemning the tiny vices of other people. Thus the log is the master and the judge of the speck.

Now, anyone who is a Christian must certainly know and feel in himself that such immaculate purity is impossible and that daily the article “the forgiveness of sins” has to rule in us. Therefore it is easy to pardon other people’s faults and to put them all together by saying in the Lord’s Prayer: “Forgive us as we forgive.” This is especially so when it is evident that the other person honors the Word and does not despise or persecute it. Where the Word is, there Christ’s kingdom is, and full forgiveness, which consumes the speck. Therefore, where we notice this, we should not despise or condemn anyone. Otherwise we shall make our own speck a log and fail to obtain forgiveness, because we refuse to forgive other people.

You may say to this: “Am I not to speak out when an injustice is being done? Am I to call it justice and condone it? Am I to find it pleasing when the properties of the monasteries are seized or when there is coarse behavior and no praying or fasting?” No, I am not telling you to do that. He acknowledges here that there is a speck and that it should be removed; but here He is giving you instructions about doing it properly. I have to admit that it is not very nice, this speck in the eye. But above all I must determine whether I have a log in my own eye, and take that out first. Make the villain in your own breast pious, and then go on to see to it that the little villain becomes pious, too. It is wrong when the big thieves hang the little ones, as the saying goes, and the big villains condemn the little ones.⁷ If the pope and his supporters began here, sweeping in front of their own door first and changing their thieving and villainous ways, we would have to follow or suffer the consequences. But now they refuse to surrender their log or to have it denounced, while they condemn us for having a speck and not maintaining the purity we should. In this way that big heretic, the pope, condemns the other little heretics.⁸ While the big thieves steal publicly and rob incessantly, the little thieves have to call them “pious” and be willing to hang for them and to pay for them.

“There shall be no such perversion in My kingdom,” Christ says, “but first you must make the big villain pious, the one you find in your own skin when you examine yourself carefully. Once you have accomplished this much, there will be time enough to make a little villain pious. But it will amaze you how much trouble the big villain will cause you every day. Therefore I am willing to guarantee and to stake My life on it that you will never get around to removing the speck from someone else’s eye, and will have to say: ‘How can I deal with other people and make them pious first? I cannot even make myself pious or get rid of my log.’ Thus you will probably leave your brother’s speck unharmed.” You see, what

Christ means to say as a summary of this teaching is that we should willingly practice forgiveness, patient forbearance, and humility in our relations with one another; that is what the situation would have to be like if we followed this teaching. Then everything in Christendom would move along correctly and harmoniously, as it should, and God would be with us. But through his members and through Sectarianism the devil keeps this from happening.

The grim sentence that Christ pronounces here ought to make us tremble at this vice. As I have said, the one who judges always has a log in his eye as far as God is concerned, while the one who is being judged has only a speck. Now, the log is an infinitely graver sin than the speck, that is, the kind of sin that damns altogether and leaves us no grace. However great our sins and transgressions may be otherwise, He can forgive all of these, as He shows by calling the neighbor's sin a "speck." But you spoil everything when to these sins you add the abomination and the filth of judging and condemning someone else on account of his faults and when you refuse to forgive the way you want God to forgive you. You go ahead refusing to see the log, and you imagine that you are without sin. But if you recognized yourself, as has been said, you would also refrain from judging your neighbor. Thus your log would be called a little speck, and it would obtain the forgiveness of sins. You would also be willing to forgive and tolerate and excuse someone else's speck, in view of the fact that God forgives and pardons your log.

But "log in the eye" is the right name for something which makes a man stone-blind, something which the world can neither see nor evaluate. In fact, it is so beautifully decorated that the world imagines it is something precious and very sacred. In speaking about the villainous eye (Matt. 6:23), Christ said earlier that greedy people light a lantern for themselves and dream up the lovely idea that this must not be called being greedy but worshiping God. So it is here, too. Those who have a log in their eye refuse to admit that they have, or to be denounced as blind and miserable people. They want to be praised for judging the doctrine and the life of other people from a truly Christian motivation. In this way the schismatic spirits can brag and swear that the reason they teach differently is not any pride or envy, but only their desire for the glory of God and the salvation of their neighbor. They make it all so beautiful and bright, and they make their humility and God's glory so great that they cannot see anything else. In matters of life it is the same. As soon as people begin judging and criticizing one another, we see the same camouflage and the same boast: "I am not doing this out of hostility to the person but out of love for righteousness. I am a friend to the person but an enemy to the cause."⁹ This tickles a person so gently beneath his lovely exterior that he never becomes aware of any log.

But it will not do for you to judge and pass judgment as you please, without the Word and command of God, and then to invoke the glory and the righteousness of God. This is a demonic addition, decorating and beautifying itself with this camouflage. Here it is said that God does not want us to take it upon ourselves to act as judges, either in matters of doctrine or in matters of life. Where judging or rebuking is necessary, those should do it who have the office and the commission to do it: preachers and ministers in the spiritual realm and the government in the secular realm, or a brother with a brother alone, on the basis of a brotherly love that bears and corrects the neighbor's faults.

6. *Do not give dogs what is holy; and do not throw your pearls before swine, lest they trample them underfoot and turn to attack you.*

Now the Lord Christ has almost finished His preaching about the fruit and the works that follow doctrine. Next He will begin warning and admonishing us to be on our guard against other doctrine. Thus He also admonishes the apostles when He sends them out to preach, and says (Matt. 10:16): "Behold, I send you out as sheep in the midst of wolves; so be wise as serpents and innocent as doves." The situation of a Christian who is supposed to speak and preach the Word of God and to confess it by his life is really a dangerous one, because of the people. He has good reason to become impatient, because the world is so infinitely evil and because he lives in it surrounded by snakes and all kinds of vermin. That is why He declares: "Be careful not to throw what is holy before swine and dogs, for they might trample it underfoot or turn to attack you." By this He intends to show them and to teach them a lesson. Wherever they go to preach in public before a crowd, they will find dogs and swine, who cannot do anything but trample on the Gospel and then persecute the preachers.

Now, who are the ones that trample on what is holy and turn against us? This, too, happens in two areas, both in doctrine and in life. In the first place, it is the false teachers that do it. They take our Gospel and learn it; thus they get our jewel and precious treasure in which we are baptized and live and of which

we boast. Then they go back where they came from and start preaching against us and turning their snouts and their teeth against us. Our sectarian fanatics used to keep very quiet when the pope was raging and ruling, and you never heard a peep out of them. Now that we have run the danger of opening the path and of liberating them from the tyranny of the pope, and now that they have heard our doctrine and can imitate our preaching, they go out and turn against us. They become the worst enemies we have on earth, and no one has ever preached as badly as we, though without us they would not have known anything about it. In the second place, the situation is the same with regard to life. This is true most of all among us, where there is contempt or boredom with the Gospel and where things have progressed so far that a preacher can hardly make a living any more. Squire Bigwig¹⁰ out in the country monopolizes all the land and keeps the preachers in such a way that they cannot help losing their taste for preaching. He makes them his servants so that they have to preach and do what he wants. After him comes a Squire Skinflint in the cities and Tom, Dick, and Harry.¹¹ They maintain that they do not want any Gospel or Word of God. Yet it is from us that they got their freedom from the tyranny of the pope and all their other possessions, even the outward ones. Now they would like to drive us out into the country along with our Gospel, or to starve us out.

Well, there is nothing we can do about it. We have to put up with these snakes, dogs, and swine surrounding us and corrupting the Gospel both in doctrine and in life. Wherever there are faithful preachers they always have to take this. Such is the fortune of the Gospel in the world. If it should ever develop again that people like the pope and the bishops have control—I have often predicted this, and I am afraid that it may happen, all too soon—then the Gospel will be eliminated altogether and trampled down, and its preachers will be done for. The Gospel has to be a doormat for everybody, and the whole world walks all over it and tramples it underfoot, along with its preachers and pupils. Now, what are we going to do about it? “Do not throw it,” Christ says, “before swine and dogs.” “Yes, dear Lord, but they already have it. Since the proclamation is in public and is broadcast into the world, we cannot keep them from coming across the Gospel and taking it for themselves.” But this still does not mean that they have it, and, thank God, we can keep them from getting at what is holy. They may perhaps get the shells and the husks, that is, the freedom of the flesh. But all of them—dogs or swine, bigwigs¹² or misers or peasants—shall be prevented from getting a single letter of the Gospel, though they may read all the books and listen to all the sermons and get the idea that they know it thoroughly.

The art that Christ is teaching us here, therefore, is how to separate ourselves from any such hog or dog we may see. This is how we treat the schismatic spirits: We have no fellowship with them, we administer no Sacrament to them, we communicate no consolation of the Gospel to them. Instead we show them that they shall not enjoy anything of Christ, our treasure. By doing this we withhold the pearl and what is holy from them right well. So far as I am concerned, no bigwig or peasant, no fanatic or schismatic spirit shall get the Gospel and Christ unless he first asks me about it and agrees with me, so that I or any other real preacher can affirm it. Anyone who has the Gospel correctly must certainly agree with us and be one with us, insofar as we are already sure that what we have is the true Gospel and the pearls. Certainly he will not trample us underfoot the way Squire Bigwig does, or condemn us the way the sectarians do, or despise us the way the peasants do in the cities and towns. He will hold in esteem both the clear Word and those who preach it and gladly listen to it. Where this is not so, we shall regard them as swine and dogs and tell them that they will get nothing from us. Meanwhile we shall let them read and listen and lay claim to the name “Evangelical,” if they choose, the way I have to do with certain bigwigs and towns. This much is sure: Whoever despises the office of the ministry will not think very highly of the Gospel. Since they trample the ministers and the preachers underfoot and treat them more cruelly than the peasants treat their hogs, we shall take back our pearls and see how much of the Gospel they will have without any thanks to us. If you can trample the Word of God and its preachers underfoot, He can trample you underfoot as well.

Here is what Christ intends to say: “If you see that someone despises your preaching and tramples it underfoot, have no fellowship with such a person but withdraw from him.” He says the same in Matthew 18:17: “If he refuses to listen to you and the church, let him be to you as a heathen and a tax collector.” In other words, you tell them that they are not Christians but damned heathen, and you want them to hear no preaching and to have no part in our possessions, as Peter says to Simon Magus in Acts 8:21. This is what I do, and what everyone does who takes the preaching of the Gospel seriously, in order not to make

ourselves partakers of their sin. God does not want us to be hypocritical with our sectarians, as though their doctrine were correct. We must regard them as our enemies, from whom we are separated by the Gospel, by Baptism, by the Sacrament, and by all their doctrine and life. In the same way we have to say to our own people that if they want to participate in the Gospel, they must not despise us but prove by their fruit that they mean it seriously, or at least that they hold the Word and the Sacrament in esteem and humbly submit to it.

“You see,” people say, “this is how they are trying to re-establish a dominion and to occupy a seat of authority, like the one the pope has been occupying. This would be intolerable, and we would have done better to remain under the pope.” To this I answer: “As a matter of fact, I myself have been afraid that this might happen. But abusing the clergy and trampling them underfoot is not the way to accomplish your purpose of preventing their tyranny, but the way to help bring it about. With the elimination of those whom you are trampling underfoot and chasing away you will still be unable to dispense with clergy or preachers. Christ intends to keep His rule over the world, so that His Gospel, Baptism, and Sacrament may remain. Though there may be no prince willing to protect it, He will do so, because the Father has placed Him at His right hand and wants Him to be Lord. Though you may chase away all the clergy, you will not topple Christ from His throne. What will happen to you is this: Because you refuse the upright and pious preachers and cannot tolerate them, God will replace them with others, who will govern you with a compulsion and a tyranny worse than the old one.” Therefore our bigwigs and others are on the right path when they put their heads together with the intention of hushing up and putting us under their thumb. They do not realize that there is Another sitting up there who keeps His rule and says: “If you refuse to have the right kind of preachers, then you shall have the devil and his preachers, who preach lies to you. These you will have to accept, and you will have to let them govern you and torment you.” Because the Gospel has been refused and even persecuted in our Germany, the corners are full of sectarians, fanatics, and Anabaptists; and there is nothing anyone can do to prevent it.

The right preventive measure here would be to take the Gospel seriously and to pray God faithfully that He may send true and faithful laborers into His harvest (Matt. 9:38). Then no one would have to be afraid. From such preachers we would not get oppression or compulsion or damage to our body or soul, but support and help and every kind of benefit for everyone. This has been true of us. We may well boast before God and the world that we have not sought any dominion or advantage for ourselves, but have served the whole world with our body and life. We have not imposed a burden or damage on anyone, but have gladly helped him, even in a temporal way. And for all this we have suffered danger, violence, and persecution. Since they do not like us any more, may God grant that others follow us who treat them otherwise, who oppress, torment, and skin them. Then they will see what they had in us, and they will have to take it from men whom they would not look at now or hire as stableboys. All they deserve is to have such tyrants of whom they have to be afraid, as they had the pope. He was the sort of government they need. Our crazy princes have just started to learn this. What they have in mind is to be unrestrained and unafraid of the pope. They are beginning to protect the clergy, not for their sakes but to subordinate them to themselves and to make them live by their good pleasure. They are protecting these clergy in such a way that it would be better for them to join sides with us, whom they consider to be their enemies, than to let their feathers be picked by the princes in the name of protecting them. But this is how it should be and must be, and it serves them both right.

It must not be this way among Christians. Those who have honest and pious hearts should highly esteem their ministers and preachers in all humility and love, for the sake of Christ and of His Word. They should regard them highly as a gift and jewel given by God, more precious than any temporal treasure or possession. Similarly, true and pious preachers will faithfully seek only the welfare and the salvation of all people. They will not impose any burden on them, either in their consciences or even outwardly in their temporal possessions and physical existence. Whoever despises them should know that he is not a Christian and that he has lost the treasure once more. Our preaching and admonition is for everyone who will accept it and agree with us. Whoever refuses to do so and yet uses the name of the Gospel or the pretense of Christian brotherhood to despise us and to trample us underfoot, against him we use the art of letting him keep the pretense but actually taking everything back, so that he has nothing left at all. We have the command to separate ourselves from such people. We do not enjoy doing it, and we would have

preferred to have them stay with us. But since they refuse, we must let them go and not let them ruin our treasure or trample it underfoot.

7. *Ask, and it will be given you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you.*
8. *For every one who asks, receives, and he who seeks, finds, and to him who knocks it will be opened.*
9. *Or what man of you, if his son asks him for a loaf, will give him a stone?*
10. *Or if he asks for a fish, will give him a serpent?*
11. *If you, then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father who is in heaven give good things to those who ask Him?*

After teaching His disciples and instituting the office of the ministry, telling them what they are expected to preach and how they are to live, Christ, the Lord, now adds an admonition to prayer. By this He intends to teach them that, second only to the office of preaching, prayer is the chief work of a Christian and an inseparable part of the sermon. He also wants to indicate that because of all the temptations and hindrances we face, nothing is more necessary in Christendom than continual and unceasing prayer that God would give His grace and His Spirit to make the doctrine powerful and efficacious among us and among others. That is why, in the words we quoted from the prophet Zechariah (Zech. 12:10),¹³ God promised that He would pour out upon the Christians a Spirit of grace and of supplication. In these two items He summarizes all Christian existence.

Now, what He intends to say is this: "I have given you instructions about how you ought to live and what you ought to watch out for. In addition, it is necessary that you ask and that you have the confidence to go right on seeking and knocking without becoming lazy or lax in it. You will have need of asking, seeking, and knocking. Though doctrine and life may both have begun all right, we shall have to suffer¹⁴ from all sorts of transgressions and offenses that hinder us daily and keep us from progressing. We battle against these continually with all our might, but the strongest shield we have is prayer. If we do not use that, it is impossible for us to hold our own and to go on being Christians. We can plainly see now not only the sort of obstacles that oppose the Gospel every day, but also our own neglect of prayer and our attitude, as though this warning and admonition did not refer to us and we did not need prayer any more, now that the useless chattering and muttering of the rosaries and the other idolatrous prayers have stopped. All this is not a good sign, and it makes me afraid that some great misfortune which we could have prevented will overtake us.

Therefore every Christian should pay attention to this admonition. It is, in the first place, a commandment, as much as the previous statement, "Judge not" is a commandment. He should know that he is obliged to practice this Christian work. He should not be like that peasant who said: "I give grain to my minister, and he prays for me"; or like the people who think: "What is the use of my praying? If I do not pray, others do." We must not suppose that it is no concern of ours or that it is left up to our free choice; but I have given more detailed admonition on this elsewhere.¹⁵ In the second place, you have here the comforting promise and rich assurance that He attaches to prayer, to make it evident that He cares about it and to teach us to think about prayer as something dear and precious before God, because His admonition is so serious and His invitation so friendly, and He promises that we shall not ask in vain. Even if we had no other reason or attraction than this rich and friendly word, it should be enough to prompt us to pray. I shall not even talk about how dear His exhortation is or how sublime His command or how desperate our need.

Our own desperate need should be enough to make us pray. But in addition, as though that were not enough, He seeks to draw us to it by means of the beautiful analogy of every father's relation to his son. Though the son may be a good-for-nothing scamp, still he will not give him a serpent when he asks him for a fish. From that he draws these consoling words: "If you can do this, though you do not have a good nature or a single good trait in comparison with God, will not God, your heavenly Father, whose nature is completely good, give you good things if you ask Him for them?" This is the most sublime attraction by which anyone can be persuaded to pray, if we just looked at these words and took them to heart.

We have already spoken of the need that prompts Him to give this admonition and should prompt us to ask. Once you have the Word of God right and have made a good start in both doctrine and life, then

inevitably temptation and opposition arise, not one kind but thousands of kinds. In the first place, there is our own flesh, that rotten old bag. It quickly becomes bored, inattentive, and indifferent to the Word of God and the good life. Thus we always have less of wisdom and of the Word of God, of faith and love and patience, than we should. This is the first enemy hanging around our neck so heavily every day that he keeps dragging us that way. Next comes the second enemy, the world. It begrudges us the dear Word and faith and refuses to put up with anything in us, no matter how weak we may be. It goes ahead and condemns us, it tries to take away what we have, and it gives us no peace.

Those are two great temptations that hinder us inwardly in our prayer, and outwardly try to chase us away from it. Therefore all we can do is to go on crying to God, asking Him to strengthen and advance His Word in us and to restrain the persecutors and the sects so that it is not extinguished. Now, the third enemy is the strongest of all, the devil himself. He has us at a great disadvantage for two reasons: by nature we are not good; and in addition we are weak in faith and in spirit. Thus he invades my own castle and baffles against me. He also has the world on his side, and he incites all the sects against me. Through them he shoots his flaming, poisonous darts (Eph. 6:16) at me, to wear me down, to extinguish the Word in me again and to smother it, and to establish his control as he once had it, without any danger of being expelled. There, you see, are three troubles that press us down hard and will not get off our neck as long as we have life and breath. Hence we have continual reason for prayer and invocation. This is why He adds the words “ask,” “seek,” and “knock,” to indicate that we do not have everything yet but that our situation is one of shortcomings and needs everywhere. If we had everything, we would not need to ask or seek; if we were already in heaven, we would not need to knock.

Thus the highest temptations involve the service of God and the Word of God. We also have the common and temporal need of this life on earth. We should pray God to grant us the blessing of peace and a good government and to protect us from all kinds of trouble, from sickness and pestilence, from famine and bloodshed and bad weather. You are not beyond the reach of death yet, nor have you eaten up all your daily bread; hence you dare not stop praying for Him to give it to you daily. Similarly, because daily you have to watch so much shameful behavior everywhere, you have to go on praying in support of the government and in opposition to vices of every sort and the tendency of people to rob and steal from one another. Over and above all this you have your wife and children and servants to control at home. Thus you have your hands full; for whoever intends to keep and observe both Christian and imperial righteousness throughout his life has taken on more than one man’s task and assignment.

What shall we do? We face so many great needs and obstacles that we could not escape them even by slamming the door in their face. I am so lazy and lax in my attention to the Word of God and to everything good. How can I prevent my own death, or the riots and rumpus that the world causes, or the raging of the devil, or the trouble and misfortune everywhere? Now, because Christ, our Lord, knows this well, He wants to be a good and faithful physician and to show us a precious and powerful medicine. He wants to teach us what to do, as though He were saying: “The world is insane. It tries to get rid of its insanity by the use of wisdom and reason; and it looks for many ways and means, for all sorts of help and advice on how to escape this distress. But the shortest and surest way is to go into a little room (Matt. 6:6) or a corner and there to open up your heart and to pour it out before God, filled with complaints and sighs, but also with confidence and trust that as your faithful heavenly Father He wants to give you His help and advice in this distress.” In Isaiah 37 we read the story of King Hezekiah. The enemy was besieging the city with a great army and was so oppressing him and overwhelming him that, by human standards, the situation was utterly hopeless. Then the enemy ridiculed him mercilessly and made fun of his misfortune by writing him a letter full of blasphemy. The pious king might well have despaired; but all he did was to go up into the temple, spread the letter before God on the altar, and fall down and pray from his heart. Soon he was heard and helped.

But getting ourselves to the point of praying causes us distress and anguish, and this requires the greatest skill. With our own concerns and thoughts we torture ourselves and stew over trying to pull this off our neck and to get rid of it. There is an evil and clever devil riding me and other people and frequently playing these tricks on me in my temptation or anxiety, whether it has to do with spiritual or with secular affairs. He immediately butts in and makes you start stewing over it. In this way he snatches us from our prayer and makes us so dizzy that we do not even think of praying. By the time you begin praying you have already tortured yourself half to death. He is well aware of what prayer achieves and can do. That is

why he creates so many obstacles and disturbances, to keep you from getting around to it at all. Hence we ought to learn to take these words to heart. We should develop the habit, whenever we see anguish or need, to fall on our knees immediately and to spread the need before God, on the basis of this admonition and promise. Then we would find help and would not have to torture ourselves with our own ideas about looking for help. This is a very precious medicine, one that certainly helps and never fails, if you will only use it.

The right way of praying has been adequately discussed above, and also elsewhere. Here we are discussing only the power of prayer and the motivation for it. The principal thing to do is, first of all, to look at the Word of God. It will teach you what you should believe from your heart, to make you certain that your faith, Gospel, and Christ are correct and that your station in life is pleasing to God. Soon you will see the devil opposing you, and you will sense all sorts of inadequacies, inwardly in your faith and outwardly in your station. The whole world will seem to be turning topsy-turvy and swarming with temptations. When you feel this way, be wise enough to force your heart to start praying immediately and to say: "Dear Lord, I have Thy Word, and I am in the station that pleases Thee. This much I know. Thou seest all my inadequacies, and I know no help except in Thee. Help Thou, therefore, because Thou hast commanded that we should ask, seek, and knock, and hast said that then we shall surely receive, find, and have what we want." If you form this resolution and habit of confident prayer and you do not receive, come around and accuse me of lying to you. Though He may not give it to you that very instant, still He will give you enough so that your heart will receive comfort and strength until the time when He gives more abundantly (Eph. 3:20) than you could have hoped. This is another good thing about prayer. If you use it and practice it and thus ponder the Word of His promise, your heart keeps getting stronger and firmer in its confidence, and finally gets much more than it would have otherwise.

I could prove this easily from my own example and from that of other pious people. I have tried it, and so have many people with me. Thus at the Diet of Augsburg the devil was trying to devour us. The situation was so desperate and intense that the whole world expected violence to break out, as some spiteful people had been threatening. The swords were already drawn, and the guns loaded. But through our prayers God came to our aid and made it possible for those screamers, with their scratching and threatening, to get what was coming to them. He gave us a good peace and a year of grace, the likes of which there have not been for a long time, better than we could have hoped for. Now if danger and distress arise again, we will ask Him again, and He will help and deliver us again. Of course, He may let us suffer oppression for a little while in order to strengthen us and to drive us to pray that much harder. What sort of prayer would there be if there were no distress oppressing us until we felt it? Feeling your distress helps to make your prayer stronger. Let everyone, therefore, learn not to despise his prayer, nor to doubt that it will surely be heard and that in God's good time he will receive what he wants.

Why does Christ use so many words? He lists three items: "Ask, and it will be given you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you." One would have been enough. It is evident, as has been said, that by this He intends to admonish us even more strongly to pray. He knows that we are timid and shy, that we feel unworthy and unfit to present our needs to God. We feel the needs, but we cannot express them. We think that God is so great and we are so tiny that we do not dare to pray. This, too, is a great hindrance from the devil, and it does great damage to prayer. That is why Christ wants to lure us away from such timid thoughts, to remove our doubts, and to have us go ahead confidently and boldly. Though I am unworthy, I am still His creature; and since He has made me worthy of being His creature, I am also worthy of receiving what He has promised and so generously offered to me. In other words, if I am unworthy, He and His promise are not unworthy. You can venture on this vigorously and trustfully, you can put it in His lap joyfully and confidently. But above all, be sure that you really believe in Christ and that you have a proper occupation, one that pleases God, so that you are not like the world, which does not care about its occupation but only about the vices and the villainy that it goes right on planning day and night.

It would be possible to interpret the three statements to mean that He is repeating the same thing in different words to point to that constancy in prayer about which St. Paul admonishes in Romans 12:12: "Constant in prayer." Then it would be equivalent to His saying: "It is not enough just to begin and to sigh once, to recite a prayer and then to go away. As your need is, so should your prayer be. Your need does not attack you once and then let you go. It hangs on, it falls around your neck again, and it refuses to let

go. You act the same way! Pray continually, and seek and knock, too, and do not let go.” This is the lesson of the parable in Luke 18:1–8 about the widow. She was so persistent and importunate in her refusal to let go of the judge that he was overpowered and had to help her in spite of himself. How much more, Christ argues there (Luke 18:7), will God give us if He sees that we do not stop praying but go right on knocking so that He has to hear it? This is all the more so because He has promised to do so and shows that such persistence is pleasing to Him. Since your need goes right on knocking, therefore, you go right on knocking, too, and do not relent. For you have His Word, and He will have to say: “All right, then, you may have what you want.” St. James speaks of this in his Epistle when he says (James 5:16): “The prayer of a righteous man has great power in its effects” if it is serious and persistent; and in support of this he cites the example from the Scriptures of the prophet Elijah (James 5:16, 17). By urging you not only to ask but also to knock, God intends to test you to see whether you can hold on tight, and to teach you that your prayer is not displeasing to Him or unheard, simply because His answer is delayed and you are permitted to go on seeking and knocking.

12. *So whatever you wish that men would do to you, do so to them; for this is the Law and the Prophets.*

With these words He concludes the teaching He has been giving in these three chapters, and wraps it all up in a little package where it can all be found. Thus everyone can put it in his bosom and keep it; it is as if He were saying: “Would you like to know what I have been preaching, and what Moses and all the Prophets teach you? I shall tell it to you so briefly and put it in such a way that you dare not complain about its being too long or too hard to remember.” This is the kind of sermon that can be expanded or contracted; from it all teaching and preaching go forth and are broadcast, and here they come back together. How could it be put more succinctly and clearly than in these words? The trouble is that the world and our old Adam refuse to let us ponder what He says and measure our lives against the standard of this teaching. We let it go in one ear and out the other. If we always measured our lives and actions against this standard, we would not be so coarse and heedless in what we do, but we would always have enough to do. We could become our own teachers, teaching ourselves what we ought to do; and we would not have to chase after holy lives and holy works, nor would we need many lawyers and law books. This is stated briefly and learned easily, if we only were diligent and serious in acting and living according to it.

Let me illustrate it with a somewhat crude example. Surely there is no one who would enjoy being robbed; if he asks his own heart about this, he has to say that he really would not enjoy it at all. Now, why does he fail to draw the conclusion that he should treat others the way he wants to be treated? At a market, you see everyone marking up his prices as high as he pleases, asking 30 pfennigs for something that is not worth 10. If you ask him, “Friend, would you want to be treated that way?” he must be honest and reasonable enough to say: “I would be willing to pay for it what its market value is and what would be reasonable and proper, so that I am not overcharged.” There, you see, your heart is telling you honestly how you would like to be treated. And your conscience is arguing that you should treat others the same way; it can teach you well about your relations with your neighbor in buying and selling and all kinds of business, all things belonging to the Seventh Commandment (Ex. 20:15): “You shall not steal.”

It is the same with the other Commandments. If you have a wife, a daughter, or a maid, you would not want her to be corrupted or to acquire a bad reputation. You want everyone to respect her, to treat her well, and to speak the best about her. Then why are you so perverse that you yearn for someone else’s wife and want to corrupt her yourself? Why do you not help to improve her reputation, instead of finding pleasure in talking behind her back and slandering her? Similarly, you would not want anyone to do you injury or harm, to malign you, or to do anything like that. Then why do you yourself violate the rule and standard that you demand of others and want them to keep? How can you judge, criticize, and condemn someone else if he does not treat you that way? Why do you refuse to obey your own rule? Go through all the commandments of the Second Table this way, and you will find that this is really the summary of all possible sermons, as He Himself says here. Thus this is properly termed a short sermon. But on the other hand, if it were expanded through all the details it implies, it is such a long sermon that it would be endless, since the things that will be done on earth until the Last Day are innumerable. It takes a good teacher to condense and summarize such a long-drawn-out sermon in such a way that everyone can carry it home with him, be reminded of it daily, and see what is missing in his whole life; for he has it written in his own heart, in fact, in his whole life and activity, as we shall hear in more detail.

I am convinced, moreover, that it would be influential and productive of fruit if we only got into the habit of remembering it and were not so lazy and inattentive. I do not regard anyone as so coarse or so evil that he would shirk this or be offended at it if he really kept it in mind. It was certainly clever of Christ to state it this way. The only example He sets up is ourselves, and He makes this as intimate as possible by applying it to our heart, our body and life, and all our members. No one has to travel far to get it, or devote much trouble or expense to it. The book is laid into your own bosom, and it is so clear that you do not need glasses to understand Moses and the Law. Thus you are your own Bible, your own teacher, your own theologian, and your own preacher. The way He directs you, you only need one look at them to find out how the book pervades all your works and words and thoughts, your heart and body and soul. Just guide yourself by this, and you will be more wise and learned than all the skill and all the books of the lawyers.

To take a crude example again: If you are a manual laborer, you find that the Bible has been put into your workshop, into your hand, into your heart. It teaches and preaches how you should treat your neighbor. Just look at your tools—at your needle or thimble, your beer barrel, your goods, your scales or yardstick or measure—and you will read this statement inscribed on them. Everywhere you look, it stares at you. Nothing that you handle every day is so tiny that it does not continually tell you this, if you will only listen. Indeed, there is no shortage of preaching. You have as many preachers as you have transactions, goods, tools, and other equipment in your house and home. All this is continually crying out to you: “Friend, use me in your relations with your neighbor just as you would want your neighbor to use his property in his relations with you.” In this way, you see, this teaching would be inscribed everywhere we look, and engraved upon our entire life, if we only had ears willing to hear it and eyes willing to see it. It is being presented to us in such abundance that no one can give the excuse that he did not know it or that it was not announced and preached to him often enough. But we are like the vipers, which stop up their ears and become deaf when someone tries to trap them.¹⁶ We refuse to see or hear what is inscribed on our own heart and thoughts, and we plunge in recklessly: “Ha! What do I care about somebody else? I may do business with my own possessions as I please, and sell them for as much as I can get for them. Who is going to stop me?” That is what Squire Skinflint and Squire Squeeze¹⁷ do at the market. If someone rebukes and threatens them from the Word of God, they simply laugh and mock and become firmer in their wickedness. But we are not preaching to such people, and neither is Christ. He wants to have nothing to do with them and despises them as much as they do Him. He will let them go to the devil, so that He and they will have nothing further to do with each other.

Those who want to be pious, who fear God, and who think about how to live and behave, must know that they simply have no right to do business with their property and manage it as they please, as though they themselves were the lords of all. They have the obligation to carry on their business in a proper and orderly way; this is why there is territorial and civil law. That is how everyone would want his neighbor to treat him; therefore he should also treat his neighbor that way, taking and offering only good merchandise. Christ means this commandment seriously, and He will not let it be made free or optional, as though one could obey it or disobey it with impunity. He will enforce it, too, however much the world may take it as an insult and despise it. If you do not obey it, He will deal with you according to your own standard and judgment, and it will strike you in your house and home. You will have no blessing from what you have acquired in disobedience to this teaching, but you and your children will have only trouble and sorrow. He wants His commandment to be kept; otherwise you will have neither property nor good fortune.

In the second place, Christ not only makes this so intimate, as we have said, that we have to see it in everything we look at, He also portrays it in such a way that everyone has to blush in shame over himself. There is no one who enjoys doing something wrong when other people can see it. No one dares to sin publicly, in the presence of people, with the same freedom as he does privately, where no one can see him. So Christ intends here to appoint us as our own witnesses and to make us afraid of ourselves. Then if we do something wrong, our conscience will stand up against us with this commandment, as an eternal witness, and say: “Look here, what are you doing? According to the usual fair-business practice, you ought to put such and such a price on this. But you are putting on a much higher price. Or the way you are debasing and misrepresenting this merchandise, you would not want to have someone else sell you something like that.” How it would annoy you if someone charged you a gulden for something barely worth ten groschen! If you had one drop of honest blood in your body, you would have to be ashamed of yourself. If someone else acted this way, you would call him a thief and a villain. Then why are you not

ashamed of yourself, since it is not someone else but yourself who has to make this accusation, and you are condemned by your own conscience? This may be all right for a brazen hardhead, who has no sense of shame before the people or before himself, much less before God. But when someone else treats you that way you can quickly exclaim: “Is it not a sin and a shame and a clever¹⁸ way of robbing my wallet?” You can quickly recognize a thief and a villain in someone else; but you refuse to see the one working in your own breast, whom you can easily catch and feel.

Oh, how many fellows like this there are in all the businesses and trades! They go along, smugly deceiving and cheating the people wherever they can; still they refuse to be called thieves and villains, so long as they do it secretly and adroitly. If everyone had to give back what he has stolen and robbed in his business or job, very few people would be able to keep anything. Yet they go along like pious people, because no one dares to accuse and denounce them publicly. They suppose that they are sinless; yet if they look around, every corner of their house and home is full of theft and, by God, they do not have a single gulden or two in the house that was not stolen. Yet none of this is supposed to be called theft. If it were merely theft, and not murder in addition! Shoddy merchandise or unwholesome food and drink can make people weak and sick. Thus you deprive them not only of their money but also of their health. Many a person eats and drinks and then gets sick and often dies as a result. My friend, except for the name, is this not as bad as breaking into his house or rifling his treasure chest or striking him dead?

Now, if you were not such a heinous and brazen person, you would be ashamed when your conscience says this to you and reminds you of this saying. It would give you pause. In fact, it would make you so afraid that you would be unable to remain at rest anywhere on account of it. This burden continually oppresses us and drives us. It is an eternal witness against us, always condemning us, so that it becomes unbearable. It would soon teach you that you have to stop this robbing and stealing and whatever else you would not like to have someone else do to you. Get used to looking at this saying once in a while and practicing it on yourself. Thus in your whole existence, in every task in which you have contact and dealings with your neighbor, you have a daily sermon in your heart. From it you can easily learn to understand all the commandments and the whole Law, how to control and conduct yourself personally and socially. On this basis you can easily decide what is right and wrong in the world.

But you may say: “How can He say that the Law and the Prophets consist in this? Do not the Scriptures of the Law and the Prophets contain much more than this? They contain the doctrine of faith and promises, which are not mentioned here.” The answer is that here Christ names the Law and the Prophets in direct contrast to the Gospel or the promise. He is not preaching here about the sublime doctrine of faith in Christ but only about good works. These are two distinctive proclamations; both must be preached, but each at its appropriate time. You can tell that plainly from the words in the text where He says: “Whatever you wish that men would do to you, do so to them.” By this He indicates that His preaching here does not go beyond the relation that people have with us and we with them, and that it is not talking about the grace of Christ which we receive from God. What He intends to say now is this: “When the time comes to preach about the good life and about the works which we should perform in our relations with our neighbor, you will find nothing in all the Law and the Prophets except what this saying teaches.” He uses the words “men” and “do so to them” to specify that He is discussing only the commandments of the Second Table.

The best thing in the saying is that He does not say, “Other people shall do so to you,” but, “You shall do so to other people.” Everyone would like to have others do good to him. There are many villains and rascals who have no objection if other people are pious and do good to them, but they refuse to treat anyone else that way. So our peasants nowadays suppose that it is an injustice and a great burden that they are required to give fair measure, and yet they can yell and complain that their taxes are robbery. Such people are simply snakes. Now, some are a little better when they say: “I would be willing to take my turn and to do what I should if other people did it to me first.” This saying declares: “You should do what you expect from another.” If you want others to do it to you, you begin and be the first. And if they refuse, you do it anyway. If you will not be pious and do good until you see it in someone else, nothing will ever come of it. If others refuse, you are still obliged to do it, on the basis of the Law and of what this ordinance declares to be right, since that is how you would like to be treated. Whoever wants to be pious must not let himself be diverted by the example of other people. It is not right for you to say: “He cheated me, and so I have to do him dirt in turn.” Because you do not like it, do not do it to him; begin with the

way you would like to be treated. By your example you may prompt other people to do good to you in turn, even those who used to do you damage before. When you do not do good yourself, your reward is that no one does good to you either. And it serves you right, before God and the people.

13. *Enter by the narrow gate; for the gate is wide, and the way is easy, that leads to destruction, and those who enter by it are many.*

14. *For the gate is narrow, and the way is hard, that leads to life, and those who find it are few.*

Our dear Lord has now finished preaching. Finally He closes this sermon with several warnings, to arm us against all kinds of hindrances and offenses of both doctrine and life that we confront in the world. Truly the teaching has been beautiful and precious. It is extensive, and at the same time it is brief and compact, contained in a single word, to make it easy to say and understand. Now comes the toil and trouble of applying it in life. It is really a hard and tough life to be a Christian or a pious man, and it will not taste sweet to us. As that good girl said: "It takes a lot to be honorable." Indeed it does, and it takes a great deal more to lead a Christian life. Our dear Lord has in mind here that people may find it appealing and think to themselves: "I would like to live that way, but it takes a great deal." Christ says: "That is what I am saying, too. Therefore I am warning you to be on the lookout and not to let yourself be turned aside if it is a little sour and difficult, for it cannot be and will not be any other way in the world." A Christian has to know this and be armed against it, so that he does not let it trouble him or hinder him if the whole world lives otherwise. On no account dare he imitate the great mob, something Moses forbade already in Exodus 23:2: "You shall not follow the multitude to do evil"; as though he were saying: "You will always see the continuous activity of offense in the world." As Christ says here: "The way to destruction is broad, and those who walk upon it are many; the gate is very wide, to let the crowd pass through it."

That is the great offense that disconcerts a great many people and causes them to fall away from us. In fact, it gave headaches to the prophets and the saints, as David often complains in the Psalter. He does so in great detail in Psalm 73:3–5: "It vexed me when I saw the prosperity of the wicked. For they are not in danger of death, but they stand adorned like a palace. They are not in trouble as other men; they are not stricken like other men." In other words, he says: "They are successful on earth; they get rich, they have their house and home full, they live riotously, and they do whatever they please or whatever comes to their mind. But what do I do, by contrast?" "I must be pious and suffer, and I am stricken all the day long, I am chastened every morning" (Ps. 73:14). That is: "If I transgress the least little bit, He is immediately behind me with the rod. That is all I get for being pious. Over there, they have nothing but honor and joy. That is why the whole world sides with them and everybody praises and exalts them." We saw that under the papacy. A person had only to put on clerical garb for the whole world to stage a celebration in his honor. Everyone lent a helping hand, and blessed was the mother who bore him (Luke 11:27). It is the same way now. As long as someone is an enemy to us, they hold him in high honor and esteem, let him live as he pleases. It troubled the dear fathers that they had to see the world having success with its wickedness, with everyone praising it and running after it. Meanwhile they were supposed to be pious and to have nothing in exchange except trouble, and to suffer contempt and persecution from everyone.

Christ wants to point this out and to warn His followers that in the world everyone should live as though he were alone and should consider His Word and preaching as the very greatest thing on earth, thinking this way to himself: "I see my neighbor and the whole city, yes, the whole world, living differently. All those who are great or noble or rich, the princes and the lords, are allied with it. Nevertheless I have an ally who is greater than all of them, namely, Christ and His Word. When I am all alone, therefore, I am still not alone. Because I have the Word of God, I have Christ with me, together with all the dear angels and all the saints since the beginning of the world. Actually there is a bigger crowd and a more glorious procession surrounding me than there could be in the whole world now. Only I cannot see it with my eyes, and I have to watch and bear the offense of having so many people forsake me or live and act in opposition to me." You must hold on to this if you want to endure. Otherwise this offense will overwhelm you when you see how other people live and believe. This is the strongest argument that the Turks employ: "Do you suppose that God is so terrible that He would condemn a whole wide world?" The papists argue the same way: "Do you suppose that only what you drag out of your corner is right and that the whole world is damned? Were so many popes, bishops, holy fathers, kings, and princes completely mistaken?" They stress this so insistently that no one can tear them loose from it. They draw the certain conclusion that our doctrine is not correct, and yet the only basis they have is this: "There are many of us

and few of them. We are pious and learned and wise; we are the people of God; and we sit in the apostles' seat. Therefore we cannot err. Christ has not forsaken His church, nor God His people. It is impossible for God to damn so many outstanding people for the sake of a few. After all, He did not create heaven for nothing!"

Against all this Christ teaches as follows: "Put out your eyes, or at least turn them away. On no account must you look at the great mob, but only at the Word of God. You must know that it should and must be this way. The way to destruction is broad, and the gate is wide, and many enter by it. On the other hand, the gate to life is narrow, and the way is hard, and those who travel it are very few." Therefore the argument does not hold when the Turk and the pope boast about their faith: "There are many of us, and we have believed this for a long time. Therefore it must be right." Christ bluntly declares the opposite. He calls the road that is broad and well traveled "the way to destruction," and He warns that it should not be a source of offense to us that there are so few of us and the other mob is so large. This little morsel is quite hard to digest if you really feel it. I myself have often choked on it and thought: "We are such a tiny and poor little flock, despised and condemned by everything high and great on earth. Do we have a right to defy the whole world, to boast that only our cause is right, and to pronounce the judgment on all of them that the pope and the bishops and all their supporters belong to the devil?" But we must overcome this and conclude: "I know that my cause is right, though the whole world may say otherwise."

How the dear Virgin Mary must have felt when the angel came and brought her the message that she was to be the mother of the Highest (Luke 1:26 ff.)! Who was standing near her and believed this or that supported her? Should she have considered the fact that there were available the daughters of so many rich, noble, and great lords and princes? Could not God have found any other one for this high work? Yet the only virgin He called to it was she, a poor, unknown, and despised maiden. What should the patriarch Abraham have done when he had to move out of Chaldea (Gen. 12:1 ff.) and travel alone, as if he were the only Christian and the whole world were damned? But he could not let this divert him, nor could he pay attention to other people. Instead he had to say: "How God deals with the whole world I will leave in His care. I will cling to His Word and follow that, regardless of whether I see the whole world going differently." So also Mary must have thought: "I shall let God worry about what He is to do with others. I will abide by the Word that I hear, telling me what He plans to do with me." So we, too, must argue: "I see the pope, the bishops, the princes, the sects, the townspeople, and the peasants acting as they please, smugly despising and mocking us; and I might say: 'Do you imagine that only you are right against all of these?' But be gone, pope and princes, scholars and the whole world! I know that the doctrine is correct and that it is the Word of God. I will stick to that, please God, come what may."

Now Christ intends to say: "I have taught you this to make you see how very few people are on your side and how many will teach and live in opposition to you. This will give you a headache, but hold tight, and do not let it get you angry. You should know that this is how it should and must be, and you should remember that I told you beforehand: 'The gate to life is narrow, and the way is hard, but the other way is wide and easy.' Therefore do not let that divert you. Listen to what I am saying to you, and follow Me. I have traveled over the narrow way, and so have all the saints. You must travel that way, too, if you want to come to Me. Let the others travel their wide way. Wait and see how narrow the pit will be into which they will have to enter. But you, who now have to travel through the narrow gate on the hard way, will come into a beautiful room, as large and as wide as heaven and earth."

What is it that makes the way so narrow and hard? None other than the devil himself, the world, and our own lazy flesh. It is resistant and defensive, and it refuses to go on trusting God and clinging to His Word. It cannot stand poverty, danger, and the contempt of the world. In other words, it would like to travel on the wide road. Therefore it makes this road distasteful and hard for us. Next comes the world, with its persecution, hanging, murder, fire, and drowning, all because we refuse to travel on the wide way with it. If there is nothing else it can do, it venomously slanders and disgraces us, hounding us with sword, fire, and water. Thus it is a hard-enough fight to stand there and battle against our own flesh, trusting God, loving our neighbor, living chastely, and remaining in our calling.¹⁹ If we manage to do all this by hard labor, then the world has to add to it by persecuting and slandering us as the worst criminals on earth, to make our life even harder. And then comes the devil himself. He tortures the heart with evil thoughts of unbelief, fear, dread, and despair. Everything good that we do he turns into sin and shame. Surrounded by such enemies, we are still supposed to stand firm and to keep our goal in mind. It would be easy to get

disgusted, to fall back, and to say: "I see them resting and having a good time. They move along quietly and peacefully, and they have the reputation, the glory, and the honor of being the true servants of God. Why should I be the only one to let myself be tormented, vexed, and disgraced so terribly? I want to stay where all of them stay."

The ancients portrayed this well in the legend of the knight Tondalo.²⁰ Only they did not interpret it correctly, because they applied it to purgatory or the pain of souls after this life. With a burden on his back, he had to cross a narrow bridge, barely wider than a hand. Beneath him was a pool of sulphur, full of dragons, and approaching him was someone to whom he had to yield. That harmonizes beautifully with this statement. The life of a Christian is as hard as if he were walking on a narrow path, in fact, on nothing but razors. Beneath us in the world is the devil, who is continually snapping at us with his jaws in order to bring on impatience, despair, and murmuring against God. In addition, the world is advancing on us, and it refuses either to yield to us or to let us pass. And around our neck lies our own flesh. Thus we are hemmed in on every side. The way itself is so narrow that it would be difficult enough even if there were no dangers or obstacles in the way. Nevertheless we have to go through or become the property of the world and the devil.

Think about this, and guide yourself accordingly. If you want to be a Christian, then be one. It will never be any different. You will never make the way any wider, and you have to watch how few travel on it, while the great mob travels over there. But let this be your comfort: first, that God is standing next to you; and second, that after you have gone through, you will enter a beautiful and wide room. If you just cling to the Word, guiding yourself by it, and not by what your eyes see, He will certainly be next to you. He will be so strong that your spirit will overcome the flesh, the world, and the devil, who will be unable to do anything with your flesh or with the world or with himself. The Word to which you cling by faith is too strong for him, though it seems tiny and we do not see it. But he knows very well what it is capable of doing, since he has often tried it out and felt what a power and military force it can be when you believe in it. That is why the prophet can be so defiant in Psalm 118:6, 12, 13: "With the Lord on my side I do not fear. What can man do to me? They surrounded me like bees, they blazed like a fire of thorns; in the name of the Lord I cut them off! I was pushed hard so that I was falling, but the Lord helped me." You see, he does not have anything either except the Word and the faith that the Lord is alongside him, though he still does not see Him. He does feel the world and the flesh, making his way narrow and embittering his life. Still he stands firm. It is enough for him that the Lord is next to him and allied with him, and he is sure that He will continue to be his Ally and will conquer, though the whole world were to oppose him.

We, too, have to become accustomed to this comfort by learning to make the narrow gate and the hard way into a wide room and the little flock into a large crowd. Then we shall not go on staring with our eyes wide open, but by faith and the Word we shall guide ourselves by what is invisible. Christ Himself and the whole heavenly host are at my side and have traveled this very same way, preceding me to heaven in a beautiful and long procession. Until the Last Day all Christendom will be traveling on the same road. Where He goes and stays, there all of them must go and stay. Thus our way becomes light and easy, and we go on through with good cheer. To this Christ invites us when He says (Matt. 11:28–30): "Come to Me, all who labor and are heavy-laden, and I will give you rest. For My yoke is easy, and My burden is light." It is as if He wanted to say: "Do not be vexed by what I lay upon you in the world. It is a yoke and a burden for the flesh, and it is called a hard way and a narrow gate. But just cling to Me, and I will make it nice for you, pleasant and easy, giving you enough strength to travel the road with ease. What is more, you will experience how it becomes pleasant and sweet for you."

It is certainly true, if we accurately total up both sides, that the believers have the advantage. Therefore they should not want to trade places with the wicked. The wicked live riotously, while the believers have to suffer a great deal. Nevertheless the wicked torment and trouble themselves ten times as much as they do us with their venomous and restless hatred, with their unsuccessful efforts to do us harm, and with all kinds of wicked actions and tricks. Thus they make themselves guilty. They cannot have a good conscience or a single joyful hour, and they are their own devils here on earth. And with all this they do not do anything to us except to soil us and weigh us down a little, as much as God permits.

But those who believe in Christ do not need such anxieties and trouble. We can have a joyful heart and conscience in spite of the fact that we are weighed down a little and pinched by the devil. He has to let up, and meanwhile we are refreshed by the Word. Thus our burden and weight becomes sweet, and all we

have is half a torment, on the outside in the outward man. They are the devil's victims twice; they have their hell both here and hereafter, with eternal torment and a restless conscience because of their bloodshed and murder. Thus they cannot get any cheerful or kind thoughts toward God, even though outwardly they may have a little fun and pleasure. It serves them right, as the Scriptures say (Jer. 17:18): "Lord, destroy them with double destruction." You see, this way the Lord in His faithfulness wants us to be warned and then also comforted, so that we do not mind when our life is embittered and we have to see and feel so much offense in the world. For if we look at it correctly, it is only half embittered for us. Through Christ, in whom we believe, everything in our heart becomes sweet and brings life and eternal joy. What does it matter, then, if the old Adam is weighed down a little in the process?

15. *Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing but inwardly are ravenous wolves.*

So far the Lord has been serving up both doctrine and life correctly, and warning against whatever opposes it or harms it or hinders it. To this He now appends a warning. Even when everything is going all right in doctrine and in life we should be on the lookout for teachers who secretly arise in our midst with the title of genuine preachers and under the pretext of the Gospel but who introduce another Gospel and thus distort and destroy both doctrine and life. It is inevitable that the devil will use every device, both outward and inward, to attack the true and pure teaching of the Gospel on every side. Since the beginning of this sermon Christ has been saying that whoever intends to be a Christian has to consider this. In the first place, he will have to bear the brunt of enemies outside Christendom. They will oppose him, hate him, and harm him. They will strike and strangle him. At least, they will slander, curse, and condemn him. It has been decided that anyone who has no haters, slanderers, and persecutors is not yet a Christian, or at least that he has not yet proved his Christianity with an outward act and confession. As soon as he wants to confess his faith, the world becomes hostile to him; and if it can, it will certainly kill him for it.

Now these are overt enemies, those outside Christendom, whom everyone can see and feel right away. "But over and above these," Christ intends to say here, "you will have enemies of another kind. They are not the ones who are on the outside and who deny the doctrine. They are the ones who grow up in your own midst, who bear your name and boast of it. They are the ones who do the greatest harm." Though the others may stir up quite a tumult, all they can do is to take away my body and my goods; but with all their violence they cannot take away from me my heart and my faith. The enemies on the inside do not disturb my body and my goods but let me keep what I have. Craftily they reach out for the doctrine, to remove the treasure itself from my heart, the dear Word, for whose sake we endure persecution from those other enemies. This is really a miserable business! Those who are called our brethren and who lay claim to Christian teaching rise up against us. Under the cover of the same name, they abolish the true teaching and introduce a different one, as St. Paul predicts in his warning to his Ephesians (Acts 20:30): "From among your own selves will arise men teaching and preaching perverse things." It is, I say, particularly deplorable that those who do it should be from and in our own group, people whom we consider to be upright and against whom we cannot defend ourselves until they have started to do their damage.

This is the persecution within Christendom which was foretold to us throughout Scripture and which has been going on since the beginning of the world. Moses experienced it with his people. Jacob, Isaac, and Abraham experienced it with their families. And though Adam had only two sons, one of them had to start a sect. It seems to me that we have experienced enough of this ourselves. There were so many who originally supported us and joined the cause of the Gospel against the pope that it might have seemed for a while that we were going to have the whole world on our side. Just when everything seemed to be in full swing, our own people went ahead to cause us more anguish than all the princes, kings, and emperors could have done. What shall we do about it? They do great harm to us. In addition they strengthen the case of our enemies, who can now cry out against us.²¹ "There you can see what their teaching is, because they are not even unified among themselves. The Holy Spirit cannot be with them, because they themselves persecute, attack, and slander one another." We have to put up with seeing the case of our enemy strengthened by this offense, and our own case weakened and slandered. Thus we are opposed both by our enemies and by our brethren. This is actually the greatest outward tribulation in Christendom that our teaching has to endure.

We must expect this sort of thing all the time, and we cannot escape it. With this sermon, therefore, Christ gives us a comfort and a warning against it. The comfort is that we should not be frightened or worry ourselves to death over this miserable offense, when we see and feel that we who lay claim to the

Word of God are not unified among ourselves. As we have been instructed by His Word, we should reply this way: "I knew beforehand, when I made up my mind to be a Christian, that it would be the way that Christ, my Lord, predicted. I would have two kinds of enemies—those from the outside and those from the inside, from my own dearest friends and brethren. This will not scare me off, however, nor persuade me to apostatize from my teaching, as if the fact that my former brethren oppose me made the teaching wrong. Christ Himself had His betrayer Judas with Him. The fact that His precious disciple forsook Him and caused this trouble does not make what He taught false and what He did wrong. Therefore we must not mind our Judases either."

The warning is that we should expect this with certainty and that we should carefully watch and protect ourselves so that these sects do not deceive us. We have to arm ourselves against them and learn to know them. When He says, "Beware," He wants to teach us not to be patient²² with such people, but to be open-eyed, watchful, careful, and wise. All we need in opposition to those outward enemies is patience, to endure what they lay upon us and to stand firm. But here suffering or yielding to them is not in order. I must be watchful and careful. I must not even confide a word to my brother privately but only look at the Word with sharp and alert eyes, trusting no man who is on my side now; for today he can preach with me, but perhaps tomorrow against me. No one should think that he is secure and not in need of this admonition. This temptation is so dangerous and sly that even the most spiritual have their hands full to avoid being deceived by it. The rest of the crowd, who are smug and careless, just cannot keep from being seduced. It is, therefore, not in vain that He says, "Beware." The outward appearance and the name are so beautiful that no one can recognize it, as we shall hear, unless he has the correct understanding of the Word of God, then gives it his diligent attention, and makes it his highest concern to keep it pure and unadulterated.

Look how He describes the outward appearance and impression of the false teachers. In the first place, He gives them the name "prophets"; that is what they are called, and that is what they are, teachers and preachers. They boast of the fact that they have no other title or reputation than this, that they have the very same office of the ministry, the same Scriptures, and the same God as the others. Nevertheless they are false prophets. Here He is discussing those who have the commission to preach. The others, who go ahead without any office or commission, do not deserve to be called "false prophets" but tramps and rascals; and they should be given over to the police.²³ Even if they taught correctly, they would be intolerable. They try to meddle into other people's office and commission, in defiance of the ordinances of the government. Like thieves, they sneak secretly into corners, where no unauthorized person has a right to set up a preaching-meeting of his own or to obtrude himself, though he may hear and know that there is false preaching going on in public; for he does not have the commission or the responsibility to do so. God has instituted this office, as He has others; therefore we should not act in opposition to it. Whoever administers it wrongly, will be responsible for himself and will certainly find his Judge.

In the second place, He says that they come in sheep's clothing, that they are irreproachable and outwardly indistinguishable from genuine preachers. These are the two things that do the damage: They have the valid office, and in addition they give such a beautiful impression and appearance that no one can say anything except that they are true, pious preachers, interested in everyone's salvation. Such is their own precious claim, to which they can even swear, that they use nothing but the name and the Word of God. This makes such a powerful impression that the people are swept away like a flood, and no one can stop it. Who is there among the common people that can oppose these men or dare to denounce them? Who even knows how to protect himself against them, since they claim to come with the name and the Word of God?

Here Christ is warning us about both characteristics of these false prophets. We should not be swayed by the fact that they occupy the office of the ministry, though this is necessary and proper for a preacher. But this does not give anyone a guarantee that people have to believe him, as though he could not be a scoundrel in the ministry. It is not unusual in the world for villains and rascals to occupy every office and station in society and to abuse it. "I concede that they may be called prophets," Christ says, "but beware and be sure that they are not false prophets." Similarly, do not look only at sheep's clothing and the precious name and appearance under which they come, for here you are told that hidden underneath there might be a ravenous wolf. So beware that the sheep's clothing does not deceive you, for if they are to deceive the people, they all have to put on this lovely camouflage and appearance. Precisely that is the

difference between these secret enemies and those other overt enemies, who invade us openly and whom everyone recognizes. But these enemies walk around in our midst with the same office that we have, and they make an impression by using the same Scriptures and words. Nevertheless they are coming, Christ says, “on their own”; that is, though they do have the office, still they bring a kind of word and teaching that God has not committed to them and that He did not send them to preach, their own dreams and “doctrines of demons” (1 Tim. 4:1), decorated with the name of God. Take special warning, therefore, against the sheep’s clothing. Trust no man, however fine an impression he may make, but look only at the Word. See whether he is properly using it or whether he is using it as a pretext to peddle his own stuff.

You see, if we took up this warning and guided ourselves by the words of Christ, we could easily defend ourselves against all the false prophets and preachers. They are breaking in all over the place. This is due to the fact that we who hear the genuine Gospel do not take it seriously and are not concerned about really having it and keeping it. We act so sleepy and slothful, as if we could never lose it. As a consequence we are taken in by this lovely outward appearance and show before we have a chance to look around. As soon as a different new teacher comes along and goes to work, the word “Beware!” is forgotten. Yet it is with this word that we should be armed, listening to each individual as though we did not hear him, looking and paying attention only to the doctrine. Some frivolous and fickle spirits only look into the preachers’ mouths and chase after them, impelled by a curiosity that makes them think: “Oh, I have listened to this one already. Now I have to listen to that one, too. He is such a fine, learned, and saintly man.” There the devil already has a foothold, and he has taken them in before they realize what is going on. Now he drives and directs them at will from one schism to another. Paul says of such people that they are like a reed (Matt. 11:7), “tossed to and fro and carried about with every wind of doctrine” (Eph. 4:14). If a different one arises today or tomorrow, they quickly rush over to listen to him. The cause of this is the fact that in their heart they do not have a sure understanding of the Word of God and that they depreciate the Gospel. They imagine that if they have heard it once or twice, they know it all and have it all. They quickly become bored with it, so that as soon as someone else comes along bringing something new, they open up their eyes and ears wide. The same thing happens to them that happened to Adam and Eve when they were seduced by the serpent, who made them open up their eyes to see the forbidden tree and who insinuated such beautiful thoughts as these, contrary to the Word of God (Gen. 3:1): “Why should we not eat from this tree, too?” Thus their desires and curiosity were aroused, and they became bored with all the trees in all of Paradise, staring only at this one.

If we took the Gospel seriously and if, in our lives, we were concerned to keep this treasure pure and clean, we would not be deceived so easily. I hope that no schismatic spirit could overturn me very easily, since I know that the Gospel is true and I would not want to lose it. If someone comes along in his beautiful sheep’s clothing, I will not pay attention to his mask, as though I wanted to hear something different or new, but to whether or not he agrees with my Gospel. If not, then, thank God, I am well grounded and certain enough to know that he is a false prophet and a ravenous wolf under his sheep’s clothing.

So the demonic spirits have a double advantage: the fact that we are such careless, smug, and frivolous people; and the fact that they can deck themselves out in the beautiful wool of a sheep. By “sheep’s clothing” He does not mean wickedness and coarse sins, like those of heathen and non-Christians. He means the excellent name and reputation of true Christians, who have Holy Baptism, the Sacrament, Christ, and everything that is Christ’s. They have to bring all this along. None of them dares to come along with the statement: “This is what I say.” They come along instead with the statement: “Dear friends, this is what Christ says. There you have the Word of God and the Scriptures. If you want to be saved, you must believe this. Anyone who teaches otherwise, is deceiving you.” They make use of the glorious name of Christ and God, and of awesome and grand words like “the glory of God,” “truth,” “eternal salvation,” and other words like these. When someone hears himself being admonished by these glorious words, with the salvation or damnation of his soul at stake, he becomes frightened and makes a commitment immediately, unless he is well armed and well grounded against this. For it cuts like a sharp razor and penetrates body and soul.

This is one part of the sheep’s clothing. In addition they deck themselves out in special works and ways. They walk around in gray coats, with a sour look on their faces. They give the impression of being strict ascetics, with their fasts, chastisements, hard beds, and the like. They simply do not live like

ordinary people. This, too, is very impressive and really bewitches the people so that whole crowds fall into line. With a single sermon such a criminal can seduce an entire city which has had the Word of God for a long time. In one hour he can make them forget²⁴ what they have been listening to for ten years. If I wanted to, I could easily manage in two or three sermons to preach my people right back into the papacy, and put on such an appearance of special sanctity that I could create new pilgrimages and Masses. As has been said, the common people are easy to talk into something, besides being curious and eager to hear something new.

You see, that is how they have to deck themselves out in both doctrine and life. They make use of the same Word that we hear, and in addition they lead a beautiful and glittering life. Our Anabaptist schismatics seduce many people by yelling that the Gospel we have is not the right one, since they claim that it does not produce any fruit and that the people remain wicked, proud, and greedy. Or they say that you have to have something more than the mere Word and letter; you have to have the Spirit working, and an honest resolution to improve your life. If what we have really were the Word of God, it would certainly produce fruit. Then they proceed to say that they have the right understanding and the right fruit in their life. When a simple and inexperienced man hears this, he says: "That is really true!" Thus he lets himself be overwhelmed by the glorious words "Spirit" and "fruits of the Spirit." Then they take the next step and say: "Whoever wants to be a Christian must not participate in secular government or wield the sword or own private property (the way we do). Only he is a genuine Christian who proves it with his works by forsaking everything, by refusing secular power or authority, by wearing a gray coat, and by enduring hunger and trouble." This is what they call "the fruits of the Spirit." You see, these ate nothing but sheep's clothing, by which they mislead whole crowds of the poor people.

Now, who can recognize the wolf under the sheep's clothing and defend himself against him? I reply that the only advice I know is what I have already mentioned. Everyone should see to it, above all, that he is sure of his cause and of the doctrine. In his heart he should be so well grounded in it that he can stick to the doctrine even though he sees everyone on earth teaching and living contrary to it. Anyone who wants to move along in safety simply dare not pay attention to any of the outward masks in Christendom and guide himself by them. He must pay attention only to the Word, which shows us the right way of life that avails before God. For example, you must hold on to the chief part, the summary, of Christian teaching and accept nothing else: That God has sent and given Christ, His Son, and that only through Him does He forgive us all our sins, justify and save us. Then if you open your eyes, you will see all sorts of differing situations and ways of life—men and women, masters and servants, princes and subjects, rich and poor, and whatever stations and offices there may be in the world, all so intertwined that nothing about them makes any special impression on me. But since I am so well grounded and know the chief part, which includes everything, my heart draws this conclusion: "Whether, please God, I see a married person or a single person, a master or a servant, a learned man or a layman, gray clothes or red, fasting or eating, a sour face or a smiling one, what do I care about that? In other words, the differences that I see among them are all identical to me. For I have come to the insight that a girl in her red coat or a prince in his golden spangles can be no less a Christian than a beggar in his gray coat or a monk in his shirt of wool or hair. With this insight I am safe against all kinds of outward masks."

Anyone who does not have this chief part, or who does not know how to guide himself according to it, cannot defend himself against being taken in by these masks. He sees one person carrying on with his wife and children or decked out so gloriously and expensively, while the other person has a sour expression on his face, fasts, goes around barefooted and in a gray coat. Immediately he draws this conclusion: "This is really a holy man! But those others amount to nothing." So he is unrestrained in his admiration for the masks, and he does not have the sense to ask: "Could a villain be lying hidden under that gray coat?" A Christian can draw this conclusion and ask: "Dear monk, are you wearing your gray coat out of necessity? Or do you have the special idea that you want people to think of you as something special? You are simply doubling your desperate wickedness when you make people stare open-mouthed at your disguise. Otherwise you have to say: 'If a farmer plowing or spreading manure on his field is no less a Christian and no less entitled to get to heaven than I, what am I accomplishing by my special way of life?'"

As I have said, the great common crowd cling to these masks, which give them an eyeful and provide something special to see. Therefore it does not help to preach a long sermon against them. By nature we are inclined to such a teaching and to such works anyway, since it appeals to our reason, which would

always prefer to deal with God on the basis of its own works. So the devil stirs up the fire and blows on it through these teachers, till he has taken us in completely. But if we want to get through safely, we must be careful, above all, as I have always taught, to be correct in the chief doctrine about Christ. Then we can make the right judgments about all the outward masks and ways of life, and the Spirit will teach us and lead us well. Thus any individual who wants to be pious will find enough genuine good works to do in his own station, and he will not have to go looking for anything special.

If you are a prince or a judge, a servant or a maid, and you are expected to practice and prove your faith, to administer your office and station correctly, and to act properly, then you will surely get such a task and assignment that no Carthusian will have a more stringent routine than yours. Why is it such great trouble and hard work for him to wear a gray coat or a cowl or wooden shoes, or to cause his body a little trouble—if he is a strict one—and meanwhile to live without concern or worry and have plenty for his gluttony and guzzling? This other person has to eat his daily bread in the sweat of his face (Gen. 3:19) with bitter toil. Not only his body but also his heart has to be tormented by the wicked world and his neighbors. And he has to expect and suffer every kind of trouble, discord, and sorrow. Thus real citizenship, when carried on in a Christian manner, is ten times as hard as a Carthusian routine, except that it does not shine the way a monk does when he wears a cowl and lives in isolation from society. If you open your eyes and really compare the two, even your reason will have to draw this same conclusion.

Thus a prince may wear golden chains and a mantle of sable. But if he is pious, he is such a tormented and miserable man under that mantle of sable that you could not find his equal in any monastery. In this way you can go through all the offices and stations. Wherever you find a pious man or woman, you do not have to go looking for a monk or a nun. For such a person is already enough of a monk and is following a harder routine than the whole hooded and tonsured crowd. Before God all the monks and hermits are foolishness in comparison with one pious child, servant, or maid who is obedient and faithful in the performance of his duty. Just do what a pious man or woman should do, and you will have a rule more stringent than the rules, the cowls, and the tonsures of Francis and all the monks, which are more likely to cover a villain than a pious Christian.

Our crazy reason refuses to pay attention to this. It decries it and thinks to itself: “Why, that is an ordinary thing that anyone could do in his own home!” It yearns for something else that is strange and special, stares at it, and lets itself be led by all the clatter. Yet this is all just a pretense. They come along and rebuke us with their worthless way of life, in order to make every other way, though it may be God’s ordinance and station, seem contemptible and worthless. Our inadequacy comes from our failure to hold on to the Word of God seriously enough; otherwise we would soon say: “Bring on the Carthusians, the Anabaptists, the devil himself, or his mother!”²⁵ None of them could make a better station or way of life than God has made.” Every pious husband, servant, maid or faithful worker, therefore, must be said to have a station that is excellent, high, and godly. If we could evaluate all occupations and stations correctly on the basis of the Word, then everyone could teach and live correctly, and everything would go along just fine. The proper stations then would be those which God has created and ordained and with which He is pleased. And if God made it possible for us to get to the point that one city would have many such pious citizens—men, women, and children; masters, servants, and maids—we would have the kingdom of heaven on earth. We would not need any monasteries. People would not have to fast or pray and sing all day long in church but simply do no more than what their various stations and occupations required.

Now you see what the sheep’s clothing is with which they make the people stare. But what are they inwardly and at heart? Nothing else, Christ says, than ravenous wolves. The aim of these desperate scoundrels with the beautiful appearance of their doctrine and life is to destroy souls and to tear them up. They will not do it outwardly, like the tyrants and persecutors who tear up life and property, or like the preachers who preach against us publicly and condemn our doctrine. They will do it inwardly, by secretly tearing away the treasure in our heart, which has now become the throne and kingdom and dwelling place of God. In other words, the aim of their villainy, which they decorate with their doctrine and life, is to tear up the faith and chief doctrine about Christ. Right now the Anabaptists are bearing our name outwardly.²⁶ They even acknowledge that we have the Gospel in our word and proclamation; but they say, “The fruit does not follow.” With this phrase, “no fruit,” they divert people from faith to works, and they remove the chief item, which is faith in Christ, leading us away to look only at the fruit. When this is present, then the Gospel is the correct one, and vice versa. Their whole teaching is nothing else than that you have to take

hold and prove your faith by your fruit, by owning no private property, and by forsaking everything. Thus they fall back on their works again and put their trust in them for their salvation.

The worst part of it is that they do not even teach the real fruit, which the Gospel teaches and demands after faith, but their own dreams and imaginations. They do not say anything about the fact that everyone should carry out his station correctly and faithfully and should remain in it. On the contrary, they lead the people away from these stations. They teach them to desert them and run away from them as something secular and to take up something special—to wear a sour expression, to live strictly, not to eat and drink and dress like other people, to let themselves be tortured and killed voluntarily and unnecessarily. “Otherwise,” they say, “the Gospel is not bringing any fruit in you, and you are still not a Christian, though you may have been believing for a long time.”

They decorate these dreams of theirs with Scripture and with statements from the Gospel. Never, either by precept or example, did Christ teach or command that we should run away from human society, forsake everything, and own no private property, except in case of necessity, when we must either forsake this or forsake His Word. You must not, therefore, forsake all this until He commands you to and you are forced to. If it comes to that, then you must say: “Before I forsake Christ and the Gospel, let my wife and children, my body and goods, sun and moon and all the creatures be gone.” Except in the case of such a necessity, you have God’s commandment: love your neighbor, serve him and help him with your body and goods; love and rule your wife, children, and servants; do not run away and leave them sitting there. Yet that is what these people do, in opposition to the Word and ordinance of God, and without any necessity. And they claim to be special saints and brag about the great fruit of the Gospel!

Learn to recognize how, under the sheep’s clothing, these spirits inwardly tear up and take away your faith. They lead you away from Christ back upon yourself, and this they call the fruit of the Gospel, something they themselves have thought up to destroy the genuine fruit. These are the ravenous wolves in sheep’s clothing who have corrupted Christianity in every age. Until recently they were called monks; now they are the Anabaptists, the new monks. In previous ages it was the Pelagians, Ishmaelites, Esauites, and Cainites.²⁷ This faith²⁸ has lasted since the beginning of the world; and though these Anabaptists may be on the way out, others are on their way in. In other words, monkery must remain as long as the world stands, although it may assume other names and new activities. Anyone who takes it upon himself to start something special that goes beyond faith and the common occupations is and remains a monk, though he may not affect the same manner or habit or bearing. Of course, it is easy to beware of those who go around with cowl and tonsure; they have been described often enough for everyone to recognize them. But beware of the new monks. They do not wear cowls, but they are setting up other special ways. They make a pretense of great devotion and sanctity, with their sour expressions, gray coats, and ascetic life. They say that it is wrong to wear satin or silk, red or colored clothing—just what the other monks taught. Thus it is still the same old monkery, only with a different mask. Therefore the artists have hit it exactly right when they portrayed the devil in a monk’s cowl, with his devilish claws protruding underneath.²⁹ Since the beginning of the world, all he has been doing is seducing the world by monkery.

16. *You will know them by their fruits. Are grapes gathered from thorns, or figs from thistles?*

17. *So every sound tree bears good fruit, but the bad tree bears evil fruit.*

18. *A sound tree cannot bear evil fruit, nor can a bad tree bear good fruit.*

19. *Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.*

20. *Thus you will know them by their fruits.*

Having warned His followers to hold fast to His teaching and to be careful that they are not seduced by others who are ravenous wolves under sheep’s clothing, Christ, the Lord, now uses another warning to teach them how to recognize such people by their fruits. He cites an example in plain and simple words that even a child can understand. No one is so naive as to suppose that a thornbush bears figs or grapes. Nevertheless, though the words may be simple, no one can see their full implication unless he pays diligent attention to the Word of God. The most important thing is to understand what He calls a good or a bad tree and good or bad fruit. It is easy to say that this is a fig tree or a thistle or a good apple tree or a sour plum tree, and this is something that the eyes can easily see and the reason easily grasp. But what Christ is pointing to here cannot be located except by a spiritual understanding on the basis of the Word of God. We heard earlier that these same false teachers put on such an appearance and are so glib in their speech that reason is not capable of evaluating them or of defending itself against them. As a matter of

fact, this sort of teaching springs from reason and is completely compatible with it. Naturally it pleases us, for it teaches about our own actions and works, which lie within our understanding and our capacity.

A brief definition of “a sound tree that bears good fruit” is this: one who conducts his life, existence, and behavior according to the Word of God, pure and unadulterated. Later on He will be discussing many people who have heard the Word of God, who say, “Lord, Lord!” and who have done many signs, yet are false and hypocritical. Here you have to close up your reason altogether and follow only the Word of God, basing your ideas and opinions about life and works upon it, so that you may know what the Word of God calls a “good tree” or “good fruit.” It is too hard for reason to understand that a man is not a sound tree with good fruit when it sees him wearing nothing but a gray coat, fasting every week like that Pharisee in the Gospel (Luke 18:12), and even doing miracles and signs. Its knowledge cannot go any higher, nor can its thought and understanding be any better. It is simply fascinated by all this, and it concludes that whoever leads a life different from that of other people must be a special and saintly man. Reason, the blind fool, fails to see that all such works are still very far from the Word of God. You may ask reason: “How do you know that these works are as precious as you make them?” The only answer it can give you is, “I suppose so.” Into the ashcan³⁰ with your suppositions, if I am supposed to base my salvation and blessedness on them! The command is: You must not imagine or suppose, but you must know and have a sure basis and testimony from the Word of God, telling you that this is pleasing to Him. Then you can say: “The work is well done, the station is one that pleases God. I know this, not from my own light or star, which makes it seem good or bad to me, but from its agreement with the Word and the commandment of God. To me it does not seem right that a husband or a wife, a prince or a judge should be as holy as the one who sneaks off into corners or into the desert. But it will not do for me to decide on the basis of my supposition. Though someone were to be able to drive out demons and to do all the miracles that the apostles did, I would rather be a shoemaker’s apprentice or a dishwasher on the basis of the Word of God. I would elevate this occupation above all your suppositions, even if you were able to raise the dead.” So stick to the principle that bearing good fruit refers to the kind of life and good works that are in agreement with the Word and the commandment of God.

Thus the words “You will know them by their fruits” are set down as a distinguishing mark and a standard for judging and recognizing these prophets. If we are taken in, that is no one’s fault but our own. He has not left us in doubt but has portrayed them clearly and precisely. “If their sheep’s clothing makes it impossible for you to judge them,” He says, “then take note of their fruits and works, and see whether these are upright and good.” You may say: “All right, but how do I recognize these? They may fool me too.” Answer: You know what God’s commandments are. See whether they agree with them. I will guarantee that no schismatic spirit will come without making his own special mark and leaving a stench behind so that you can tell that the devil has been there. No false teaching or heresy has ever arisen without bringing along the distinguishing mark He points to here: that it has set forth works different from the ones which God has commanded and ordained. The world is seduced simply because it follows insane reason and leaves the Word of God lying under the bench. It does not notice what He commands, and meanwhile it stares at the masks in the hope of seeing something special.

Anyone who wants to judge correctly here should do as Christ teaches him to do. He should take their works and fruit in hand and measure them against the Word or commandment of God, to see how these harmonize. Take the saintliest Carthusian monk with his strict routine on the one side and St. Paul with the Ten Commandments on the other. You will see that St. Paul preaches this way: If you have Christ through faith, then let everyone be obedient and subject to the government (Rom. 13:1) and practice mutual love in your station (Rom. 13:8–10). You see, there you have the true mirror of a Christian life, based upon the commandment and ordinance of God. By way of contrast, the schismatic spirit comes along and says: “Oh, that is so ordinary. There are many wicked people in these stations, and it is all secular. We have to look for something better.” So he goes and makes something special and strange. He comes marching along in a cowl or a gray coat, which is now supposed to be a wonderful life and a perfect station. But if you are grounded in the Word of God, you can quickly judge and say: “Where did God command you to set up these special stations and works in opposition to the universal stations that He has ordained? I am well aware of the fact that in every station there are many rascals as well as many pious people, but what do I care if someone misuses them? I will remain with the Word, which teaches me that such stations are good in spite of the fact that there are bad people in them. I watch this, and I am guided by it. Since the

station is good, the works and fruit demanded by it and done according to the Word of God must also be right and good. But since your station has no Word of God, the works that are done in it cannot be good. Thus both the tree and its fruit are rotten and useless.”

There you have a sure basis for judgment, one that cannot deceive you, when Christ teaches you to know them by their fruit. In my reading about all the heretics and schismatics I have discovered that without fail they all set out to do something different from what God had required and commanded, one in this teaching and another in that. One forbade the eating of certain food, another forbade marriage, a third condemned the civil government, and each set forth something all his own. Thus they all fall into this pattern. It all depends, therefore, on really knowing and maintaining the definition of what Christ calls good works or fruits: a good work is one that is required or commanded by the Word of God and proceeds on the basis of that commandment. So a wife who is pious and faithful in her marriage can claim and boast that her station is commanded by God, that it is supported by the true, pure, and unadulterated Word of God, and that it heartily pleases God. Hence her works are all good fruit. Good should not be judged and evaluated on the basis of our suppositions but on the basis of what God says and pronounces to be good. If you stick to this, you cannot go wrong. They must go wrong. There stands the judgment that they cannot teach about right fruit. God takes the same attitude toward them when they preach about nothing except the stunts they themselves have thought up. Since they despise the real fruit and works for their lack of any special show, He despises the rotten works that they undertake so ostentatiously in their presumption that they are improving on what He has done.

There is a proverb invented by the priests, and it seems to me that the devil himself was making fun of them with it. When our Lord God was making a priest, the devil was watching and wanted to imitate Him. But he made the tonsure too wide, and it turned out to be a monk. Therefore the monks are the devil’s creatures. Of course, that is said in fun, as a joke, but it is really true. When the devil sees God commanding obedience and mutual love and creating a fine, spiritual people of His own, he cannot let it go at that. He just has to build his chapel or tavern next to the church³¹ and then to start teaching his monkery, poverty, gray coats, and the like. Thus the monks are always the devil’s priests. They preach nothing but the doctrine of demons, as Paul calls it (1 Tim. 4:1), which they have taken up on the basis of their own supposition and which, in their superior wisdom, they claim to be an improvement on the work of God.

Christ wants to say now: “If you want to recognize and judge these people, cling to the pure Word of God. Then you will be certain what the right fruit is, and you will see how they measure up to it. You will surely discover that they teach and practice something different from what God has commanded. This gives you a way of testing the tree, too, to see that it is no good.” Now He gives them a crude and childlike example: “Are grapes gathered from thorns, or figs from thistles?” They suppose: “Well, why not? Why should that be impossible? Why, you can gather pure sugar from them.” They regard these works as much more precious than the ones that God has commanded. Take a look at the two kinds of trees—the vine or the fig tree, and the thorn or the thistle by contrast. Thistles and thorns may bloom, too, but what sort of fruit do they yield?³² The fig tree is such an unpretentious tree and does not strut or brag about its fruit and leaves. It does not sprout any leaves until the fruit is ready, but before you realize it, it yields its fruit. Thus the grapevine has less glory in its outward appearance than any other tree and is just a dry and weak stick. Yet it yields grapes which are sweeter than anything else that grows, while other trees spread themselves and strut with their leaves and flowers so that it would seem that they will yield pure sugar; but all they produce is this sour and useless fruit.

These people likewise put on a fine outward appearance and set up a clatter with their bragging about the special works that they will be the only ones to perform. But when the blossoms have fallen, there is nothing left but a hawthorn full of stones, useless for nourishment or food, or thistleheads, which just prick and scratch if you take hold of them. If you measure them up against the commandment of God and ask whether God has commanded and required such works and whether they have served and benefited the neighbor, it is clear that they are valueless and only a hindrance to the genuine good fruit. The other stations, by contrast, put on no special outward appearance by glittering and glistening. Still they yield the finest and best fruit and are the most useful things on earth—but in the sight of God and of those who are illumined with spiritual vision so that they can see correctly and judge correctly.

This is why He says: “Are figs gathered from thorns?” As if He wanted to say: “The blossoms may be something wonderful, but wait a while and see what you will find when picking and gathering time comes. The only outcome will be disappointment for the people who have been expecting large and precious fruit but who find nothing that provides consolation or pleasure for them or for other people.” The regrettable thing is that this ghostly invention of the devil deceives and seduces even the sharpest mind that does not have the Word of God and a sound understanding. It follows its own supposition and devotion, and it imagines that if it finds these pleasing, God must find them pleasing too. But this should be reversed so that I find pleasing what I hear is pleasing to Him, even though all of God’s stations have their annoyances and many bad people in them who corrupt this fruit, just the way the bad worms do.

Now He closes this comparison with a common saying that He was fond of using otherwise too.³³ “Every sound tree bears good fruit, but the bad tree bears evil fruit.” Now, what is the point of teaching this in so many words? Who does not know it already? A blind man could tell it by feeling a bush. Does He think that we are such fools, not to know this? If someone already knows it, let him. We want to learn it and to remain Christ’s pupils. As has been said, it is not such an easy art to judge in the activity which Christ is discussing. The purpose of this saying is to comfort and strengthen people who are in the stations that conflict with the feelings and attitudes of reason—stations which have many annoyances and evil incidents in them so that people are taken aback and regard them as dangerous and as unsuitable for the service of God. St. Augustine used to torment himself and agonize over this, even when he had already become a great theologian.³⁴ He would have liked to see everything just right and to eliminate the evil elements from these stations. The Pelagian heretics caused him a great deal of trouble in this regard. Almost all the heretics have tried to make everything perfectly pure and—if you will pardon the expression—they have fouled it up instead.

But why look for it far away? Here it is stated admirably and briefly: Nothing but good fruit can come from the station that God has created and ordained, and from the man who works and lives in this station on the basis of the Word of God. With this you can now comfort your heart against thoughts like these: “Oh, it was this person or that who got me into this station. It causes me nothing but disgust and trouble.” I have often been tempted this way in connection with my own office, and still am. If it had not been for the Word of God, I would have stopped preaching a long time ago and would have said farewell to the world, the way the monks used to do. It is the devil himself doing this and making everyone’s station hard for him. Though God has assigned this office and work to us and is heartily pleased with it as the good fruit of a good heart, the devil so confuses foolish human reason that it fails to recognize this and thus destroys its own station and fruit. Because it does not see that this is a good tree and a good station, it is an obstacle to itself and therefore cannot yield good fruit.

Learn to look at your station on the basis of this statement, and draw this conclusion from it: “Thank God, I know now that I am in a good and blessed station, one that pleases God. Though it may be annoying to my flesh and contain a great deal that is troubling and disgusting, I shall cheerfully put up with all that. Here I have the comfort that Christ says: ‘A sound tree bears good fruit.’ He says this about every station that is grounded in the Word of God, though it may be despised and decried by the world and the special saints. On the other hand, I hear this judgment: ‘Every bad tree brings forth evil fruit.’ When I see the saintliest Carthusian, therefore, I am looking at an abominably bad tree, though he may make a wonderful impression and have less worry and opposition than I do. The devil does not make things as bitter and as difficult for him as he does for the genuine divine stations. That is why people find such stations and occupations to their liking. As I cannot see that the fruit in my station is good, so he cannot see either that his station and fruit is rotten and useless. They would like to reverse this saying to read this way: ‘A bad tree brings forth good fruit, and a sound tree brings forth bad fruit.’ ” In other words, reason is unable to judge here, or to see the goodness in its station and its works, or to get any joy or pleasure out of them. Instead, it praises the exact opposite. If this were visible to us, we would live in sheer joy and bear and endure with a joyful heart whatever God lays upon us, being certain that because the tree is sound, the fruit also must be good. When a pious hired man is hauling a wagonload of manure to the field, he is actually hauling a wagonload of precious figs and grapes—but in the sight of God, not in our own sight, since we do not believe, so that everyone gets tired of his station and goes staring at another one.

Now, that is what Christ means by drawing the frank and direct conclusion: “A sound tree bears good fruit, and vice versa.” To make it even stronger, He adds the extra statement: “A sound tree cannot bear

evil fruit, nor can a bad tree bear good fruit.” “What? Do You mean that it is impossible for a servant or a maid to be a villain, or for a man or woman to commit adultery, or for a prince to be a tyrant, or for a preacher to be a seducer, as You Yourself have said? Where but in the various stations and businesses should we look for scoundrels and villains?”

Answer: Unfortunately, that is true. But then none of these people is a sound tree any more, since he is transgressing the limits of his station and living in opposition to the commandment of God. But if he remains in his station or office and does what this demands, he cannot be a bad tree. Therefore He says: “You just be sure to remain a sound tree, and I promise you that what you do cannot be wrong. The works that God has commanded must be laudable, and they cannot be called wrong.” Now, what greater blessing could we want than to have this praise and testimony from Christ Himself, in opposition to the schismatic spirits and eccentrics? We know that we are in a station where we cannot do wrong so long as we live according to the Word of God and do what we have been commanded to do. In fact, though something wrong might creep in by our excesses, not purposely or deliberately but through our ignorance or weakness, this, too, has to be good and pardonable. In other words, you cannot ruin it, since you are living in the divine office and in the Word. If you remain in that, it cannot be Wrong. Though it might be sin otherwise, it will not be called wrong but will be covered over and forgiven.³⁵ Such is the wonderful blessing of the Word of God. Though a fig tree or other tree may sometimes bear wormy fruit, a fig is still good fruit and has no spines or thorns. Rather than to be fruitless, the tree will bear fruit that is wormy, though that is not its fault. So all the works of a Christian are of a good kind because the tree is sound. He lives in such a way that he would gladly bear nothing but good fruit, though sometimes, through the weakness of the flesh or some other obstacle, something wrong creeps in.

By contrast, even if those thornbushes and thistles strained themselves, they could not bear any fruit that could be called a good apple or a fig. If a Carthusian or a barefoot monk tortured himself to death with praying, he could not say an Our Father that God would call good, or do a single good work. The more he would do in his anxiety for doing good works, the worse he would make it. It is decided: “A thistle does not bear figs, and a thornbush does not bear grapes.” In short, “A bad tree cannot bear good fruit.” He is really threatening severely and frightening us strictly away from all self-chosen orders and stations, since they cannot do a single good work.³⁶ And He is really giving us wonderful comfort, that we who live according to the Word of God cannot do wrong.

And so He concludes now: “Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.” There you have the sentence handed down which will finally strike all those who teach and obey their own works, without any word of God. In doing this, their intention is to make their cause last forever. They imagine that since they are the really valuable trees and plants, God has to spare them, hedge them in and fence them, and take very good care of them. They do not see the sentence that has been pronounced against them. He has already taken hold of the ax and laid it to the tree, as Christ says elsewhere.³⁷ All they are fit for is hell-fire. For it is written (Matt. 15:13): “Every plant which My heavenly Father has not planted will be rooted up.”

He has been saying all this in comparisons and parables or obscure words. Now He goes on to explain what He meant by this, adding the correct gloss in clear and distinct words:

21. *Not everyone who says to Me, “Lord, Lord,” shall enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of My Father who is in heaven.*

That is to say: “I shall close heaven against the very ones who serve Me, who think that their cause is the best, who are seriously endeavoring to get into the kingdom of heaven, and who think they have it, in preference to everyone else.” It is a frightening judgment, that no one is deeper in hell than the great servants of God, the most saintly monks. Since the devil is a villain who cannot hide his own villainy, he has made up a proverb to poke fun at his own saints, which says: “Hell is paved with nothing but tonsures.”³⁸ This is the same thing that Christ says here, that those who brag about being the greatest saints shall not enter the kingdom of heaven. Why? “Because,” He says, “they say, ‘Lord, Lord,’ but they do not do the will of My Father who is in heaven.” What? Do you mean that they are not doing the will of God when they serve God day and night and work miracles besides, as we shall see? If they shall not be saved, what is to be the fate of the great common crowd? Answer: You hear him saying no to this and making a distinction between saying, “Lord, Lord,” and doing the will of His Father. He says: “The ones I want are those who do My Father’s will. I do not want those who incessantly cry, ‘Lord, Lord,’ and come with their

great devotion as if I had to lift them up to heaven. They hope, in fact, they count on getting to heaven themselves, and also on bringing others in by their merit, on occupying high thrones, and on getting special crowns.” They boast defiantly: “Should not a Carthusian merit more and have a higher rank in heaven than an ordinary layman or a wife? Otherwise, what is he doing in the monastery with his ascetic life?” But it does not say: “Carthusians or servants of God³⁹ enter heaven,” but “those who do the will of God.”

To do the will of God does not mean to put on cowls or gray coats or to run away from human society into the monastery. It is not written that we should do those things, but that Christ preached and taught this: that we should believe in Christ and be found in a calling that has a word of God, and do in it what He has commanded. Take the Ten Commandments in hand, and look how St. Paul teaches all the stations on the basis of these (Rom. 13:8–10): There should be fidelity and obedience from inferiors to superiors, and among the others there should be mutual love and service, and everyone should perform his office faithfully. You find nothing here about clericalism or monasticism, about gray coats, or about any other special way of life. Now, whoever lives according to this, does the will of God, as Christ Himself has testified. These are the ones who belong in heaven, not the ones who neglected the Word of God and yet supposed that they were serving God very seriously and devoutly by saying the word twice, “Lord, Lord,” while the rest of us hardly say it once. They are always busier and more energetic in their worship than the genuine Christians; but since they have been doing their own will, they had better look for another Lord to hear them and to open up heaven for them. By this He intends to warn us again that we should be careful not to let ourselves be seduced by those who present such great and wonderful services, even if they work miracles. We should abide by what He calls good so that everything proceeds and is done on the basis of His commandment, though it may not be very ostentatious or pleasing to reason. He has given us the sure indication that no schismatic spirit will be able to abide by that or be able to teach about good fruit, much less to bear it, but only about his own ideas, spun out of his own head.

Now, the first ones whom Christ rejects are those who come and fill the world with worship, as He predicted about them in Matthew 24:5, 23, 24: “Many false Christs and false prophets will arise and say: ‘Lo, here is Christ!’ or, ‘There He is!’ and they will lead many astray.” Next come others, who not only say, “Lord, Lord,” but also do great wonders and signs. About these He says now:

22. *On that day many will say to Me, “Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in Your name, and cast out demons in Your name, and do many mighty works in Your name?”*

23. *And then will I declare to them, “I never knew you; depart from Me, you evildoers.”*

These are really high and outstanding people. Yet they are bitterly deceived and go to hell quite by surprise. The others, whom He has just been discussing, go there, too, but like good fellows. That is, unless they are converted at the very end; and I hope that on their deathbed many of them have been saved and converted from their error. But here are people who claim to be sure of heaven, who start bargaining with God and saying: “Are we not to be saved? After all, we preached in Thy name and did so many miracles.” What goes on here, that those who do miracles, and do them in the name of Christ, should still be numbered among the false Christians and among the evil and damned people? I always supposed, and correctly, that God does not give a sign or a testimony to confirm lies. As Moses says (Deut. 18:20–22): “If a prophet presumes to speak a word in My name which I have not commanded him to speak—and if you say in your heart, ‘How may we know the word which the Lord has not spoken?’—when a prophet speaks in the name of the Lord, if the word does not come to pass or come true, that is a word which the Lord has not spoken.” Here we read the opposite: that they do signs in His name and still are false and wicked people.

First of all, the answer might be that they used to be true Christians, who produced genuine sermons and miracles but who afterwards fell away. It comes from the devil himself, as St. Paul warns his Corinthians, whenever a Christian begins to feel that he is something more than other people or that he has special intelligence, wisdom, and other gifts.⁴⁰ He is pleased with himself (Rom. 15:1), and he becomes proud. He becomes the kind of man who shells out the grain and leaves only the empty husks. Yet he imagines that he is pious and in good shape. There have been many people like this, and there still are. When God adorns a man with great and outstanding gifts, he is in extreme danger of losing his humility and becoming proud. There is a story about an ancient father in the wilderness who had a special gift for expelling demons.⁴¹ He helped so many people that the whole world chased after him and thought of him

almost as a god. When he felt that all this glory was beginning to tempt his vanity, he asked God to protect him and to keep him from falling into pride. So God let him be possessed and plagued by the devil for four weeks, till he lost his whole reputation and everyone said: "You see, that man helped other people, and now he is lying there unable to help himself!" So he got rid of the temptation and kept his humility. I cite this as an example to indicate how dangerous it is to have great and excellent gifts and how willing pride always is to attach itself to them. We see the same thing in ordinary outward affairs, even in the beggar's staff of temporal possessions and dominion. In other words, the gifts of God are excellent and noble, but we are so polluted that we cannot help ourselves: either we feel them and then become proud and defiant, or we feel the lack of them and then we despair.

That, I say, would be an adequate answer, and a correct one, though we shall not pursue it here. The chief interpretation here is that He is talking about false prophecies and miracles, as He speaks in Matthew 24:24: "False Christs and false prophets will arise and show great signs and wonders, so as to lead astray, if possible, even the elect." In 2 Thessalonians 2:9, 10 St. Paul says that the Antichrist will come "with all sorts of pretended powers and signs and wonders and with all wicked deception for unrighteousness, because they refused to love the truth and so be saved." So it is certain that false signs will happen in Christendom and that the false Christians will look upon them as true and genuine signs. This has really been happening in the papacy, though in Turkey, too, there are many such priests and special saints. You can read about this in the books and legends, especially in what the monks have written. They are all crawling with miracles, though they were really nothing but lies and rascalities. How they have made fools of the people nowadays with all those pilgrimages to the Grym Valley, to the Oak, or to Trier!⁴² I myself have seen some monks who were abominable rascals and reckless men, but who expelled the devil and played with him as if he were a child.

Who could recount all the rascality and devilish sorcery they have been practicing under the holy name of Christ, Mary, the holy cross, or St. Cyprian? The monks have been practicing all this mightily, and the whole world has fallen for it, so that no one even dares to peep against it. No pope or bishop ever preached against it, but they all helped it along. If anyone opposed it, he was violently beaten down and crushed. A short time ago Bishop Ernest of Saxony tore down one of these devil's chapels. But the evil outcome was that it made him ill, and he was only too happy to rebuild it. This sorcery has helped to introduce and confirm things like purgatory, Masses for the dead, the worship of all the saints, pilgrimages, monasteries, churches, and chapels. Many have even prophesied about the future, like Lichtenberg and others. All this has happened through the devil: to substantiate his abominations and his lies, to cast a spell over the people, and to hold them captive in error so that none of them could run away from him.

It is a minor matter for the devil to let himself be expelled even by an evil fellow, if he chooses, and yet to remain unexpelled. By this abominable deception he possesses and traps the people even more completely. Being a clever and experienced spirit, he can also guess at future events. Usually he makes fools of the people with his prophecies, by juggling them in such a way that they can be interpreted to mean various things; whichever way it comes out, he has hit it right. He used to do this long ago through his heathen priests.⁴³ Then the people go crazy with excitement: "Surely God is dwelling here! You can see and touch the miracles and signs!" They cannot figure out that the devil is doing it to deceive and seduce the people. The fools do not remember that Christ clearly foretold all this and faithfully warned us against it, personally and through His apostles. But this had to be the outcome, and it serves us right for despising the Word of God and for not being concerned about losing Christ and accepting the signs of the devil. For the devil it was a lot of fun, by which he had the complete control over Christendom that he sought.

Once we have seen this and experienced all too often what great damage the devil has done through these lying spirits and false signs, it should bring us to our senses. We should not imitate our predecessors in neglecting Christ's Word and letting it be spoken in vain, so that we do not end up the way they did. This sermon or prophecy was written as a warning. Unfortunately it comes too late for our predecessors, but early enough for us if we heed it. Then we will not let ourselves be diverted by their claims of the signs and wonders that Mary and other saints have done, nor by the skillful way they throw dust into our eyes to lead us away from the Word. Since we hear this warning that these false signs have to happen, we shall be smart enough not to believe in any mere sign.

When He discussed these miracles in Matthew 24, He warned them faithfully and seriously (Matt. 24:25): “Lo, I have told you beforehand”; as if He wanted to say: “Beware, and cling to My warning, for otherwise you will certainly be seduced. You have My Word, so that you know what the will of My Father is. Contrast these two. Here you have My teaching, which tells you how to live and act. There you see the signs that contradict this teaching.” He wants you to draw this conclusion: “Since I see such wonderful signs over there, while over here I have the teaching as well as the warning, I shall first examine the implication of the signs. I shall test them where they ought to be tested, as to whether they serve to strengthen my faith in the Word: that Christ died for me; that through Him I may obtain piety and salvation in the sight of God; and that I should carry out my station and pay faithful attention to it. I may discover the contrary, that by this they want to strengthen and confirm their own stuff and teach me⁴⁴ to run to this or that saint who does so many signs and miracles every day, or to crawl into a hood because this is such a holy order. This would mean being led away from Christ, from my church, pulpit, Baptism, and the Sacrament, and from my station and the works demanded of me—all things with which I should remain. Therefore I refuse to listen or to know any of this though an angel were to come from heaven (Gal. 1:8) and raise the dead before my very eyes. Christ has taught and warned me: ‘Hold on to My Word, pulpit, and Sacrament. Where these are there you will find Me. Stay there, for you do not need to go running or looking any farther. I will never come any nearer to you than where My Gospel, Baptism, and ministry are; through them I come into your heart and talk to you.’ He also says: ‘Be a father or a mother, a prince or a subject, a master or a servant. Remain in your station, where you hear Me speak, where I Myself am present. You silly men, why go running to wood and stone, where no Word of God is preached? Why stare with your eyes wide open at the devil’s signs, as if Christ were somewhere where His Word is not?’ ”

You see, this is the way to beat back the papists, who come crowding around with their “customs, fathers, councils, and so many signs and miracles,” by which they try to substantiate their cause. Just to give them a short answer: “All right, let us contrast the two. Here I have Christ’s Word; of this I am certain, and it has been powerfully substantiated throughout the world. You are showing me, by contrast, your teaching and your signs, which point me to rosaries, pilgrimages, the worship of saints, Masses, monkery, and other special and self-chosen works. There is nothing here about Christ, or about faith, Baptism, and the Sacrament, or about obedience and the good works which Christ teaches me to practice within my station, in my relations with my neighbor. Instead, there is the exact opposite. Hence these cannot be genuine signs, but both the teaching and the signs are the devil’s deception.” This way we could easily recognize and judge all false signs and say: “Let the signs come and go, I do not care, even if you raised the dead before my very eyes. All of this can deceive me, but the Word of God does not deceive me.” The devil can make fools of people and cast a spell over them, so that he makes a man seem dead for a while and then brings him back to consciousness, as if he were raised from the dead. Or he can damage your eye or some other part of your body and then restore it to health, so that you imagine that it was done by a miracle. So God decrees that even genuine miracles happen as a punishment for those who do not pay attention to the truth, as St. Paul says (2 Thess. 2:9–12), and as a warning for the others. People are going to such extremes in their ingratitude and contempt for His Word that wrath is not a sufficient punishment. If the world stands much longer, this will happen to us, too, for sinning so gravely that it has to deteriorate into all sorts of errors and signs.

Because the world simply refuses to listen and wants to despise the Word, yearning for something different, He will send it enough to seduce it into the abyss of all error. This is what happened when nothing else was being preached and taught in all the churches, monasteries, and schools, and all the books were smeared up with these lying signs. The only reason for this was the fact that these signs had taken place—as though it had not been proclaimed often enough that this was going to happen and that the people would be seduced by it, so that even the elect would scarcely be rescued from the error (Matt. 24:24). It serves those people right for so wantonly letting themselves be seduced and refusing to heed this warning. He gave the Word on how people should believe and live, and in addition He confirmed it with plenty of signs. He intends this to be enough, to let it go at that, and to do nothing else. Yet they insist on setting up a different and new teaching and better stations, contrary to the Word of God and the genuine miracles.

Therefore Christ says now: “I will not heed them though they boast: ‘Lord, did we not do many mighty works in Your name?’ I will pronounce a sentence upon them which reads: ‘I never knew you; depart from Me, you evildoers.’ ” “How so, dear Lord? After all, the signs and wonders are there, and no one can deny it!” He will say: “Yes, but why have you neglected My Word, which was confirmed by My miracles, setting up something else about which I know nothing, governing the world according to your own ideas, and following these? Since you have despised My Word and have not done My Father’s will, I refuse to know you or to have any grace for you.” They do not pay attention to this on earth nowadays, and they suppose that they will be right next to God. They will find out, and all too suddenly!

So the right interpretation of this text is that He is talking about the miracles which the false teachers perform to confirm their teaching. These He refuses to recognize, on the basis either of their signs or of their prophesying. In this connection, there is a more subtle argument—I do not know whether it belongs here—that God occasionally lets genuine signs take place through wicked people and that God is acting through them. So Caiaphas, the high priest, prophesied (John 11:50).⁴⁵ And Balaam delivered a most beautiful sermon about Christ; Moses himself says that the Holy Spirit entered into him (Num. 24:2) and that he had to prophesy against his will, as Caiaphas did also. Nor can it be denied that as an apostle of Christ, Judas performed many signs, just as the other apostles and disciples did. What shall we say to this?

St. John himself gives the answer when he says about Caiaphas (John 11:51): “Being high priest that year, he prophesied.” It can happen that because such a person is in a public office or in the government, he prophesies or does miracles and accomplishes a great deal of good, bringing many people to God. Still he may not be a pious person himself but may be going to the devil. A preacher occupies a public station and is an official person; correctly considered, such a person performs the greatest works, signs, and wonders that take place on earth. Through his office, through the Word and the Sacrament that he administers to you, he brings you to faith, rescues you from the power of the devil and from eternal death, and leads you to eternal life in heaven. This far surpasses all outward signs and wonders. Nevertheless he himself may be an unbelieving and wicked man.

In this issue, therefore, you must always pay attention to the Word of God and guide yourself according to it, not according to the personality. You heard earlier about the signs that take place in order to substantiate something different from the Word of God; about these there is nothing in Scripture. But there are signs which apply to something that God has spoken and substantiated. So the prophecy of the high priest Caiaphas announced that with His death Christ would redeem the world. This was a genuine and precious prophecy, though his motive was venomous and wicked. Although the prophet Balaam was a villain, he prophesied truly as a prophet about the people of God and about Christ; God was speaking through him. Now, if a preacher correctly administers his office and performs signs by its power, he should be listened to. But if he would like to get off the track and go some different way, to establish something different and apart from his office, he would no longer be a genuine prophet but a false one. If the apostle Judas preached and did miracles—though he belonged to the devil, as Christ says (John 6:70)—he did so by the power of the apostolic office, to confirm Christ so that the people would believe in Him. On this basis you judge everyone who occupies an office in Christendom. Not all those who occupy an office and who preach are Christians, or pious people. God does not ask about that. The person may be anything he pleases; but the office is right and good nevertheless, since it does not belong to man but to God Himself. So Caiaphas prophesies, not as Caiaphas, a murderer and a scoundrel, but as a high priest. So the minister or preacher baptizes you and brings you to eternal life, not as Mr. John Pommer,⁴⁶ but as a minister. God lets this happen in order to honor and establish the office. Since Judas is in the right public office, the one that Christ has ordained, it is the office that is being honored in him, not the person.

So it is in secular affairs, too, as Solomon says (Prov. 16:10): “Inspired decisions are on the lips of a king”; that is, everything that the government orders is right, and God confirms it. When it performs its office of judging criminals and punishing them, therefore, this is God’s judgment, which He speaks up in heaven and which He wants to be carried out—the same action that is forbidden otherwise, apart from the office. So Scripture makes everyone in the sacred office a prophet or a foreteller, though in his own person he may well be a villain or a tyrant. As Solomon says again (Prov. 8:15): “By Me kings reign”; that is: “Their law and judgment are My law and judgment, along with everything they do according to their office, if they rule properly.” Nevertheless the majority of them in the world are great villains underneath, who have no qualms about abusing the law and their own authority. But when they keep within the limits

of their office and do what the law demands, this is all God's business. Bringing this down to another level: It is as when a prince or a lord gives a command to a servant or sends out his representatives, you listen to them and honor them, though they may be rascals, not for their own sakes, but for the sake of their lord, whose office and command they bring along with them.

Now, since God does this in the secular sphere, He will lay even more emphasis upon it in the spiritual sphere, to make His office and ministry productive and powerful. As we have said, when a minister preaches or baptizes, this is nothing but a miracle, inasmuch as he lets the Gospel and Baptism remain valid regardless of whether he is pious or wicked. And if, as a non-Christian, he does not have the treasure himself, still the one who accepts the Word and believes receives the treasure. Now, if such signs and miracles take place through the office of the ministry, redeeming souls from sin, death, and the devil, how much more can tiny, outward miracles that do not help the soul take place in the physical sphere!

It is necessary here to distinguish between the two things, the office and the person. Because one man is pious and twenty are wicked, you must not reject the office on account of the person, as usually happens. You should investigate whether the tendency and purpose of the office and the miracle is to praise and confirm the doctrine of faith in Christ and whether they harmonize with what He has spoken, commanded, and instituted. If you see that this is so, then you may say: "This sermon is right, though the person may be a good-for-nothing. I will accept the sign, but I will ask no questions about the person." If it is not so, then you must not accept it or believe it, regardless of how great the sign may be or how saintly and precious the person may be. There are also many bishops, preachers, and others in office who imagine that this entitles them to God's special favor personally. As I have said above, this is a mistake. It will not help on the Last Day for them to boast and say: "Lord, we did many mighty works in Your name." God did not give them the power to do this on account of their person but on account of their office; He did not do these things for their sakes personally but for the sake of validating their office.

This applies to people in public office, through whom signs and wonders take place. Some of them are pious and some wicked, but this neither detracts from the office nor adds to it. But what do you say about those who do miracles and foretell the future though they are not in office? In Luke 9:49, 50 we read about some who did miracles though they were not Christ's disciples. The apostles informed Christ of this and said: "Master, we saw a man casting out demons in Your name, and we forbade him because he does not follow You." But He answered: "Do not forbid him; for he who is not against us is for us." He was an individual person, whom Christ had not installed into the office, and yet He says that they should not forbid him, adding the reason (Mark 9:39): "No one who does a mighty work in My name will be able soon after to preach evil about Me."

Answer: It is true, as I have said, that God does not let any signs take place through wicked men unless they are in public office, since God does not grant signs for the sake of their person but of their office. But where genuine signs take place through an individual person, such a person must certainly be pious, as are those who have a special revelation through dreams or visions. But such signs must be aimed at praising Christ and advancing the Gospel. So you have two kinds of signs that are good and legitimate: first, those that are performed by pious persons who are Christians; secondly, those that are performed by evil persons who occupy an office and teach correctly. We should always be guided by this certain standard, which should be applied to every kind of person, whether pious or impious, in office or out of office: Do the signs aim at praising Christ and advancing your faith? If you notice that they are directing you somewhere else, to pilgrimages or to prayers to saints or to the deliverance of souls from purgatory, in other words, to a dependence on your own works and the creation of a righteousness of your own, then you must say: "If you did every possible miracle for me, so that I could see it and touch it, I still would not believe you. For Christ has given me adequate warning about that."

God Himself set up this rule through Moses (Deut. 13:1-3): "If a prophet arises among you, or a dreamer of dreams, and gives you a sign or a wonder, and the sign or wonder which he tells you comes to pass, and if he says, 'Let us go after other gods,' which you have not known, and 'Let us serve them,' you shall not listen to the words of that prophet or to that dreamer of dreams." He also indicated the final cause⁴⁷ by which you can recognize them and proceed correctly: If they try to make you institute a different worship, that is, to forsake the single pure doctrine and to start something different alongside it, then you should not believe, though it were snowing miracles. He Himself interprets it further and says (Deut. 13:3): "For the Lord, your God, is testing you, to know whether you love the Lord, your God, with

all your heart and with all your soul.” It is as if He wanted to say: “He wants to try you out, to see how firmly you hold to the teaching that has already been established and is in force.”

In other words, the rule is this: Regardless of their size and number, no wonders or signs are to be accepted contrary to established teaching. We have God’s commandment; He has commanded from heaven (Matt. 17:5): “Listen to Him, Christ is the only one to whom you should listen.” In addition we have this warning, that false prophets will come and do great signs, but that they are all on the wrong track, away from Christ and toward something different. The only preventive is to have a good grasp of the doctrine and to keep it before your eyes continually. You can evaluate everything on this basis: Is this what the Gospel and the Creed teaches, which you pray every day, saying: “I believe in Christ alone, who died for me,” or is it something different? We have had adequate warning, if anyone is willing to heed it. But it does not make much of an impression on the great masses any more than it did before. I am convinced that if someone were to arise here today and perform just one sign, whole crowds would fall for it. That is how the crazy mob behaves. If someone pulls out something new in front of them and makes them stare, they forsake everything, the Word and the doctrine, and go gaping after that. And you can shout yourself to death against it. So they used to let such coarse and obvious lies and brazen fraud make fools of them and lead them around by the nose, following any rascal who arose with a lie about a new relic, new pilgrimages, and the like. The source of this is the shameful curiosity and boredom of our flesh and blood, as well as the devil himself, so that signs and wonders, especially the false ones, always get more of a following than the genuine ones. No one sees or cares that Christ and His apostles and others did miracles. But so soon as someone expels a demon, that beats all. All right, anyone who refuses to take a warning and wants to be seduced, dare not blame us.

24. *Everyone, then, who hears these words of Mine and does them will be like a wise man who built his house upon the rock;*
25. *And the rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat upon that house, but it did not fall, because it had been founded on the rock.*
26. *And everyone who hears these words of Mine and does not do them will be like a foolish man who built his house upon the sand;*
27. *And the rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell; and great was the fall of it.*

This is the conclusion and the end, on which everything depends: “Whoever not only hears this sermon with his ears but also does it is a wise and clever man.” The doctrine is a good and a precious thing, but it is not being preached for the sake of being heard but for the sake of action and its application to life. Particularly since we are always in danger from false prophets and miracle-workers, we should think it over and accept this teaching and warning, while we still hear it and have it, both as teachers and pupils. If we want to put it off until our little hour strikes and death and the devil come storming in with their rainstorms and tempests, then we have delayed too long. Therefore we must not only hear and be able, but actually *do* and *fight*.⁴⁸

Those who say, “Lord, Lord,” hear it too. The pope, bishops, kings, and the whole world have been hearing it. The priests at Mass and the monks have read, sung, and chanted it every day. But no one has done it or preached it. They have remained with their false worship and their false miracles and have confirmed other people in them too. Though they have been listening a great deal and doing miracles, they have not done the will of God. They do not remain with the doctrine of Christ and genuine good works, but fall back on their own works, which are done without faith or love. Among all the monks and priests there is not a single authentic work to be found. They do not do any works to serve or help their neighbor but only to seek their own advantage. Therefore they completely lack faith, love, and patience. They really do nothing at all, as Christ says, though they hear the right teaching; for it does not get a grip on them, since their hearts are nothing but sand.

Nevertheless, as we have said, there is plenty of activity and teaching among them, even more than among the true preachers and Christians. This, too, gives the people the wrong impression. With his ascetic and spiritual life a hermit or a Carthusian seems to be doing much more than St. Paul or any true preacher and Christian. The outward masks of special works and worship are so dazzling that an ordinary Christian life seems pale by comparison. So they have no shortage of doing, teaching, and believing. “The difference is,” Christ says, “that they hear My teaching, but all they want to do is what they themselves

have invented. I cannot keep them on the track of doing what I teach them.” If we Christians were as diligent in our works as they are in theirs, we would be nothing but saints. Still neither side really gets anywhere: we are lazy and indolent; they are entirely too active, but never in doing genuine works. And so, thank God, we still have the advantage, in that we have started believing and loving a little and are on the right track, however weak our progress may be.

Now He closes this with a beautiful analogy, showing the final outcome of both: “Everyone who hears and practices My teaching is a fine, smart builder, who does not build on sand but first finds a strong rock as a foundation. Once he has this, he builds on it so that his house may last and stand firm. Then when the storms and rains strike around it and above it, and when the floods and winds strike beneath it to wash away the ground and upset the house, it stands immovable against all of them as though it were defying them. But everyone who erects his building on sand will discover that it will stand only until the rain and the floods wash it away and the wind upsets it, so that it lies in a heap or collapses by itself.” With this analogy He intends to give us a faithful warning to be careful that we hold tight to His teaching and do not let go of Christ in our hearts, as our only sure Foundation (1 Cor. 3:11) and the Cornerstone of our salvation and blessedness (1 Peter 2:6), as St. Paul and St. Peter call Him on the basis of Isaiah 28:16. If we stand grounded and built on that, we shall remain impregnable. We can let the world and the devil and all the false teachers and schismatic spirits send rain and hail and slush on us and storm and rage around us with every kind of danger and trouble.

Those miserable and foolish people cannot have this assurance and certainty. They do not stand on the rock, that is, on the doctrine about Christ, but on the shifting sand of their own suppositions and dreams. When trouble comes and they have to battle against the devil and death, then they discover that they have put their trust in loose sand and that their stations and works cannot last. I myself have had the experience of seeing many such poor people, especially in monasteries. They really felt this, and finally the fright and terror of their conscience drove them crazy, and some of them remained in eternal despair. The reason was the fact that they had built on their own way of life, devotion, and good intentions and did not know anything about Christ. That sort of room was just equipped for the devil, and he could gleefully upset it and throw it all into a heap.

St. Bernard himself also had to feel this and admit it. He had led an extremely ascetic life with prayers, fasts, and chastisements, and there was nothing he lacked. He was an example for everyone else, and I know no one among the monks who wrote or lived better than he. And yet, when the anguish of death came upon him, he himself had to pronounce this judgment on his whole holy life: “Oh, I have lived damnably and passed my life shamefully!”⁴⁹ “How so, dear St. Bernard? Have you not been a pious monk all your life? Are not⁵⁰ chastity, obedience, preaching, fasting, and praying something valuable?” “No,” he says, “it is all lost and belongs to the devil.” Along comes the rain and the wind, pulling down the foundation and the floor and the building into one heap. Therefore he would have had to be damned eternally by his own judgment if he had not come to his senses through his loss, turned around, walked away from monkery, taken hold of a different foundation, clinging to Christ, and being preserved in the Creed that the children pray. As he says: “I am not worthy of eternal life, and I cannot obtain it by my own merit. Yet my Lord Christ has a double right to it: first, a right as the Lord and the heir to it from eternity; secondly, a right which He has won through His suffering and death. The first He keeps for Himself, the second He grants to me.” If they were saved, that is how all the monks and priests and everyone who claimed to be holy had to crawl out of their cowls and all their works and cling to Christ, though they found it distasteful to do so. It is hard for a man who has devoted his entire life to this self-made holiness and has depended on it to tear loose from it in one hour and to cast himself only upon Christ. Hence He warns and admonishes us to take hold of His teaching and to do it while we still have time, before the agony and the death pangs come over us.

So our dear Lord has finished this beautiful sermon. Now the evangelist concludes by saying that the whole world had to testify that this teaching was much different from any that they had been accustomed to hearing before.

28. *And when Jesus finished these sayings, the crowds were astonished at His teaching,*

29. *For He taught them as one who had authority, and not as their scribes.*

With this the evangelist indicates what kind of preachers and teachers the scribes were, namely, that it was all cold, vain, and idle prattle. They did not stress and emphasize the commandments of God seriously

and vigorously. Thus our ragwashers used to slobber over the pulpit about nothing but purgatory, indulgences, cowls, rosaries, and lighting candles. But He took hold of things in a different and quite unheard-of way, showing the true doctrine and life and denouncing vices. Thus they all felt that the man was teaching with authority. Everything was living and vocal, as if it had hands and feet. They were compelled to say that this had to be called preaching with authority, while what the others did was vain and empty, nothing but dead verbiage. So it is clever of our papists now to be ashamed of their rotten rags and to keep quiet about them. They are starting to imitate us and our books in preaching a little about faith and good works; of course, they still distort and destroy it, because they do not take right preaching seriously or have the grace to be able to understand it.

POSTSCRIPT

Here at the end one more question remains to be discussed. In this sermon we have heard Christ emphasizing works very vigorously. He says (Matt. 5:3): “The poor shall have the kingdom of heaven”; (Matt. 5:7): “The merciful shall obtain mercy.” He says again (Matt. 5:11, 12) that those who suffer persecution for His sake will be rewarded in heaven. What is more, He says at the end of the fifth chapter (Matt. 5:46): “If you love those who love you, what reward have you?” In the sixth chapter He says about almsgiving, fasting, and praying (Matt. 6:4, 6, 18): “Your Father who sees in secret will reward you openly.” From these statements those silly false preachers have drawn the conclusion that we enter the kingdom of heaven and are saved by our own works and actions. On this they build their endowments, monasteries, pilgrimages, Masses, and the like.

This question is a little subtle and would be more appropriate in a school before the learned people than in a pulpit before simple, common people. But since it occurs so often in the text, we must not bypass it completely but have to say something about it. It is necessary that everyone should know at least a little about the distinction between grace and merit, for the two are mutually exclusive. When grace is being preached, certainly merit cannot be preached; and what is grace cannot be merit, for “otherwise grace would no longer be grace,” says St. Paul (Rom. 11:6). Since that is beyond every doubt, anyone who confuses these two causes the people to go astray and misleads both himself and those who listen to him.

For the present, we shall ignore the subtle answer, and discuss the question in the most obvious possible terms. First of all, it must be maintained that faith or being a Christian is quite distinct from its fruit, as I have often said. So far as being a Christian and bearing the Christian name is concerned, one is no different from the other; everyone has an identical treasure and the identical possessions. The Baptism of St. Peter is no different or better than that of St. Paul, and the Baptism of a child born yesterday is no less a Baptism than that of St. John the Baptist or St. Peter and all the apostles. Nor do they have any different or better Christ than the most insignificant Christian.

Now, from this perspective, no merit or distinction means a thing. The most insignificant Christian receives the same body and blood of Christ in the Sacrament; and when he listens to the Gospel, he is listening to the same Word of God that Peter and Paul listened to and preached. Similarly, no saint can pray a different Our Father or a better one, or confess a different Creed, or recite a different Decalog from what is my daily prayer and every child’s. This is so obvious that anyone can understand and comprehend it. In that which entitles us to the name “Christian” there is no inequality or discrimination among persons, but one is like the next—man or woman, young or old, learned or unlearned, noble or ignoble, prince or peasant, master or servant, major or minor saint. There is only one kind of Christ and one kind of faith. The sun in the heavens is the same toward everyone. It shines on a peasant as well as on a king, on a blind man as well as on a man with sharp vision, on a sow in the street as well as on the loveliest woman on earth. It shines on a thorn no less than on a rose, on a clod no less than on a purple robe. The same sun shines on the poorest beggar and on the greatest king or emperor.

But it is in the outward sphere and in our activity that the inequalities and the various distinctions among Christians appear—not as Christians nor as to what makes them Christians, but as to the fruit. I am a baptized Christian, but over and above this I am also a preacher, though I could be a Christian without that. As a preacher I am the kind of Christian that is supposed to present the Word to the people, to console the sorrowful, and to instruct the erring and ignorant. Another person is the head of a household or a manual laborer, who is supposed to govern his household, take care of his work, and support his wife and children. Such a man is quite different from you and me, and yet I have to say: “He is just as much of a Christian, and he has as much of Baptism, the grace of God, and eternal life as I and everyone else. In

Christ he is no less significant than I, and here there is no distinction between women and men.” A woman’s task is different from a man’s, a servant’s from a master’s, a preacher’s from an ordinary citizen’s, a child’s from a father’s, a pupil’s or disciple’s from a teacher’s. Everyone of them has his own task or fruit. So throughout the outward sphere there are differences, while in the inward sphere they are all Christians and identical. There is only one Christian estate and only one natural condition of all men.

We see the same thing in the heavens, St. Paul says (1 Cor. 15:41). There are so many varieties of stars, and they are all dissimilar—one great and the other small, one bright and the other dim. Yet there is only one sun and only one heaven. They are all alike in that they all stand in one heaven and have one kind of sun, and still they are unlike in their size and brightness. It is the same on earth, too, Saint Paul continues (1 Cor. 15:39): “Not all flesh is alike, but there is one kind for men, another for animals, another for birds.” They are all alike in being flesh; each has its limbs, head, heart, stomach, etc., as well as the others. Still there is a distinction of natures between men, animals, birds, and fish.

Now if you want to describe or portray a Christian, you must paint him in such a way that there is no distinction among the different ones; each one must be like each other one in every way. You must not portray him on the basis of the fact that he is a man or a woman, a preacher or a layman, a prince or a pauper, a manual laborer or a Carthusian monk. None of these distinctions makes him what he is; and compared in this respect with Peter and Paul, he is as good and as holy as they. In fact, no one amounts to more or is any better than he. If St. Peter were better than I in what makes a Christian a Christian, he would have to have a better Christ, Gospel, and Baptism. But since the possession we have is identical in all respects, we must all be alike so far as this is concerned, with no one elevated above the other. It is possible that one does more and greater deeds than another, as St. Peter raised the dead (Acts 9:40). Performing miracles that I do not perform makes him a greater and a brighter star than me in heaven, but not a different kind of star; and he does not have a different heaven either. St. Paul did more and worked harder than all the apostles (1 Cor. 15:10); but this does not mean that he had a better apostolic office or preached a different and better Christ.

Regarding merit, then, we say this. If the subject is what makes a Christian a Christian, how to become pious before God and obtain forgiveness of sins and eternal life, here we are all alike; here all our merit is completely excluded, and we must not hear or know anything about it. You have not merited the Gospel or Christ or Baptism, but it is purely a gift, freely given. Our sins are forgiven free, and we become God’s children and are put into heaven without any contribution on our part. Our quarrel here is with the abomination of the sophists, who exalt our works to the point that by them we get a gracious God and merit heaven. In fact, they are so brazen that they dare to say that even in mortal sin a man is capable of doing so much on his own, of performing such acts of devotion, and of achieving such good works that by this he may still and propitiate the wrath of God. That amounts to throwing the roof to the ground, upsetting the foundation, building salvation on mere water, hurling Christ from His throne completely, and putting up our works in His place. From this it must follow that we do not need Baptism or Christ or the Gospel or faith; for even in mortal sin I find enough goodness and power in myself to pull myself up by my own works and to merit forgiveness of sins and eternal life. From this you can see that all their drivel about merit is a slander and a blasphemy of God, when it comes to the subject we are now discussing, namely, how and by what means we come to the grace of God and eternal life. As if it were not bad enough that they teach this abominable blasphemy, they are actually defending it and condemning us as heretics on account of it.

It is easy to figure out and understand that one of these two must be false: Either we do merit grace by our actions, or Christ with His Baptism must be useless and worthless. Then Christ acted like a fool, to let Himself be tortured and to shed His blood so dearly and to expend so much, in gaining and granting to us something that was unnecessary and that we already have by ourselves. Though they denounce us as heretics for refusing to agree with them regarding this merit of works, we will bide our time, letting them call us heretics and turning it over to God, our Judge. And we shall withstand them all the more firmly, telling them that they are not heretics, but the worst blasphemers under the sun. They shamefully deny and curse Christ, as Peter prophesied about them (2 Peter 2:1); and as the Epistle to the Hebrews says (Heb. 10:29), they punch Christ in the teeth and trample Him underfoot, along with His Baptism, the Sacrament, and the whole Gospel, and whatever God has given us through Him.

I would really like to hear how these miserable people could reply to this. They assert that by our works we can move toward receiving grace; when this is done and we have merited so much, we merit the kingdom of heaven and eternal salvation over and above what they call “first grace.”¹ What then is merited by the other works that follow? Let us assume that a papist has performed his Mass or other work in grace and that by this precious work, which is worthy of eternal life, he has merited the kingdom of heaven. They call this the merit of condignity. What then will he merit by the works and Masses that he does tomorrow and thereafter in the same grace? Since they do not know what to say, they begin to distinguish between “essential and accidental reward,” saying: “These subsequent works make it possible to merit something extra, a sort of little gift or bonus, which God gives us over and above eternal life.” If this is true, then it seems to me that the first works are the best but that the others are not so good; for otherwise they would have to merit the same. Usually, the subsequent works tend to be better, since they are practiced and cultivated more carefully. Now since the last works do not merit the kingdom of heaven, the first must not merit it either. Or, if they are all equal and if every work can merit it, then God would have to build as many heavens as there are good works performed. And where would our Lord God find all those heavens to pay for every good work? Those are really smart people, being able to measure everything so smoothly and accurately! What shall we say then? Everything they present is sheer lying and deception. None of these things is true: first, that any man can merit grace by his own works, much less that a man in mortal sin can do so; secondly, even if, as their lie says, a man were in grace through his works, that such works done in grace should be precious enough to be worthy of the kingdom of heaven. There stands Christ, stating the exact opposite in frank and plain words (Luke 17:10): “When you have done all that is commanded you, say, ‘We are unworthy servants.’ ”

Here we should steadfastly maintain our teaching so that we never let any work take credit for gaining the favor and grace of God, for liberating us from sin, and for bringing us to heaven. My merit is worthless for this. And if someone should want to use it for this, I must trample it underfoot and damn it to the devil himself in hell, as a thing that denies Christ and seeks to hinder my faith. All that avails here is the fact that God has given all this free, out of pure grace, by sending Christ, His Son, and letting Him die for me, announcing and granting this to me, and commanding me simply to believe it and to be baptized in it. None of my works has anything to do with this, but it is purely a gift, bestowed from heaven and brought to me by Christ. Let all merit be simply discarded here in favor of the conclusion that it is impossible to obtain grace and the forgiveness of sins in any other way, manner, or measure than by hearing the Word of God about Christ and by receiving it through faith. And why should we brag about our merit in order to make God applaud us? They themselves and all the saints have to pray in the Lord’s Prayer every day as long as we live: “Forgive us our debts.” And yet these desperate saints have the audacity to say that a man in mortal sin can prepare himself for grace, and then can merit eternal life!

How do you deal with the fact that there are so many passages about reward and merit? For the benefit of the simple people, we give the answer now that these are simply intended to comfort Christians. Once you have become a Christian and have a gracious God and the forgiveness of sins, both of past sins and of those that cling to you every day, a certain result will be that you will have to do much and suffer much on account of your faith and your Baptism. As these three chapters have shown in detail, the devil himself, together with the world and the flesh, will attach himself to you and torment you from every side, making the world seem too narrow for you. If we were left to be stuck in this, without Word or consolation, we would despair and say: “Who wants to be a Christian or preach or do good works? You see what happens to them. The world tramples them underfoot, defames and slanders them, and tries every kind of villainy and evil trick on them, finally robbing them of their honor, their property, and their life. All Christ can call me is poor, troubled, hungry, meek, peaceable, afflicted, and persecuted! Is this supposed to last forever and never change?”

Then He has to speak out, strengthening and comforting us and saying: “Now you are in grace, and you are the children of God. Though you have to suffer for that in the world now, do not let it frighten you. Hold on tight, and do not let what you see tire you out or wear you down. Let everyone do his duty. If this causes him trouble, it will not do him any damage. He should know that the kingdom of heaven is his and that he will be richly repaid.” Repaid, but how? We already have it through Christ, apart from, and prior to, any action of ours. As St. Paul says (1 Cor. 15:41), God will make you a big, bright star and give you a special gift, even in this life. Even here on earth, a Christian can obtain so much from God through

his prayer and good works: He can save a whole country, prevent war, famine, and pestilence. This is not because the work is so precious in its own right, but because He has promised this to strengthen and comfort us and to keep us from thinking that our works, troubles, and sorrows have been lost and forgotten.

Now, none of this implies any merit on our part for earning grace or Baptism or Christ and heaven, which is what they mean when they talk about merit; but it all refers to the fruit of Christianity. As we have seen, Christ is saying nothing in this sermon about how we become Christians, but only about the works and fruit that no one can do unless he already is a Christian and in a state of grace. This is evident from the words that they have to endure poverty, suffering, and persecution simply because they are Christians and have the kingdom of heaven. Now, if we are discussing the fruit that follows grace and the forgiveness of sins, we will let the terms “merit” and “reward” be used. What we oppose is the idea that works of ours like these are the highest good, which must precede them and without which they do not take place or please God. If the insistence on grace alone without any merit is preserved, then we have no objection to giving the name “merits” to the fruit that follows. Only such statements should not be distorted and applied in an antiscriptural way to our meriting grace, but interpreted correctly, the way they were intended, as a consolation to Christians—especially when they have to suffer opposition, when they get the feeling and the impression that our life, suffering, and activity are pointless and useless. This is the consolation that Scripture uses everywhere in urging perseverance in good works. So in Jeremiah 31:16 it says: “Your works shall be rewarded”; and St. Paul says in 1 Corinthians 15:58: “In the Lord your labor is not in vain.” If we did not have this consolation, we could not stand the misery, persecution, and trouble we get in exchange for doing so much good, nor let our teaching and preaching be rewarded with nothing but ingratitude and abuse. Finally we would have to stop working and suffering, though it is our obvious duty to do so.

God wants to wake us up and to strengthen us with this beautiful promise. Then we will not pay attention to the ingratitude, hate, envy, and contempt of the world, but pay attention to Him who says: “I am your God. If the world refuses to thank you and deprives you of your reputation and property, even of your body and life, just cling to Me, and find your consolation in the fact that I still have a heaven with so much in it that I can easily recompense you and give you ten times as much as they can take away from you now.” And we can defy the world this way: “If it refuses to be kind to us, then it can leave, and take its kindness and everything else along. I did not start anything for its sake, and I will not do anything or stop anything for its sake. But I will do everything and suffer everything for the sake of Him whose promises are so generous and who says: ‘Through Christ you already have all the treasure in heaven, and more than enough. Yet I will give you even more, as a bonus. You will have the kingdom of heaven revealed to you, and the Christ whom you now have in faith you will have in sight as well, in eternal glory and joy, the more you suffer and labor now.’ ”

Here we should also put wonderful statements and admonitions like Hebrews 10:35: “Do not throw away your confidence, which has a great reward.” And in Matthew 19:29 Christ says: “Everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or children or lands, for My name’s sake, will receive a hundredfold in this life, and in the world to come eternal life.” Here He says (Matt. 5:12): “Your reward is great in heaven.” Thus He shows that they already have the kingdom of heaven, and yet that they will have it even more gloriously when it is revealed.

You see, these passages are correctly interpreted when they are applied, not to any confidence in our own works contrary to faith, but to the consolation of Christians and believers. If the sophists had directed their discussion of merit to this, it would have been fine. But they built their own work-holiness and monkery on this, expecting God to regard them as special saints and to be a peddler selling heaven to them and giving them the highest seats, because they are people with whom ordinary Christians should not even be compared. This was not an unwise thing to do, since it brought them not poverty, misery, sorrow, and persecution, but money, property, and honor. No order was ever established to let its members exercise themselves in the Word of Christ, the Sacrament, faith, love, and patience, but only to gain a reputation before God and His extra favor with their cowls and special ascetic life, as people who needed neither Christ nor faith.

In this sense we concede that Christians have merit and a reward with God, but not in order to make them children of God and heirs of eternal life. Rather it is intended to console believers who already have

this, to let them know that He will not leave unrewarded what they suffer here for Christ's sake, but that if they suffer much and labor much, He will adorn them specially on the Last Day, more and more gloriously than the others, as special stars that are greater than others. So St. Paul will be more brilliant, more bright and clear than others. This does not refer to the forgiveness of sins nor to meriting heaven, but to a recompense of greater glory for greater suffering. We refuse to tolerate the way they treat this issue; for it is a slander and a blasphemy to Christ, God, and the Holy Spirit, and to everything that God has given us through Him. We would rather be denounced as heretics and scoundrels and be burned at the stake than surrender or deny this treasure. We will also hold to this consolation, though we may have to suffer trouble, shame, and persecution on account of it, since this is inevitable. The devil will not make any concessions to us here, nor come to any agreement with us. He intends to uphold the pope's teaching and to make us believe the way he believes. Because he sees that we refuse, he attacks us with all his might. He knows very well that once this doctrine is granted—that Christ and the forgiveness of sins are purely a gift—then anyone can count on his fingers and come to the conclusion that the papacy with its Masses, monkery, purgatory, and worship of saints must amount to nothing; and it will all collapse by itself.

Learn to give this answer regarding the passages that refer to merit and reward: "Of course I hear Christ saying (Matt. 5:3): 'Blessed are the poor, for they shall have the kingdom of heaven'; and (Matt. 5:11, 12): 'Blessed are you when you suffer persecution for My sake, for your reward is great in heaven.' But by these statements He is not teaching me where to build the foundation of my salvation, but giving me a promise that is to console me in my sufferings and in my Christian life. You must not confuse this and throw the two into the same pot, nor make my merit out of what God gives me in Christ through Baptism and the Gospel. It does not say that I can merit this and that I do not need Christ and Baptism for it. Rather, those who are Christ's pupils, those to whom He has been preaching here and who have to suffer many things for His sake, should know how to console themselves. Because people refuse to tolerate them on earth, they will have everything that much more abundantly in heaven; and he who does the most work and endures the most suffering will also get the most glorious recompense."

In Christ, as I have said, they are all alike. Grace is granted equally to all and brings full salvation to each individual, as the highest and most common possession; thus whoever has Christ has everything. And yet there will be a distinction in the glory with which we shall be adorned, and in the brightness with which we shall shine. In this life there is a distinction among gifts, and one labors and suffers more than another. But in that life it will all be revealed, for the whole world to see what each one has done from the degree of glory he has; and the whole heavenly host will rejoice. Let this be sufficient on the matter.

THE MAGNIFICAT

Translated by

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JESUS

To his Serene Highness, Prince John Frederick, Duke of Saxony, Landgrave of Thuringia, Margrave of Meissen, my Gracious Lord and Patron.

SERENE and high-born prince, gracious lord! May your Grace accept my humble prayer and service.

Your Grace's kind letter has lately come into my hands, and its cheering contents brought me much joy. By way of reply I send you this little exposition of the Magnificat. I promised it to you long ago, but the troublesome quarrels of many adversaries have repeatedly interrupted it. If I put it off any longer, I shall have to blush for shame. It is not proper for me to make any more excuses; otherwise I may retard your Grace's youthful spirit, which inclines to the love of Sacred Scripture and which might be stirred up and strengthened still further by more exercise in it. To this end I wish your Grace God's grace and help.

And this is really necessary. For the welfare of many people lies in the power of so mighty a prince, once he is taken out of himself and graciously governed by God; on the other hand, the destruction of many people lies in his power if he is left to himself and ruled by God's displeasure. Although the hearts of all men are in God's almighty hand, it is not without reason that only about kings and princes is it said (Prov. 21:1): "The king's heart is in the hand of God; He turns it wherever He will." Thus God would

instill His fear in the mighty lords, to teach them that they can think nothing without His special inspiration. The actions of other men bring gain or loss upon themselves alone, or upon just a few others. But rulers are appointed for the special purpose of being either harmful or helpful to other people; and the more people, the wider their domain. Therefore Scripture calls pious and God-fearing princes “angels of God” (1 Sam. 29:9) and even “gods” (Ps. 82:6). But harmful princes it calls “lions” (Zeph. 3:3), “dragons” (Jer. 51:34), and “raging beasts” (Ezek. 14:21). These God includes among His four plagues—pestilence, famine, war, and raging beasts (Ezek. 14:13–19 and Rev. 6:8).

Since the heart of man by nature is flesh and blood, it is of itself prone to presumption. And when, in addition, power, riches, and honor come to him, these form so strong an incentive to presumption and smugness that he forgets God and does not care about his subjects. Being able to do wrong with impunity, he lets himself go and becomes a beast, does whatever he pleases, and is a ruler in name, but a monster in deed. Therefore the sage Bias¹ has well said: “The office of ruler reveals what sort of man a ruler is.” As for the subjects, they do not dare to let themselves go for fear of the government. Since they need not fear men, therefore, all rulers should fear God more than others do, learning to know Him and His works and walking diligently, as St. Paul says in Romans 12:8: “He who rules, let him rule with diligence.”

Now, in all of Scripture I do not know anything that serves such a purpose so well as this sacred hymn of the most blessed Mother of God, which ought indeed to be learned and kept in mind by all who would rule well and be helpful lords. In it she really sings sweetly about the fear of God, what sort of Lord He is, and especially what His dealings are with those of low and high degree. Let someone else listen to his love singing a worldly ditty; this pure virgin well deserves to be heard by a prince and lord, as she sings him her sacred, chaste, and salutary song. It is a fine custom, too, that this canticle is sung in all the churches daily at vespers, and in a special and appropriate setting that sets it apart from the other chants.

May the tender Mother of God herself procure for me the spirit of wisdom profitably and thoroughly to expound this song of hers, so that your Grace as well as we all may draw from it wholesome knowledge and a praiseworthy life, and thus come to chant and sing this Magnificat eternally in heaven. To this may God help us. Amen.

Herewith I commend myself to your Grace, humbly beseeching your Grace in all kindness to receive my poor effort.

Wittenberg, March 10, 1521

IN order properly to understand this sacred hymn of praise, we need to bear in mind that the Blessed Virgin Mary is speaking on the basis of her own experience, in which she was enlightened and instructed by the Holy Spirit. No one can correctly understand God or His Word unless he has received such understanding immediately from the Holy Spirit. But no one can receive it from the Holy Spirit without experiencing, proving, and feeling it. In such experience the Holy Spirit instructs us as in His own school, outside of which nothing is learned but empty words and prattle. When the holy virgin experienced what great things God was working in her despite her insignificance, lowliness, poverty, and inferiority, the Holy Spirit taught her this deep insight and wisdom, that God is the kind of Lord who does nothing but exalt those of low degree and put down the mighty from their thrones, in short, break what is whole and make whole what is broken.

Just as God in the beginning of creation made the world out of nothing, whence He is called the Creator and the Almighty, so His manner of working continues unchanged. Even now and to the end of the world, all His works are such that out of that which is nothing, worthless, despised, wretched, and dead, He makes that which is something, precious, honorable, blessed, and living. On the other hand, whatever is something, precious, honorable, blessed, and living, He makes to be nothing, worthless, despised, wretched, and dying. In this manner no creature can work; no creature can produce anything out of nothing.¹ Therefore His eyes look only into the depths, not to the heights; as it is said in Daniel 3:55 (Vulgate): “Thou sittest upon the cherubim and beholdest the depths”; in Psalm 138:6: “Though the Lord is high, He regards the lowly; but the haughty He knows from afar.” Psalm 113:5, 6: “Who is like the Lord, our God, who is seated on high, who looks far down upon the heavens and the earth?” For since He is the Most High, and there is nothing above Him, He cannot look above Him; nor yet to either side, for there is none like Him. He must needs, therefore, look within Him and beneath Him; and the farther one is beneath Him, the better does He see him.

The eyes of the world and of men, on the contrary, look only above them and are lifted up with pride, as it is said in Proverbs 30:13: "There is a people whose eyes are lofty, and their eyelids lifted up on high." This we experience every day. Everyone strives after that which is above him, after honor, power, wealth, knowledge, a life of ease, and whatever is lofty and great. And where such people are, there are many hangers-on; all the world gathers round them, gladly yields them service, and would be at their side and share in their exaltation. Therefore it is not without reason that the Scriptures describe so few kings and rulers who were godly men. On the other hand, no one is willing to look into the depths with their poverty, disgrace, squalor, misery, and anguish. From these all turn away their eyes. Where there are such people, everyone takes to his heels, forsakes and shuns and leaves them to themselves; no one dreams of helping them or of making something out of them. And so they must remain in the depths and in their low and despised condition. There is among men no creator who would make something out of nothing, although that is what St. Paul teaches in Romans 12:16 when he says, "Dear brethren, set not your mind on high things, but go along with the lowly."

Therefore to God alone belongs that sort of seeing that looks into the depths with their need and misery, and is near to all that are in the depths; as St. Peter says (1 Peter 5:5): "God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble." And this is the source of men's love and praise of God. For no one can praise God without first loving Him. No one can love Him unless He makes Himself known to him in the most lovable and intimate fashion. And He can make Himself known only through those works of His which He reveals in us, and which we feel and experience within ourselves. But where there is this experience, namely, that He is a God who looks into the depths and helps only the poor, despised, afflicted, miserable, forsaken, and those who are nothing, there a hearty love for Him is born. The heart overflows with gladness and goes leaping and dancing for the great pleasure it has found in God. There the Holy Spirit is present and has taught us in a moment such exceeding great knowledge and gladness through this experience.

For this reason God has also imposed death on us all and laid the cross of Christ together with countless sufferings and afflictions on His beloved children and Christians. In fact, sometimes He even lets us fall into sin, in order that He may look into the depths even more, bring help to many, perform manifold works, show Himself a true Creator, and thereby make Himself known and worthy of love and praise. Alas, the world with its proud eyes constantly thwarts Him in this, hinders His seeing, working, and helping, and our knowledge, love, and praise of Him, depriving Him of all His glory and itself of its pleasure, joy, and salvation. He also cast His only and well-beloved Son Christ into the depths of all woe and showed in Him most plainly to what end His seeing, work, help, method, counsel, and will are directed. Therefore, having most fully experienced all these things, Christ abounds through all eternity in the knowledge, love, and praise of God; as it is said in Psalm 21:6: "Thou dost make Him glad with the joy of Thy presence," namely, in that He sees Thee and knows Thee. Here, too, belongs Psalm 44:7, 8, where it is said that all the saints will do nothing in heaven but praise God, because He looked upon them when they were in the depths and there made Himself known to them and loved and praised by them.

The tender mother of Christ does the same here and teaches us, with her words and by the example of her experience, how to know, love, and praise God. For since she boasts, with heart leaping for joy and praising God, that He regarded her despite her low estate and nothingness, we must believe that she came of poor, despised, and lowly parents. Let us make it very plain for the sake of the simple. Doubtless there were in Jerusalem daughters of the chief priests and counselors who were rich, comely, youthful, cultured, and held in high renown by all the people; even as it is today with the daughters of kings, princes, and men of wealth. The same was also true of many another city. Even in her own town of Nazareth she was not the daughter of one of the chief rulers, but a poor and plain citizen's daughter, whom none looked up to or esteemed. To her neighbors and their daughters she was but a simple maiden, tending the cattle and doing the housework, and doubtless esteemed no more than any poor maidservant today, who does as she is told around the house.

For thus Isaiah announced (Is. 11:1, 2): "There shall come forth a rod out of the stem of Jesse, and a flower shall rise up out of his root, and the Holy Spirit shall rest upon Him." The stem and root is the generation of Jesse or David, in particular the Virgin Mary; the rod and flower is Christ. Now, as unlikely, indeed incredible, a thing it is that a fair branch and flower should spring from a dry and withered stem and root, just so unlikely was it that Mary the Virgin should become the mother of such a child. For I take

it that she is called a stem and root not only because she became a mother in a miraculous manner without violation of her virginity—just as it is miraculous to make a branch grow out of a dead tree stump—but also for the following reason. In the days of David and Solomon the royal stem and line of David had been green and flourishing, fortunate in its great glory, might, and riches, and famous in the eyes of the world. But in the latter days, when Christ was to come, the priests had usurped this honor and were the sole rulers, while the royal line of David had become so impoverished and despised that it was like a dead stump, so that there was no hope or likelihood that a king descended from it would ever attain to any great glory. But when all seemed most unlikely—comes Christ, and is born of the despised stump, of the poor and lowly maiden! The rod and flower springs from her whom Sir Annas' or Caiaphas' daughter would not have deigned to have for her humblest lady's maid. Thus God's work and His eyes are in the depths, but man's only in the height.

So much for the occasion of Mary's canticle, which we shall now consider in detail.

46. My soul magnifies God, the Lord.

These words express the strong ardor and exuberant joy with which all her mind and life are inwardly exalted in the Spirit. Therefore she does not say, "I exalt the Lord," but, "My soul doth exalt Him." It is as if she said: "My life and all my senses float in the love and praise of God and in lofty pleasures, so that I am no longer mistress of myself; I am exalted, more than I exalt myself, to praise the Lord." This is the experience of all those who are saturated with the divine sweetness and Spirit: they cannot find words to utter what they feel. For to praise the Lord with gladness is not a work of man; it is rather a joyful suffering and the work of God alone. It cannot be taught in words but must be learned in one's own experience. Even as David says in Psalm 34:8: "Oh, taste and see that the Lord is sweet; blessed is the man that trusts in Him." He puts tasting before seeing, because this sweetness cannot be known unless one has experienced and felt it for himself; and no one can attain to such experience unless he trusts in God with his whole heart when he is in the depths and in sore straits. Therefore David makes haste to add, "Blessed is the man that trusteth in God." Such a person will experience the work of God within himself and will thus attain to His sensible sweetness and through it to all knowledge and understanding.

Let us take up the words in their order. The first is "my soul." Scripture divides man into three parts,² as St. Paul says in I Thessalonians 5:23: "May the God of peace Himself sanctify you wholly; and may your spirit and soul and body be kept sound and blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ." There is yet another division of each of these three, and the whole of man, into two parts, which are called "spirit" and "flesh." This is a division, not of the nature of man but of his qualities. The nature of man consists of the three parts—spirit, soul and body; and all of these may be good or evil, that is, they may be spirit or flesh. But we are not now dealing with this division. The first part, the spirit, is the highest, deepest, and noblest part of man. By it he is enabled to lay hold on things incomprehensible, invisible, and eternal. It is, in brief, the dwelling place of faith and the Word of God. Of it David speaks in Psalm 51:10: "Lord, create in my inward parts a right spirit," that is, a straight and upright faith. But of the unbelieving he says in Psalm 78:37: "Their heart was not right with God, nor was their spirit faithful to Him."

The second part, the soul, is this same spirit, so far as its nature is concerned, but viewed as performing a different function, namely, giving life to the body and working through the body. In the Scriptures it is frequently put for the life; for the spirit may live without the body, but the body has no life apart from the spirit. Even in sleep the soul lives and works without ceasing. It is its nature to comprehend not incomprehensible things but such things as the reason can know and understand. Indeed, reason is the light in this dwelling; and unless the spirit, which is lighted with the brighter light of faith, controls this light of reason, it cannot but be in error. For it is too feeble to deal with things divine. To these two parts of man the Scriptures ascribe many things, such as wisdom and knowledge—wisdom to the spirit, knowledge to the soul; likewise hatred, love, delight, horror, and the like.

The third part is the body with its members. Its work is only to carry out and apply that which the soul knows and the spirit believes. Let us take an illustration of this from Scripture.³ In the tabernacle fashioned by Moses there were three separate compartments. The first was called the holy of holies: here was God's dwelling place, and in it there was no light. The second was called the holy place; here stood a candlestick with seven arms and seven lamps. The third was called the outer court; this lay under the open sky and in the full light of the sun. In this tabernacle we have a figure of the Christian man. His spirit is the holy of holies, where God dwells in the darkness of faith, where no light is; for he believes that which he neither

sees nor feels nor comprehends. His soul is the holy place, with its seven lamps, that is, all manner of reason, discrimination, knowledge, and understanding of visible and bodily things. His body is the forecourt, open to all, so that men may see his works and manner of life.

Now Paul prays God, who is a God of peace, to sanctify us not in one part only, but wholly, through and through, so that spirit, soul, body, and all may be holy. We might mention many reasons why he prays in this manner, but let the following suffice. When the spirit is no longer holy, then nothing is holy. This holiness of the spirit is the scene of the sorest conflict and the source of the greatest danger. It consists in nothing else than in faith pure and simple, since the spirit has nothing to do with things comprehensible, as we have seen. But now there come false teachers and lure the spirit out of doors; one puts forth this work, another that mode of attaining to godliness. And unless the spirit is preserved and is wise, it will come forth and follow these men. It will fall upon the external works and rules and imagine it can attain to godliness by means of them. And before we know it, faith is lost, and the spirit is dead in the sight of God.

Then commence the manifold sects and orders. This one becomes a Carthusian, that one a Franciscan; this one seeks salvation by fasting, that one by praying; one by one work, another by another. Yet these are all self-chosen works and orders, never commanded by God, but invented by men. Engrossed in them, they have no eye for faith but only go on teaching men to put their trust in works, until they are so sunk in works that they fall out among themselves. Everyone claims to be the greatest and despises the others, as our bragging and blustering Observantines⁴ do today. Over against such work-saints and teachers of pious appearance Paul prays, calling God a God of peace and unity. Such a God these divided, unpeaceable saints cannot have or keep unless they give up “their own things,” agree together in the same spirit and faith, and learn that works breed nothing but discrimination, sin, and discord, while faith alone makes men pious, united, and peaceable. As it is said in Psalm 68:6: “God makes us dwell in unity in the house”; and in Psalm 133:1: “Behold how good and pleasant it is when brothers dwell in unity.”

There is no peace except where men teach that we are made pious, righteous, and blessed by no work nor outward thing but solely by faith, that is, a firm confidence in the unseen grace of God that is promised us, as I showed at greater length in the *Treatise on Good Works*.⁵ But where there is no faith, there must necessarily be many works; and where these are, peace and unity depart, and God cannot remain. Therefore Paul is not content with saying here simply, “your spirit, your soul,” etc.; but he says, “your whole spirit,” for on this all depends. He employs a fine Greek expression, ὁλόκληρον ὑμῶν τὸ πνεῦμα—“your spirit that possesses the whole inheritance.” It is as if he said: “Let no doctrine of works lead you astray. The believing spirit alone possesses all things. Everything depends on the faith of the spirit. And this same ‘spirit that possesses the whole inheritance’ I pray God to preserve in you against the false doctrines which would make works the basis of our trust in God and which are but false tidings,⁶ because they do not base such trust upon God’s grace alone.” When this spirit that possesses the whole inheritance is preserved, both soul and body are able to remain without error and evil works. On the other hand, when the spirit is without faith, the soul together with the whole life cannot but fall into wickedness and error, however good an intention and opinion it may profess, and find in that its own devotion and satisfaction. As a consequence of this error and false opinion of the soul, all the works of the body also become evil and damnable, even though a man killed himself with fasting and performed the works of all the saints. In order, therefore, that our works and our life may not be in vain, but that we may become truly holy, it is necessary that God preserve, first, our spirit, and then our soul and body, not only from overt sins but much more from false and apparent good works.

Let this suffice in explanation of these two words, soul and spirit; they occur very frequently in the Scriptures. We come to the “magnifies,” which means to make great, to exalt, to esteem one highly, as having the power, the knowledge, and the desire to perform many great and good things, such as those that follow in this canticle. Just as a book title indicates what is the contents of the book, so this word “magnifies” is used by Mary to indicate what her hymn of praise is to be about, namely, the great works and deeds of God, for the strengthening of our faith, for the comforting of all those of low degree, and for the terrifying of all the mighty ones of earth. We are to let the hymn serve this threefold purpose; for she sang it not for herself alone but for us all, to sing it after her. Now, these great works of God will neither terrify nor comfort anyone unless he believes that God has not only the power and the knowledge but also the willingness and hearty desire to do such great things. In fact, it is not even enough to believe that He is willing to do them for others but not for you. This would be to put yourself beyond the pale of these works

of God, as is done by those who, because of their strength, do not fear Him, and by those of little faith who, because of their tribulations, fall into despair.

That sort of faith is nothing; it is dead; it is like an idea learned from a fairy tale. You must rather, without any wavering or doubt, realize His will toward you and firmly believe that He will do great things also to you, and is willing to do so. Such a faith has life and being; it pervades and changes the whole man; it constrains you to fear if you are mighty, and to take comfort if you are of low degree. And the mightier you are, the more must you fear; the lowlier you are, the more must you take comfort. This no other kind of faith is able to effect. How will it be with you in the hour of death? There you must believe that He has not only the power and the knowledge but also the desire to help you. For it requires indeed an unspeakably great work to deliver you from eternal death, to save you and make you God's heir. To this faith all things are possible, as Christ says (Mark 9:23); it alone abides; it also comes to experience the works of God and thus attains to the love of God and thence to songs and praise of God, so that man esteems Him highly and truly magnifies Him.

For God is not magnified by us so far as His nature is concerned—He is unchangeable—but He is magnified in our knowledge and experience when we greatly esteem Him and highly regard Him, especially as to His grace and goodness. Therefore the holy mother does not say: "My voice or my mouth, my hand or my thoughts, my reason or my will, magnifies the Lord." For there are many who praise God with a loud voice, preach about Him with high-sounding words, speak much of Him, dispute and write about Him, and paint His image; whose thoughts dwell often upon Him and who reach out after Him and speculate about Him with their reason; there are also many who exalt Him with false devotion and a false will. But Mary says, "My soul magnifies Him"—that is, my whole life and being, mind and strength, esteem Him highly. She is caught up, as it were, into Him and feels herself lifted up into His good and gracious will, as the following verse shows. It is the same when anyone shows us a signal favor; our whole life seems to incline to him, and we say: "Ah, I esteem him highly"; that is to say, "My soul magnifies him." How much more will such a lively inclination be awakened in us when we experience the favor of God, which is exceeding great in His works. All words and thoughts fail us, and our whole life and soul must be set in motion, as though all that lived within us wanted to break forth into praise and singing.

But here we find two kinds of false spirits that cannot sing the Magnificat aright. First, there are those who will not praise Him unless He does well to them; as David says (Ps. 49:18): "He will praise Thee when Thou shalt do well to him." These seem indeed to be greatly praising God; but because they are unwilling to suffer oppression and to be in the depths, they can never experience the proper works of God, and therefore can never truly love or praise Him. The whole world nowadays is filled with praise and service to God, with singing and preaching, with organs and trumpets, and the Magnificat is magnificently sung; but it is regrettable that this precious canticle should be rendered by us so utterly without salt or savor. For we sing only when it fares well with us; as soon as it fares ill, we stop our singing and no longer esteem God highly, but suppose He can or will do nothing for us. Then the Magnificat also must languish.

The other sort are more dangerous still. They err on the opposite side. They magnify themselves by reason of the good gifts of God and do not ascribe them to His goodness alone. They themselves desire to bear a part in them; they want to be honored and set above other men on account of them. When they behold the good things that God has done for them, they fall upon them and appropriate them as their own; they regard themselves as better than others who have no such things. This is really a smooth and slippery position. The good gifts of God will naturally produce proud and self-complacent hearts. Therefore we must here give heed to Mary's last word, which is "God." She does not say, "My soul magnifies itself" or "exalts me." She does not desire herself to be esteemed; she magnifies God alone and gives all glory to Him. She leaves herself out and ascribes everything to God alone, from whom she received it. For though she experienced such an exceeding great work of God within herself, yet she was ever minded not to exalt herself above the humblest mortal living. Had she done so, she would have fallen, like Lucifer, into the abyss of hell (Is. 14:12).

She had no thought but this: if any other maiden had got such good things from God, she would be just as glad and would not grudge them to her; indeed, she regarded herself alone as unworthy of such honor and all others as worthy of it. She would have been well content had God withdrawn these blessings from her and bestowed them upon another before her very eyes. So little did she lay claim to anything, but left all of God's gifts freely in His hands, being herself no more than a cheerful guest chamber and willing

hostess to so great a Guest. Therefore she also kept all these things forever. That is to magnify God alone, to count only Him great and lay claim to nothing. We see here how strong an incentive she had to fall into sin, so that it is no less a miracle that she refrained from pride and arrogance than that she received the gifts she did. Tell me, was not hers a wondrous soul? She finds herself the Mother of God, exalted above all mortals, and still remains so simple and so calm that she does not think of any poor serving maid as beneath her. Oh, we poor mortals! If we come into a little wealth or might or honor, or even if we are a little prettier than other men, we cannot abide being made equal to anyone beneath us, but are puffed up beyond all measure. What should we do if we possessed such great and lofty blessings?

Therefore God lets us remain poor and hapless, because we cannot leave His tender gifts undefiled or keep an even mind, but let our spirits rise or fall according to how He gives or takes away His gifts. But Mary's heart remains the same at all times; she lets God have His will with her and draws from it all only a good comfort, joy, and trust in God. Thus we too should do; that would be to sing a right Magnificat.

47. And my spirit rejoices in God, my Savior.

We have seen what is meant by "spirit"; it is that which lays hold by faith on things incomprehensible. Mary, therefore, calls God her Savior, or her Salvation, even though she neither saw nor felt that this was so, but trusted in sure confidence that He was her Savior and her Salvation. This faith came to her through the work God had done within her. And, truly, she sets things in their proper order when she calls God her Lord before calling Him her Savior, and when she calls Him her Savior before recounting His works. Thereby she teaches us to love and praise God for Himself alone, and in the right order, and not selfishly to seek anything at His hands. This is done when one praises God because He is good, regards only His bare goodness, and finds his joy and pleasure in that alone. That is a lofty, pure, and tender mode of loving and praising God and well becomes this Virgins high and tender spirit.

But the impure and perverted lovers, who are nothing else than parasites and who seek their own advantage in God, neither love nor praise His bare goodness, but have an eye to themselves and consider only how good God is to them, that is, how deeply He makes them feel His goodness and how many good things He does to them. They esteem Him highly, are filled with joy and sing His praises, so long as this feeling continues. But just as soon as He hides His face and withdraws the rays of His goodness, leaving them bare and in misery, their love and praise are at an end. They are unable to love and praise the bare, unfelt goodness that is hidden in God. By this they prove that their spirit did not rejoice in God, their Savior, and that they had no true love and praise for His bare goodness. They delighted in their salvation much more than in their Savior, in the gift more than in the Giver, in the creature rather than in the Creator. For they are not able to preserve an even mind in plenty and in want, in wealth and in poverty; as St. Paul says (Phil. 4:12): "I know how to abound and how to suffer want."

Here apply the words in Psalm 49:18: "They will praise Thee when Thou shalt do well with them." That is to say: "They love not Thee but themselves; if they have but Thy good and pleasant things, they care nothing for Thee." As Christ also said to those who sought Him (John 6:26): "Truly, truly, I say to you, you seek Me, not because you saw signs, but because you ate your fill of the loaves."

Such impure and false spirits defile all of God's gifts and prevent His giving them many gifts, especially the gift of salvation. The following is a good illustration of this: Once a certain godly woman saw in a vision three virgins seated near an altar. During the Mass a beautiful boy leaped from the altar, and approaching the first virgin in a most friendly manner, lavished caresses upon her and smiled lovingly in her face. Then he approached the second virgin, but was not so friendly with her; he did not give her a caress, though he did lift her veil and give her a pleasant smile. But for the third virgin he had not a friendly sign, struck her in the face and tore her hair, thrust her from him and dealt most ungallantly with her. Then he ran swiftly back upon the altar and disappeared.

Afterwards the vision was interpreted for the woman as follows: The first of the three virgins was a figure of the impure and self-seeking spirits, on whom God must lavish many good things and whose will He must do rather than they His; they are unwilling to suffer want but must always find joy and comfort in God and are not content with His goodness. The second virgin was a figure of the spirits that make a beginning of serving God and are willing to do without some things, but not without all or to be free from all self-seeking and enjoyment. God must now and then smile upon them and let them feel His good things, in order that they may learn from this to love and praise His bare goodness. But the third virgin, that poor Cinderella⁷—for her there is nothing but want and misery; she seeks to enjoy nothing and is

content to know that God is good, even though she should never once experience it, though that is impossible. She keeps an even mind in both situations and she loves and praises God's goodness just as much when she does not feel it as when she does. She neither falls upon the good things when they are given nor falls away when they are removed. That is the true bride of Christ, who says to Him: "I seek not Thine, but Thee; Thou art to me no dearer when it goes well with me, nor any less dear when it goes ill."

Such spirits fulfill what is written (Is. 30:21): "You shall not stray from the even and right way of God, neither to the left hand nor to the right." That is to say, they are to love and praise God evenly and rightly and not seek their own advantage or enjoyment. Such a spirit was David's; when he was driven from Jerusalem by his son Absalom and was likely to be cast out forever and to lose his kingdom and the favor of God, he said (2 Sam. 15:25, 26): "If I find favor in the eyes of the Lord, He will bring me back; but if He says, 'I have no pleasure in you,' behold, here I am." Oh, how pure a spirit that was, not to stop loving, praising, and following the goodness of God even in the direst distress! Such a spirit is manifested here by Mary, the Mother of God. Standing in the midst of such exceedingly great good things, she does not fall upon them or seek her own enjoyment in them, but keeps her spirit pure in loving and praising the bare goodness of God, ready and willing to have God withdraw them from her and leave her spirit poor and naked and needy.

Now, it is much more difficult to practice moderation in the midst of riches, honor, and power than amid poverty, dishonor, and weakness, since the former are mighty incentives to evil-doing. So the wondrous pure spirit of Mary is worthy of even greater praise, because, having such overwhelming honors heaped upon her head, she does not let them tempt her, but acts as though she did not see it, remains "even and right in the way," clings only to God's goodness, which she neither sees nor feels, overlooks the good things she does feel, and neither takes pleasure nor seeks her own enjoyment in it. Thus she can truly sing, "My spirit rejoices in God, my Savior." It is indeed a spirit that exults only in faith and rejoices not in the good things of God that she felt, but only in God, whom she did not feel and who is her Salvation, known by her in faith alone. Such are the truly lowly, naked, hungry, and God-fearing spirits, as we shall see below.⁸

From all this we may know and judge how full the world is nowadays of false preachers and false saints, who fill the ears of the people with preaching good works. There are indeed a few who teach them how to do good works, but the greater part preach human doctrines and works that they themselves have devised and set up. Even the best of them, unfortunately, are so far from this "even and straight road" that they constantly drive the people to "the right hand" by teaching good works and a godly life, not for the sake of the bare goodness of God, but for the sake of one's own enjoyment. For if there were no heaven or hell and if they could not enjoy the good gifts of God, they would let His good things go unloved and unpraised. These men are mere parasites and hirelings; slaves, not sons; aliens, not heirs. They turn themselves into idols, whom God is to love and praise and for whom He is to do the very things they ought to do for Him. They have no spirit, nor is God their Savior. His good gifts are their Savior, and with them God must serve them as their lackey. They are the Children of Israel, who were not content in the desert with eating bread from heaven, but wanted meat, onions, and garlic, too (Num. 11:4-6).

Alas, all the world, all the monasteries, and all the churches are now filled with such people. They all walk in their false, perverted, and uneven spirit, and urge and drive others to do the same. They exalt good works to such a height that they imagine they can merit heaven through them. But the bare goodness of God is what ought rather to be preached and known above all else, and we ought to learn that, just as God saves us out of pure goodness, without any merit of works, so we in our turn should do the works without reward or self-seeking, for the sake of the bare goodness of God. We should desire nothing in them but His good pleasure, and not be anxious about a reward. That will come of itself, without our seeking. For though it is impossible that the reward should not follow, if we do well in a pure and right spirit, without thought of reward or enjoyment; nevertheless God will not have such a self-seeking and impure spirit, nor will it ever obtain a reward. A son serves his father willingly and without reward, as his heir, solely for the father's sake. But a son who served his father merely for the sake of the inheritance would indeed be a wicked child and deserve to be cast off by his father.

48. *For He has regarded the low estate of His handmaiden. For behold, henceforth all generations will call me blessed.*

The word “low estate” has been translated “humility” by some, as though the Virgin Mary referred to her humility and boasted of it; hence certain prelates also call themselves *humiles*.⁹ But that is very wide of the mark, for no one can boast of any good thing in the sight of God without sin and perdition. In His sight we ought to boast only of His pure grace and goodness, which He bestows upon us unworthy ones; so that not our love and praise but His alone may dwell in us and may preserve us. Thus Solomon teaches us to do (Prov. 25:6, 7): “Do not put yourself forward in the king’s presence or stand (that is, pretend to be something) in the place of the great; for it is better to be told, ‘Come up here,’ than to be put lower in the presence of the prince.” How should such pride and vainglory be attributed to this pure and righteous Virgin, as though she boasted of her humility in the presence of God? For humility is the highest of all the virtues, and no one could boast of possessing it except the very proudest of mortals. It is God alone who knows humility; He alone judges it and brings it to light; so that no one knows less about humility than he who is truly humble.

In Scriptural usage, “to humble” means “to bring down,” or “to bring to naught.” Hence, in the Scriptures, Christians are frequently called poor, afflicted, despised.¹⁰ Thus, in Psalm 116:10: “I am greatly afflicted”—that is, humbled. Humility, therefore, is nothing else than a disregarded, despised, and lowly estate, such as that of men who are poor, sick, hungry, thirsty, in prison, suffering, and dying. Such was Job in his afflictions, David when he was thrust out of his kingdom, and Christ as well as all Christians, in their distresses. Those are the depths of which we said above¹¹ that God’s eyes look only into them, but men’s only to the heights, namely, to that which is splendid and glorious and makes a brave show. Therefore in the Scriptures (Zech. 12:4) Jerusalem is called a city upon which God’s eyes are open—that is to say, Christendom lies in the depths and is despised by the world; therefore God regards her, and His eyes are always fixed upon her, as He says in Psalm 32:8: “I will fix my eyes upon you.”

St. Paul also says in 1 Corinthians 1:27, 28: “God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise. God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong. God chose what is low and despised in the world, even things that are not, to bring to nothing things that are.” In this way He turns the world with all its wisdom and power into foolishness and gives us another wisdom and power. Since, then, it is His manner to regard things that are in the depths and disregarded, I have rendered the word “humility” with “nothingness” or “low estate.” This, therefore, is what Mary means: “God has regarded me, a poor, despised, and lowly maiden, though He might have found a rich, renowned, noble, and mighty queen, the daughter of princes and great lords. He might have found the daughter of Annas or of Caiaphas, who held the highest position in the land. But He let His pure and gracious eyes light on me and used so poor and despised a maiden, in order that no one might glory in His presence, as though he were worthy of this, and that I must acknowledge it all to be pure grace and goodness and not at all my merit or worthiness.”

Now, we described above¹² at length how lowly was the estate of this tender Virgin and how unexpectedly this honor came to her, that God should regard her in such abundant grace. Hence she does not glory in her worthiness nor yet in her unworthiness, but solely in the divine regard, which is so exceedingly good and gracious that He deigned to look upon such a lowly maiden, and to look upon her in so glorious and honorable a fashion. They, therefore, do her an injustice who hold that she gloried, not indeed in her virginity, but in her humility. She gloried neither in the one nor in the other, but only in the gracious regard of God. Hence the stress lies not on the word “low estate,” but on the word “regarded.” For not her humility but God’s regard is to be praised. When a prince takes a poor beggar by the hand, it is not the beggar’s lowliness but the prince’s grace and goodness that is to be commended.

In order to dispel that false opinion and to distinguish true from false humility, we shall have to digress a little and treat the subject of humility, on which many are far astray. Humility we call that which St. Paul calls in Greek *ταπεινοφροσύνη*,¹³ and in Latin, *affectus vilitatis seu sensus humilium rerum*—that is, a love and leaning to lowly and despised things. Now we find many here who carry water to the well; that is to say, they affect humble clothing, faces, gestures, places, and words, but with the intention of being regarded by the mighty and rich, by scholars and saints, even by God Himself, as men who take pleasure in lowly things. If they knew that no one regarded what they did, they would soon give up. That is an artificial humility. For their villainous eye¹⁴ is fixed only on the reward and result of their humility and not on lowly things apart from a reward; hence when the reward and result no longer allures, their humility stops. Such people cannot be said to have their heart and will set on things of low degree; for they have only their thoughts, lips, hands, clothes, and outward conduct in them, while their heart looks above to

great and lofty things, to which it hopes to attain by that semblance of humility. Yet these men suppose that they are humble saints.

But the truly humble look not to the result of humility but with a simple heart regard things of low degree, and gladly associate with them, It never once enters their mind that they are humble. Here the water flows from the well; here it follows naturally and as a matter of course, that they will cultivate humble conduct, humble words, places, faces, and clothing, and shun as far as possible great and lofty things. Thus David says in Psalm 131:1: "O Lord, my heart is not lifted up, my eyes are not raised too high." And Job 22:29 says: "He who has been humbled shall be in glory; and he who bows down his eyes shall be saved." Hence honors always come unexpectedly upon them, and their exaltation is a surprise to them; for they have been simply content with their lowly station and never aspired to the heights. But the falsely humble wonder why their glory and honor are so long in coming; their secret false pride is not content with their low estate but aspires in secret ever higher and higher.

True humility, therefore, never knows that it is humble, as I have said; for if it knew this, it would turn proud from contemplation of so fine a virtue. But it clings with all its heart and mind and senses to lowly things, sets them continually before its eyes, and ponders them in its thoughts. And because it sets them before its eyes, it cannot see itself nor become aware of itself, much less of lofty things. And therefore, when honor and elevation come, they must take it unawares and find it immersed in thoughts of other things. Thus Luke tells us (Luke 1:29) that Mary was troubled at the angel's saying and considered in her mind what sort of greeting this might be, since she had never expected anything like it. Had it come to Caiaphas' daughter, she would not have considered in her mind what sort of greeting it was, but would have accepted it immediately, thinking: "Oh, how wonderful! This is just as it should be."

False humility, on the other hand, never knows that it is proud; for if it knew this, it would soon grow humble from contemplation of that ugly vice. But it clings with heart and mind and senses to lofty things, sets them continually before its eyes, and ponders them in its thoughts. And because it does this, it cannot see itself nor become aware of itself. Hence honors come to it not unawares or unexpectedly, but find it immersed in thoughts of them. But dishonor and humiliation take it unawares and when it is thinking of something far different.

It is in vain, therefore, to teach men to be humble by teaching them to set their eyes on lowly things, nor does anyone become proud by setting his eyes on lofty things. Not the things but our eyes must be changed; for we must spend our life here in the midst of things both lowly and lofty. It is our eye that must be plucked out, as Christ says.¹⁵ Moses does not tell us (Gen. 3:7) that Adam and Eve saw different things after the Fall, but he says their eyes were opened and they saw that they were naked, though they had been naked before and were not aware of it. Queen Esther wore a precious crown upon her head, yet she said it seemed but a filthy rag in her eyes, Esther 14:16 (Apocryphal). The lofty things were not removed out of her sight, but being a mighty queen, she had them before her in great abundance, and not a lowly thing within sight; yet her eyes were humble, her heart and mind did not look at the lofty things, and thus God accomplished wondrous things through her. It is thus not the things but we that must be changed in heart and mind. Then we shall know of ourselves how to despise and shun lofty things and how to esteem and seek after lowly things. Then humility is truly good, and steadfast in every way, and yet is never aware that it is humble. All things are done gladly, and the heart is undisturbed, however things may shift and turn, from high to low, from great to small.

Oh, how much pride lurks behind that humble garb, speech, and conduct, of which the world is so full today. Men despise themselves, yet so as to be despised by no one else; they fly from honors, yet so as to be pursued by honors; they shun lofty things, but in order to be esteemed and praised, and not to have their lowly things accounted all too low. But this holy virgin points to nothing except her low estate. In it she was content to spend the remainder of her days, never seeking to be honored or exalted or ever becoming aware of her own humility. For humility is so tender and precious a thing that it cannot abide beholding its own face; that belongs to God's eyes alone, as it is said in Psalm 113:6: "He looks far down upon the lowly in the heavens and the earth." For if anyone could see his own humility, he could judge himself worthy of salvation and thus anticipate God's judgment; for we know that God certainly saves the humble. Therefore God must reserve to Himself the right to know and look at humility, and must hide it from us by setting before our eyes things of low degree and exercising us in them so that we may forget to look at

ourselves. That is the purpose of the many sufferings, of death, and all manner of afflictions we have to bear on earth; by means of the trouble and pain they cause us we are to pluck out the evil eye.

Thus the word “low estate” shows us plainly that the Virgin Mary was a poor, despised, and lowly maiden, who served God in her low estate, nor knew it was so highly esteemed by Him. This should comfort us and teach us that though we should willingly be humbled and despised, we ought not to despair as though God were angry at us. Rather we should set our hope on His grace, concerned only lest we be not cheerful and contented enough in our low estate and lest our evil eye be opened too wide and deceive us by secretly lusting after lofty things and satisfaction with self, which is the death of humility. What profit is it to the damned that they are humbled to the lowest degree, since they are not willing and content to be where they are? Again, what harm is it to all angels that they are exalted to the highest degree, so long as they do not cling to their station with false desire? In short, this verse teaches us to know God aright, because it shows us that He regards the lowly and despised. For he knows God aright who knows that He regards the lowly, as we have said above.¹⁶ From such knowledge flows love and trust in God, by which we yield ourselves to Him and gladly obey Him.

As Jeremiah says (Jer. 9:23, 24): “Let no one glory in his might, riches, or wisdom; but if anyone wants to glory, let him glory in this, that he understands and knows Me.” And St. Paul teaches (2 Cor. 10:17): “Let him who boasts, boast in the Lord.” Now, after lauding her God and Savior with pure and single spirit, and after truly singing the praises of His goodness by not boasting of His gifts, the Mother of God addresses herself in the next place to the praise also of His works and gifts. For, as we have seen, we must not fall upon the good gifts of God or boast of them, but make our way through them and ascend to Him, cling to Him alone, and highly esteem His goodness. Thereupon we should praise Him also in His works, in which He showed forth that goodness of His for our love, trust, and praise. Thus His works are simply that many incentives to love and praise His bare goodness that rules over us.

Mary begins with herself and sings what He has done for her. Thus she teaches us a twofold lesson. First, every one of us should pay attention to what God does for him rather than to all the works He does for others. For no one will be saved by what God does to another, but only by what He does to you. When St. Peter asked about John (John 21:21): “What about this man?” Christ answered him by saying (John 21:22): “What is that to you? Follow Me.” It is as though He were to say: “John’s works will not help you. You yourself must take hold and await what I will do for you.” But now the world is captive to a dreadful abuse—the sale and distribution of good works—by which certain audacious spirits would assist others, especially such as live or die without good works of their own, just as if these spirits had a surplus of good works. But St. Paul plainly says in 1 Corinthians 3:8: “Each man shall receive his wages according to his labor”—certainly not according to that of anyone else.

It would be tolerable if they prayed for others, or brought their works before God by way of intercession. But since they deal with their works as if they were something they had to give away, it becomes a scandalous piece of business. And, worst of all, they give away works of theirs of whose value in God’s sight they themselves are ignorant; for God looks not at the works but at the heart and at the faith by which He Himself works with us. To this they pay not the least attention, but trust only in the external works, deceiving themselves and all others besides. They have even gone so far as to persuade men to don the monk’s cowl on their deathbeds, pretending that whoever dies in that sacred habit receives indulgence for all his sins and is saved.¹⁷ Thus they have begun to save men not only with the works but with the clothes of others. Unless we see to it, I fear the evil spirit will drive them on to bring people to heaven by means of monastic diet, cells, and burial. Great God, what gross darkness is this! A monk’s cowl makes a man pious and saves him! Where, then, is the need of faith? Let us all turn monk or all die in cowls. At this rate, all the cloth would go to the making of monks’ cowls! Beware, beware of the wolves in such sheep’s clothing; they will deceive you and tear you limb from limb.¹⁸ Remember that God also has His work in you, and base your salvation on no other works than those God works in you alone, as you see the Virgin Mary do here. To let the intercessions of others assist you in this is right and proper; we ought all to pray and work for one another. But no one should depend on the works of others, without the works of God in himself. Everyone should make an effort to regard himself and God as though God and he were the only persons in heaven and on earth and as though God were dealing with no one else than with him. Only then may he also glance at the works of others.

In the second place, she teaches us that everyone should strive to be foremost in praising God by showing forth the works He has done to him, and then by praising Him for the works He has done to others. Thus we read (Acts 15:12) that Paul and Barnabas declared to the apostles the works God had done by them, and that the apostles in turn rehearsed those He had done by them. The same was done by the apostles, in Luke 24:34, 35, with respect to the appearances of Christ after His resurrection. Thus there arose a common rejoicing and praising of God, each one praising the grace bestowed on another, yet most of all that bestowed on himself, however much more modest it was than that of the other. So simple-hearted were they that all desired to be foremost, not in possessing the gifts but in praising and loving God; for God Himself and His bare goodness were sufficient for them, however small His gifts. But the hirelings and mercenaries grow green with envy when they observe that they are not first and foremost in possessing the good things of God; instead of praising, they murmur because they are made equal to, or lower than, others, like the laborers in the Gospel (Matt. 20:11, 12) who murmured against the householder, not because he did them any wrong, but because he made them equal to the other laborers by giving to all the same pfennig.

Even so we find men today who do not praise the goodness of God, because they cannot see that they have received the same things as St. Peter or any other of the saints, or as this or that man living on earth. They imagine they also would praise and love God if they possessed as much as these, and they despise the good gifts of God which are showered so abundantly upon them and which they altogether overlook—such as life, body, reason, goods, honor, friends, the ministration of the sun and all created things. And even if they had all the good things of Mary, they still would not recognize God in them or praise Him because of them. For as Christ says in Luke 16:10: “He who is faithful in a very little is faithful also in much; and he who is dishonest in a very little is dishonest also in much.” Therefore, because they despise the little and the few things, they are not worthy of the much and the great things. But if they praised God in the little, the much would also be added unto them. They act as they do because they look above them and not beneath them; if they looked beneath them, they would find many that have not half of what they have and yet are content in God and sing His praise. A bird pipes its lay and is happy in the gifts it has; nor does it murmur because it lacks the gift of speech. A dog frisks gayly about and is content, even though he is without the gift of reason. All animals live in contentment and serve God, loving and praising Him. Only the evil, villainous eye of man¹⁹ is never satisfied, nor can it ever be really satisfied because of its ingratitude and pride. It always wants the best place at the feast as the chief guest (Luke 14:8); it is not willing to honor God, but would rather be honored by God.

There is a tale,²⁰ dating back to the days of the Council of Constance, of two cardinals who were riding around when they spied a shepherd standing in a field and weeping. One of the two cardinals, being a good soul and unwilling to pass by without offering the man some comfort, rode up to him and asked him why he wept. The shepherd, who was weeping bitterly, was a long time replying to the cardinal’s question. At last, pointing his finger at a toad, he said: “I weep because God has made me so well favored a creature, and not hideous like this reptile, and I have never yet acknowledged it or thanked and praised Him for it.” The cardinal beat his breast and trembled so violently that he fell from his mount. He had to be carried to his lodging, and he cried out: “O St. Augustine, how truly you have said: ‘The unlearned start up and take heaven by violence, and we with all our learning, look how we wallow in flesh and blood!’ ”²¹ Now, I am sure that this shepherd was neither rich nor handsome nor powerful; nevertheless he had so clear an insight into God’s good gifts and pondered them so deeply that in them he found more than he could comprehend.

Mary confesses that the foremost work God did for her was that He regarded her, which is indeed the greatest of His works, on which all the rest depend and from which they all derive. For where it comes to pass that God turns His face toward one to regard him, there is nothing but grace and salvation, and all gifts and works must follow. Thus we read in Genesis 4:4, 5 that He had regard for Abel and his offering, but for Cain and his offering He had no regard. Here is the origin of the many prayers in the Psalter—that God would lift up His countenance upon us, that He would not hide His countenance from us, that He would make His face shine upon us, and the like.²² And that Mary herself regards this as the chief thing, she indicates by saying: “Behold, since He has regarded me, all generations will call me blessed.”

Note that she does not say men will speak all manner of good of her, praise her virtues, exalt her virginity or her humility, or sing of what she has done. But for this one thing alone, that God regarded her,

men will call her blessed. That is to give all the glory to God as completely as it can be done. Therefore she points to God's regard and says: "For, behold, henceforth all generations will call me blessed. That is, beginning with the time when God regarded my low estate, I shall be called blessed." Not *she* is praised thereby, but God's *grace* toward her. In fact, she is despised, and she despises herself in that she says her low estate was regarded by God. Therefore she also mentions her blessedness before enumerating the work that God did to her, and ascribes it all to the fact that God regarded her low estate.

From this we may learn how to show her the honor and devotion that are her due. How ought one to address her? Keep these words in mind, and they will teach you to say: "O Blessed Virgin, Mother of God, you were nothing and all despised; yet God in His grace regarded you and worked such great things in you. You were worthy of none of them, but the rich and abundant grace of God was upon you, far above any merit of yours. Hail to you! Blessed are you, from thenceforth and forever, in finding such a God." Nor need you fear that she will take it amiss if we call her unworthy of such grace. For, of a truth, she did not lie when she herself acknowledged her unworthiness and nothingness, which God regarded, not because of any merit in her, but solely by reason of His grace.

But she does take it amiss that the vain chatterers preach and write so many things about her merits. They are set on proving their own skill and fail to see how they spoil the Magnificat, make the Mother of God a liar, and diminish the grace of God. For, in proportion as we ascribe merit and worthiness to her, we lower the grace of God and diminish the truth of the Magnificat. The angel salutes her only as highly favored of God, and because the Lord is with her (Luke 1:28), which is why she is blessed among women. Hence all those who heap such great praise and honor upon her head are not far from making an idol of her, as though she were concerned that men should honor her and look to her for good things, when in truth she thrusts this from her and would have us honor God in her and come through her to a good confidence in His grace.

Whoever, therefore, would show her the proper honor must not regard her alone and by herself, but set her in the presence of God and far beneath Him, must there strip her of all honor, and regard her low estate, as she says; he should then marvel at the exceedingly abundant grace of God, who regards, embraces, and blesses so poor and despised a mortal. Thus regarding her, you will be moved to love and praise God for His grace, and drawn to look for all good things to Him, who does not reject but graciously regards poor and despised and lowly mortals. Thus your heart will be strengthened in faith and love and hope. What do you suppose would please her more than to have you come through her to God this way, and learn from her to put your hope and trust in Him, notwithstanding your despised and lowly estate, in life as well as in death? She does not want you to come to her, but through her to God.

Again, nothing would please her better than to have you turn in fear from all lofty things on which men set their hearts, seeing that even in His mother God neither found nor desired anything of high degree. But the masters who so depict and portray the blessed Virgin that there is found in her nothing to be despised, but only great and lofty things—what are they doing but contrasting us with her instead of her with God? Thus they make us timid and afraid and hide the Virgin's comfortable picture, as the images are covered over in Lent.²³ For they deprive us of her example, from which we might take comfort; they make an exception of her and set her above all examples. But she should be, and herself gladly would be, the foremost example of the grace of God, to incite all the world to trust in this grace and to love and praise it, so that through her the hearts of all men should be filled with such knowledge of God that they might confidently say: "O Blessed Virgin, Mother of God, what great comfort God has shown us in you, by so graciously regarding your unworthiness and low estate. This encourages us to believe that henceforth He will not despise us poor and lowly ones, but graciously regard us also, according to your example."

What do you think? David, St. Peter, St. Paul, St. Mary Magdalene, and the like, are examples to strengthen our trust in God and our faith, by reason of the great grace bestowed on them without their worthiness, for the comforting of all men. Will not the blessed Mother of God also gladly be such an example to all the world? But now she cannot be this because of the fulsome eulogists and empty chatterers, who do not show the people from this verse how the exceeding riches of God joined in her with her utter poverty, the divine honor with her low estate, the divine glory with her shame, the divine greatness with her smallness, the divine goodness with her lack of merit, the divine grace with her unworthiness. On this basis our love and affection toward God would grow and increase with all

confidence, which is why her²⁴ life and works, as well as the lives and works of all the saints, have been recorded. But now we find those who come to her for help and comfort, as though she were a divine being, so that I fear there is now more idolatry in the world than ever before. But enough of this for the present.

The Latin phrase “all generations” I have rendered in German with “children’s children,” although literally it means “all generations.”²⁵ But that is an obscure expression, and many have been hard put to it by this passage to know how it can be that all generations shall bless her, since the Jews, the heathen, and many wicked Christians blaspheme her or scorn to call her blessed. They understand the word “generations” of the totality of mankind, whereas its meaning here is rather the line of natural descent, as father, son, grandson, and so on, each member being called a generation. The Virgin Mary means to say simply that her praise will be sung from one generation to another so that there will never be a time when she will not be praised. This she indicates by saying, “Behold, henceforth all generations”—that is, it begins now and will continue throughout all generations, to children’s children.

The word μακαριούσι means more than simply “to call blessed”; its meaning is rather “to bless,” or to “make blessed.” This consists not merely in saying the words, bending the knee, bowing the head, doffing the hat, making images, or building churches; for this even the wicked can do. But it is done with all one’s strength and with downright sincerity, when the heart, moved by her low estate and God’s gracious regard of her, as we have seen, rejoices in God and says or thinks with all its heart, “O Blessed Virgin Mary!” So to bless her is to accord her the honor that is her due, as we have seen.

49. *For He who is mighty has done great things for me, and holy is His name.*

Here she sings in one breath of all the works that God has done to her, and observes the proper order. In the preceding verse she sang of God’s regard and gracious good will toward her, which is indeed the greatest and chief work of grace, as we have said. Now she comes to the works and gifts. For God indeed gives to some many good things and richly adorns them, as He did Lucifer in heaven. He scatters His gifts broadcast among the multitude; but He does not therefore regard them. His good things are merely gifts, which last for a season; but His grace and regard are the inheritance, which lasts forever, as St. Paul says in Romans 6:23: “The grace of God is eternal life.” In giving us the gifts He gives only what is His, but in His grace and His regard of us He gives His very self. In the gifts we touch His hand; but in His gracious regard we receive His heart, spirit, mind, and will. Hence the Blessed Virgin puts His regard in the first and highest place, and does not begin by saying: “All generations will call me blessed, because He has done great things for me,” as this verse says; but she begins: “He has regarded my low estate,” as the preceding verse shows. Where God’s gracious will is, there are also His gifts; but, on the other hand, where His gifts are, there is not also His gracious will. This verse therefore logically follows the preceding verse. We read in Genesis 25:5, 6 that Abraham gave gifts to the sons of his concubines; but to Isaac, his natural son by his true helpmate Sarah, he gave the whole inheritance. Thus God would not have His true children put their trust in His goods and gifts, spiritual or temporal, however great they be, but in His grace and in Himself, yet without despising the gifts.

Nor does Mary enumerate any good things in particular, but gathers them all together in one word and says, “He has done great things for me.” That is: “Everything He has done for me is great.” She teaches us here that the greater devotion there is in the heart, the fewer words are uttered. For she feels that however she may strive and try, she cannot express it in words. Therefore these few words of the Spirit are so great and profound that no one can comprehend them without having, at least in part, the same Spirit. But for the unspiritual, who deal in many words and much loud noise, such words seem utterly inadequate and wholly without salt or savor. Christ also teaches us in Matthew 6:7 not to speak much when we pray, as the unbelievers do, for they think that they will be heard for their many words. Even so there is today in the churches a great ringing of bells, blowing of trumpets, singing, shouting, and intoning, yet I fear precious lit fie worship of God, who wants to be worshiped in spirit and truth, as He says in John 4:24.

Solomon says in Proverbs 27:14: “He who blesses his neighbor with a loud voice, rising early in the morning, will be counted as cursing.” For such a person arouses the suspicion that he is endeavoring to adorn an evil cause; he protests too much and only defeats his own end. On the other hand, he who curses his neighbor with a loud voice, rising up early in the morning (that is, not indifferently, but with great zeal and urgency), is to be regarded as a praiser of him. For men do not believe him, but suppose that he is motivated by hatred and a wicked heart; he hurts his own cause and helps his neighbor’s. In the same way,

to think to worship God with many words and a great noise is to count Him either deaf or ignorant, and to suppose we must waken or instruct Him. Such an opinion of God tends to His shame and dishonor rather than to His worship. But when one ponders well His divine works in the depths of his heart and regards them with wonder and gratitude so that one breaks out from very ardor into sighs and groanings rather than into speech; when the words, not nicely chosen or prescribed, flow forth in such a way that the spirit comes seething with them, and the words live and have hands and feet, in fact, the whole body and life with all its members strives and strains for utterance—that is indeed a worship of God in spirit and truth, and such words are all fire, light, and life. As David says in Psalm 119:140: “Lord, Thy statements are completely fiery”; and again (Ps. 119:171): “My lips will pour forth praise,” even as boiling water overflows and seethes, unable to contain itself for the great heat within the pot. Of this sort are the words of the blessed Virgin in this hymn of hers—few, but profound and mighty. Such souls St. Paul calls, in Romans 12:11, “aglow with the Spirit,” fervent and seething in spirit, and teaches us to be that way too.

The “great things” are nothing less than that she became the Mother of God, in which work so many and such great good things are bestowed on her as pass man’s understanding. For on this there follows all honor, all blessedness, and her unique place in the whole of mankind, among which she has no equal, namely, that she had a child by the Father in heaven, and such a Child. She herself is unable to find a name for this work, it is too exceedingly great; all she can do is break out in the fervent cry: “They are great things,” impossible to describe or define. Hence men have crowded all her glory into a single word, calling her the Mother of God. No one can say anything greater of her or to her, though he had as many tongues as there are leaves on the trees, or grass in the fields, or stars in the sky, or sand by the sea. It needs to be pondered in the heart what it means to be the Mother of God.²⁶

Mary also freely ascribes all to God’s grace, not to her merit. For though she was without sin, yet that grace was far too great for her to deserve it in any way. How should a creature deserve to become the Mother of God? Though certain scribblers make much ado about her worthiness for such motherhood, I prefer to believe her rather than them. She says her low estate was regarded by God, not thereby rewarding her for anything she had done, but, “He has done great things for me,” He has done this of His own accord without any doing of mine. For never in all her life did she think to become the Mother of God, still less did she prepare or make herself meet for it. The tidings took her all unaware, as Luke reports (Luke 1:29). Merit, however, is not unprepared for its reward, but deliberately seeks and awaits it.

It is no valid argument against this to cite the words of the hymn “Regina coeli laetare,”²⁷ “Whom thou didst merit to bear,” and again, “Whom thou wast worthy to bear.” For the same things are sung about the holy cross, which was a thing of wood and incapable of merit. The words are to be understood in this sense: In order to become the Mother of God, she had to be a woman, a virgin, of the tribe of Judah, and had to believe the angelic message in order to become worthy, as the Scriptures foretold.²⁸ As the wood had no other merit or worthiness than that it was suited to be made into a cross and was appointed by God for that purpose, so her sole worthiness to become the Mother of God lay in her being fit and appointed for it; so that it might be pure grace and not a reward, that we might not take away from God’s grace, worship, and honor by ascribing too great things to her. For it is better to take away too much from her than from the grace of God. Indeed, we cannot take away too much from her, since she was created out of nothing, like all other creatures. But we can easily take away too much from God’s grace, which is a perilous thing to do and not well pleasing to her. It is necessary also to keep within bounds and not make too much of calling her “Queen of Heaven,” which is a true-enough name and yet does not make her a goddess who could grant gifts or render aid, as some suppose when they pray and flee to her rather than to God. She gives nothing, God gives all, as we see in the words that follow.

“He who is mighty.” Truly, in these words she takes away all might and power from every creature and bestows them on God alone. What great boldness and robbery on the part of so young and tender a maiden! She dares, by this one word, to make all the strong feeble, all the mighty weak, all the wise foolish, all the famous despised, and God alone the Possessor of all strength, wisdom, and glory. For this is the meaning of the phrase: “He who is mighty.” There is none that does anything, but as St. Paul says in Ephesians 1: “God accomplishes all in all,”²⁹ and all creatures’ works are God’s works. Even as we confess in the Creed: “I believe in God the Father, the Almighty.” He is almighty because it is His power alone that works in all and through all and over all. Thus St. Anna, the mother of Samuel, sings in 1 Samuel 2:9: “Not by might shall a man prevail.” St. Paul says in 2 Corinthians 3:5: “Not that we are

sufficient of ourselves to claim anything as coming from us; our sufficiency is from God.” This is a most important article of faith, including many things; it completely puts down all pride, arrogance, blasphemy, fame, and false trust, and exalts God alone. It points out the reason why God alone is to be exalted—because He does all things. That is easily said but hard to believe and to translate into life. For those who carry it out in their lives are most peaceable, composed, and simple-hearted folk, who lay no claim to anything, well knowing it is not theirs but God’s.

This, then, is the meaning of these words of the Mother of God: “In all those great and good things there is nothing of mine, but He who alone does all things, and whose power works in all, has done such great things for me.” For the word “mighty” does not denote a quiescent power, as one says of a temporal king that he is mighty, even though he may be sitting still and doing nothing. But it denotes an energetic power, a continuous activity, that works and operates without ceasing. For God does not rest, but works without ceasing, as Christ says in John 5:17: “My Father is working still, and I am working.” In the same sense St. Paul says in Ephesians 3:20: “He is able to do more than all that we ask”; that is, He always does more than we ask; that is His way, and thus His power works. That is why I said Mary does not desire to be an idol; she does nothing, God does all. We ought to call upon her, that for her sake God may grant and do what we request. Thus also all other saints are to be invoked, so that the work may be every way God’s alone.

Therefore she adds, “And holy is His name.” That is to say: “As I lay no claim to the work, neither do I to the name and fame. For the name and fame belong to Him alone who does the work. It is not proper that one should do the work and another have the fame and take the glory. I am but the workshop in which He performs His work; I had nothing to do with the work itself. No one should praise me or give me the glory for becoming the Mother of God, but God alone and His work are to be honored and praised in me. It is enough to congratulate me and call me blessed, because God used me and did His works in me.” Behold, how completely she traces all to God, lays claim to no works, no honor, no fame. She conducts herself as before, when she still had nothing of all this; she demands no higher honors than before. She is not puffed up, does not vaunt herself or proclaim with a loud voice that she is become the Mother of God. She seeks not any glory, but goes about her usual household duties, milking the cows, cooking the meals, washing pots and kettles, sweeping out the rooms, and performing the work of maidservant or housemother in lowly and despised tasks, as though she cared nothing for such great gifts and graces. She was esteemed among other women and her neighbors no more highly than before, nor desired to be, but remained a poor townswoman, one of the great multitude. Oh, how simple and pure a heart was hers, how strange a soul was this! What great things are hidden here under this lowly exterior! How many came in contact with her, talked, and ate and drank with her, who perhaps despised her and counted her but a common, poor, and simple village maiden, and who, had they known, would have fled from her in terror.

That is the meaning of the clause: “Holy is His name.” For “holy” means “separated,” “dedicated to God,” that none should touch or defile it but all should hold it in honor. And “name” means a good report, fame, praise, and honor. Thus everyone should let God’s name alone, not lay hands on it or appropriate it to himself. It is a symbol of this when we read in Exodus 30:25–32 that Moses made an oil of holy ointment, at God’s command, and strictly forbade that it be poured on any man’s flesh. That is, no man should ascribe to himself the name of God. For we desecrate God’s name when we let ourselves be praised or honored, or when we take pleasure in ourselves and boast of our works or our possessions, as is the way of the world, which constantly dishonors and desecrates the name of God. But as the works are God’s alone, so, too, the name should be His. And all that thus hallow His name and deny themselves all honor and glory, rightly honor His name, and therefore are hallowed by it. Thus we read in Exodus 30:29 that the precious ointment was so holy that it hallowed whatever it touched. That is, when God’s name is hallowed by us, so that we lay claim to no work, fame, or self-satisfaction in it, it is rightly honored, and in turn touches and hallows us.

Therefore we must be on our guard, because we cannot do without God’s good things while we live on earth, and therefore we cannot be without name and honor. When men accord us praise and honor, we ought to profit by the example of the Mother of God and at all times arm ourselves with this verse to make the proper reply and to use such honor and praise correctly. We should openly say, or at least think in our heart: “O Lord God, Thine is this work that is being praised and celebrated. Thine be also the name. Not I have done it but Thou, who art able to do all things, and holy is Thy name.” We ought neither to reject this

praise and honor as though they were wrong, nor to despise them as though they were nothing, but refuse to accept them as too precious or noble, and ascribe them to Him in heaven, to whom they belong. This is one lesson from this precious verse. It also furnishes us an answer to the question that some may ask, whether no man ought to honor another. St. Paul says in Romans 12:10 that we should “outdo one another in showing honor.” But no one should accept the honor as accorded to him, nor take it to himself, but should hallow it and ascribe it to God, to whom it belongs, by performing all manner of good works, from which honor comes. For no one should lead a dishonorable life. But if he is to live honorably, honor will have to be shown him. Yet as an honorable life is the gift and work of God, so, too, the name should be His alone, holy and undefiled by self-complacency. For this we pray in the Lord’s Prayer: “Hallowed be Thy name.”

50. “*And His mercy is on those who fear Him, from generation to generation.*”

We must accustom ourselves to the Scriptural usage according to which generations are, as we have said above,³⁰ the succession of those born in the course of nature, one human being descending from another. Hence the German word *Geschlechter* is not an adequate translation, though I do not know a better one. For by *Geschlechter* we understand families or blood relations. But the word here means the natural succession from father to son and son’s son, each several member being called a generation; so that the following would not be a bad translation: “and His mercy endures to children’s children of those who fear Him.” This is a very common expression in Scripture, with its origin in the words of God under the First Commandment, spoken on Mount Sinai to Moses and all the people (Ex. 20:5, 6): “I am your God, strong and jealous, visiting the sins of the fathers upon the children to the third and fourth generation of those who hate Me, and showing steadfast love to many thousand generations of those who love Me and keep My Commandments.”

Having finished singing about herself and the good things she had from God, and having sung His praises, Mary now rehearses all the works of God that He works in general in all men, and sings His praises also for them, teaching us to understand the work, method, nature, and will of God. Many philosophers and men of great acumen have also engaged in the endeavor to find out the nature of God; they have written much about Him, one in this way, another in that, yet all have gone blind over their task and failed of the proper insight. And, indeed, it is the greatest thing in heaven and on earth, to know God correctly if that may be granted to one. This the Mother of God teaches us here in a masterly fashion, if we would only listen, just as she taught the same above,³¹ in and by her own experience. How can one know God better than in the works in which He is most Himself? Whoever understands His works correctly cannot fail to know HIS nature and will, His heart and mind. Hence to understand His works is an art. And in order that we may learn it, Mary enumerates, in the following four verses, six divine works among as many classes of persons. She divides all the world into two parts and assigns to each side three works and three classes of men, so that either side has its exact counterpart in the other. She describes the works of God in each of these two parts, portraying Him so well that it could not be done better.

This division is well conceived and is borne out by other passages of Scripture. For instance, God says in Jeremiah 9:23, 24: “Let not the wise man glory in his wisdom, let not the mighty man glory in his might, let not the rich man glory in his riches; but let him who glories glory in this, that he understands and knows Me, that I am the Lord who practice kindness, justice, and righteousness in the earth; for in these things I delight, says the Lord.” This is a noble text and well agrees with this hymn of the Mother of God. Here we see that He, too, divides all that is in the world into three parts—wisdom, might, and riches—and puts them all down by saying no one should glory in these things, for no one will find Him in them, nor does He delight therein. Over against them He sets three others—kindness, justice, and righteousness. “In these things,” says He, “I am to be found; indeed, I practice them, so near am I to them; nor do I practice them in heaven, but in the earth, where men may find Me. And whoever thus understands Me may well glory and trust in that fact. For if he is not wise but poor in spirit, My kindness is with him; if he is not mighty but brought low, My justice is by his side to save him; if he is not rich but poor and needy, the more he has of My righteousness.”

Under wisdom He includes all spiritual possessions and gifts, by which a man may gain popularity, fame, and a good report, as the following verse will show. Such gifts are intellect, reason, wit, knowledge, piety, virtue, a godly life, in short, whatever is in the soul that men call divine and spiritual, all great and high gifts, yet none of them God. Under might He includes all authority, nobility, friends, high station, and

honor, whether pertaining to temporal or to spiritual goods or persons, though there is in Scripture no spiritual authority or power, but only servants and subjects—together with all the rights, liberties, and privileges pertaining to them. Under riches are included good health, beauty, pleasure, strength, and every external good that may befall the body. Opposed to these three are the poor in spirit, the oppressed, and those who lack the necessities of life. Let us now consider these six works in order.

THE FIRST WORK OF GOD, MERCY

Of this our verse treats: “His mercy is on those who fear Him from generation to generation.” She begins with the highest and greatest things, with the spiritual and inward goods, which produce the most vain, proud, and stiff-necked people on earth. No rich or mighty man is so puffed up and bold as one such smart aleck³² who feels and knows that he is in the right, understands all about a matter, and is wiser than other people. Especially when he finds he ought to give way or confess himself in the wrong, he becomes so insolent and is so utterly devoid of the fear of God that he dares to boast of being infallible, declares God is on his side and the others on the devil’s side, and has the effrontery to appeal to the judgment of God. If such a man possesses the necessary power, he rushes on headlong, persecuting, condemning, slandering, slaying, banishing, and destroying all who differ with him, saying afterward he did it all to the honor and glory of God. He is as certain and sure as hardly an angel in heaven, of earning much thanks and merit before God. Oh, how big a bubble we have here! How much Scripture has to say about such men, and how many grievous things it threatens them with! But they feel them less than the anvil feels the smith’s hammer. This is a great and widespread evil.

Christ says of such men in John 16:2: “The hour is coming when whoever kills you will think that he is offering service to God.” And Psalm 10:5, 6 says about the same crowd: “As for all his foes, he puffs at them and says, I shall not meet adversity”; as if he were to say: “I am in the right, I do well, God will richly reward me.” Such were the people of Moab, of whom we read in Isaiah 16:6 and Jeremiah 48:29, 30: “We have heard of the pride of Moab—he is very proud—of his loftiness, his pride, and his arrogance; his reputation and his wrath are greater than his power.” Thus we see that such men would gladly do more in their great arrogance than they are able. Such were the people of the Jews in their dealings with Christ and the apostles. Such were the friends of St. Job, who argued against him with extraordinary wisdom and praised and preached God in the loftiest terms. Such people will not give you a hearing; it is impossible that they should be in the wrong or give way. They must have their way though all the world perish. Scripture cannot find reproaches enough for such a lost crew. Now it calls them an adder stopping its ears lest it hear; now a wild ox that cannot be tamed; again, a raging lion, a mighty, immovable rock, a dragon, etc.³³ But nowhere are they more aptly portrayed than in Job 40:15 and 41:1 where He calls them **בְּהֵמוֹת**. **בְּהֵמָה** is a single beast, **בְּהֵמוֹת** a drove of beasts, that is, a people having a bestial mind and unwilling to be ruled by the Spirit of God. In those chapters God describes it as having eyes “like the eyelids of the dawn” (41:18), for their prudence is unbounded. “His hide is so hard that he laughs at the arrow and the javelin” (41:26–28); that is, when they are preached to, they laugh it to scorn, for their right must not be questioned. Again, “his scales are joined one to another, that no air can come between them” (41:16, 17); that is, they hold so closely together that no Spirit of God can come into them. “His heart,” says the Lord, “is as firm as a smith’s anvil” (41:24); it is the body of the devil. Therefore He also ascribes the same things to the devil, in this passage. Such, above all others, are the pope and his herd today and these many days. They do all of these things, and worse than were ever done; there is no hearing nor giving way, it profits nothing to speak, to counsel, beg, or threaten. It is simply, “We are in the right,” and there is an end of it, in spite of everyone else, though it be the whole world.

But someone might say: “How is that? Are we not bound to defend the right? Should we let the truth go? Are we not commanded to die for the sake of the right and the truth? Did not the holy martyrs suffer for the sake of the Gospel? And Christ Himself, did not He desire to be in the right? It happens indeed that such men are now and then in the right publicly (and as they prate, before God) and that they do wisely and well.” I reply: Here it is high time and most necessary that we open our eyes, for here lies the crux of the whole matter. Everything depends on our proper understanding of “being in the right.” It is true, we are to suffer all things for the sake of the truth and the right, and not to deny it, however unimportant the matter be. It may also be that those men are now and then in the right; but they spoil all by not rightly asserting their right, by not going about it in fear or setting God before their eye. They suppose it is sufficient that it is right, and then they desire to continue and carry it out by their own power. Thus they

turn their right into a wrong, even if it was in itself right. But it is much more dangerous when they only think they are in the right, yet are not certain, as they do in the important matters that pertain to God and His right. Let us, however, deal first with the more tangible human right and use a simple illustration that all may grasp.

Is it not true that money, property, body, wife, child, friends, and the like are good things created and given by God Himself? Since, then, they are God's gifts and not your own, suppose He were to try you, to learn whether you were willing to let them go for His sake and to cleave to Him rather than to such gifts of His. Suppose He raised up an enemy, who deprived you of them in whole or in part, or you lost them by death or some other mischance. Do you think you would have just cause to rage and storm and to take them again by force or to sulk impatiently until they were restored to you? And if you said that they were good things and God's creatures, made with His own hands, and that, since all the Scriptures called such things good, you were resolved to fulfill God's Word and defend or get back such good at cost of life and limb, not suffering their loss voluntarily or surrendering them patiently—what a farce that would be! To do right in this case, you should not rush in headlong, but fear God and say: "Dear Lord, they are good things and gifts of Thine, as Thine own Word and Scripture; nevertheless I do not know whether Thou wilt permit me to keep them. If I knew that I was not to have them, I would not move a finger to get them back. If I knew that Thou wouldst rather have them remain in my possession than in that of others, I would serve Thy will by taking them back at risk of life and property. But now, since I know neither and see that for the present Thou permittest them to be taken from me, I commit the case to Thee. I will await what I am to do, and be ready to have them or to do without them."

That, mark you, is a right soul, and one that fears God. There is God's mercy, as the Mother of God sings. Hence we can see why in times past Abraham, David, and the people of Israel waged war and slew many. They went into battle by the will of God, they stood in fear, and fought not for the sake of the goods but because God commanded them to fight, as the narratives show, in which this command of God is usually set forth at the beginning. In this way the truth is not denied, for the truth declares they are good things and God's creatures. But the same truth declares also and teaches that you should let such good things go, be ready at all times to do without them, if God so wills it, and cleave to God alone. The truth, by saying they are good, does not compel you to take the good things back again, nor to say they are not good; but it does compel you to regard them with equanimity and to confess that they are good and not evil.

In the same manner we must treat the right and the manifold good things of reason or wisdom. Who can doubt that right is a good thing and a gift of God? God's Word itself says right is good, and no one should admit that his good and righteous cause is unrighteous or evil, but should sooner die for it and let go everything that is not God. To do otherwise would be to deny God and His Word, for He says right is good and not evil. But if such right is snatched from you or suppressed, would you cry out, storm and rage, and slay the whole world? Some do this; they cry to heaven, work all manner of mischief, ruin land and people, and fill the world with war and bloodshed. How do you know whether or not it is God's will that you keep such a gift and right? It belongs to Him, and He can take it from you today or tomorrow, outwardly or inwardly, by friend or foe, just as He wills. He tries you to see whether you will dispense with your right for His will's sake, be in the wrong and suffer wrong, endure shame for Him, and cleave to Him alone. If you fear God and think: "Lord, it is Thine; I will not keep it unless I know Thou wilt give it to me. Let go what will: only be Thou my God"—then this verse is fulfilled: "His mercy is on those who fear Him," who refuse to do anything apart from His will. Then both sides of God's Word are observed. In the first place, you confess that the right, your reason, knowledge, wisdom, and all your thoughts are right and good, as God's Word teaches. In the second place, you are willing to dispense with such good things for God's sake, to be wrongfully despoiled and put to shame before the world, as God's Word also teaches. To confess the right and good is one thing, to obtain it is another. It is enough for you to confess that you are in the right; if you cannot obtain it, commit that to God. To you is committed the confession, the obtaining God has reserved to Himself. If He desires you also to obtain, He will perform it Himself or put it in your way, without any thought of yours, so that you must come into possession of it and win the victory, above all that you asked or thought (Eph. 3:20). If He does not desire you to obtain it, let His mercy be sufficient for you (2 Cor. 12:9). Though they deprive you of the victory of the right, they cannot deprive you of the confession. Thus we must refrain, not from the good things of God but from

wickedly and falsely cleaving to them; so that we may use them or suffer the lack of them with equanimity, and cling, whatever befalls, to God alone. Oh, this is a thing that ought to be known to all princes and rulers who, not content with confessing the right, immediately want to obtain it and win the victory, without the fear of God; they fill the world with bloodshed and misery, and think what they do is right and well done because they have, or think they have, a just cause. What else is that but proud and haughty Moab, which calls and makes itself worthy to possess the right, that fine and noble good and gift of God; while if it regards itself right in the sight of God, it is not worthy to live on earth or eat a crust of bread, because of its sins. Oh, blindness, blindness! Who is worthy of the least creature of God? Yet we desire not only to possess the highest creatures, right, wisdom, and honor, but to keep them or regain possession of them with furious shedding of blood and every disaster. Thereupon we go and pray, fast, hear Mass, and found churches, with such bloody, furious, raving hearts, it is a wonder the stones do not burst asunder in our face.

Here a question arises. If a ruler did not defend his land and subjects against injustice, but followed my advice, made no resistance, and let all be taken from him, what would the world come to? I will briefly set down my view of the matter. Temporal power is in duty bound to defend its subjects, as I have frequently said;³⁴ for it bears the sword in order to keep in fear those who do not heed such divine teaching, and to compel them to leave others in peace. And in this the temporal power seeks not its own but its neighbor's profit and God's honor; it would gladly remain quiet and let its sword rust, if God had not ordained it to be a hindrance to evildoers. Yet this defense of its subjects should not be accompanied by still greater harm; that would be but to leap from the frying pan into the fire.³⁵ It is a poor defense to expose a whole city to danger for the sake of one person, or to risk the entire country for a single village or castle, unless God enjoined this by a special command, as He did in former times. If a robber knight robs a citizen of his property and you, my lord, lead your army against him to punish this injustice, and in so doing lay waste the whole land, who will have wrought the greater harm, the knight or the lord? David overlooked many things when he was unable to punish without bringing harm upon others. All rulers must do the same. On the other hand, a citizen must endure a certain measure of suffering for the sake of the community, and not demand that all other men undergo the greater injury for his sake. Christ did not want the weeds to be gathered up, lest the wheat also be rooted up with them (Matt. 13:29). If men went to war on every provocation and passed by no insult, we should never be at peace and have nothing but destruction. Therefore, right or wrong is never a sufficient cause indiscriminately to punish or make war. It is a sufficient cause to punish within bounds and without destroying another. The lord or ruler must always look to what will profit the whole mass of his subjects rather than any one portion. That householder will never grow rich who, because someone has plucked a feather from his goose, flings the whole goose after him. There is no time now to go into the subject of war.

We must do the same in things divine, such as faith and the Gospel, which are the highest goods and which no one should let go. But the right, favor, honor, and acceptance of them we must cast in the balance and commit them to God. We should be concerned not to obtain but to confess, and willingly endure being reviled before all the world, being persecuted, banished, burned at the stake, or otherwise slain, as unrighteous, deceivers, heretics, apostates, blasphemers, and what not; for then God's mercy is upon us. They cannot take the faith and the truth from us, even though they take our life. There are not very many, however, who rage and fret to obtain and to win the victory in this matter, as men do in temporal goods and rights. There are also few who confess it aright and on principle. But we should grieve and lament for the others who through the defeat of the Gospel are hindered in their sours salvation. In fact, we should lament and labor (yet as in the sight of God) because of the injury to souls inflicted by the Moabites for the sake of their own temporal goods and rights, as we said above.³⁶ For it is a lamentable thing when God's Word does not win the victory, lamentable not so far as the confessor is concerned, but so far as those are concerned who should have been saved by it. Hence we find in the prophets, in Christ, and in the apostles, such sorrow and lamentation for the suppression of the Word of God, though they were glad to bear any injustice and injury. For far more depends on the obtaining of this good than of any other. Yet no one should employ force or keep or regain such right of the Gospel by rage and unreason; he should rather humble himself before God as one who may not be worthy that such a great and good thing be done through him, and commit all to His mercy with prayer and lamentation.

This, then, is the first work of God—that He is merciful to all who are ready to do without their own opinion, right, wisdom, and all spiritual goods, and willing to be poor in spirit. These are the ones who truly fear God, who count themselves not worthy of anything, be it ever so small, and are glad to be naked and bare before God and man; who ascribe whatever they have to His pure grace, bestowed on the unworthy; who use it with praise and fear and thanksgiving, as though it belonged to another, and who seek not their own will, desire, or honor, but His alone to whom it belongs. Mary also indicates how much more gladly God shows such mercy, which is His noblest work, than its counterpart, His strength; for she says this work of God endures without ceasing from generation to generation of those that fear Him, while His strength endures only to the third and fourth generation, though in the verse that follows it has no time or limit set to it.

THE SECOND WORK OF GOD, BREAKING SPIRITUAL PRIDE.

51. *He has shown strength with His arm, He has scattered the proud in the imagination of their hearts.*

I trust no one will be confused by my translation. Above I rendered this verse, “He shows strength,” and here, “He has shown strength.”³⁷ I have done this in order that we may the better understand these words, which are not bound to any one time, but are intended to set forth in general the works of God that He always has done, always does, and always will do. Hence the following would be a fair translation: “God is a Lord whose works are of such a nature that He mightily scatters the proud and is merciful to those who fear Him.” In the Scriptures, the “arm” of God means God’s own power, by which He works without the medium of any creature. This work is done quietly and in secret, and no one becomes aware of it until all is accomplished; so that this power, or arm, can be known and understood only by faith. Therefore Isaiah complains (Is. 53:1) that so few have faith in this arm, saying: “Who has believed what we have heard, and to whom has the arm of the Lord been revealed?” These things are so because, as he goes on to say (Is. 53:2 ff.), all is done in secret and without the semblance of power. We also read in Habakkuk 3:4 that there are horns coming out of God’s hands, to indicate His mighty power; and yet it is said: “There He veiled His power.” What is the meaning of this?

It means that when God works by means of His creatures, it is plainly seen where the strength is and where the weakness. Hence the proverb, “God helps those who help themselves.”³⁸ For example, whichever prince wins a battle, it is seen that God defeated the other by him. When a man is devoured by a wolf or otherwise injured, it is evident that it took place by means of the creature. Thus God makes or breaks one creature by means of another. Whoever falls, falls; whoever stands, stands. But it is different when God Himself works, with His own arm. Then a thing is destroyed or raised up before one knows it, and no one sees it done. Such works as these He does only among the two divisions of mankind, the godly and the wicked. He lets the godly become powerless and to be brought low, until everyone supposes their end is near, whereas in these very things He is present to them with all His power, yet so hidden and in secret that even those who suffer the oppression do not feel it but only believe. There is the fullness of God’s power and His outstretched arm. For where man’s strength ends, God’s strength begins, provided faith is present and waits on Him. And when the oppression comes to an end, it becomes manifest what great strength was hidden underneath the weakness. Even so, Christ was powerless on the cross; and yet there He performed His mightiest work and conquered sin, death, world, hell, devil, and all evil. Thus all the martyrs were strong and overcame. Thus, too, all who suffer and are oppressed overcome. Therefore it is said in Joel 3:10: “Let the weak say, ‘I am strong’ ”—yet in faith, and without feeling it until it is accomplished.

On the other hand, God lets the other half of mankind become great and mightily to exalt themselves. He withdraws His power from them and lets them puff themselves up in their own power alone. For where man’s strength begins, God’s strength ends. When their bubble is fullblown, and everyone supposes them to have won and overcome, and they themselves feel smug in their achievement, then God pricks the bubble, and it is all over. The poor dupes do not know that even while they are puffing themselves up and growing strong they are forsaken by God, and God’s arm is not with them. Therefore their prosperity has its day, disappears like a bubble, and is as if it had never been. To this the psalmist refers in Psalm 73:16–20. It bothered him when he saw the riches, pride, and prosperity of the wicked in the world. At last he said: “When I thought how to understand this, it seemed to me a wearisome task, until I looked into the secrets of God; then I perceived their end. I saw that they were exalted only in their self-deception, and were brought to ruin in their exaltation. How they are destroyed in a moment, how quickly it is all over for

them! It is as though they had never existed, like a dream when one awakes.” And Psalm 37:35, 36: “I have seen a wicked man overbearing and towering like a cedar of Lebanon. Again I passed by, and, lo, he was no more; though I sought him, he could not be found.”

It is because of our lack of faith that we cannot wait a little, until the time comes when we, too, shall see how the mercy of God together with all His might is with those who fear Him, and the arm of God with all severity and power against the proud. O faithless! We grope with our hands for the mercy and the arm of God, and, unable to feel them, suppose our cause lost and that of our enemies won, as though God’s grace and mercy had forsaken us and His arm turned against us. This we do because we do not know His proper works and therefore do not know Him, neither His mercy nor His arm. For He must and will be known by faith; hence our sense and our reason must close their eyes. This is the eye that offends us; therefore it must be plucked out and cast from us.³⁹ These, then, are the two contrary works of God, from which we learn that He is minded to be far from the wise and prudent and near to the foolish and those compelled to be in the wrong. This makes God worthy of love and praise and comforts soul and body and all our powers.

We come to the words: “He scatters the proud in the imagination of their hearts.” This scattering takes place, as we have said, when their prudence is at its height and when they are filled with their own wisdom; then, truly, God’s wisdom is no longer with them. And in what better way could He scatter them than by depriving them of His eternal wisdom and permitting them to be filled with their own temporal, short-lived, and perishing wisdom? For Mary says: “the proud in the imagination of their hearts”; that is, those who delight in their own opinions, thoughts, and reason, which not God but their heart inspires, and who suppose that these are right and good and wise above all others. Therefore they exalt themselves above those who fear God, put down and pour shame upon the opinion and right of others, and persecute them to the utmost, so that their own cause may by all means be right and be maintained. When they have accomplished this, they boast and loudly brag, as the Jews did with Christ. Yet the Jews did not see that by this their cause was destroyed and brought down, while Christ was exalted to glory. We observe, then, that our verse treats of spiritual goods and how one can know God’s twofold work in them. It shows us that we ought gladly to be poor in spirit and in the wrong and let our adversaries be in the right. They will not long continue; the promise is too strong for them. They cannot escape God’s arm but must succumb and be brought as low as they once were high, if we will only believe it. But where there is no faith, God does not perform such works; He withdraws His arm and works openly by means of the creatures, as we said above.⁴⁰ But these are not His proper works, by which He may be known; for in them the creatures’ strength is mingled with His own. They are not God’s own pure works, as they must be when no one works with Him and He alone does the work, which He does when we become powerless and oppressed in our right or our opinion and let God’s power work in us. What precious works these are!

With what mastery Mary here hits the perverse hypocrites! She looks not at their hands or in their eyes, but in their hearts when she says: “the proud in the imagination of their hearts.” She refers in particular to the enemies of divine truth, such as the Jews in their opposition to Christ, and the men of today. For these scholars and saints are not proud of their dress or conduct; they pray much, fast much, preach and study much; they also say Mass, go meekly with bowed head, and shun costly clothes. They think there are no greater foes to pride, error, and hypocrisy, nor any better friends of truth and of God than they themselves. How else could they bring such great harm upon the truth if they were not such holy, pious, and learned men? Their doings make a brave outward show and impress the common people. Oh, they have good hearts and mean well, they call upon the good God and pity the poor Jesus, who was so unrighteous and proud, and not so pious as they. He says of them in Matthew 11:19: “Divine wisdom is justified by her children” that is: “They are more righteous and wise than I, who am divine wisdom itself; whatever I do is wrong, and I am mastered by them.”

These are the most venomous and pernicious men on earth, their hearts abysses of satanic pride. There is no helping them; they will not heed our counsel. It does not concern them; they leave that to poor sinners, for whom such teaching is necessary, but not for them. John calls them “a brood of vipers” in Luke 3:7, and so does Christ (Matt. 12:34). These are the right guilty ones,⁴¹ who do not fear God and are fit only that God should scatter them with their pride, because no one persecutes the right and wisdom more than they—yet for the sake of God and of righteousness, as we have said. Hence they must be first and foremost among the three enemies of God on this side.⁴² For the rich are the least His enemies; the

mighty are much more hostile; but these smart alecks are the worst of all because of their influence on others. The rich destroy the truth among themselves; the mighty drive it away from others; but these wise ones utterly extinguish the truth itself and replace it with other things, the imagination of their own heart, so that the truth cannot come into its own again. As much as the truth itself is better than the men among whom it dwells, so much worse are the wise than the mighty and the rich. Oh, God is their special enemy, as they well deserve.

THE THIRD WORK, PUTTING DOWN THE MIGHTY

52. He has put down the mighty from their seats.

This work and those that follow are easily understood from the two foregoing works. God scatters the wise and prudent in their own thoughts and imaginations, on which they depend, venting their pride on those who fear God, who must needs be in the wrong and see their right and their opinion rejected; which happens chiefly for the sake of God's Word. Just so He destroys and puts down the mighty, and the great with their strength and authority, on which they depend, venting their pride on their inferiors, the godly and weak, who must suffer injury, pain, death, and all manner of evil at their hands. And just as He comforts those who must suffer wrong and shame for the right, truth, and Word, so He comforts those who must suffer injury and evil. And as much as He comforts the latter, so much He terrifies the former. But this, too, must all be known and waited for in faith. For He does not destroy the mighty as suddenly as they deserve, but lets them go for a season, until their might has reached its highest point. When it has done this, God does not support it, neither can it support itself; it breaks down of its own weight without any crash or sound, and the oppressed are raised up, also without any sound, for God's strength is in them, and it alone remains when the strength of the mighty has fallen.

Observe, however, that Mary does not say He breaks the seats, but He casts the mighty from their seats. Nor does she say He leaves those of low degree in their low degree, but He exalts them. For while the world stands, authority, rule, power, and seats must remain. But God will not long permit men to abuse them and turn them against Him, inflict injustice and violence on the godly, and enjoy it, boast of them, and fail to use them in the fear of God, to His praise and in defense of righteousness. We see in all histories and in experience that He puts down one kingdom and exalts another, lifts up one principality and casts down another, increases one people and destroys another; as He did with Assyria, Babylon, Persia, Greece, and Rome, though they thought they would sit in their seats forever. Nor does He destroy reason, wisdom, and right; for if the world is to go on, these things must remain. But He does destroy pride and the proud, who use these things for selfish ends, enjoy them, do not fear God, but persecute the godly and the divine right by means of them, and thus abuse the fair gifts of God and turn them against Him.

Now, in things divine, the smart alecks and proud sages usually make common cause with the mighty and persuade them to take sides against the truth; as it is written in Psalm 2:2: "The kings of the earth set themselves, and the rulers take counsel together, against the Lord and His Anointed." For truth and right must always be assailed by the wise, the mighty, and the rich, that is, by the world with its greatest and best ability. Hence the Holy Spirit comforts truth and right by the mouth of this mother and bids them not to be deceived or afraid. Let them be wise, mighty, rich: it will not be for long. For if the saints and scholars, together with the mighty lords and the rich, were not against but for the right and the truth, what would become of the wrong? Who would there be to suffer evil? But this must never come to pass. The learned, saintly, mighty, great and rich, and the best that the world has must fight against God and the right, and be the devil's own. As it is said in Habakkuk 1:16: "His food is rich and choice"; that is to say, the evil spirit has a most delicate palate and is fond of feasting on the very best, daintiest, and choicest morsels, as a bear on honey. Hence the learned and saintly hypocrites, the great lords and the rich, are the devil's own tidbits. On the other hand, as St. Paul says in 1 Corinthians 1:28, those whom the world rejects, the poor, lowly, simplehearted, and despised, God has chosen, causing the best part of mankind to bring suffering upon the lowest part, in order that men may know that our salvation consists not in man's power and works but in God's alone, as St. Paul also says (1 Cor. 3:7). Hence there is much truth in these sayings, "The more men know, the worse they grow"; "A prince, a rare bird in heaven"; "Rich here, poor yonder."⁴³ For the learned will not surrender the pride of their hearts, nor the mighty their oppression, nor the rich their pleasures. And so it goes.

THE FOURTH WORK, EXALTING THE LOWLY

And exalted those of low degree.

Those of low degree are here not the humble, but all those who are contemptible and altogether nothing in the eyes of the world. It is the same expression that Mary applied to herself above: "He has regarded the low estate of His handmaiden." Nevertheless, those who are willing to be nothing and lowly of heart, and do not strive to be great, are truly humble. Now, when He exalts them, it does not mean that He will put them in the seats of those He has cast out any more than that when He shows mercy to those who fear Him, He puts them in the place of the learned, that is, the proud. Rather He lets them be exalted spiritually and in God, and be judges over seats and power and all might, here and hereafter; for they have more knowledge than all the learned and the mighty. How this is done was said above⁴⁴ under the first work and need not be repeated. All this is said for the comfort of the suffering and for the terror of the tyrants, if we only had faith enough to believe that it is true.

THE FIFTH AND SIXTH WORKS

53. *He has filled the hungry with good things, and the rich He has sent empty away.*

We said above that by those of low degree are meant not those who are despised and nothing in appearance, but those who are willing to be in such a state, especially if they have been forced into it for the sake of God's Word or the right. Even so, by the hungry are not meant those who have little or nothing to eat, but those who gladly suffer want, especially if they are forcibly compelled by others to do so for the sake of God or the truth. Who is lowlier, more despised, and needier than the devil and the damned, or than men who are tortured, starved, or slain on account of their evil deeds, or all who are lowly and in want against their will? Yet that does not help them but only adds to their misery. Of them the Mother of God does not speak, but of those who are one with God and God with them, and who believe and trust in Him.

On the other hand, what hindrance was their riches to the holy fathers Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob? What hindrance was his royal throne to David, or his authority in Babylon to Daniel? Or their high station or great riches to those who had them or who have them today, provided they do not set their hearts on them or seek their own advantage in them? Solomon says in Proverbs 16:2: "The Lord weighs the spirit"; that is, He judges not according to the outward appearance, whether one is rich or poor, high or low, but according to the spirit and how it behaves itself within. There must needs be such differences and distinctions of persons and stations in our life here on earth; yet the heart should neither cling to them nor fly from them—neither cling to the high and rich nor fly from the poor and lowly. Thus it is also said in Psalm 7:9, 11: "God tries the hearts and minds, therefore He is a righteous judge." But men judge according to the outward appearance; therefore they often err.

These works are done in secret, like those mentioned above,⁴⁵ so that no one is aware of them until they have come to an end. A rich man is not aware how really empty and wretched he is until he comes to die or otherwise suffers loss. Then only does he see how all his goods were altogether nothing, as it is said in Psalm 76:5: "They sank into sleep (that is, they died); all the rich men discovered that they had nothing in their hands." On the other hand, the hungry and thirsty know not how filled with good things they are until they come to the end. Then they find the words of Christ true, in Luke 6:21: "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst, for they shall be filled"; and the comforting promise of the Mother of God here: "He has filled the hungry with good things." It is utterly impossible for God to let anyone who trusts in Him die of starvation; all angels would have to come and feed him. Elijah was fed by ravens and lived for many days on a handful of meal, he and the widow of Zarephath (1 Kings 17:6, 15). God cannot forsake those who trust in Him. Hence David says in Psalm 37:25: "I have been young, and now am old; yet I have not seen the righteous forsaken, or his children begging bread." Now, he is righteous that trusts in God. Again, in Psalm 34:10: "The rich suffer want and hunger; but those who seek the Lord lack no good thing." And St. Hannah, the mother of Samuel, says in 1 Samuel 2:5: "Those who were full have hired themselves out for bread, and the hungry are filled."

But our wretched unbelief always hinders God from working such works in us, and ourselves from experiencing and knowing them. We desire to be filled and have plenty of everything before hunger and want arrive. We lay up provision against future hunger and need, so that we no longer have need of God and His works. What sort of faith is that which trusts in God, when all the while you feel and know that you have goods laid up to help yourself? It is because of our unbelief that we see God's Word, the truth, and the right defeated and wrong triumph and yet remain silent, do not rebuke, speak out, or prevent it, but

let things go as they will. Why? We are afraid that we, too, might be attacked and made poor and might then perish of hunger and be forever laid low. That is to esteem temporal goods more than God and to put them in God's place as an idol. If we do this, we do not deserve to hear or to understand this comfortable promise of God: that He exalts the lowly, puts down the mighty, fills the poor, and empties the rich. We do not deserve ever to come to the knowledge of His works, without which there is no salvation. We must therefore be damned forever, as Psalm 28:5 says: "Because they do not regard the works of the Lord or the work of His hand, He will break them down and build them up no more."

And this is only fair, because they do not believe His promises but count Him a fickle, lying God. They dare not venture or begin anything on the strength of His words, so little do they esteem His truth. It is indeed necessary that we make a trial, and venture out on His words; for Mary does not say that He has filled the full and exalted those of high degree, but: "He has filled the hungry and exalted those of low degree." You must feel the pinch of poverty in the midst of your hunger and learn by experience what hunger and poverty are, with no provision on hand and no help in yourself or any other man, but in God only; so that the work may be God's alone and impossible to be done by any other. You must not only think and speak of a low estate but actually come to be in a low estate and caught in it, without any human aid, so that God alone may do the work. Or if it should not come to such a pass, you must at least desire it and not shrink from it. We are Christians and have the Gospel, which neither the devil nor men can abide, in order that we may come into poverty and lowliness and God may thereby have His work in us. Think for yourself, and you will see that if God were to fill you before you were hungry or to exalt you before you were brought low, He would have to sink to the level of a wizard or conjurer; He would be unable to do what He promises, and all His works would be a mere jest, whereas it is written in Psalm 111:7: "His works are truth and trustworthiness." And even if He were to perform His works as soon as you felt the first pinch of want or lowliness, or to help you in some slight need, such works would be altogether unworthy of His divine power and majesty; for Psalm 111:2 says of them: "Great are the works of the Lord, sought out according to all His desires."

Let us assume the reverse case. If He were to put down the rich and those of high degree before they became either rich or high, how would He go about it? They must first have risen to so high a place and come into such great riches that they themselves and everyone else supposed—in fact, that it was actually the case—none could put them down, none could stop them, and that they were sure of themselves and said what Isaiah writes of them and of Babylon (Is. 47:8, 9): "Now hear this, you tender one, who sit securely, who say in your heart, 'I am, and there is no one besides me; I shall not sit as a widow or know the loss of children' (that is, of power and help): both these things shall come to you in one day." Then God can perform His deeds in them. Thus He let Pharaoh exalt himself against the Children of Israel and oppress them, as He Himself says about him in Exodus 9:16: "For this purpose have I raised you up, to show My power through you, so that My name may be declared throughout all the earth." The Bible is full of these examples, teaching nothing but the work and the Word of God and rejecting the work and word of men.

Behold, how strong a comfort this is, that not man but God gives to the hungry, and that He not only gives them this or that but fills and fully satisfies them. Mary says, moreover: "with good things." That is to say, this fullness is to be harmless, wholesome, and saving, benefiting both body, soul, and all their powers. But it also shows that, before being filled, the hungry are lacking in all good things and filled with all want. For, as we said above,⁴⁶ riches here include all manner of temporal goods for the supply of bodily needs, to make the soul glad. Even so, hunger here signifies the lack not only of food, but of all temporal goods. For a man can do without everything else but food, so that almost all goods exist for the sake of furnishing him with food, without which no man can live, even though he might be able to live without clothing, house, money, property, and fellow men. Scripture, therefore, here designates temporal goods according to that part of them whose need and use are most essential and which we can least of all do without. Thus it also calls misers and men covetous of temporal goods, "servants of their own belly" (Rom. 16:18), and Paul calls their belly their god (Phil. 3:19). How could one be more strongly and comfortably moved to willing endurance of hunger and poverty than by these fine words of the Mother of God—that God will fill all the hungry with good things? Whoever is not moved by these words and such glory and praise of poverty is certainly without faith and trust, a genuine heathen.

On the other hand, how could one bring a more damning accusation against riches, or more grievously terrify the rich, than by saying that God sends them empty away? Oh, how great and overflowing are both God's filling and God's sending away! How utterly vain here is the help or counsel of any creature! A man is frightened when he hears that his father has disowned him or that he has fallen into disfavor with his lord. Yet we rich men and of high degree are not frightened when we hear that God disowns us—indeed, not only disowns us, but threatens to break, humble, and send us empty away! It is a joy, on the other hand, when one's father is good and one's lord gracious, and many a one sets such great store by these things as to give up life and property for them. We have here such a promise of God and such strong comfort—yet we can neither use nor enjoy them, neither thank Him for them nor rejoice in them! Oh, wretched unbelief, hard and firm as stock and stone, not to feel such great things! Let this suffice concerning the six works of God.

54. *He has helped His servant Israel in remembrance of His mercy.*

After enumerating the works of God in her and in all men, Mary returns to the beginning and to the chief thing. She concludes the Magnificat by mentioning the very greatest of all God's works—the Incarnation of the Son of God. She freely acknowledges herself as the handmaiden and servant of all the world, confessing that this work which was performed in her was not done for her sake alone, but for the sake of all Israel. But she divides Israel into two parts and refers only to that part that is God's servant. Now, no one is God's servant unless he lets Him be his God and perform His works in him, of which we spoke above.⁴⁷ Alas, the word "service of God" has nowadays taken on so strange a meaning and usage that whoever hears it thinks not of these works of God, but rather of the ringing of bells, the wood and stone of churches, the incense pot, the flicker of candles, the mumbling in the churches, the gold, silver, and precious stones in the vestments of choirboys and celebrants, of chalices and monstrances, of organs and images, processions and churchgoing, and, most of all, the babbling of lips and the rattling of rosaries. This, alas, is what the service of God means now. Of such service God knows nothing at all, while we know nothing but this. We chant the Magnificat daily, to a special tone and with gorgeous pomp; and yet the oftener we sing it, the more we silence its true music and meaning. Yet the text stands firm. Unless we learn and experience these works of God, there will be no service of God, no Israel, no grace, no mercy, no God, though we kill ourselves with singing and ringing in the churches and drag into them all the goods in all the world. God has not commanded any of these things; undoubtedly, therefore, He takes no pleasure in them.

Now, the Israel that is God's servant is the one whom the Incarnation of Christ benefits. That is His own beloved people, for whose sake He also became man, to redeem them from the power of the devil, of sin, death, and hell, and to lead them to righteousness, eternal life, and salvation. That is the help of which Mary sings. As Paul says in Titus 2:14: "Christ gave Himself for us, to purify for Himself a people of His own"; and St. Peter in 1 Peter 2:9: "You are a holy nation, a chosen people, a royal priesthood." These are the riches of the boundless mercy of God, which we have received by no merit but by pure grace. Therefore she sings: "He has remembered His mercy." She does not say: "He has remembered our merit and worthiness." We were in need, to be sure, but completely unworthy. That is the basis of His praise and glory, while our boasting and presumption must keep quiet. There was nothing for Him to regard that could move Him except His mercy, and this name He desired to make known. But why does she say, "He remembered" rather than "He regarded"? Because He had promised this mercy, as the following verse shows. Now, He had waited a long time before showing it, until it seemed as though He had forgotten—even as all His works seem as though He were forgetting us—but when He came, it was seen that He had not forgotten but had continually had in mind to fulfill His promise.

It is true that the word "Israel" means the Jews alone and not us Gentiles. But because they would not have Him, He chose certain out of their number and thus satisfied the name Israel and made of it henceforth a spiritual Israel. This was shown in Genesis 32:24–28, when the holy patriarch Jacob wrestled with the angel, who strained the hollow of his thigh out of joint, to show that his children should henceforth not boast of their fleshly birth, as the Jews do. Therefore he also received a new name, that he should henceforth be called Israel, as a patriarch who was not only Jacob, the father of fleshly children, but Israel, the father of spiritual children. With this the word "Israel" agrees, for it means "a prince with God." That is a most high and holy name and contains in itself the great miracle that, by the grace of God, a man prevailed, as it were, with God, so that God does what man desires. We see the same thing in the

case of Christendom. Through Christ she is joined to God as a bride to her bridegroom, so that the bride has a right to, and power over, her Bridegroom's body and all His possessions; all of this happens through faith. By faith man does what God wills; God in turn does what man wills. Thus Israel means a godlike, God-conquering man, who is a lord in God, with God, and through God, able to do all things.

That is the meaning of Israel. For $\aleph$ means a lord, a prince; $\aleph$ means God. Put them together, and they become $\aleph\aleph$ according to the Hebrew fashion. Such an Israel God would have. Therefore, when Jacob had wrestled with the angel and prevailed, He said to him (Gen. 32:28): "Your name shall be called Israel; for since you have power with God, you shall also have power with men." There would be much more to say on this subject, for Israel is a strange and profound mystery.

55. *As He spoke to our fathers, to Abraham, and to his seed forever.*

Here all merit and presumption are brought low, and God's grace and mercy alone are exalted. For God has not helped Israel on account of their merits, but on account of His own promise. In pure grace He made the promise, in pure grace He also fulfilled it. Wherefore St. Paul says in Galatians 3:17 that God gave the promise to Abraham four hundred years before He gave the Law to Moses, that no one might glory, saying he had merited and obtained such grace and promise through the Law or the works of the Law. This same promise the Mother of God here lauds and exalts above all else, ascribing this work of the Incarnation of God solely to the undeserved promise of divine grace, made to Abraham.

The promise of God to Abraham is recorded especially in Genesis 12:3 and Genesis 22:18, and is referred to in many other places besides. It runs thus: "By Myself I have sworn: in your Seed shall all families or nations of the earth be blessed." These words are highly esteemed by St. Paul (Gal. 3:16) and by all the prophets, and well might they be. For in these words Abraham and all his descendants were preserved and saved, and in them we, too, must all be saved; for here Christ is contained and promised as the Savior of the whole world. This is Abraham's bosom (Luke 16:22), in which were kept all who were saved before Christ's birth; without these words no one was saved, even though he had performed all good works. Let us examine them more fully.

In the first place, it follows from these words of God that without Christ all the world is in sin and under condemnation, and is accursed with all its doing and knowing. For if He says that not some but all nations shall be blessed in Abraham's Seed, then without Abraham's Seed no nation shall be blessed. What need was there for God to promise so solemnly and with so mighty an oath, that He would bless them, if they were already blessed and not rather cursed? From this saying the prophets drew many inferences; namely, that all men are evil, liars all, false and blind, in short, without God, so that in the Scriptural usage to be called a man is no great honor, since in God's sight the name "man" is no better than the name "liar" or "faithless" in the eyes of the world. So completely is man corrupted through Adam's fall that the curse⁴⁸ is innate with him and become, as it were, his nature and being.

It follows, in the second place, that this Seed of Abraham could not be born in the common course of nature, of a man and a woman; for such a birth is cursed and results in nothing but accursed seed, as we have just said. Now, if all the world was to be redeemed from the curse by this Seed of Abraham and thereby blessed, as the word and oath of God declare, the Seed itself had to be blessed first, neither touched nor tainted by that curse, but pure blessing, full of grace and truth (John 1:14). Again, if God, who cannot lie, declared with an oath that it should be Abraham's natural seed, that is, a natural and genuine child, born of his flesh and blood, then this Seed had to be a true, natural man, of the flesh and blood of Abraham. Here, then, we have a contradiction—the natural flesh and blood of Abraham, and yet not born in the course of nature, of man and wife. Therefore He uses the word "your seed," not "your child," to make it very clear and certain that it should be his natural flesh and blood, such as seed is. For a child need not be one's natural child, as everyone knows. Now, who will find the means to establish God's word and oath, where such contradictory things lie side by side?

God Himself has done this thing. He is able to keep what He has promised, even though no one may understand it before it come to pass; for His word and work do not demand the proof of reason, but a free and pure faith. Behold, how He combined the two. He raises up seed for Abraham, the natural son of one of his daughters, a pure virgin, Mary, through the Holy Spirit, and without her knowing a man. Here there was no natural conception with its curse, nor could it touch this seed; and yet it is the natural seed of Abraham, as truly as any of the other children of Abraham. That is the blessed Seed of Abraham, in whom all the world is set free from its curse. For whoever believes in this Seed, calls upon Him, confesses Him,

and abides in Him, to him all his curse is forgiven and all blessing given, as the word and oath of God declare—"In your Seed shall all the nations of the earth be blessed." That is to say: "Whatever is to be blessed must and shall be blessed through this Seed, and in no other way." This is Abraham's Seed, begotten by none of his sons, as the Jews always confidently expected, but born of this one daughter of his, Mary, alone.

That is what the tender mother of this Seed means here by saying: "He has helped His servant Israel, as He promised to Abraham and to all his seed." She found the promise fulfilled in herself; hence she says: "It is now fulfilled; He has brought help and kept His word, solely in remembrance of His mercy." Here we have the foundation of the Gospel and see why all its teaching and preaching drive men to faith in Christ and into Abraham's bosom. For where there is not this faith, no other way can be devised and no help given to lay hold of this blessed Seed. And indeed, the whole Bible depends on this oath of God, for in the Bible everything has to do with Christ. Furthermore, we see that all the fathers in the Old Testament, together with all the holy prophets, had the same faith and Gospel as we have, as St. Paul says in 1 Corinthians 10:1-4; for they all remained with a strong faith in this oath of God and in Abraham's bosom and were preserved in it. The sole difference is, they believed in the coming and promised Seed; we believe in the Seed that has come and has been given. But it is all the one truth of the promise, and hence also one faith, one Spirit, one Christ, one Lord (Eph. 4:5), now as then, and forever, as Paul says in Hebrews 13:8.

But the subsequent giving of the Law to the Jews is not on a par with this promise. The Law was given in order that by its light they might the better come to know their cursed state and the more fervently and heartily desire the promised Seed; in this they had an advantage over all the heathen world. But they turned this advantage into a disadvantage; they undertook to keep the Law by their own strength, and failed to learn from it their needy and cursed state. Thus they shut the door upon themselves, so that the Seed was compelled to pass them by. They still continue in this state, but God grant not for long. Amen. This was the cause of the quarrel all the prophets had with them. For the prophets well understood the purpose of the Law, namely, that men should thereby know their accursed nature and learn to call upon Christ. Hence they condemned all the good works and everything in the life of the Jews that did not agree with this purpose. Therefore the Jews became angry with them and put them to death as men who condemned the service of God, good works, and godly living; even as the hypocrites and graceless saints ever do, of which we might say a great deal.

When Mary says, "His seed forever," we are to understand "forever" to mean that such grace is to continue to Abraham's seed (that is, the Jews) from that time forth, throughout all time, down to the Last Day. Although the vast majority of them are hardened, yet there are always some, however few, that are converted to Christ and believe in Him. For this promise of God does not lie: the promise was made to Abraham and to his seed, not for one year or for a thousand years, but "for the ages," that is, from one generation to another, without end. We ought, therefore, not to treat the Jews in so unkindly a spirit, for there are future Christians among them, and they are turning every day. Moreover, they alone, and not we Gentiles, have this promise, that there shall always be Christians among Abraham's seed, who acknowledge the blessed Seed, who knows how or when? As for our cause, it rests upon pure grace, without a promise of God. If we lived Christian lives, and led them with kindness to Christ, there would be the proper response. Who would desire to become a Christian when he sees Christians dealing with men in so unchristian a spirit? Not so, my dear Christians. Tell them the truth in all kindness; if they will not receive it, let them go. How many Christians are there who despise Christ, do not hear His Word, and are worse than Jews or heathen! Yet we leave them in peace and even fall down at their feet and wellnigh adore them as gods. Let this suffice for the present. We pray God to give us a right understanding of this Magnificat, an understanding that consists not merely in brilliant words but in glowing life in body and soul. May Christ grant us this through the intercession and for the sake of His dear Mother Mary! Amen.

EPILOG

In conclusion I come once more to your Grace, craving pardon for my temerity. I know full well that your Grace's youth is amply supplied, each day, with wholesome instruction and admonition. Yet I cannot neglect my duty as a loyal subject, nor keep my conscience from dwelling on and being concerned for your Grace. It is the hope of us all that God may by His salutary grace so direct the future that the rule of

Saxony shall come into your Grace's hands, which will be a great and precious thing if it turns out well, but a perilous and wretched one if it turns out ill. We must in all things hope and pray for the best, but nonetheless fear and be prepared for the worst.

Your Grace should reflect that in all the Scriptures God did not permit any heathen king or prince throughout the length and breadth of the world to be praised, but, contrariwise, to be punished; this is a mighty and terrible example to all rulers. Moreover, even in Israel, His chosen people, He never found a king worthy of praise and not rather of punishment. Above all, in the kingdom of Judah, the chief portion of the whole race of mankind, exalted by God and beloved of Him above all others, there were few, not above six, kings found worthy of praise. And the very best of kings, His own beloved David, who had no peer among temporal rulers before, beside, or after him, filled as he was with the fear and the wisdom of God, and directing his whole rule not after his own reason but according to God's command alone, nevertheless stumbled more than once. Therefore the Scripture, unable to blame his reign and yet finding it necessary to narrate the calamity that befell the people on his account, put the blame not on David but on the people. It says that God's anger was kindled against them so that He let the saintly David be moved by the devil to number the people; on account of this, seventy thousand of them were destroyed by pestilence (2 Samuel 24:1–15).

All these things were foreordained by God in order to terrify those in authority, to keep them in fear, and to admonish them of their peril. For great possessions, glory, power, and favor, as well as the flatterers no lord may be without, surround and lay siege to the heart of a prince, moving it to pride, to forgetfulness of God and neglect of the people and the common weal, to sensuality, blasphemy, arrogance, and idleness, in short, to every sort of vice and evil. Indeed, there is no caste or city that is so heavily besieged and assaulted. Unless, therefore, one fortifies himself by means of such examples, and takes the fear of God for his defense and rampart, how can he endure? For unless a lord and ruler loves his subjects and has for his chief concern not how to live at ease but how to uplift and improve his people, his case is hopeless; he rules only for his sours perdition. Nor will it avail him to make amends by the foundation of great anniversaries, monasteries, altars, and what not. God will require of him an account of his office and station and will not be satisfied with anything else.

Therefore, my gracious Lord and Prince, I commend the Magnificat to your Grace, particularly the fifth and sixth verses, in which its chief content is gathered up. I beseech and exhort your Grace in all your life to fear nothing on earth, not even hell itself, so much as that which the Mother of God there calls "the imagination of their hearts" (Luke 1:51). That is the greatest, closest, mightiest, and most destructive foe of all mankind, and especially of rulers. Its name is reason, good sense, or opinion; and from it all counsels and all rule must be derived. Your grace will never be secure from it unless you continually keep it under suspicion and follow it only in the fear of God. I do not mean your Grace's counsels only, but those of all your counselors as well. None should be despised, none trusted. How is this to be done?

Why, your Grace should not leave prayer to the cowls or to the chalices,⁴⁹ as it is now the wretched custom to put one's trust in other men's prayers, without praying oneself; but your Grace should pluck up courage and be of good cheer, put away your timidity, and yourself converse with God in your heart or in secret, boldly casting down the keys at His feet, and pleading His own institution with Him. Something like this: "Behold, O God, my Father, it is Thy doing and appointment that I was born and created in this estate, to be a ruler. This none can deny, and Thou Thyself knowest it to be true. Whether worthy or unworthy, I yet am what Thou and everyone sees. Grant, therefore, my Lord and Father, that I may rule over Thy people to Thy praise and their profit. Let me not follow my own reason, but be Thou my reason," and so on.

In this spirit, then, let things go as they will, in God's name. How well such a prayer and such a spirit please God He Himself shows in the case of Solomon, who also prayed such a prayer, which I have translated and appended here. May it serve your Grace as a pattern at the close of this proclamation, and awaken in you a consoling trust in God's grace, so that both the fear and the mercy of God may be together, as the fifth verse sings. Herewith I commend myself to your Grace, and your Grace to God. May He grant you a blessed reign. Amen.

1 Kings 3:5–14

At the city of Gibeon God appeared to Solomon in a dream by night and said: "Ask what I shall give you." And Solomon said: "My God, Thou hast shown great grace to Thy servant David, my father, who

walked before Thee in truth and righteousness and whose heart was right with Thee; and therefore Thou hast kept for him this great grace, that Thou hast given him a son to sit on his throne this day.

“And now, O Lord, my God, Thou hast made Thy servant king in place of David, my father, although I am but a little child, who does not know when to go out or come in. And Thy servant is in the midst of Thy people whom Thou hast chosen, a great people, that cannot be numbered or counted for multitude.

“Give Thy servant therefore a listening heart (one that hears and obeys) to govern Thy people and discern between good and evil; for who is able to govern Thy people, so great and grave?”

God was pleased with these words and with the fact that Solomon had asked for these things. And God said to him: “Because you have asked this, and have not asked for yourself long life or riches or the life of your enemies, but have asked for yourself understanding to hear how you should govern, behold, I now do according to your word. Behold, I give you a wise and discerning mind, so that none like you has been before you and none like you shall arise after you.

“I give you also what you have not asked, both riches and glory, so that no other king shall compare with you, all your days. And if you walk in My ways, keeping My statutes and My commandments, as your father David walked, then I will lengthen your days.”

²

²Luther, M. (1999, c1956). *Vol. 21: Luther's works, vol. 21 : The Sermon on the Mount and the Magnificat* (J. J. Pelikan, H. C. Oswald & H. T. Lehmann, Ed.). Luther's Works. Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House.