CONCERNING CHRISTIAN LIBERTY

by Martin Luther

LETTER OF MARTIN LUTHER TO POPE LEO X.

Among those monstrous evils of this age with which I have now for three

years been waging war, I am sometimes compelled to look to you and to

call you to mind, most blessed father Leo. In truth, since you alone are

everywhere considered as being the cause of my engaging in war, I cannot

at any time fail to remember you; and although I have been compelled

by the causeless raging of your impious flatterers against me to appeal

from your seat to a future council--fearless of the futile decrees

of your predecessors Pius and Julius, who in their foolish tyranny

prohibited such an action--yet I have never been so alienated in feeling

from your Blessedness as not to have sought with all my might, in

diligent prayer and crying to God, all the best [gifts for](http://www.gutenberg.org/cache/epub/1911/pg1911.txt) you and for

your see. But those who have hitherto endeavoured to terrify me with the

majesty of your name and authority, I have begun quite to despise and

triumph over. One thing I see remaining which I cannot despise, and this

has been the reason of my writing anew to your Blessedness: namely, that

I find that blame is cast on me, and that it is imputed to me as a great

offence, that in my rashness I am judged to have spared not even your

person.

Now, to confess the truth openly, I am conscious that, whenever I have

had to mention your person, I have said nothing of you but what was

honourable and good. If I had done otherwise, I could by no means have

approved my own conduct, but should have supported with all my power the

judgment of those men concerning me, nor would anything have pleased

me better, than to recant such rashness and impiety. I have called

you Daniel in Babylon; and every reader thoroughly knows with what

distinguished zeal I defended your conspicuous innocence against

Silvester, who tried to stain it. Indeed, the published opinion of so

many great men and the repute of your blameless life are too widely

famed and too much reverenced throughout the world to be assailable by

any man, of however great name, or by any arts. I am not so foolish as

to attack one whom everybody praises; nay, it has been and always will

be my desire not to attack even those whom public repute disgraces. I am

not delighted at the faults of any man, since I am very conscious myself

of the great beam in my own eye, nor can I be the first to cast a stone

at the adulteress.

I have indeed inveighed sharply against impious doctrines, and I have

not been slack to censure my adversaries on account, not of their bad

morals, but of their impiety. And for this I am so far from being sorry

that I have brought my mind to despise the judgments of men and to

persevere in this vehement zeal, according to the example of Christ,

who, in His zeal, calls His adversaries a generation of vipers, blind,

hypocrites, and children of the devil. Paul, too, charges the sorcerer

with being a child of the devil, full of all subtlety and all malice;

and defames certain persons as evil workers, dogs, and deceivers. In the

opinion of those delicate-eared persons, nothing could be more bitter or

intemperate than Paul's language. What can be more bitter than the words

of the prophets? The ears of our generation have been made so delicate

by the senseless multitude of flatterers that, as soon as we perceive

that anything of ours is not approved of, we cry out that we are being

bitterly assailed; and when we can repel the truth by no other pretence,

we escape by attributing bitterness, impatience, intemperance, to our

adversaries. What would be the use of salt if it were not pungent, or of

the edge of the sword if it did not slay? Accursed is the man who does

the work of the Lord deceitfully.

Wherefore, most excellent Leo, I beseech you to accept my vindication,

made in this letter, and to persuade yourself that I have never thought

any evil concerning your person; further, that I am one who desires that

eternal blessing may fall to your lot, and that I have no dispute with

any man concerning morals, but only concerning the word of truth. In all

other things I will yield to any one, but I neither can nor will forsake

and deny the word. He who thinks otherwise of me, or has taken in my

words in another sense, does not think rightly, and has not taken in the

truth.

Your see, however, which is called the Court of Rome, and which neither

you nor any man can deny to be more corrupt than any Babylon or Sodom,

and quite, as I believe, of a lost, desperate, and hopeless impiety,

this I have verily abominated, and have felt indignant that the people

of Christ should be cheated under your name and the pretext of the

Church of Rome; and so I have resisted, and will resist, as long as

the spirit of faith shall live in me. Not that I am striving after

impossibilities, or hoping that by my labours alone, against the furious

opposition of so many flatterers, any good can be done in that most

disordered Babylon; but that I feel myself a debtor to my brethren, and

am bound to take thought for them, that fewer of them may be ruined, or

that their ruin may be less complete, by the plagues of Rome. For many

years now, nothing else has overflowed from Rome into the world--as

you are not ignorant--than the laying waste of goods, of bodies, and of

souls, and the worst examples of all the worst things. These things are

clearer than the light to all men; and the Church of Rome, formerly the

most holy of all Churches, has become the most lawless den of thieves,

the most shameless of all brothels, the very kingdom of sin, death, and

hell; so that not even antichrist, if he were to come, could devise any

addition to its wickedness.

Meanwhile you, Leo, are sitting like a lamb in the midst of wolves,

like Daniel in the midst of lions, and, with Ezekiel, you dwell among

scorpions. What opposition can you alone make to these monstrous evils?

Take to yourself three or four of the most learned and best of the

cardinals. What are these among so many? You would all perish by poison

before you could undertake to decide on a remedy. It is all over with

the Court of Rome; the wrath of God has come upon her to the uttermost.

She hates councils; she dreads to be reformed; she cannot restrain the

madness of her impiety; she fills up the sentence passed on her mother,

of whom it is said, "We would have healed Babylon, but she is not

healed; let us forsake her." It had been your duty and that of your

cardinals to apply a remedy to these evils, but this gout laughs at the

physician's hand, and the chariot does not obey the reins. Under the

influence of these feelings, I have always grieved that you, most

excellent Leo, who were worthy of a better age, have been made pontiff

in this. For the Roman Court is not worthy of you and those like you,

but of Satan himself, who in truth is more the ruler in that Babylon

than you are.

Oh, would that, having laid aside that glory which your most abandoned

enemies declare to be yours, you were living rather in the office of a

private priest or on your paternal inheritance! In that glory none are

worthy to glory, except the race of Iscariot, the children of perdition.

For what happens in your court, Leo, except that, the more wicked and

execrable any man is, the more prosperously he can use your name

and authority for the ruin of the property and souls of men, for the

multiplication of crimes, for the oppression of faith and truth and

of the whole Church of God? Oh, Leo! in reality most unfortunate, and

sitting on a most perilous throne, I tell you the truth, because I wish

you well; for if Bernard felt compassion for his Anastasius at a time

when the Roman see, though even then most corrupt, was as yet ruling

with better hope than now, why should not we lament, to whom so much

further corruption and ruin has been added in three hundred years?

Is it not true that there is nothing under the vast heavens more

corrupt, more pestilential, more hateful, than the Court of Rome? She

incomparably surpasses the impiety of the Turks, so that in very truth

she, who was formerly the gate of heaven, is now a sort of open mouth

of hell, and such a mouth as, under the urgent wrath of God, cannot be

blocked up; one course alone being left to us wretched men: to call back

and save some few, if we can, from that Roman gulf.

Behold, Leo, my father, with what purpose and on what principle it is

that I have stormed against that seat of pestilence. I am so far from

having felt any rage against your person that I even hoped to gain

favour with you and to aid you in your welfare by striking actively and

vigorously at that your prison, nay, your hell. For whatever the efforts

of all minds can contrive against the confusion of that impious Court

will be advantageous to you and to your welfare, and to many others with

you. Those who do harm to her are doing your office; those who in every

way abhor her are glorifying Christ; in short, those are Christians who

are not Romans.

But, to say yet more, even this never entered my heart: to inveigh

against the Court of Rome or to dispute at all about her. For, seeing

all remedies for her health to be desperate, I looked on her with

contempt, and, giving her a bill of divorcement, said to her, "He that

is unjust, let him be unjust still; and he that is filthy, let him

be filthy still," giving myself up to the peaceful and quiet study of

sacred literature, that by this I might be of use to the brethren living

about me.

While I was making some advance in these studies, Satan opened his

eyes and goaded on his servant John Eccius, that notorious adversary of

Christ, by the unchecked lust for fame, to drag me unexpectedly into the

arena, trying to catch me in one little word concerning the primacy of

the Church of Rome, which had fallen from me in passing. That boastful

Thraso, foaming and gnashing his teeth, proclaimed that he would dare

all things for the glory of God and for the honour of the holy apostolic

seat; and, being puffed up respecting your power, which he was about

to misuse, he looked forward with all certainty to victory; seeking to

promote, not so much the primacy of Peter, as his own pre-eminence among

the theologians of this age; for he thought it would contribute in no

slight degree to this, if he were to lead Luther in triumph. The result

having proved unfortunate for the sophist, an incredible rage torments

him; for he feels that whatever discredit to Rome has arisen through me

has been caused by the fault of himself alone.

Suffer me, I pray you, most excellent Leo, both to plead my own cause,

and to accuse your true enemies. I believe it is known to you in what

way Cardinal Cajetan, your imprudent and unfortunate, nay unfaithful,

legate, acted towards me. When, on account of my reverence for your

name, I had placed myself and all that was mine in his hands, he did not

so act as to establish peace, which he could easily have established by

one little word, since I at that time promised to be silent and to make

an end of my case, if he would command my adversaries to do the same.

But that man of pride, not content with this agreement, began to justify

my adversaries, to give them free licence, and to order me to recant, a

thing which was certainly not in his commission. Thus indeed, when the

case was in the best position, it came through his vexatious tyranny

into a much worse one. Therefore whatever has followed upon this is the

fault not of Luther, but entirely of Cajetan, since he did not suffer me

to be silent and remain quiet, which at that time I was entreating for

with all my might. What more was it my duty to do?

Next came Charles Miltitz, also a nuncio from your Blessedness. He,

though he went up and down with much and varied exertion, and omitted

nothing which could tend to restore the position of the cause thrown

into confusion by the rashness and pride of Cajetan, had difficulty,

even with the help of that very illustrious prince the Elector

Frederick, in at last bringing about more than one familiar conference

with me. In these I again yielded to your great name, and was prepared

to keep silence, and to accept as my judge either the Archbishop of

Treves, or the Bishop of Naumburg; and thus it was done and concluded.

While this was being done with good hope of success, lo! that other and

greater enemy of yours, Eccius, rushed in with his Leipsic disputation,

which he had undertaken against Carlstadt, and, having taken up a

new question concerning the primacy of the Pope, turned his arms

unexpectedly against me, and completely overthrew the plan for peace.

Meanwhile Charles Miltitz was waiting, disputations were held, judges

were being chosen, but no decision was arrived at. And no wonder! for

by the falsehoods, pretences, and arts of Eccius the whole business was

brought into such thorough disorder, confusion, and festering soreness,

that, whichever way the sentence might lean, a greater conflagration was

sure to arise; for he was seeking, not after truth, but after his own

credit. In this case too I omitted nothing which it was right that I

should do.

I confess that on this occasion no small part of the corruptions of Rome

came to light; but, if there was any offence in this, it was the fault

of Eccius, who, in taking on him a burden beyond his strength, and in

furiously aiming at credit for himself, unveiled to the whole world the

disgrace of Rome.

Here is that enemy of yours, Leo, or rather of your Court; by his

example alone we may learn that an enemy is not more baneful than a

flatterer. For what did he bring about by his flattery, except evils

which no king could have brought about? At this day the name of the

Court of Rome stinks in the nostrils of the world, the papal authority

is growing weak, and its notorious ignorance is evil spoken of. We

should hear none of these things, if Eccius had not disturbed the plans

of Miltitz and myself for peace. He feels this clearly enough himself in

the indignation he shows, too late and in vain, against the publication

of my books. He ought to have reflected on this at the time when he was

all mad for renown, and was seeking in your cause nothing but his own

objects, and that with the greatest peril to you. The foolish man hoped

that, from fear of your name, I should yield and keep silence; for I

do not think he presumed on his talents and learning. Now, when he sees

that I am very confident and speak aloud, he repents too late of his

rashness, and sees--if indeed he does see it--that there is One in

heaven who resists the proud, and humbles the presumptuous.

Since then we were bringing about by this disputation nothing but the

greater confusion of the cause of Rome, Charles Miltitz for the third

time addressed the Fathers of the Order, assembled in chapter, and

sought their advice for the settlement of the case, as being now in a

most troubled and perilous state. Since, by the favour of God, there

was no hope of proceeding against me by force, some of the more noted of

their number were sent to me, and begged me at least to show respect to

your person and to vindicate in a humble letter both your innocence

and my own. They said that the affair was not as yet in a position of

extreme hopelessness, if Leo X., in his inborn kindliness, would put his

hand to it. On this I, who have always offered and wished for peace, in

order that I might devote myself to calmer and more useful pursuits, and

who for this very purpose have acted with so much spirit and vehemence,

in order to put down by the strength and impetuosity of my words, as

well as of my feelings, men whom I saw to be very far from equal to

myself--I, I say, not only gladly yielded, but even accepted it with joy

and gratitude, as the greatest kindness and benefit, if you should think

it right to satisfy my hopes.

Thus I come, most blessed Father, and in all abasement beseech you

to put to your hand, if it is possible, and impose a curb to those

flatterers who are enemies of peace, while they pretend peace. But there

is no reason, most blessed Father, why any one should assume that I am

to utter a recantation, unless he prefers to involve the case in

still greater confusion. Moreover, I cannot bear with laws for the

interpretation of the word of God, since the word of God, which teaches

liberty in all other things, ought not to be bound. Saving these two

things, there is nothing which I am not able, and most heartily willing,

to do or to suffer. I hate contention; I will challenge no one; in

return I wish not to be challenged; but, being challenged, I will not be

dumb in the cause of Christ my Master. For your Blessedness will be able

by one short and easy word to call these controversies before you and

suppress them, and to impose silence and peace on both sides--a word

which I have ever longed to hear.

Therefore, Leo, my Father, beware of listening to those sirens who

make you out to be not simply a man, but partly a god, so that you can

command and require whatever you will. It will not happen so, nor will

you prevail. You are the servant of servants, and more than any other

man, in a most pitiable and perilous position. Let not those men deceive

you who pretend that you are lord of the world; who will not allow any

one to be a Christian without your authority; who babble of your having

power over heaven, hell, and purgatory. These men are your enemies and

are seeking your soul to destroy it, as Isaiah says, "My people, they

that call thee blessed are themselves deceiving thee." They are in error

who raise you above councils and the universal Church; they are in error

who attribute to you alone the right of interpreting Scripture. All

these men are seeking to set up their own impieties in the Church under

your name, and alas! Satan has gained much through them in the time of

your predecessors.

In brief, trust not in any who exalt you, but in those who humiliate

you. For this is the judgment of God: "He hath cast down the mighty from

their seat, and hath exalted the humble." See how unlike Christ was to

His successors, though all will have it that they are His vicars. I fear

that in truth very many of them have been in too serious a sense His

vicars, for a vicar represents a prince who is absent. Now if a pontiff

rules while Christ is absent and does not dwell in his heart, what

else is he but a vicar of Christ? And then what is that Church but a

multitude without Christ? What indeed is such a vicar but antichrist

and an idol? How much more rightly did the Apostles speak, who call

themselves servants of a present Christ, not the vicars of an absent

one!

Perhaps I am shamelessly bold in seeming to teach so great a head, by

whom all men ought to be taught, and from whom, as those plagues of

yours boast, the thrones of judges receive their sentence; but I imitate

St. Bernard in his book concerning Considerations addressed to Eugenius,

a book which ought to be known by heart by every pontiff. I do this, not

from any desire to teach, but as a duty, from that simple and faithful

solicitude which teaches us to be anxious for all that is safe for

our neighbours, and does not allow considerations of worthiness or

unworthiness to be entertained, being intent only on the dangers or

advantage of others. For since I know that your Blessedness is driven

and tossed by the waves at Rome, so that the depths of the sea press

on you with infinite perils, and that you are labouring under such a

condition of misery that you need even the least help from any the least

brother, I do not seem to myself to be acting unsuitably if I forget

your majesty till I shall have fulfilled the office of charity. I will

not flatter in so serious and perilous a matter; and if in this you do

not see that I am your friend and most thoroughly your subject, there is

One to see and judge.

In fine, that I may not approach you empty-handed, blessed Father, I

bring with me this little treatise, published under your name, as a good

omen of the establishment of peace and of good hope. By this you may

perceive in what pursuits I should prefer and be able to occupy myself

to more profit, if I were allowed, or had been hitherto allowed, by your

impious flatterers. It is a small matter, if you look to its exterior,

but, unless I mistake, it is a summary of the Christian life put

together in small compass, if you apprehend its meaning. I, in my

poverty, have no other present to make you, nor do you need anything

else than to be enriched by a spiritual gift. I commend myself to your

Paternity and Blessedness, whom may the Lord Jesus preserve for ever.

Amen.

Wittenberg, 6th September, 1520.

CONCERNING CHRISTIAN LIBERTY

Christian faith has appeared to many an easy thing; nay, not a few even

reckon it among the social virtues, as it were; and this they do because

they have not made proof of it experimentally, and have never tasted of

what efficacy it is. For it is not possible for any man to write well

about it, or to understand well what is rightly written, who has not at

some time tasted of its spirit, under the pressure of tribulation; while

he who has tasted of it, even to a very small extent, can never

write, speak, think, or hear about it sufficiently. For it is a living

fountain, springing up into eternal life, as Christ calls it in John iv.

Now, though I cannot boast of my abundance, and though I know how poorly

I am furnished, yet I hope that, after having been vexed by various

temptations, I have attained some little drop of faith, and that I can

speak of this matter, if not with more elegance, certainly with more

solidity, than those literal and too subtle disputants who have hitherto

discoursed upon it without understanding their own words. That I may

open then an easier way for the ignorant--for these alone I am trying

to serve--I first lay down these two propositions, concerning spiritual

liberty and servitude:--

A Christian man is the most free lord of all, and subject to none; a

Christian man is the most dutiful servant of all, and subject to every

one.

Although these statements appear contradictory, yet, when they are found

to agree together, they will make excellently for my purpose. They are

both the statements of Paul himself, who says, "Though I be free from

all men, yet have I made myself servant unto all" (1 Cor. ix. 19), and

"Owe no man anything, but to love one another" (Rom. xiii. 8). Now love

is by its own nature dutiful and obedient to the beloved object. Thus

even Christ, though Lord of all things, was yet made of a woman; made

under the law; at once free and a servant; at once in the form of God

and in the form of a servant.

Let us examine the subject on a deeper and less simple principle. Man is

composed of a twofold nature, a spiritual and a bodily. As regards the

spiritual nature, which they name the soul, he is called the spiritual,

inward, new man; as regards the bodily nature, which they name the

flesh, he is called the fleshly, outward, old man. The Apostle speaks of

this: "Though our outward man perish, yet the inward man is renewed day

by day" (2 Cor. iv. 16). The result of this diversity is that in the

Scriptures opposing statements are made concerning the same man,

the fact being that in the same man these two men are opposed to one

another; the flesh lusting against the spirit, and the spirit against

the flesh (Gal. v. 17).

We first approach the subject of the inward man, that we may see by what

means a man becomes justified, free, and a true Christian; that is, a

spiritual, new, and inward man. It is certain that absolutely none

among outward things, under whatever name they may be reckoned, has any

influence in producing Christian righteousness or liberty, nor, on the

other hand, unrighteousness or slavery. This can be shown by an easy

argument.

What can it profit the soul that the body should be in good condition,

free, and full of life; that it should eat, drink, and act according to

its pleasure; when even the most impious slaves of every kind of vice

are prosperous in these matters? Again, what harm can ill-health,

bondage, hunger, thirst, or any other outward evil, do to the soul,

when even the most pious of men and the freest in the purity of their

conscience, are harassed by these things? Neither of these states of

things has to do with the liberty or the slavery of the soul.

And so it will profit nothing that the body should be adorned with

sacred vestments, or dwell in holy places, or be occupied in sacred

offices, or pray, fast, and abstain from certain meats, or do whatever

works can be done through the body and in the body. Something widely

different will be necessary for the justification and liberty of the

soul, since the things I have spoken of can be done by any impious

person, and only hypocrites are produced by devotion to these things. On

the other hand, it will not at all injure the soul that the body should

be clothed in profane raiment, should dwell in profane places, should

eat and drink in the ordinary fashion, should not pray aloud, and

should leave undone all the things above mentioned, which may be done by

hypocrites.

And, to cast everything aside, even speculation, meditations, and

whatever things can be performed by the exertions of the soul itself,

are of no profit. One thing, and one alone, is necessary for life,

justification, and Christian liberty; and that is the most holy word of

God, the Gospel of Christ, as He says, "I am the resurrection and the

life; he that believeth in Me shall not die eternally" (John xi. 25),

and also, "If the Son shall make you free, ye shall be free indeed"

(John viii. 36), and, "Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every

word that proceedeth out of the mouth of God" (Matt. iv. 4).

Let us therefore hold it for certain and firmly established that the

soul can do without everything except the word of God, without which

none at all of its wants are provided for. But, having the word, it is

rich and wants for nothing, since that is the word of life, of truth, of

light, of peace, of justification, of salvation, of joy, of liberty, of

wisdom, of virtue, of grace, of glory, and of every good thing. It is

on this account that the prophet in a whole Psalm (Psalm cxix.), and in

many other places, sighs for and calls upon the word of God with so many

groanings and words.

Again, there is no more cruel stroke of the wrath of God than when He

sends a famine of hearing His words (Amos viii. 11), just as there is

no greater favour from Him than the sending forth of His word, as it is

said, "He sent His word and healed them, and delivered them from their

destructions" (Psalm cvii. 20). Christ was sent for no other office than

that of the word; and the order of Apostles, that of bishops, and that

of the whole body of the clergy, have been called and instituted for no

object but the ministry of the word.

But you will ask, What is this word, and by what means is it to be used,

since there are so many words of God? I answer, The Apostle Paul (Rom.

i.) explains what it is, namely the Gospel of God, concerning His Son,

incarnate, suffering, risen, and glorified, through the Spirit, the

Sanctifier. To preach Christ is to feed the soul, to justify it, to set

it free, and to save it, if it believes the preaching. For faith alone

and the efficacious use of the word of God, bring salvation. "If thou

shalt confess with thy mouth the Lord Jesus, and shalt believe in thine

heart that God hath raised Him from the dead, thou shalt be saved" (Rom.

x. 9); and again, "Christ is the end of the law for righteousness to

every one that believeth" (Rom. x. 4), and "The just shall live by

faith" (Rom. i. 17). For the word of God cannot be received and honoured

by any works, but by faith alone. Hence it is clear that as the soul

needs the word alone for life and justification, so it is justified by

faith alone, and not by any works. For if it could be justified by any

other means, it would have no need of the word, nor consequently of

faith.

But this faith cannot consist at all with works; that is, if you imagine

that you can be justified by those works, whatever they are, along with

it. For this would be to halt between two opinions, to worship Baal, and

to kiss the hand to him, which is a very great iniquity, as Job says.

Therefore, when you begin to believe, you learn at the same time that

all that is in you is utterly guilty, sinful, and damnable, according to

that saying, "All have sinned, and come short of the glory of God" (Rom.

iii. 23), and also: "There is none righteous, no, not one; they are all

gone out of the way; they are together become unprofitable: there is

none that doeth good, no, not one" (Rom. iii. 10-12). When you have

learnt this, you will know that Christ is necessary for you, since He

has suffered and risen again for you, that, believing on Him, you might

by this faith become another man, all your sins being remitted, and you

being justified by the merits of another, namely of Christ alone.

Since then this faith can reign only in the inward man, as it is said,

"With the heart man believeth unto righteousness" (Rom. x. 10); and

since it alone justifies, it is evident that by no outward work or

labour can the inward man be at all justified, made free, and saved; and

that no works whatever have any relation to him. And so, on the other

hand, it is solely by impiety and incredulity of heart that he becomes

guilty and a slave of sin, deserving condemnation, not by any outward

sin or work. Therefore the first care of every Christian ought to be to

lay aside all reliance on works, and strengthen his faith alone more

and more, and by it grow in the knowledge, not of works, but of Christ

Jesus, who has suffered and risen again for him, as Peter teaches

(1 Peter v.) when he makes no other work to be a Christian one. Thus

Christ, when the Jews asked Him what they should do that they might work

the works of God, rejected the multitude of works, with which He saw

that they were puffed up, and commanded them one thing only, saying,

"This is the work of God: that ye believe on Him whom He hath sent, for

Him hath God the Father sealed" (John vi. 27, 29).

Hence a right faith in Christ is an incomparable treasure, carrying with

it universal salvation and preserving from all evil, as it is said, "He

that believeth and is baptised shall be saved; but he that believeth

not shall be damned" (Mark xvi. 16). Isaiah, looking to this treasure,

predicted, "The consumption decreed shall overflow with righteousness.

For the Lord God of hosts shall make a consumption, even determined

(verbum abbreviatum et consummans), in the midst of the land" (Isa.

x. 22, 23). As if he said, "Faith, which is the brief and complete

fulfilling of the law, will fill those who believe with such

righteousness that they will need nothing else for justification." Thus,

too, Paul says, "For with the heart man believeth unto righteousness"

(Rom. x. 10).

But you ask how it can be the fact that faith alone justifies, and

affords without works so great a treasure of good things, when so many

works, ceremonies, and laws are prescribed to us in the Scriptures?

I answer, Before all things bear in mind what I have said: that faith

alone without works justifies, sets free, and saves, as I shall show

more clearly below.

Meanwhile it is to be noted that the whole Scripture of God is divided

into two parts: precepts and promises. The precepts certainly teach us

what is good, but what they teach is not forthwith done. For they show

us what we ought to do, but do not give us the power to do it. They

were ordained, however, for the purpose of showing man to himself, that

through them he may learn his own impotence for good and may despair of

his own strength. For this reason they are called the Old Testament, and

are so.

For example, "Thou shalt not covet," is a precept by which we are all

convicted of sin, since no man can help coveting, whatever efforts to

the contrary he may make. In order therefore that he may fulfil the

precept, and not covet, he is constrained to despair of himself and

to seek elsewhere and through another the help which he cannot find in

himself; as it is said, "O Israel, thou hast destroyed thyself; but in

Me is thine help" (Hosea xiii. 9). Now what is done by this one precept

is done by all; for all are equally impossible of fulfilment by us.

Now when a man has through the precepts been taught his own impotence,

and become anxious by what means he may satisfy the law--for the

law must be satisfied, so that no jot or tittle of it may pass away,

otherwise he must be hopelessly condemned--then, being truly humbled and

brought to nothing in his own eyes, he finds in himself no resource for

justification and salvation.

Then comes in that other part of Scripture, the promises of God, which

declare the glory of God, and say, "If you wish to fulfil the law, and,

as the law requires, not to covet, lo! believe in Christ, in whom are

promised to you grace, justification, peace, and liberty." All these

things you shall have, if you believe, and shall be without them if you

do not believe. For what is impossible for you by all the works of the

law, which are many and yet useless, you shall fulfil in an easy and

summary way through faith, because God the Father has made everything to

depend on faith, so that whosoever has it has all things, and he who has

it not has nothing. "For God hath concluded them all in unbelief, that

He might have mercy upon all" (Rom. xi. 32). Thus the promises of God

give that which the precepts exact, and fulfil what the law commands;

so that all is of God alone, both the precepts and their fulfilment. He

alone commands; He alone also fulfils. Hence the promises of God belong

to the New Testament; nay, are the New Testament.

Now, since these promises of God are words of holiness, truth,

righteousness, liberty, and peace, and are full of universal goodness,

the soul, which cleaves to them with a firm faith, is so united to them,

nay, thoroughly absorbed by them, that it not only partakes in, but

is penetrated and saturated by, all their virtues. For if the touch of

Christ was healing, how much more does that most tender spiritual touch,

nay, absorption of the word, communicate to the soul all that belongs to

the word! In this way therefore the soul, through faith alone, without

works, is from the word of God justified, sanctified, endued with truth,

peace, and liberty, and filled full with every good thing, and is truly

made the child of God, as it is said, "To them gave He power to become

the sons of God, even to them that believe on His name" (John i. 12).

From all this it is easy to understand why faith has such great power,

and why no good works, nor even all good works put together, can compare

with it, since no work can cleave to the word of God or be in the soul.

Faith alone and the word reign in it; and such as is the word, such is

the soul made by it, just as iron exposed to fire glows like fire, on

account of its union with the fire. It is clear then that to a Christian

man his faith suffices for everything, and that he has no need of works

for justification. But if he has no need of works, neither has he need

of the law; and if he has no need of the law, he is certainly free from

the law, and the saying is true, "The law is not made for a righteous

man" (1 Tim. i. 9). This is that Christian liberty, our faith, the

effect of which is, not that we should be careless or lead a bad life,

but that no one should need the law or works for justification and

salvation.

Let us consider this as the first virtue of faith; and let us look also

to the second. This also is an office of faith: that it honours with the

utmost veneration and the highest reputation Him in whom it believes,

inasmuch as it holds Him to be truthful and worthy of belief. For there

is no honour like that reputation of truth and righteousness with which

we honour Him in whom we believe. What higher credit can we attribute

to any one than truth and righteousness, and absolute goodness? On

the other hand, it is the greatest insult to brand any one with the

reputation of falsehood and unrighteousness, or to suspect him of these,

as we do when we disbelieve him.

Thus the soul, in firmly believing the promises of God, holds Him to be

true and righteous; and it can attribute to God no higher glory than

the credit of being so. The highest worship of God is to ascribe to Him

truth, righteousness, and whatever qualities we must ascribe to one in

whom we believe. In doing this the soul shows itself prepared to do His

whole will; in doing this it hallows His name, and gives itself up to

be dealt with as it may please God. For it cleaves to His promises, and

never doubts that He is true, just, and wise, and will do, dispose, and

provide for all things in the best way. Is not such a soul, in this its

faith, most obedient to God in all things? What commandment does there

remain which has not been amply fulfilled by such an obedience? What

fulfilment can be more full than universal obedience? Now this is not

accomplished by works, but by faith alone.

On the other hand, what greater rebellion, impiety, or insult to God

can there be, than not to believe His promises? What else is this, than

either to make God a liar, or to doubt His truth--that is, to attribute

truth to ourselves, but to God falsehood and levity? In doing this,

is not a man denying God and setting himself up as an idol in his own

heart? What then can works, done in such a state of impiety, profit us,

were they even angelic or apostolic works? Rightly hath God shut up

all, not in wrath nor in lust, but in unbelief, in order that those

who pretend that they are fulfilling the law by works of purity and

benevolence (which are social and human virtues) may not presume

that they will therefore be saved, but, being included in the sin of

unbelief, may either seek mercy, or be justly condemned.

But when God sees that truth is ascribed to Him, and that in the faith

of our hearts He is honoured with all the honour of which He is worthy,

then in return He honours us on account of that faith, attributing to

us truth and righteousness. For faith does truth and righteousness in

rendering to God what is His; and therefore in return God gives glory

to our righteousness. It is true and righteous that God is true and

righteous; and to confess this and ascribe these attributes to Him, this

it is to be true and righteous. Thus He says, "Them that honour Me I

will honour, and they that despise Me shall be lightly esteemed" (1 Sam.

ii. 30). And so Paul says that Abraham's faith was imputed to him for

righteousness, because by it he gave glory to God; and that to us

also, for the same reason, it shall be imputed for righteousness, if we

believe (Rom. iv.).

The third incomparable grace of faith is this: that it unites the soul

to Christ, as the wife to the husband, by which mystery, as the Apostle

teaches, Christ and the soul are made one flesh. Now if they are one

flesh, and if a true marriage--nay, by far the most perfect of all

marriages--is accomplished between them (for human marriages are but

feeble types of this one great marriage), then it follows that all they

have becomes theirs in common, as well good things as evil things; so

that whatsoever Christ possesses, that the believing soul may take to

itself and boast of as its own, and whatever belongs to the soul, that

Christ claims as His.

If we compare these possessions, we shall see how inestimable is the

gain. Christ is full of grace, life, and salvation; the soul is full of

sin, death, and condemnation. Let faith step in, and then sin, death,

and hell will belong to Christ, and grace, life, and salvation to the

soul. For, if He is a Husband, He must needs take to Himself that which

is His wife's, and at the same time, impart to His wife that which is

His. For, in giving her His own body and Himself, how can He but give

her all that is His? And, in taking to Himself the body of His wife, how

can He but take to Himself all that is hers?

In this is displayed the delightful sight, not only of communion, but of

a prosperous warfare, of victory, salvation, and redemption. For, since

Christ is God and man, and is such a Person as neither has sinned, nor

dies, nor is condemned, nay, cannot sin, die, or be condemned, and since

His righteousness, life, and salvation are invincible, eternal, and

almighty,--when I say, such a Person, by the wedding-ring of faith,

takes a share in the sins, death, and hell of His wife, nay, makes them

His own, and deals with them no otherwise than as if they were His, and

as if He Himself had sinned; and when He suffers, dies, and descends to

hell, that He may overcome all things, and since sin, death, and

hell cannot swallow Him up, they must needs be swallowed up by Him in

stupendous conflict. For His righteousness rises above the sins of all

men; His life is more powerful than all death; His salvation is more

unconquerable than all hell.

Thus the believing soul, by the pledge of its faith in Christ, becomes

free from all sin, fearless of death, safe from hell, and endowed with

the eternal righteousness, life, and salvation of its Husband Christ.

Thus He presents to Himself a glorious bride, without spot or wrinkle,

cleansing her with the washing of water by the word; that is, by faith

in the word of life, righteousness, and salvation. Thus He betrothes her

unto Himself "in faithfulness, in righteousness, and in judgment, and in

loving-kindness, and in mercies" (Hosea ii. 19, 20).

Who then can value highly enough these royal nuptials? Who can

comprehend the riches of the glory of this grace? Christ, that rich and

pious Husband, takes as a wife a needy and impious harlot, redeeming

her from all her evils and supplying her with all His good things. It

is impossible now that her sins should destroy her, since they have

been laid upon Christ and swallowed up in Him, and since she has in her

Husband Christ a righteousness which she may claim as her own, and which

she can set up with confidence against all her sins, against death and

hell, saying, "If I have sinned, my Christ, in whom I believe, has not

sinned; all mine is His, and all His is mine," as it is written, "My

beloved is mine, and I am His" (Cant. ii. 16). This is what Paul says:

"Thanks be to God, which giveth us the victory through our Lord Jesus

Christ," victory over sin and death, as he says, "The sting of death is

sin, and the strength of sin is the law" (1 Cor. xv. 56, 57).

From all this you will again understand why so much importance is

attributed to faith, so that it alone can fulfil the law and justify

without any works. For you see that the First Commandment, which says,

"Thou shalt worship one God only," is fulfilled by faith alone. If you

were nothing but good works from the soles of your feet to the crown of

your head, you would not be worshipping God, nor fulfilling the First

Commandment, since it is impossible to worship God without ascribing to

Him the glory of truth and of universal goodness, as it ought in truth

to be ascribed. Now this is not done by works, but only by faith of

heart. It is not by working, but by believing, that we glorify God, and

confess Him to be true. On this ground faith alone is the righteousness

of a Christian man, and the fulfilling of all the commandments. For to

him who fulfils the first the task of fulfilling all the rest is easy.

Works, since they are irrational things, cannot glorify God, although

they may be done to the glory of God, if faith be present. But at

present we are inquiring, not into the quality of the works done, but

into him who does them, who glorifies God, and brings forth good

works. This is faith of heart, the head and the substance of all our

righteousness. Hence that is a blind and perilous doctrine which teaches

that the commandments are fulfilled by works. The commandments must have

been fulfilled previous to any good works, and good works follow their

fulfillment, as we shall see.

But, that we may have a wider view of that grace which our inner man

has in Christ, we must know that in the Old Testament God sanctified to

Himself every first-born male. The birthright was of great value, giving

a superiority over the rest by the double honour of priesthood and

kingship. For the first-born brother was priest and lord of all the

rest.

Under this figure was foreshown Christ, the true and only First-born of

God the Father and of the Virgin Mary, and a true King and Priest, not

in a fleshly and earthly sense. For His kingdom is not of this world; it

is in heavenly and spiritual things that He reigns and acts as Priest;

and these are righteousness, truth, wisdom, peace, salvation, etc.

Not but that all things, even those of earth and hell, are subject to

Him--for otherwise how could He defend and save us from them?--but it is

not in these, nor by these, that His kingdom stands.

So, too, His priesthood does not consist in the outward display of

vestments and gestures, as did the human priesthood of Aaron and our

ecclesiastical priesthood at this day, but in spiritual things, wherein,

in His invisible office, He intercedes for us with God in heaven, and

there offers Himself, and performs all the duties of a priest, as Paul

describes Him to the Hebrews under the figure of Melchizedek. Nor does

He only pray and intercede for us; He also teaches us inwardly in the

spirit with the living teachings of His Spirit. Now these are the two

special offices of a priest, as is figured to us in the case of fleshly

priests by visible prayers and sermons.

As Christ by His birthright has obtained these two dignities, so He

imparts and communicates them to every believer in Him, under that law

of matrimony of which we have spoken above, by which all that is the

husband's is also the wife's. Hence all we who believe on Christ are

kings and priests in Christ, as it is said, "Ye are a chosen generation,

a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a peculiar people, that ye should

show forth the praises of Him who hath called you out of darkness into

His marvellous light" (1 Peter ii. 9).

These two things stand thus. First, as regards kingship, every Christian

is by faith so exalted above all things that, in spiritual power, he is

completely lord of all things, so that nothing whatever can do him

any hurt; yea, all things are subject to him, and are compelled to be

subservient to his salvation. Thus Paul says, "All things work together

for good to them who are the called" (Rom. viii. 28), and also, "Whether

life, or death, or things present, or things to come, all are yours; and

ye are Christ's" (1 Cor. iii. 22, 23).

Not that in the sense of corporeal power any one among Christians has

been appointed to possess and rule all things, according to the mad and

senseless idea of certain ecclesiastics. That is the office of kings,

princes, and men upon earth. In the experience of life we see that we

are subjected to all things, and suffer many things, even death.

Yea, the more of a Christian any man is, to so many the more evils,

sufferings, and deaths is he subject, as we see in the first place in

Christ the First-born, and in all His holy brethren.

This is a spiritual power, which rules in the midst of enemies, and is

powerful in the midst of distresses. And this is nothing else than that

strength is made perfect in my weakness, and that I can turn all things

to the profit of my salvation; so that even the cross and death are

compelled to serve me and to work together for my salvation. This is

a lofty and eminent dignity, a true and almighty dominion, a spiritual

empire, in which there is nothing so good, nothing so bad, as not to

work together for my good, if only I believe. And yet there is nothing

of which I have need--for faith alone suffices for my salvation--unless

that in it faith may exercise the power and empire of its liberty. This

is the inestimable power and liberty of Christians.

Nor are we only kings and the freest of all men, but also priests for

ever, a dignity far higher than kingship, because by that priesthood we

are worthy to appear before God, to pray for others, and to teach one

another mutually the things which are of God. For these are the duties

of priests, and they cannot possibly be permitted to any unbeliever.

Christ has obtained for us this favour, if we believe in Him: that just

as we are His brethren and co-heirs and fellow-kings with Him, so we

should be also fellow-priests with Him, and venture with confidence,

through the spirit of faith, to come into the presence of God, and cry,

"Abba, Father!" and to pray for one another, and to do all things

which we see done and figured in the visible and corporeal office of

priesthood. But to an unbelieving person nothing renders service or work

for good. He himself is in servitude to all things, and all things turn

out for evil to him, because he uses all things in an impious way for

his own advantage, and not for the glory of God. And thus he is not a

priest, but a profane person, whose prayers are turned into sin, nor

does he ever appear in the presence of God, because God does not hear

sinners.

Who then can comprehend the loftiness of that Christian dignity which,

by its royal power, rules over all things, even over death, life, and

sin, and, by its priestly glory, is all-powerful with God, since God

does what He Himself seeks and wishes, as it is written, "He will fulfil

the desire of them that fear Him; He also will hear their cry, and will

save them"? (Psalm cxlv. 19). This glory certainly cannot be attained by

any works, but by faith only.

From these considerations any one may clearly see how a Christian

man is free from all things; so that he needs no works in order to be

justified and saved, but receives these gifts in abundance from faith

alone. Nay, were he so foolish as to pretend to be justified, set

free, saved, and made a Christian, by means of any good work, he would

immediately lose faith, with all its benefits. Such folly is prettily

represented in the fable where a dog, running along in the water

and carrying in his mouth a real piece of meat, is deceived by the

reflection of the meat in the water, and, in trying with open mouth to

seize it, loses the meat and its image at the same time.

Here you will ask, "If all who are in the Church are priests, by what

character are those whom we now call priests to be distinguished from

the laity?" I reply, By the use of these words, "priest," "clergy,"

"spiritual person," "ecclesiastic," an injustice has been done, since

they have been transferred from the remaining body of Christians to

those few who are now, by hurtful custom, called ecclesiastics. For Holy

Scripture makes no distinction between them, except that those who are

now boastfully called popes, bishops, and lords, it calls ministers,

servants, and stewards, who are to serve the rest in the ministry of the

word, for teaching the faith of Christ and the liberty of believers. For

though it is true that we are all equally priests, yet we cannot, nor,

if we could, ought we all to, minister and teach publicly. Thus Paul

says, "Let a man so account of us as of the ministers of Christ and

stewards of the mysteries of God" (1 Cor. iv. 1).

This bad system has now issued in such a pompous display of power and

such a terrible tyranny that no earthly government can be compared to

it, as if the laity were something else than Christians. Through this

perversion of things it has happened that the knowledge of Christian

grace, of faith, of liberty, and altogether of Christ, has utterly

perished, and has been succeeded by an intolerable bondage to human

works and laws; and, according to the Lamentations of Jeremiah, we have

become the slaves of the vilest men on earth, who abuse our misery to

all the disgraceful and ignominious purposes of their own will.

Returning to the subject which we had begun, I think it is made clear by

these considerations that it is not sufficient, nor a Christian course,

to preach the works, life, and words of Christ in a historic manner, as

facts which it suffices to know as an example how to frame our life, as

do those who are now held the best preachers, and much less so to keep

silence altogether on these things and to teach in their stead the laws

of men and the decrees of the Fathers. There are now not a few persons

who preach and read about Christ with the object of moving the human

affections to sympathise with Christ, to indignation against the Jews,

and other childish and womanish absurdities of that kind.

Now preaching ought to have the object of promoting faith in Him, so

that He may not only be Christ, but a Christ for you and for me, and

that what is said of Him, and what He is called, may work in us. And

this faith is produced and is maintained by preaching why Christ came,

what He has brought us and given to us, and to what profit and advantage

He is to be received. This is done when the Christian liberty which we

have from Christ Himself is rightly taught, and we are shown in what

manner all we Christians are kings and priests, and how we are lords of

all things, and may be confident that whatever we do in the presence of

God is pleasing and acceptable to Him.

Whose heart would not rejoice in its inmost core at hearing these

things? Whose heart, on receiving so great a consolation, would not

become sweet with the love of Christ, a love to which it can never

attain by any laws or works? Who can injure such a heart, or make it

afraid? If the consciousness of sin or the horror of death rush in upon

it, it is prepared to hope in the Lord, and is fearless of such evils,

and undisturbed, until it shall look down upon its enemies. For it

believes that the righteousness of Christ is its own, and that its sin

is no longer its own, but that of Christ; but, on account of its faith

in Christ, all its sin must needs be swallowed up from before the face

of the righteousness of Christ, as I have said above. It learns, too,

with the Apostle, to scoff at death and sin, and to say, "O death, where

is thy sting? O grave, where is thy victory? The sting of death is sin,

and the strength of sin is the law. But thanks be to God, which giveth

us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ" (1 Cor. xv. 55-57). For

death is swallowed up in victory, not only the victory of Christ, but

ours also, since by faith it becomes ours, and in it we too conquer.

Let it suffice to say this concerning the inner man and its liberty, and

concerning that righteousness of faith which needs neither laws nor

good works; nay, they are even hurtful to it, if any one pretends to be

justified by them.

And now let us turn to the other part: to the outward man. Here we shall

give an answer to all those who, taking offence at the word of faith and

at what I have asserted, say, "If faith does everything, and by itself

suffices for justification, why then are good works commanded? Are we

then to take our ease and do no works, content with faith?" Not so,

impious men, I reply; not so. That would indeed really be the case, if

we were thoroughly and completely inner and spiritual persons; but that

will not happen until the last day, when the dead shall be raised. As

long as we live in the flesh, we are but beginning and making advances

in that which shall be completed in a future life. On this account the

Apostle calls that which we have in this life the firstfruits of the

Spirit (Rom. viii. 23). In future we shall have the tenths, and the

fullness of the Spirit. To this part belongs the fact I have stated

before: that the Christian is the servant of all and subject to all. For

in that part in which he is free he does no works, but in that in which

he is a servant he does all works. Let us see on what principle this is

so.

Although, as I have said, inwardly, and according to the spirit, a man

is amply enough justified by faith, having all that he requires to have,

except that this very faith and abundance ought to increase from day

to day, even till the future life, still he remains in this mortal life

upon earth, in which it is necessary that he should rule his own body

and have intercourse with men. Here then works begin; here he must not

take his ease; here he must give heed to exercise his body by fastings,

watchings, labour, and other regular discipline, so that it may be

subdued to the spirit, and obey and conform itself to the inner man and

faith, and not rebel against them nor hinder them, as is its nature to

do if it is not kept under. For the inner man, being conformed to God

and created after the image of God through faith, rejoices and delights

itself in Christ, in whom such blessings have been conferred on it, and

hence has only this task before it: to serve God with joy and for nought

in free love.

But in doing this he comes into collision with that contrary will in

his own flesh, which is striving to serve the world and to seek its own

gratification. This the spirit of faith cannot and will not bear, but

applies itself with cheerfulness and zeal to keep it down and restrain

it, as Paul says, "I delight in the law of God after the inward man; but

I see another law in my members, warring against the law of my mind and

bringing me into captivity to the law of sin" (Rom. vii. 22, 23), and

again, "I keep under my body, and bring it unto subjection, lest that

by any means, when I have preached to others, I myself should be a

castaway" (1 Cor. ix. 27), and "They that are Christ's have crucified

the flesh, with the affections and lusts" (Gal. v. 24).

These works, however, must not be done with any notion that by them a

man can be justified before God--for faith, which alone is righteousness

before God, will not bear with this false notion--but solely with this

purpose: that the body may be brought into subjection, and be purified

from its evil lusts, so that our eyes may be turned only to purging away

those lusts. For when the soul has been cleansed by faith and made to

love God, it would have all things to be cleansed in like manner, and

especially its own body, so that all things might unite with it in the

love and praise of God. Thus it comes that, from the requirements of his

own body, a man cannot take his ease, but is compelled on its account

to do many good works, that he may bring it into subjection. Yet these

works are not the means of his justification before God; he does them

out of disinterested love to the service of God; looking to no other

end than to do what is well-pleasing to Him whom he desires to obey most

dutifully in all things.

On this principle every man may easily instruct himself in what measure,

and with what distinctions, he ought to chasten his own body. He will

fast, watch, and labour, just as much as he sees to suffice for keeping

down the wantonness and concupiscence of the body. But those who pretend

to be justified by works are looking, not to the mortification of their

lusts, but only to the works themselves; thinking that, if they can

accomplish as many works and as great ones as possible, all is well with

them, and they are justified. Sometimes they even injure their brain,

and extinguish nature, or at least make it useless. This is enormous

folly, and ignorance of Christian life and faith, when a man seeks,

without faith, to be justified and saved by works.

To make what we have said more easily understood, let us set it forth

under a figure. The works of a Christian man, who is justified and saved

by his faith out of the pure and unbought mercy of God, ought to be

regarded in the same light as would have been those of Adam and Eve in

paradise and of all their posterity if they had not sinned. Of them it

is said, "The Lord God took the man and put him into the garden of Eden

to dress it and to keep it" (Gen. ii. 15). Now Adam had been created by

God just and righteous, so that he could not have needed to be justified

and made righteous by keeping the garden and working in it; but, that

he might not be unemployed, God gave him the business of keeping and

cultivating paradise. These would have indeed been works of perfect

freedom, being done for no object but that of pleasing God, and not in

order to obtain justification, which he already had to the full, and

which would have been innate in us all.

So it is with the works of a believer. Being by his faith replaced

afresh in paradise and created anew, he does not need works for his

justification, but that he may not be idle, but may exercise his own

body and preserve it. His works are to be done freely, with the sole

object of pleasing God. Only we are not yet fully created anew in

perfect faith and love; these require to be increased, not, however,

through works, but through themselves.

A bishop, when he consecrates a church, confirms children, or performs

any other duty of his office, is not consecrated as bishop by these

works; nay, unless he had been previously consecrated as bishop, not one

of those works would have any validity; they would be foolish, childish,

and ridiculous. Thus a Christian, being consecrated by his faith, does

good works; but he is not by these works made a more sacred person, or

more a Christian. That is the effect of faith alone; nay, unless he were

previously a believer and a Christian, none of his works would have any

value at all; they would really be impious and damnable sins.

True, then, are these two sayings: "Good works do not make a good man,

but a good man does good works"; "Bad works do not make a bad man, but a

bad man does bad works." Thus it is always necessary that the substance

or person should be good before any good works can be done, and that

good works should follow and proceed from a good person. As Christ says,

"A good tree cannot bring forth evil fruit, neither can a corrupt tree

bring forth good fruit" (Matt. vii. 18). Now it is clear that the fruit

does not bear the tree, nor does the tree grow on the fruit; but, on the

contrary, the trees bear the fruit, and the fruit grows on the trees.

As then trees must exist before their fruit, and as the fruit does not

make the tree either good or bad, but on the contrary, a tree of either

kind produces fruit of the same kind, so must first the person of the

man be good or bad before he can do either a good or a bad work; and his

works do not make him bad or good, but he himself makes his works either

bad or good.

We may see the same thing in all handicrafts. A bad or good house does

not make a bad or good builder, but a good or bad builder makes a good

or bad house. And in general no work makes the workman such as it is

itself; but the workman makes the work such as he is himself. Such

is the case, too, with the works of men. Such as the man himself is,

whether in faith or in unbelief, such is his work: good if it be done

in faith; bad if in unbelief. But the converse is not true that, such as

the work is, such the man becomes in faith or in unbelief. For as works

do not make a believing man, so neither do they make a justified man;

but faith, as it makes a man a believer and justified, so also it makes

his works good.

Since then works justify no man, but a man must be justified before he

can do any good work, it is most evident that it is faith alone which,

by the mere mercy of God through Christ, and by means of His word,

can worthily and sufficiently justify and save the person; and that a

Christian man needs no work, no law, for his salvation; for by faith he

is free from all law, and in perfect freedom does gratuitously all that

he does, seeking nothing either of profit or of salvation--since by

the grace of God he is already saved and rich in all things through his

faith--but solely that which is well-pleasing to God.

So, too, no good work can profit an unbeliever to justification and

salvation; and, on the other hand, no evil work makes him an evil and

condemned person, but that unbelief, which makes the person and the tree

bad, makes his works evil and condemned. Wherefore, when any man is made

good or bad, this does not arise from his works, but from his faith or

unbelief, as the wise man says, "The beginning of sin is to fall away

from God"; that is, not to believe. Paul says, "He that cometh to God

must believe" (Heb. xi. 6); and Christ says the same thing: "Either make

the tree good and his fruit good; or else make the tree corrupt, and

his fruit corrupt" (Matt. xii. 33),--as much as to say, He who wishes to

have good fruit will begin with the tree, and plant a good one; even

so he who wishes to do good works must begin, not by working, but by

believing, since it is this which makes the person good. For nothing

makes the person good but faith, nor bad but unbelief.

It is certainly true that, in the sight of men, a man becomes good or

evil by his works; but here "becoming" means that it is thus shown and

recognised who is good or evil, as Christ says, "By their fruits ye

shall know them" (Matt. vii. 20). But all this stops at appearances and

externals; and in this matter very many deceive themselves, when they

presume to write and teach that we are to be justified by good works,

and meanwhile make no mention even of faith, walking in their own ways,

ever deceived and deceiving, going from bad to worse, blind leaders of

the blind, wearying themselves with many works, and yet never attaining

to true righteousness, of whom Paul says, "Having a form of godliness,

but denying the power thereof, ever learning and never able to come to

the knowledge of the truth" (2 Tim. iii. 5, 7).

He then who does not wish to go astray, with these blind ones, must look

further than to the works of the law or the doctrine of works; nay,

must turn away his sight from works, and look to the person, and to the

manner in which it may be justified. Now it is justified and saved, not

by works or laws, but by the word of God--that is, by the promise of His

grace--so that the glory may be to the Divine majesty, which has saved

us who believe, not by works of righteousness which we have done, but

according to His mercy, by the word of His grace.

From all this it is easy to perceive on what principle good works are

to be cast aside or embraced, and by what rule all teachings put forth

concerning works are to be understood. For if works are brought forward

as grounds of justification, and are done under the false persuasion

that we can pretend to be justified by them, they lay on us the yoke

of necessity, and extinguish liberty along with faith, and by this very

addition to their use they become no longer good, but really worthy of

condemnation. For such works are not free, but blaspheme the grace of

God, to which alone it belongs to justify and save through faith. Works

cannot accomplish this, and yet, with impious presumption, through

our folly, they take it on themselves to do so; and thus break in with

violence upon the office and glory of grace.

We do not then reject good works; nay, we embrace them and teach them in

the highest degree. It is not on their own account that we condemn them,

but on account of this impious addition to them and the perverse notion

of seeking justification by them. These things cause them to be only

good in outward show, but in reality not good, since by them men are

deceived and deceive others, like ravening wolves in sheep's clothing.

Now this leviathan, this perverted notion about works, is invincible

when sincere faith is wanting. For those sanctified doers of works

cannot but hold it till faith, which destroys it, comes and reigns in

the heart. Nature cannot expel it by her own power; nay, cannot even see

it for what it is, but considers it as a most holy will. And when

custom steps in besides, and strengthens this pravity of nature, as has

happened by means of impious teachers, then the evil is incurable, and

leads astray multitudes to irreparable ruin. Therefore, though it is

good to preach and write about penitence, confession, and satisfaction,

yet if we stop there, and do not go on to teach faith, such teaching

is without doubt deceitful and devilish. For Christ, speaking by His

servant John, not only said, "Repent ye," but added, "for the kingdom of

heaven is at hand" (Matt. iii. 2).

For not one word of God only, but both, should be preached; new and old

things should be brought out of the treasury, as well the voice of

the law as the word of grace. The voice of the law should be brought

forward, that men may be terrified and brought to a knowledge of their

sins, and thence be converted to penitence and to a better manner of

life. But we must not stop here; that would be to wound only and not to

bind up, to strike and not to heal, to kill and not to make alive, to

bring down to hell and not to bring back, to humble and not to exalt.

Therefore the word of grace and of the promised remission of sin must

also be preached, in order to teach and set up faith, since without

that word contrition, penitence, and all other duties, are performed and

taught in vain.

There still remain, it is true, preachers of repentance and grace, but

they do not explain the law and the promises of God to such an end, and

in such a spirit, that men may learn whence repentance and grace are to

come. For repentance comes from the law of God, but faith or grace

from the promises of God, as it is said, "Faith cometh by hearing, and

hearing by the word of God" (Rom. x. 17), whence it comes that a man,

when humbled and brought to the knowledge of himself by the threatenings

and terrors of the law, is consoled and raised up by faith in the Divine

promise. Thus "weeping may endure for a night, but joy cometh in the

morning" (Psalm xxx. 5). Thus much we say concerning works in general,

and also concerning those which the Christian practises with regard to

his own body.

Lastly, we will speak also of those works which he performs towards his

neighbour. For man does not live for himself alone in this mortal body,

in order to work on its account, but also for all men on earth; nay, he

lives only for others, and not for himself. For it is to this end that

he brings his own body into subjection, that he may be able to serve

others more sincerely and more freely, as Paul says, "None of us liveth

to himself, and no man dieth to himself. For whether we live, we live

unto the Lord; and whether we die, we die unto the Lord" (Rom. xiv. 7,

8). Thus it is impossible that he should take his ease in this life, and

not work for the good of his neighbours, since he must needs speak, act,

and converse among men, just as Christ was made in the likeness of men

and found in fashion as a man, and had His conversation among men.

Yet a Christian has need of none of these things for justification and

salvation, but in all his works he ought to entertain this view and look

only to this object--that he may serve and be useful to others in all

that he does; having nothing before his eyes but the necessities and the

advantage of his neighbour. Thus the Apostle commands us to work with

our own hands, that we may have to give to those that need. He might

have said, that we may support ourselves; but he tells us to give to

those that need. It is the part of a Christian to take care of his own

body for the very purpose that, by its soundness and well-being, he may

be enabled to labour, and to acquire and preserve property, for the aid

of those who are in want, that thus the stronger member may serve the

weaker member, and we may be children of God, thoughtful and busy one

for another, bearing one another's burdens, and so fulfilling the law of

Christ.

Here is the truly Christian life, here is faith really working by love,

when a man applies himself with joy and love to the works of that freest

servitude in which he serves others voluntarily and for nought, himself

abundantly satisfied in the fulness and riches of his own faith.

Thus, when Paul had taught the Philippians how they had been made

rich by that faith in Christ in which they had obtained all things,

he teaches them further in these words: "If there be therefore any

consolation in Christ, if any comfort of love, if any fellowship of

the Spirit, if any bowels and mercies, fulfil ye my joy, that ye be

like-minded, having the same love, being of one accord, of one mind. Let

nothing be done through strife or vainglory; but in lowliness of mind

let each esteem other better than themselves. Look not every man on his

own things, but every man also on the things of others" (Phil. ii. 1-4).

In this we see clearly that the Apostle lays down this rule for a

Christian life: that all our works should be directed to the advantage

of others, since every Christian has such abundance through his faith

that all his other works and his whole life remain over and above

wherewith to serve and benefit his neighbour of spontaneous goodwill.

To this end he brings forward Christ as an example, saying, "Let this

mind be in you, which was also in Christ Jesus, who, being in the form

of God, thought it not robbery to be equal with God, but made Himself of

no reputation, and took upon Him the form of a servant, and was made

in the likeness of men; and being found in fashion as a man, He humbled

Himself, and became obedient unto death" (Phil. ii. 5-8). This most

wholesome saying of the Apostle has been darkened to us by men who,

totally misunderstanding the expressions "form of God," "form of a

servant," "fashion," "likeness of men," have transferred them to the

natures of Godhead and manhood. Paul's meaning is this: Christ, when He

was full of the form of God and abounded in all good things, so that He

had no need of works or sufferings to be just and saved--for all these

things He had from the very beginning--yet was not puffed up with these

things, and did not raise Himself above us and arrogate to Himself power

over us, though He might lawfully have done so, but, on the contrary,

so acted in labouring, working, suffering, and dying, as to be like the

rest of men, and no otherwise than a man in fashion and in conduct, as

if He were in want of all things and had nothing of the form of God; and

yet all this He did for our sakes, that He might serve us, and that all

the works He should do under that form of a servant might become ours.

Thus a Christian, like Christ his Head, being full and in abundance

through his faith, ought to be content with this form of God, obtained

by faith; except that, as I have said, he ought to increase this faith

till it be perfected. For this faith is his life, justification, and

salvation, preserving his person itself and making it pleasing to God,

and bestowing on him all that Christ has, as I have said above, and

as Paul affirms: "The life which I now live in the flesh I live by the

faith of the Son of God" (Gal. ii. 20). Though he is thus free from all

works, yet he ought to empty himself of this liberty, take on him the

form of a servant, be made in the likeness of men, be found in fashion

as a man, serve, help, and in every way act towards his neighbour as he

sees that God through Christ has acted and is acting towards him.

All this he should do freely, and with regard to nothing but the good

pleasure of God, and he should reason thus:--

Lo! my God, without merit on my part, of His pure and free mercy, has

given to me, an unworthy, condemned, and contemptible creature all the

riches of justification and salvation in Christ, so that I no longer

am in want of anything, except of faith to believe that this is so.

For such a Father, then, who has overwhelmed me with these inestimable

riches of His, why should I not freely, cheerfully, and with my whole

heart, and from voluntary zeal, do all that I know will be pleasing to

Him and acceptable in His sight? I will therefore give myself as a sort

of Christ, to my neighbour, as Christ has given Himself to me; and will

do nothing in this life except what I see will be needful, advantageous,

and wholesome for my neighbour, since by faith I abound in all good

things in Christ.

Thus from faith flow forth love and joy in the Lord, and from love

a cheerful, willing, free spirit, disposed to serve our neighbour

voluntarily, without taking any account of gratitude or ingratitude,

praise or blame, gain or loss. Its object is not to lay men under

obligations, nor does it distinguish between friends and enemies, or

look to gratitude or ingratitude, but most freely and willingly spends

itself and its goods, whether it loses them through ingratitude, or

gains goodwill. For thus did its Father, distributing all things to all

men abundantly and freely, making His sun to rise upon the just and the

unjust. Thus, too, the child does and endures nothing except from the

free joy with which it delights through Christ in God, the Giver of such

great gifts.

You see, then, that, if we recognize those great and precious gifts, as

Peter says, which have been given to us, love is quickly diffused in

our hearts through the Spirit, and by love we are made free, joyful,

all-powerful, active workers, victors over all our tribulations,

servants to our neighbour, and nevertheless lords of all things. But,

for those who do not recognise the good things given to them through

Christ, Christ has been born in vain; such persons walk by works, and

will never attain the taste and feeling of these great things. Therefore

just as our neighbour is in want, and has need of our abundance, so we

too in the sight of God were in want, and had need of His mercy. And as

our heavenly Father has freely helped us in Christ, so ought we freely

to help our neighbour by our body and works, and each should become to

other a sort of Christ, so that we may be mutually Christs, and that

the same Christ may be in all of us; that is, that we may be truly

Christians.

Who then can comprehend the riches and glory of the Christian life? It

can do all things, has all things, and is in want of nothing; is lord

over sin, death, and hell, and at the same time is the obedient and

useful servant of all. But alas! it is at this day unknown throughout

the world; it is neither preached nor sought after, so that we are quite

ignorant about our own name, why we are and are called Christians. We

are certainly called so from Christ, who is not absent, but dwells among

us--provided, that is, that we believe in Him and are reciprocally and

mutually one the Christ of the other, doing to our neighbour as Christ

does to us. But now, in the doctrine of men, we are taught only to seek

after merits, rewards, and things which are already ours, and we have

made of Christ a taskmaster far more severe than Moses.

The Blessed Virgin beyond all others, affords us an example of the same

faith, in that she was purified according to the law of Moses, and like

all other women, though she was bound by no such law and had no need

of purification. Still she submitted to the law voluntarily and of free

love, making herself like the rest of women, that she might not offend

or throw contempt on them. She was not justified by doing this; but,

being already justified, she did it freely and gratuitously. Thus ought

our works too to be done, and not in order to be justified by them; for,

being first justified by faith, we ought to do all our works freely and

cheerfully for the sake of others.

St. Paul circumcised his disciple Timothy, not because he needed

circumcision for his justification, but that he might not offend or

contemn those Jews, weak in the faith, who had not yet been able to

comprehend the liberty of faith. On the other hand, when they contemned

liberty and urged that circumcision was necessary for justification, he

resisted them, and would not allow Titus to be circumcised. For, as he

would not offend or contemn any one's weakness in faith, but yielded

for the time to their will, so, again, he would not have the liberty of

faith offended or contemned by hardened self-justifiers, but walked in

a middle path, sparing the weak for the time, and always resisting the

hardened, that he might convert all to the liberty of faith. On the same

principle we ought to act, receiving those that are weak in the faith,

but boldly resisting these hardened teachers of works, of whom we shall

hereafter speak at more length.

Christ also, when His disciples were asked for the tribute money, asked

of Peter whether the children of a king were not free from taxes. Peter

agreed to this; yet Jesus commanded him to go to the sea, saying, "Lest

we should offend them, go thou to the sea, and cast a hook, and take up

the fish that first cometh up; and when thou hast opened his mouth thou

shalt find a piece of money; that take, and give unto them for Me and

thee" (Matt. xvii. 27).

This example is very much to our purpose; for here Christ calls Himself

and His disciples free men and children of a King, in want of nothing;

and yet He voluntarily submits and pays the tax. Just as far, then,

as this work was necessary or useful to Christ for justification or

salvation, so far do all His other works or those of His disciples avail

for justification. They are really free and subsequent to justification,

and only done to serve others and set them an example.

Such are the works which Paul inculcated, that Christians should be

subject to principalities and powers and ready to every good work (Titus

iii. 1), not that they may be justified by these things--for they are

already justified by faith--but that in liberty of spirit they may thus

be the servants of others and subject to powers, obeying their will out

of gratuitous love.

Such, too, ought to have been the works of all colleges, monasteries,

and priests; every one doing the works of his own profession and state

of life, not in order to be justified by them, but in order to bring his

own body into subjection, as an example to others, who themselves

also need to keep under their bodies, and also in order to accommodate

himself to the will of others, out of free love. But we must always

guard most carefully against any vain confidence or presumption of being

justified, gaining merit, or being saved by these works, this being the

part of faith alone, as I have so often said.

Any man possessing this knowledge may easily keep clear of danger among

those innumerable commands and precepts of the Pope, of bishops, of

monasteries, of churches, of princes, and of magistrates, which some

foolish pastors urge on us as being necessary for justification and

salvation, calling them precepts of the Church, when they are not so

at all. For the Christian freeman will speak thus: I will fast, I will

pray, I will do this or that which is commanded me by men, not as having

any need of these things for justification or salvation, but that I

may thus comply with the will of the Pope, of the bishop, of such a

community or such a magistrate, or of my neighbour as an example to him;

for this cause I will do and suffer all things, just as Christ did and

suffered much more for me, though He needed not at all to do so on His

own account, and made Himself for my sake under the law, when He was

not under the law. And although tyrants may do me violence or wrong in

requiring obedience to these things, yet it will not hurt me to do them,

so long as they are not done against God.

From all this every man will be able to attain a sure judgment and

faithful discrimination between all works and laws, and to know who

are blind and foolish pastors, and who are true and good ones. For

whatsoever work is not directed to the sole end either of keeping under

the body, or of doing service to our neighbour--provided he require

nothing contrary to the will of God--is no good or Christian work. Hence

I greatly fear that at this day few or no colleges, monasteries, altars,

or ecclesiastical functions are Christian ones; and the same may be said

of fasts and special prayers to certain saints. I fear that in all these

nothing is being sought but what is already ours; while we fancy that

by these things our sins are purged away and salvation is attained, and

thus utterly do away with Christian liberty. This comes from ignorance

of Christian faith and liberty.

This ignorance and this crushing of liberty are diligently promoted by

the teaching of very many blind pastors, who stir up and urge the people

to a zeal for these things, praising them and puffing them up with their

indulgences, but never teaching faith. Now I would advise you, if you

have any wish to pray, to fast, or to make foundations in churches, as

they call it, to take care not to do so with the object of gaining any

advantage, either temporal or eternal. You will thus wrong your faith,

which alone bestows all things on you, and the increase of which, either

by working or by suffering, is alone to be cared for. What you give,

give freely and without price, that others may prosper and have increase

from you and your goodness. Thus you will be a truly good man and a

Christian. For what to you are your goods and your works, which are done

over and above for the subjection of the body, since you have abundance

for yourself through your faith, in which God has given you all things?

We give this rule: the good things which we have from God ought to flow

from one to another and become common to all, so that every one of us

may, as it were, put on his neighbour, and so behave towards him as if

he were himself in his place. They flowed and do flow from Christ to us;

He put us on, and acted for us as if He Himself were what we are.

From us they flow to those who have need of them; so that my faith

and righteousness ought to be laid down before God as a covering and

intercession for the sins of my neighbour, which I am to take on myself,

and so labour and endure servitude in them, as if they were my own; for

thus has Christ done for us. This is true love and the genuine truth

of Christian life. But only there is it true and genuine where there

is true and genuine faith. Hence the Apostle attributes to charity this

quality: that she seeketh not her own.

We conclude therefore that a Christian man does not live in himself, but

in Christ and in his neighbour, or else is no Christian: in Christ by

faith; in his neighbour by love. By faith he is carried upwards

above himself to God, and by love he sinks back below himself to his

neighbour, still always-abiding in God and His love, as Christ says,

"Verily I say unto you, Hereafter ye shall see heaven open, and the

angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of man" (John i.

51).

Thus much concerning liberty, which, as you see, is a true and spiritual

liberty, making our hearts free from all sins, laws, and commandments,

as Paul says, "The law is not made for a righteous man" (1 Tim. i. 9),

and one which surpasses all other external liberties, as far as heaven

is above earth. May Christ make us to understand and preserve this

liberty. Amen.

Finally, for the sake of those to whom nothing can be stated so well but

that they misunderstand and distort it, we must add a word, in case they

can understand even that. There are very many persons who, when they

hear of this liberty of faith, straightway turn it into an occasion of

licence. They think that everything is now lawful for them, and do not

choose to show themselves free men and Christians in any other way than

by their contempt and reprehension of ceremonies, of traditions, of

human laws; as if they were Christians merely because they refuse

to fast on stated days, or eat flesh when others fast, or omit the

customary prayers; scoffing at the precepts of men, but utterly passing

over all the rest that belongs to the Christian religion. On the other

hand, they are most pertinaciously resisted by those who strive after

salvation solely by their observance of and reverence for ceremonies,

as if they would be saved merely because they fast on stated days,

or abstain from flesh, or make formal prayers; talking loudly of the

precepts of the Church and of the Fathers, and not caring a straw about

those things which belong to our genuine faith. Both these parties

are plainly culpable, in that, while they neglect matters which are of

weight and necessary for salvation, they contend noisily about such as

are without weight and not necessary.

How much more rightly does the Apostle Paul teach us to walk in the

middle path, condemning either extreme and saying, "Let not him that

eateth despise him that eateth not; and let not him which eateth not

judge him that eateth" (Rom. xiv. 3)! You see here how the Apostle

blames those who, not from religious feeling, but in mere contempt,

neglect and rail at ceremonial observances, and teaches them not to

despise, since this "knowledge puffeth up." Again, he teaches the

pertinacious upholders of these things not to judge their opponents. For

neither party observes towards the other that charity which edifieth. In

this matter we must listen to Scripture, which teaches us to turn aside

neither to the right hand nor to the left, but to follow those right

precepts of the Lord which rejoice the heart. For just as a man is

not righteous merely because he serves and is devoted to works and

ceremonial rites, so neither will he be accounted righteous merely

because he neglects and despises them.

It is not from works that we are set free by the faith of Christ, but

from the belief in works, that is from foolishly presuming to seek

justification through works. Faith redeems our consciences, makes them

upright, and preserves them, since by it we recognise the truth that

justification does not depend on our works, although good works neither

can nor ought to be absent, just as we cannot exist without food and

drink and all the functions of this mortal body. Still it is not on them

that our justification is based, but on faith; and yet they ought not

on that account to be despised or neglected. Thus in this world we

are compelled by the needs of this bodily life; but we are not hereby

justified. "My kingdom is not hence, nor of this world," says Christ;

but He does not say, "My kingdom is not here, nor in this world." Paul,

too, says, "Though we walk in the flesh, we do not war after the flesh"

(2 Cor. x. 3), and "The life which I now live in the flesh I live by

the faith of the Son of God" (Gal. ii. 20). Thus our doings, life, and

being, in works and ceremonies, are done from the necessities of this

life, and with the motive of governing our bodies; but yet we are not

justified by these things, but by the faith of the Son of God.

The Christian must therefore walk in the middle path, and set these two

classes of men before his eyes. He may meet with hardened and obstinate

ceremonialists, who, like deaf adders, refuse to listen to the truth of

liberty, and cry up, enjoin, and urge on us their ceremonies, as if they

could justify us without faith. Such were the Jews of old, who would not

understand, that they might act well. These men we must resist, do just

the contrary to what they do, and be bold to give them offence, lest

by this impious notion of theirs they should deceive many along with

themselves. Before the eyes of these men it is expedient to eat flesh,

to break fasts, and to do in behalf of the liberty of faith things which

they hold to be the greatest sins. We must say of them, "Let them alone;

they be blind leaders of the blind" (Matt. xv. 14). In this way Paul

also would not have Titus circumcised, though these men urged it;

and Christ defended the Apostles, who had plucked ears of corn on the

Sabbath day; and many like instances.

Or else we may meet with simple-minded and ignorant persons, weak in

the faith, as the Apostle calls them, who are as yet unable to apprehend

that liberty of faith, even if willing to do so. These we must spare,

lest they should be offended. We must bear with their infirmity, till

they shall be more fully instructed. For since these men do not act thus

from hardened malice, but only from weakness of faith, therefore, in

order to avoid giving them offence, we must keep fasts and do other

things which they consider necessary. This is required of us by charity,

which injures no one, but serves all men. It is not the fault of these

persons that they are weak, but that of their pastors, who by the snares

and weapons of their own traditions have brought them into bondage and

wounded their souls when they ought to have been set free and healed by

the teaching of faith and liberty. Thus the Apostle says, "If meat make

my brother to offend, I will eat no flesh while the world standeth" (1

Cor. viii. 13); and again, "I know, and am persuaded by the Lord Jesus,

that there is nothing unclean of itself; but to him that esteemeth

anything to be unclean, to him it is unclean. It is evil for that man

who eateth with offence" (Rom. xiv. 14, 20).

Thus, though we ought boldly to resist those teachers of tradition, and

though the laws of the pontiffs, by which they make aggressions on the

people of God, deserve sharp reproof, yet we must spare the timid crowd,

who are held captive by the laws of those impious tyrants, till they

are set free. Fight vigorously against the wolves, but on behalf of the

sheep, not against the sheep. And this you may do by inveighing against

the laws and lawgivers, and yet at the same time observing these laws

with the weak, lest they be offended, until they shall themselves

recognise the tyranny, and understand their own liberty. If you wish to

use your liberty, do it secretly, as Paul says, "Hast thou faith? have

it to thyself before God" (Rom. xiv. 22). But take care not to use it in

the presence of the weak. On the other hand, in the presence of tyrants

and obstinate opposers, use your liberty in their despite, and with the

utmost pertinacity, that they too may understand that they are tyrants,

and their laws useless for justification, nay that they had no right to

establish such laws.

Since then we cannot live in this world without ceremonies and works,

since the hot and inexperienced period of youth has need of being

restrained and protected by such bonds, and since every one is bound

to keep under his own body by attention to these things, therefore

the minister of Christ must be prudent and faithful in so ruling and

teaching the people of Christ, in all these matters, that no root of

bitterness may spring up among them, and so many be defiled, as Paul

warned the Hebrews; that is, that they may not lose the faith, and begin

to be defiled by a belief in works as the means of justification. This

is a thing which easily happens, and defiles very many, unless faith be

constantly inculcated along with works. It is impossible to avoid this

evil, when faith is passed over in silence, and only the ordinances of

men are taught, as has been done hitherto by the pestilent, impious,

and soul-destroying traditions of our pontiffs and opinions of our

theologians. An infinite number of souls have been drawn down to hell by

these snares, so that you may recognise the work of antichrist.

In brief, as poverty is imperilled amid riches, honesty amid business,

humility amid honours, abstinence amid feasting, purity amid pleasures,

so is justification by faith imperilled among ceremonies. Solomon says,

"Can a man take fire in his bosom, and his clothes not be burned?"

(Prov. vi. 27). And yet as we must live among riches, business, honours,

pleasures, feastings, so must we among ceremonies, that is among perils.

Just as infant boys have the greatest need of being cherished in the

bosoms and by the care of girls, that they may not die, and yet, when

they are grown, there is peril to their salvation in living among

girls, so inexperienced and fervid young men require to be kept in and

restrained by the barriers of ceremonies, even were they of iron, lest

their weak minds should rush headlong into vice. And yet it would be

death to them to persevere in believing that they can be justified

by these things. They must rather be taught that they have been thus

imprisoned, not with the purpose of their being justified or gaining

merit in this way, but in order that they might avoid wrong-doing, and

be more easily instructed in that righteousness which is by faith, a

thing which the headlong character of youth would not bear unless it

were put under restraint.

Hence in the Christian life ceremonies are to be no otherwise looked

upon than as builders and workmen look upon those preparations for

building or working which are not made with any view of being permanent

or anything in themselves, but only because without them there could be

no building and no work. When the structure is completed, they are laid

aside. Here you see that we do not contemn these preparations, but set

the highest value on them; a belief in them we do contemn, because no

one thinks that they constitute a real and permanent structure. If any

one were so manifestly out of his senses as to have no other object

in life but that of setting up these preparations with all possible

expense, diligence, and perseverance, while he never thought of the

structure itself, but pleased himself and made his boast of these

useless preparations and props, should we not all pity his madness and

think that, at the cost thus thrown away, some great building might have

been raised?

Thus, too, we do not contemn works and ceremonies--nay, we set the

highest value on them; but we contemn the belief in works, which no one

should consider to constitute true righteousness, as do those hypocrites

who employ and throw away their whole life in the pursuit of works, and

yet never attain to that for the sake of which the works are done. As

the Apostle says, they are "ever learning and never able to come to the

knowledge of the truth" (2 Tim. iii. 7). They appear to wish to build,

they make preparations, and yet they never do build; and thus they

continue in a show of godliness, but never attain to its power.

Meanwhile they please themselves with this zealous pursuit, and even

dare to judge all others, whom they do not see adorned with such a

glittering display of works; while, if they had been imbued with faith,

they might have done great things for their own and others' salvation,

at the same cost which they now waste in abuse of the gifts of God. But

since human nature and natural reason, as they call it, are naturally

superstitious, and quick to believe that justification can be attained

by any laws or works proposed to them, and since nature is also

exercised and confirmed in the same view by the practice of all earthly

lawgivers, she can never of her own power free herself from this bondage

to works, and come to a recognition of the liberty of faith.

We have therefore need to pray that God will lead us and make us taught

of God, that is, ready to learn from God; and will Himself, as He has

promised, write His law in our hearts; otherwise there is no hope for

us. For unless He himself teach us inwardly this wisdom hidden in a

mystery, nature cannot but condemn it and judge it to be heretical. She

takes offence at it, and it seems folly to her, just as we see that it

happened of old in the case of the prophets and Apostles, and just as

blind and impious pontiffs, with their flatterers, do now in my case and

that of those who are like me, upon whom, together with ourselves, may

God at length have mercy, and lift up the light of His countenance upon

them, that we may know His way upon earth and His saving health among

all nations, who is blessed for evermore. Amen. In the year of the Lord

MDXX.

Concerning Christian Liberty, by Martin Luther

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