

# A SERMON ON THE THREE KINDS OF GOOD LIFE FOR THE INSTRUCTION OF CONSCIENCES

1521

*Translated by James Atkinson*

## INTRODUCTION

It is not possible to state the exact date or occasion when this discourse was delivered. Scholars are generally agreed, however, that it was preached in the year 1521, in all probability shortly before Luther's appearance at Worms on April 17. The sermon was published in that same year.

The sermon speaks in simple, graphic terms to men and women who were confused by the steady proclamation of justification by faith alone, which was at the heart of Luther's theology. They found it extremely difficult, if not impossible, to disengage themselves from old ideas and ways. They were accustomed to ceremonies, fast days, holy days, and to the kind of good works taught by the church. The people leaned heavily upon these external observances. To cast them off would work havoc, confusion, and even despair. Luther was aware of these people's feelings and it was to them that he addressed himself.

Luther begins with a brief description of the three main parts of the Hebrew tabernacle: the court, the holy place, and the holy of holies. This scheme of construction, he says, corresponds to that of Christian churches, which have a churchyard, a nave, and the sanctuary. In a manner of exposition to which the people were accustomed Luther states that through this scheme of construction the Holy Spirit teaches us that there are three kinds of doctrine, which in turn teach that there are three kinds of conscience and sin as well as three kinds of good life or works. A Christian must not confuse these with each other, but must know how to distinguish among them.

First there is the doctrine of the churchyard. This doctrine is concerned with external things: ceremonies, fastings, the wearing of special garb, and the performance of specifically "religious" works. To dwell upon these matters is to be a "churchyard saint" and subject to constant uncertainty of conscience about whether there have been enough observances and

whether they have been properly and correctly kept. A churchyard saint, Luther says, is blind to sound doctrine, and his soul is tied to empty externals.

It is necessary to graduate from the churchyard and its religion of works and externals to the nave, and thereby learn of better and sounder doctrine. Here men learn what truly good works, virtue, and conscience are and to distinguish between the grain and the chaff and to put behind them the works and the superficialities of the courtyard. Here men learn that the joyful, willing performance of the really good works, the works God commands, is found in no man's heart; men need God to put them there.

Finally there is the sanctuary, which represents the final stage of evangelical doctrine and Christian life. Here Christ and his promises are held before us. Here we learn to deny ourselves and to call upon Christ in true faith. Here the Holy Spirit comes to the believer, creating and giving the "pure, free, cheerful, glad, and loving heart, a heart which is simply gratuitously righteous, seeking no reward, fearing no punishment."

The present translation is based on the German text, *Sermon von dreierlei gutem Leben, das Gewissen zu unterrichten*, in WA 7, (792) 795–802.

1. It should be noted first of all how God Almighty commanded through Moses in the Old Testament that a tabernacle be built and divided into three parts. The first part was the holiest part of all and was called the holy of holies. It was ten cubits in length, breadth, and height and cubical in shape. The next was called the holy place, and that was the same height and width and twenty cubits long. These two parts were joined together in one building made of wooden boards so one could go into one from the other as easily as going from one room into another. The third part was called the atrium, the courtyard, which was one hundred cubits long, fifty wide, and five high, and there was a white curtain, transparent like a net, hanging around the tabernacle. No doubt our churches have developed from this pattern. We divide them into three parts, too: the churchyard, the nave, and the sanctuary. The sanctuary is the holiest, then the nave, and after that the churchyard. The same three parts are to be found in a house. First there is the yard, second the house, and third the study or bedchamber.

2. In this way the Holy Spirit shows that there are three kinds of preaching or teaching which make for three kinds of conscience and three kinds of sin, as well as three kinds of the good life with three kinds of good works. All these differences are helpful, and a Christian needs to know them lest he confuse one with the other and do nothing properly. He must not mistake the sanctuary for the churchyard, nor the churchyard for the nave. To understand these things better we propose to call the holy of holies the sanctuary, the holy place the nave, and the court the churchyard.

3. We start with the churchyard. It is preaching or teaching which is concerned only with outward works which are bound up with time and place. These matters are the ceremonies, the outward performances and techniques in matters of dress or food which cause severe damage to the conscience if a preacher does not alert his people about them. As a result of this kind of teaching, people become hardened and blind, and in this state you can tell them nothing. Let us give a few examples. Priests, monks, nuns, bishops, and all the clergy wear clothes different from the general run of people. They also do other kinds of jobs, wear sacred vestments in church, pray, sing, and so on. These are all outward works linked to dress and occasion. Now he who does these things holds that such teaching has been established by law and that they are called good works, the good life, the spiritual office. When he has done them he believes that he has most certainly earned a good conscience (for what it is worth) and that he has done the right thing. The opposite is true, too—if he overlooks one of them or neglects to do it, for example, if he does not wear his garb properly or does not observe the hours,<sup>3</sup> he gets a bad conscience, like a man who has not kept the commandments.

4. We act the same way when we observe or break the prescribed commandments, fasts, and feasts, until, through the neglect of the clergy, who are asleep on the job, we reach the point where we make it a more serious matter of conscience for someone to eat a morsel of bread on the eve of a fast than to soak himself in drink, or curse and swear, lie, deceive, or commit adultery or some other serious sin, so inseparably does this kind of teaching bind life and conscience to food and external things. In fact today there are many clergy who would have pangs of conscience ten times worse if they were to celebrate the mass without a maniple or a

chasuble or an altar stone or a silver chalice and things like that, than if they had spoken five times in a scurrilous and scandalous fashion or told lies or spoken behind somebody's back, or otherwise injured their neighbor, so inseparably bound up with these external things is their conscience and so far removed from the things that matter. And what layman or man in the street does not endure worse pangs of conscience if he eats eggs or butter or meat on the eve of a saint's day or other fast day than if he had killed or been unchaste by word or deed? Yes, things are in such a state, owing to certain blind teachers, that no layman dare touch the chalice or corporal. A great fuss and matter of conscience is made of it if anybody unwittingly does touch it. It is worse than that! If an ordinary man were incautiously to touch the holy sacrament with his finger, they skin that finger for him. They make such a matter of conscience out of this affair that there is not a command or prohibition that I regard, they have become so ridiculous.

5. Just think it over. Such a view of conscience and such error arise from the fact that people have got everything confused and do not differentiate one thing from another in the right way. Then sound instruction and the capacity to differentiate are gone, and before we know where we are, we have reached the stage where the worst is upheld as the best, and the best as the worst. Then the fear of God goes out, human presumption takes over, and the hardening and blinding of men to their sins goes on apace. This is easy to see everywhere in the world. Is it not true that everybody, spiritual and secular estate alike, is unfaithful, prideful, avaricious, hateful, unchaste, and commits all the sins there are, and that nobody takes the slightest notice of them? They have the audacity to think that they live in the fear of the Lord and do his works, although they do not seek to improve themselves in these particular items. They think that they are in a right relationship with God, and that they are doing quite well so long as they exercise their office, pray the canonical hours, wear their clerical garb, and do the right thing in church.

The laity think the same, that all they have to do is to keep their fasts and feasts. As if our God were bothered in the slightest whether you drink beer or water, whether you eat fish or meat, whether you keep the feasts or fasts! It was of people like this that Christ spoke in Matthew 23[:23–24],

“Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! for you tithe mint and dill and cummin, and have neglected the weightier matters of the law, justice and mercy and faith; these you ought to have done, without neglecting the others. You blind guides, straining out a gnat and swallowing a camel!”

6. Has our Lord himself not depicted here the foolish, perverted conscience which offends God by making important matters trifles and trifles important? How is it that a man can take such a careful sip of outward works that he even strains out a gnat, and can take such a gulp of the right works that he even swallows a camel? It is because he makes things which matter little if at all into strict matters of conscience, but has a very free and easy conscience in things of great importance on which everything depends. People who do this are all *Atrienes Sancti*, churchyard saints. They are only five cubits high. This means that their holiness is circumscribed by their five senses and their bodily existence. And yet, this very holiness shines brighter in the eyes of the world than does real holiness. That is why many stand in this court, for the churchyard is more than three times the length of the nave and ten times as long as the sanctuary. Further, the fact that there are such vast numbers in the courtyard constitutes a great inducement to follow such erroneous, perverted ideas of conscience, works, and life. Indeed, the office of the preacher and pastor is a very serious matter, for the clergy will have to render a solemn account of their failure here if they are not vigilant and active now, and are not striving against such a state of affairs and giving their people true instruction in these matters. But there is another side to it. If they resolve to do this, they will have to suffer persecution from the pope, the bishops, and the prelates. For that gang is itself in such a “churchyardish” state of spiritual life, utterly drowned in grave sin, that they will not let anyone teach anything different. They want to strain gnats and swallow camels.

7. Anybody can see for himself that such a “churchyardish” external system betters nobody, and that all the performances bound up with food and clothes, occasion and place, make nobody righteous. For everybody can see that such people continue to be unfaithful, avaricious, impatient, proud, unchaste, angry, and envious. In fact, nobody is more deeply involved in those sins than these very people who have equated

righteousness with matters of food, clothing, and observances of time and place. We can see this all around us. Is it not time we called a halt and thought things over? This cannot be the right road to becoming righteous. There must be another way somewhere. And because these people take such a light view of transgressing in very serious matters, we ought to be wise enough to despise the transgressions of their external pomposities in which we see so much that is corrupt. We must get into the habit of looking in the right direction.

Imagine you were to meet a slanderer or a vulgar gossip, and then you were to meet another man who happened not to have kept the fast or feast or who had eaten nonprescribed foods. Would you not be ten times more shocked by the first man than by the second? Would you not regard the second man as one who had swallowed a gnat, and the first a camel? It is grievous and aggravating that the pope is so concerned about eating butter and eggs that people have to buy letters from him, and yet at the same time he is not bothered about whether a man sins against God. The bishops and the prelates follow suit in this, and aid and abet him. If they themselves confuse these matters and get them upside-down, strain gnats and swallow camels, how shall the poor people extricate themselves? How indeed, when their rulers and teachers fight against them in this by their doctrine, example, and authority?

8. Let us now leave the atrium or churchyard and proceed into the holy place, the nave. This means teaching, works, and concepts of conscience which are really good. These are humility, meekness, gentleness, peace, fidelity, love, propriety, purity, and the like. These are not bound up with food and clothing, or with place, time, or person. For in these matters a layman may do more of value than a priest, a priest more than a pope, a woman more than a man, a boy more than an adult, a poor man more than a rich man, a naked man more than a man richly clad; more of value may be done in the field than in the home, more in the secret chamber than in the church. This is what God looks for. He who takes this course is traveling on the right road to heaven, apart from what he does or leaves undone in the atrium, for God does not ask him about what happened there, so long as he journeys rightly in this holy place. On the other hand, it is in the nave that we ought to make it a matter of conscience if anybody

blasphemes, swears, or speaks uncleanly, or if anybody hears, sees, does, or thinks anything improper. That constitutes the true conscience. It is here that a man strains camels and swallows gnats. It is here that a man gathers up the corn and casts away the chaff. It is here that Abel sacrifices a lamb and lets Cain sacrifice his straw. It is here that a man must fight against pride, avarice, immodesty, anger, hatred, and the like. Here must we keep ourselves fully occupied as long as we live, so as to forget the churchyard altogether and not want it. Here we see what is the proper road to piety and holiness, for we see for ourselves that those who practice this become truly righteous, but those who practice “churchyard” piety do not. That proves that this way and not the other must be the right way.

9. Some do these works in a living and selfless way. Others, however, set about them in the wrong way. They drag their dead works in with them on their backs and bury them. These are the ones who maintain a pious posture not of their own desire, but because they fear disgrace, punishment, or hell. For many a man is chaste. But if there were no shame or punishment attached to unchastity, then they would go in for it just like those who pay no regard to shame or punishment. In a similar way, many a man controls his anger or temper not gladly or because he loves gentleness, but because he could not very well vent his anger and does not like to confess it. Many a man even gives to the church and endows services, not from generosity but for the sake of glory or to satisfy his vanity. And this false ground is so deep that no saint has ever fathomed its bottom, but shows uncertainty about it and says, “Lord God, create in me a clean heart, and renew a right spirit or will in my inmost being” [Ps. 51:10]. Or again in Psalm 19[:12], “Lord, who can know all his faults? Cleanse me from secret sins.” God does not just want such works by themselves. He wants them to be performed gladly and willingly. And when there is no joy in doing them and the right will and motive are absent, then they are dead in God’s eyes. Such work is riddled with errors; it is service under compulsion, necessity, and duress and is not pleasing to God. As St. Paul says, “God loves a cheerful giver” [2 Cor. 9:7].

10. Such gladness, love, joy, and willingness are not found in the heart of any man on earth. As far as our nature goes, we are all sinners. We do not really want to be righteous; we only pretend because we are afraid of

being punished or disgraced, or because we seek our own ends and pleasure in these works. And no one is righteous solely and alone for God's sake, the way it ought to be. The natural man wants to and has to seek something whereby he may be righteous: he is not able and has no desire to be righteous for righteousness' sake. He does not allow himself to be content with righteousness, as he ought to do, but is determined by means of it either to earn something or escape something. But that is wrong in God's sight. As St. Paul concludes in Romans 3[:10], quoting Psalm 14[:1], "Therefore no man is righteous in God's sight." We ought not be good to earn something or avoid something, for that is to behave no better than a hireling, a bondsman, a journeyman, and not as willing children and heirs who are righteous for the sake of righteousness itself. Children and heirs are righteous only for righteousness' sake, that is, for God's own sake alone, for God himself is righteousness, truth, goodness, wisdom, holiness. He who seeks nothing other than holiness is the one who seeks God himself, and he will find him. He who seeks reward, however, and avoids pain, never finds him at all and makes reward his God. Whatever it is that makes a man do something, that motive is his god.

11. For these reasons a man has to go down on his knees for grace and deny himself. To this end, then, God has built the sanctuary and *Sanctum sanctorum* for us. Here he has set Christ before us and promised that he who believes in him and calls on his name shall at once receive the Holy Spirit. As he says in John 16, "The Father will send the Holy Spirit in my name." A man who denies himself and calls upon Christ in genuine trust is certain to receive the Holy Spirit. Where Christ's name is, there the Holy Spirit follows. He who calls on Christ in faith, however, possesses his name, and the Holy Spirit most certainly comes to him. When the Spirit comes, however, look, he makes a pure, free, cheerful, glad, and loving heart, a heart which is simply gratuitously righteous, seeking no reward, fearing no punishment. Such a heart is holy for the sake of holiness and righteousness alone and does everything with joy. Look! Here is really sound doctrine! This shows what a conscience is and what good works are! It is to go into the *Sanctum sanctorum*, to pass into the sanctuary. That is the last thing on earth that any man can do. This is the road to heaven. No man remains wicked; on the contrary, all become righteous. This road

is quite the opposite of the atrium, for it has no regard for the external things of the churchyard. Indeed, one sees only what enemies of this road they are and how dangerous they are.

12. Christ referred to this when he said in Mark [16:16], “He that believes shall be saved.” Faith alone saves. Why? Faith brings with it the Spirit, and he performs every good work with joy and love. In this way the Spirit fulfils God’s commandments, and brings a man his salvation, all of which is signified by the sanctuary and the nave (the *Sanctum* and the *Sanctum sanctorum*) being built in one and the same structure. But the atrium, the churchyard that lies apart, is to show that good works without faith cannot happen, and that faith without works cannot endure. A preacher should not try to separate the two, although he should push faith to the fore. Further, faith and good works may well exist without the continuance of those external things, such as sacred foods, sacred garments, sacred times, sacred places. It is for this reason that it is written in the Apocalypse that in the new dispensation the court would be handed over to the heathen [Rev. 11:2], because in the new covenant external matters of this kind should rest with the free and unfettered choice of each individual. Consequently, only the nave and the sanctuary would really be used.

Tragically has it come to pass that there has never been a people on the face of the earth that has had a bigger atrium, more holy foods, more holy garments, more holy days, more holy places, than Christians now have! It is the fault of the pope and of his canon law, in which so many worthless, dangerous, and aggravating regulations are laid down to the unspeakable detriment and obscuring of faith and good works. May God redeem us from them and protect us with his grace. Amen.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Martin Luther, *Luther’s Works, Vol. 44: The Christian in Society I*, ed. Jaroslav Jan Pelikan, Hilton C. Oswald, and Helmut T. Lehmann, vol. 44 (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1999), 231–242.