

The First Sunday after Trinity

If a person will not listen to preaching or read God's Word, but despises God's Word and community, and so dies and perishes in his sins, he cannot comfort himself with God's eternal election or receive His mercy. For Christ, in whom we are chosen, offers to all people His grace in the Word and holy Sacraments. He sincerely wants it to be heard. He has promised that where two or three are gathered together in His name and have His holy Word, He will be in their midst.

When such a person despises the instrument of the Holy Spirit and will not listen, no injustice is done to him if the Holy Spirit does not enlighten him but allows him to remain in the darkness of his unbelief and to perish. For it is written about this matter, "How often would I have gathered your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you would not!" (Matthew 23:37).

In this respect it may well be said that a person is not a stone or block. For a stone or block does not resist the person who moves it. It does not understand and doesn't care what is being done with it. But a person with his will resists God the Lord until he is converted. It is true that a person before his conversion is still a rational creature, having an understanding and will. However, he does not understand divine things. He does not have the will to desire something good and helpful. He can do nothing at all about his conversion (as has also been said above <frequently>), and is in this way much worse than a stone and block. For he resists God's Word and will, until God awakens him from the death of sin, enlightens, and renews him....

Regarding the idea that good works are harmful to salvation, we explain ourselves clearly as follows: If anyone wants to drag good works into the article of justification, rest his righteousness or trust for salvation on them, and merit God's grace and be saved by them, St. Paul himself answers, not us. He says and repeats it three times (Philippians 3:7–8)—such a person's works are not only useless and

a hindrance, but are also harmful. This is not the fault of the good works themselves, but of the false confidence placed in the works, contrary to God's clear Word.

However, it by no means follows that we are to say simply and flatly: "Good works are harmful to believers' salvation." In believers good works are signs of salvation when they are done from true causes and for true ends. That is, in the sense in which God requires them of the regenerate (Philippians 1:20). It is God's will and clear command that believers should do good works. The Holy Spirit works this in believers, and God is pleased with good works for Christ's sake. He promises a glorious reward for good works in this life and the life to come.

For this reason, too, this idea is rebuked and rejected in our churches. As a flat statement it is false and offensive. Discipline and decency might be impaired by it, and a barbarous, loose, secular, Epicurean life be introduced and strengthened. A person should avoid what is harmful to his salvation with the greatest diligence.

Christians should not be frightened away from good works, but should be admonished and urged to do them most diligently. Therefore, this bare proposition cannot and must not be tolerated, used, or defended in the Church....

Here, then, the apostle clearly says that God endured with much long-suffering the vessels of wrath. But He does not say that He made them vessels of wrath. If that had been His will, He would not have required any great long-suffering for it. The reason that they are fitted for destruction belongs to the devil and to people themselves, and not to God.

All preparation for condemnation is by the devil and a person, through sin. In no way does it come from God, who does not want any person to be damned. How, then, should He Himself prepare any person for condemnation? God is not a cause of sins. He is also not the cause of punishment or damnation. The only cause of

damnation is sin. "For the wages of sin is death." Just as God does not will sin and has no pleasure in sin, so He does not desire "the death of the wicked," nor has He pleasure in his condemnation. He is not willing "that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance" (2 Peter 3:9). So, too, it is written in Ezekiel 33:11, "As I live, declares the Lord God, I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but that the wicked turn from his way and live." (See also Ezekiel 18:23.) St. Paul testifies in clear words that from vessels of dishonor, vessels of honor may be made by God's power and working. He writes, "Therefore, if anyone cleanses himself from what is dishonorable, he will be a vessel for honorable use, set apart as holy, useful to the master of the house, ready for every good work" (2 Timothy 2:20-21). A person who should cleanse himself must first have been unclean and a vessel of dishonor. He says clearly about the vessels of mercy that the Lord Himself has prepared them for glory. He does not say this about the damned. They themselves, and not God, have prepared themselves as vessels of damnation.

Furthermore, remember that God punishes sin with sins. This means that because of their self-confidence, lack of repentance, and willful sins, He later punishes with hard-heartedness and blindness those who had been converted. This punishment should not be interpreted to mean that it never had been God's good pleasure that such persons should come to the knowledge of the truth and be saved. For both these facts are God's revealed will:

1. God will receive into grace all who repent and believe in Christ.

2. He also will punish those who willfully turn away from the holy commandment and again entangle themselves in the world's filth (2 Peter 2:20-21), decorate their hearts for Satan (Luke 11:24-26), and despise God's Spirit (Hebrews 10:29). They will be hardened, blinded, and eternally condemned if they persist in such things.