

fore, St. Augustine puts it well when he says the products of the First Commandment are faith, hope and love. As I said above, such faith and confidence bring love and hope with them. Indeed, if we see it the correct way, love is the first, or comes at the same instant with faith. For I could not trust God, if I did not think that He wished to be favorable and to love me, which leads me, in turn, to love Him and to trust Him heartily and to look to Him for all good things.

All Works Without Faith are Idolatry

20. Now you see for yourself that all those who do not at all times trust God, and those who do not in all their works or sufferings, life and death, trust in His favor, grace and good-will, but seek His favor in other things or in themselves, do not keep this commandment. Instead they practice real idolatry, even if they were to do the works of all the other commandments, and in addition had all the prayers, fasting, obedience, patience, chastity, and innocence of all the saints combined. For the chief work is not present, without which all the others are nothing but mere illusion, show and pretense, with nothing behind. Against such works Christ warns us in Matthew: "BEWARE OF FALSE PROPHETS, WHICH COME TO YOU IN SHEEP'S CLOTHING." [Matthew 7:15] Such false prophets are all who wish with their many good works, as they say, to make God favorable to themselves, and to buy God's grace from Him, as if He were a huckster or a day-laborer, unwilling to give His grace and favor for nothing.

21. These are the most perverse people on earth, who will hardly or never be converted to the right way. Such, too, are all who in adversity run around here and there, looking for counsel and help everywhere except from God, from Whom they are most urgently commanded to seek it. The Prophet Isaiah rebukes them saying "THE PEOPLE DID NOT TURN TO HIM WHO STRUCK THEM, OR SEEK THE LORD OF HOSTS" [Isaiah 9:13]. That is, God struck them and sent them sufferings and all kinds of adversity, so that they should run to Him and trust Him. But they run away from Him to men, now to Egypt, now to Assyria, possibly also to the devil; and of such idolatry much is written in the same Prophet and in the Books of the Kings. This is also the way of all holy hypocrites when they are in trouble: They do not run to God, but flee from Him, and only think of how they may get rid of their trouble through their own efforts or through human help, and yet they consider themselves and let others consider them pious people.

Faith Must Do all Works

22. This is what Apostle Paul means in many places, where he attributes so much to faith, that he says: *Justus ex fide sua vivit*, which is Latin for "THE

ONE WHO IS RIGHTEOUS WILL LIVE BY FAITH" [Romans 1:17] and faith is that because of which he is counted righteous before God. If righteousness consists of faith, it is clear that faith fulfills all commandments and makes all works righteous, since no one is justified except he keeps all the commands of God. Again, the works can justify no one before God without faith. So utterly and roundly does the Apostle reject works and praise faith, that some have taken offence at his words and say: "LET US DO EVIL SO THAT GOOD MAY COME" [Romans 3:8] although he condemns such men as erring and foolish.

23. And yet this still happens: When we reject the great, pompous works of our time, which are done entirely without faith, they say: Men are only to believe and not to do anything good. For nowadays they say that the products of the First Commandment are singing, reading, organ-playing, reading the mass, saying matins and vespers and hold mass at the other hours, the founding and decorating of churches, altars, and monastic houses, the gathering of bells, jewels, garments, trinkets and treasures, running to Rome and to the saints. Further, when we are dressed up and bow, kneel, pray the rosary and the Psalter, and all this not before an idol, but before the holy cross of God or the pictures of His saints – this we call honoring and worshiping God, and, according to the First Commandment, "having no other gods". And yet these same things usurers, adulterers and all manner of sinners can do, too, and do so daily.

24. Of course, if these things are done with such faith that we believe that they please God, then they are praiseworthy, not because of their virtue, but because of such faith, for which all works are of equal value, as has been said. But if we doubt or do not believe that God is gracious to us and is pleased with us, or if we presumptuously expect to please Him only through and after our works, then it is all pure deception: Outwardly we are honoring God, but inwardly we are setting up *self* as a false god. This is the reason why I have so often spoken against the display, magnificence and multitude of such works. I have rejected them, because it is as clear as day that they are not only done in doubt or without faith, but there is not one in a thousand who does not set his confidence upon the works, expecting by them to win God's favor and anticipate His grace; and so they make a bazaar of them²⁴. Such a thing God cannot endure, since He has promised His grace freely, and wills that we begin by trusting that grace, and in it perform all works, whatever they may be.

²⁴ Luther uses the word *Jarmarkt*; the reference here being to the bargaining that was common at such fairs.

Works and Faith Contrasted

25. Note for yourself, then, how far apart these two are: keeping the First Commandment with outward works only, and keeping it with inward trust. For this last one makes true, living children of God, the other only makes worse idolatry and the most mischievous hypocrites on earth. Those then, with their apparent righteousness lead unnumbered people into their way, and yet allow them to be without faith, so that they are miserably misled, and are caught in the pitiable babbling and mummer²⁵. Of such Christ says: "THEN IF ANYONE SAYS TO YOU, 'LOOK! HERE IS THE MESSIAH!' OR 'THERE HE IS!'—DO NOT BELIEVE IT" [Matthew 24:23]; and also " THE HOUR IS COMING WHEN YOU WILL WORSHIP THE FATHER NEITHER ON THIS MOUNTAIN NOR IN JERUSALEM. ... BUT THE HOUR IS COMING, AND IS NOW HERE, WHEN THE TRUE WORSHIPERS WILL WORSHIP THE FATHER IN SPIRIT AND TRUTH, FOR THE FATHER SEEKS SUCH AS THESE TO WORSHIP HIM." [John 4:21 f.]

26. These and similar passages have moved me and ought to move everyone to *reject* the great display of bulls²⁶, seals, flags, indulgences, by which the poor folk are led to build churches, to give, to endow, to pray, and yet faith is not mentioned, and is even suppressed. For since faith knows no distinction among works, such exaltation and urging of one work above another cannot exist beside faith. For faith desires to be the only service of God, and will grant this name and honor to no other work, except in so far as faith imparts it, as it does when the work is done in faith and by faith. This perversion is indicated in the Old Testament, when the Jews left the Temple and sacrificed at other places, in the green parks and on the mountains. [Isaiah 65:3 and 66:17] This is what these men also do: they are zealous to do all works, but this chief work of faith they regard not at all.

The Abundance of Works Included in Faith

27. Where now are they who ask, what works are good? Who ask what they shall do, how they shall be religious? Indeed, where are they who say that when we preach of faith, we shall neither teach nor do works? Does not this First Commandment give us more work to do than any man can do? If a

²⁵ From Old French *mommerie*, English: *mummer*: A person who wears a mask or fantastic costume while merrymaking or taking part in a pantomime. First used in the 1540s the transferred meaning is "ridiculous ceremony or ritual" (Summarized from <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/mummery>).

²⁶ A *bull* is a public decree or charter issued by the pope. Today, "executive order" would make for a good translation. "*Bulls*" are named after the leaden seal (*bulla*) that was traditionally appended to the end in order to authenticate its authorship.

man were a thousand men, or all men, or all creatures, this commandment would yet ask enough of him, and more than enough. Since he is commanded to live and walk at all times in faith and confidence toward God, to place such faith in no one else, and so to have only one, the true God, and none other.

28. Now, since the being and nature of man cannot for an instant be without doing or not doing something, enduring or running away from something (for, as we see, life never rests) – let him who will be pious and filled with good works, begin and, in all his life and his works, at all times exercise himself in this faith. Let him learn to do and to leave undone all things in such continual faith. Then will he find how much work he has to do, and how completely all things are included in faith. And he will find *that he cannot possibly ever grow idle, because even his idleness would need to happen as the product of exercising his faith*²⁷. In brief, nothing can be in or about us, and nothing can happen to us but that it must be good and meritorious, if we believe (as we ought) that all things please God. So says Apostle Paul: "SO, WHETHER YOU EAT OR DRINK, OR WHATEVER YOU DO, DO EVERYTHING FOR THE GLORY OF GOD" [1 Corinthians 10:31] Now it cannot be done in this Name except it be done in this faith. Likewise, Romans says "WE KNOW THAT ALL THINGS WORK TOGETHER FOR GOOD TO THE SAINTS OF GOD." [Romans 8:26]

29. Therefore, when some say that good works are forbidden when we preach faith alone, it is as if I said to a sick man: *"If you had health, you would have the use of all your limbs; but without health, the works of all your limbs are nothing"*. It is as if he then wanted to infer that I had forbidden the works of all his limbs, where, on the contrary, I meant that he must first have health, which will produce all the works of all the members. So, faith also must be in all works the master-workman and captain, or they are nothing at all.

Why Laws are Given

30. You might say: "Why then do we have so many laws of the Church and of the State, and many ceremonies of churches, monastic houses, holy places, which urge and tempt men to good works, if faith does all things through the First Commandment?" I answer: Simply because we do not all have faith or do not heed it. If every man had faith, we would need no more laws, but

²⁷ This critical passage is often mistranslated, seemingly with purpose, to manufacture some kind of an "obligation to work". See our discussion of this phrase in the Appendix, beginning on page 135.

everyone would of himself at all times do good works, as his confidence in God teaches him.

Four Kinds of Men

31. But now there are four kinds of men: the first, just mentioned, who need no law, of whom Apostle Paul says: "THE LAW IS LAID DOWN NOT FOR THE INNOCENT BUT FOR THE LAWLESS AND DISOBEDIENT, FOR THE GODLESS AND SINFUL" [1 Timothy 1:9] that is to say, for the believer. But believers of themselves do what they know and can do, only because they finally trust that God's favor and grace rests upon them in all things.

32. The second class want to abuse this freedom, put a false confidence in it, and grow lazy. Of these Apostle Peter says "AS SERVANTS OF GOD, [THEY] LIVE AS FREE PEOPLE, YET DO NOT USE YOUR FREEDOM AS A PRETEXT FOR EVIL," [1 Peter 2:16] as if he said: *The freedom of faith does not permit sins, nor will it cover them, but it sets us free to do all manner of good works and to endure all things as they happen to us*, so that a man is not bound only to one work or to a few. So also, Apostle Paul writes "DO NOT USE YOUR FREEDOM AS AN OPPORTUNITY FOR SELF-INDULGENCE." [Galatians 5:13] Such men must be urged by laws and hemmed in by teaching and exhortation.

33. The third class are wicked men, always ready for sins. These must be constrained by spiritual and temporal laws, like wild horses and dogs. And where this does not help, they must be put to death by the worldly sword, as Apostle Paul says: "FOR RULERS ARE NOT A TERROR TO GOOD CONDUCT, BUT TO BAD." [Romans 13:3]

34. The fourth class, who are still lusty, and childish in their understanding of faith and of the spiritual life, must be coaxed like young children. They must be tempted with external, definite and prescribed decorations, with reading, praying, fasting, singing, adorning of churches, organ-playing, and such other things as are commanded and observed in monastic houses and churches – until they also learn to know the faith. Although there is great danger here, when the rulers, as they currently do, busy themselves with and insist upon such ceremonies and external works as if they were the true works. They neglect faith, which they ought always to teach along with these works, just as a mother gives her child other food along with the milk, until the child can eat the strong food by itself.

Charity Endures Unnecessary Works

35. Since, then, we are not all alike, we must tolerate such people, share their observances and burdens, and not despise them, but teach them the true way of faith. So, Apostle Paul teaches us: "WELCOME THOSE WHO ARE WEAK

IN FAITH, BUT NOT FOR THE PURPOSE OF QUARRELING OVER OPINIONS." [Romans 14:1] And he did so again in Corinthians "TO THOSE UNDER THE LAW I BECAME AS ONE UNDER THE LAW (THOUGH I MYSELF AM NOT UNDER THE LAW)." [1 Corinthians 9:20] And so did Christ, when He was asked to pay tribute, which He was not obligated to pay, argues with Apostle Peter, whether the children of kings must give tribute, or only other people. Apostle Peter answers: "ONLY OTHER PEOPLE." Christ said: "'THEN THE CHILDREN ARE FREE. HOWEVER, SO THAT WE DO NOT GIVE OFFENSE TO THEM, GO TO THE SEA AND CAST A HOOK; TAKE THE FIRST FISH THAT COMES UP; AND WHEN YOU OPEN ITS MOUTH, YOU WILL FIND A COIN;[D] TAKE THAT AND GIVE IT TO THEM FOR YOU AND ME." [Matthew 17:26-27]

36. Here we see that all works and things are free to a Christian through his faith. And yet all the same, because the others do not yet believe, he observes and bears with them what he is not obligated to do. But this he does freely, for such Christian is certain that this is pleasing to God. And he does it willingly, accepts it as any other free work which comes to his hand without his choice, because he desires and seeks no more than that he may in his faith do works to please God.²⁸

37. But since in this discourse we have undertaken to teach what righteous and good works are, and are now speaking of the highest work, it is clear that we do not speak of the second, third and fourth classes of men. But rather we speak of the first, into whose likeness all the others are to grow. And until they do so, the first class must endure and instruct them. Therefore, we must not despise these men of weak faith, as if they were hopeless. Gladly they would do right and learn – and yet they cannot understand because of the ceremonies to which they cling.

38. We must rather blame their ignorant, blind teachers, who have never taught them the faith, and have led them so deeply into works. They must be gently and gradually led back again to faith, as a sick man is treated. They must be allowed for a time, for their conscience sake, to cling to some works and do them as necessary to salvation, so long as they rightly grasp the faith. For if we try to tear them out so suddenly, their weak consciences will be quite shattered and confused, and they will retain neither faith nor works. But the hardheaded, who, hardened in their works, have no heed to what is said of faith, and fight against it – these we must, as Christ did and taught, let go their way, that the blind may lead the blind.

²⁸ The theme was further developed in Luther's "*The Freedom of a Christian*". Note that this text of Luther is also available as a *Group Study Guide*. See details at the end of this book.

The Contradiction of Faith and Daily Sins

39. But you ask: How can I trust surely that all my works are pleasing to God, when at times I fall, and I talk, eat, drink and sleep too much, or otherwise transgress, as I cannot help doing? Answer: This question shows that you still regard faith as a work among other works, and do not set it above all works. For it is the highest work for this very reason, because it remains and blots out these daily sins by not doubting that God is so kind to you as to wink at such daily transgression and weakness. Indeed, even if a deadly sin should occur (which, however, never or rarely happens to those who live in faith and trust toward God), the faith rises again and does not doubt that sin is already gone. We know that because it is written "MY LITTLE CHILDREN, I AM WRITING THESE THINGS TO YOU SO THAT YOU MAY NOT SIN. BUT IF ANYONE DOES SIN, WE HAVE AN ADVOCATE WITH THE FATHER, JESUS CHRIST THE RIGHTEOUS; AND HE IS THE ATONING SACRIFICE FOR OUR SINS." [1 John 2:1-2] And in the Book of Wisdom: " FOR EVEN IF WE SIN WE ARE YOURS, KNOWING YOUR POWER." [Wisdom 15:2] And in Proverbs: "FOR THOUGH [THE RIGHTEOUS] FALL SEVEN TIMES, THEY WILL RISE AGAIN". [Proverbs 24:16]

40. Indeed, this confidence and faith must be so high and strong that every man knows that all his life and works are nothing but damnable sins before God's judgment, as it is written: "IN YOUR SIGHT NO MAN LIVING BE JUSTIFIED" [Psalms 143:2]. And man must entirely despair of his works, believing that they cannot be good except through this faith, which looks for no judgment, but only for pure grace, favor, kindness and mercy. Just like David, who says " FOR YOUR STEADFAST LOVE IS BEFORE MY EYES, AND I WALK IN FAITHFULNESS TO YOU" [Psalms 26:3]; and "LET THE LIGHT OF YOUR FACE SHINE ON US, O LORD!" (that is, the knowledge of your grace through faith, and thereby), "YOU HAVE PUT GLADNESS IN MY HEART" [Psalms 4:6-7]. For as faith trusts, so it receives.

41. As you can see, it is in this way that works are forgiven, are without guilt and are good. They are like that, not by their own nature, but by the mercy and grace of God because of the faith which trusts on the mercy of God. Therefore, we must fear because of the works, but comfort ourselves because of the grace of God, as it is written "THE LORD TAKES PLEASURE IN THOSE WHO FEAR HIM, IN THOSE WHO HOPE IN HIS STEADFAST LOVE." [Psalms 147:11] So we pray with perfect confidence: "*Our Father*," and yet petition: "*Forgive us our trespasses*". We are children and yet sinners. We are acceptable and yet do not do enough. And all this is the work of faith, firmly grounded in God's grace.

The Source of Faith

42. But if you ask where the faith and the confidence can be found and whence they come, this it is certainly most necessary to know. *First:* Without doubt it can be said that faith does not come from your works or merit, but alone from Jesus Christ, and is freely promised and given; as Apostle Paul writes: " BUT GOD PROVES HIS LOVE FOR US IN THAT WHILE WE STILL WERE SINNERS CHRIST DIED FOR US." [Romans 5:8]; as if he said: "*Ought not this give us a strong unconquerable confidence, that before we prayed or cared for it, yes, while we still continually walked in sins, Christ dies for our sin?*" Apostle Paul concludes; "MUCH MORE SURELY THEN, NOW THAT WE HAVE BEEN JUSTIFIED BY HIS BLOOD, WILL WE BE SAVED THROUGH HIM FROM THE WRATH OF GOD. FOR IF WHILE WE WERE ENEMIES, WE WERE RECONCILED TO GOD THROUGH THE DEATH OF HIS SON, MUCH MORE SURELY, HAVING BEEN RECONCILED, WILL WE BE SAVED BY HIS LIFE." [Romans 5:9-10]

43. Indeed, thus you must form Christ within yourself and see how in Him God holds before you and offers you His mercy without any previous merits of your own. From such a view of His grace you must draw faith and confidence of the forgiveness of all your sins.

44. *Faith, therefore, does not begin with works, neither do works create it.* But it must spring up and flow from the blood, wounds and death of Christ. If you see in these that God is so kindly affectionate toward you that He gives even His Son for you, then your heart also must in its turn grow sweet and kindly affectionate toward God, and so your confidence must grow out of pure good-will and love – God's love toward you and your love toward God. We never read that the Holy Spirit was given to anyone when he did works, but It was always given when men have heard the Gospel of Christ and the mercy of God. From this same Word, and from no other source, must faith still come, even in our day and always, for Christ is the rock out of which "HE NURSED HIM WITH HONEY FROM THE CRAGS, WITH OIL FROM FLINTY ROCK" as Moses says. [Deuteronomy 32:13]

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Review Questions

1. What does St. Augustine have to say about the First Commandment?

2. Why are those seeking to buy their salvation from God through their works called 'false prophets'?

3. Describe the four categories of man that need church laws to be guided to do good.

4. What are we supposed to do when we see, or work next to, people that do not understand the nature of their works?

5. How do we know that all our works are pleasing to God?

6. What makes works free of guilt and forgiven?

7. What is the only source of faith?

Study and Discussion Questions

1. Can someone looking idle possibly be exercising their faith? If so, why?

2. Explain how some critics of Luther could suggest that he had forbidden the Good Works altogether. Why is this not true?

3. Discuss: What does it mean for each of you to “form Christ within yourself”?

4. As an example, many churches organize “Mission Trips” for their members, sometimes to far-away places. What signs could tell if a specific trip were done merely for its merit rather than in the spirit of good works? Did you perhaps observe such signs in the past?

