

Against the Robbing and Murdering Hordes of Peasants

Martin Luther, May 1525

In the former book I did not venture to judge the peasants, since they had offered to be set right and to be instructed, and Christ's command, in Matthew VII, says that we are not to judge. But before I look around they go on, and, forgetting their offer, they betake themselves to violence, and rob and rage and act like mad dogs. By this it is easy to see what they had in their false minds, and that the pretences which they made in their twelve articles, under the name of the Gospel, were nothing but lies. It is the devil's work that they are at, and in particular it is the work of the archdevil who rules at Mühlhausen, and does nothing else than stir up robbery, murder and bloodshed; as Christ says of him in John VIII, 'He was a murderer from the beginning.' Since, then, these peasants and wretched folk have let themselves be led astray, and do otherwise than they have promised, I too must write of them otherwise than I have written, and begin by setting their sin before them, as God commands Isaiah and Ezekiel, on the chance that some of them may learn to know themselves. Then I must instruct the rulers how they are to conduct themselves in these circumstances.

The peasants have taken on themselves the burden of three terrible sins against God and man, by which they have abundantly merited death in body and soul. In the first place they have sworn to be true and faithful, submissive and obedient, to their rulers, as Christ commands, when he says, 'Render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar's,' and in Romans XIII, 'Let everyone be subject unto the higher powers.' Because they are breaking this obedience, and are setting themselves against the higher powers, willfully and with violence, they have forfeited body and soul, as faithless, perjured, lying, disobedient knaves and scoundrels are wont to do. St. Paul passed this judgement on them in Romans XIII when he said, that they who resist the power will bring a judgement upon themselves. This saying will smite the peasants sooner or later, for it is God's will that faith be kept and duty done.

In the second place, they are starting a rebellion, and violently robbing and plundering monasteries and castles which are not theirs, by which they have a second time deserved death in body and soul, if only as highwaymen and murderers. Besides, any man against whom it can be proved that he is a maker of sedition is outside the law of God and Empire, so that the first who can slay him is doing right and well. For if a man is an open rebel every man is his judge and executioner, just as when a fire starts, the first to put it out is the best man. For rebellion is not simple

murder, but is like a great fire, which attacks and lays waste a whole land. Thus rebellion brings with it a land full of murder and bloodshed, makes widows and orphans, and turns everything upside down, like the greatest disaster. Therefore let everyone who can, smite, slay and stab, secretly or openly, remembering that nothing can be more poisonous, hurtful or devilish than a rebel. It is just as when one must kill a mad dog; if you do not strike him, he will strike you, and a whole land with you.

In the third place, they cloak this terrible and horrible sin with the Gospel, call themselves 'Christian brethren', receive oaths and homage, and compel people to hold with them to these abominations. Thus they become the greatest of all blasphemers of God and slanderers of his holy Name, serving the devil, under the outward appearance of the Gospel, thus earning death in body and soul ten times over. I have never heard of a more hideous sin. I suspect that the devil feels the Last Day coming and therefore undertakes' such an unheard-of-act, as though saying to himself, 'This is the last, therefore it shall be the worst; I will stir up the dregs and knock out the bottom.' God will guard us against him! See what a mighty prince the devil is, how he has the world in his hands and can throw everything into confusion, when he can so quickly catch so many thousands of peasants, deceive them, blind them, harden them and throw them into revolt, and do with them whatever his raging fury undertakes.

It does not help the peasants, when they pretend that, according to Genesis i and ii, all things were created free and common, and that all of us alike have been baptized. For under the New Testament Moses does not count; for there stands our Master, Christ, and subjects us, with our bodies and our property, to the emperor and the law of this world, when he says, 'Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's.' Paul, too, says, in Romans XII, to all baptized Christians, 'Let every man be subject to the power', and Peter says, 'Be subject to every ordinance of man.' By this doctrine of Christ we are bound to live, as the Father commands from heaven, saying, 'This is My beloved Son; hear him.' For baptism does not make men free in body and property, but in soul; and the Gospel does not make goods common, except in the case of those who do of their own free will what the apostles and disciples did in Acts IV. They did not demand, as do our insane peasants in their raging, that the goods of others - of a Pilate and a Herod - should be common, but only their own goods. Our peasants, however, would have other men's goods common, and keep their own goods for themselves. Fine Christians these! I think there is not a devil left in hell; they have all gone into the peasants. Their raving has gone beyond all measure.

Since the peasants, then, have brought both God and man down upon them and are already so many times guilty of death in body and soul, since they submit to no court and wait for no verdict, but only rage on, I must

instruct the worldly governors how they are to act in the matter with a clear conscience.

First. I will not oppose a ruler who, even though he does not tolerate the Gospel, will smite and punish these peasants without offering to submit the case to judgement. For he is within his rights, since the peasants are not contending any longer for the Gospel, but have become faithless, perjured, disobedient, rebellious murderers, robbers and blasphemers, whom even heathen rulers have the right and power to punish; nay, it is their duty to punish them, for it is just for this purpose that they bear the sword, and are 'the ministers of God upon him that doeth evil'.

But if the ruler is a Christian and tolerates the Gospel, so that the peasants have no appearance of a case against him, he should proceed with fear. First he must take the matter to God, confessing that we have deserved these things, and remembering that God may, perhaps, have thus aroused the devil as a punishment upon all Germany. Then he should humbly pray for help against the devil, for 'we are battling not only against flesh and blood, but against spiritual wickedness in the air', and this must be attacked with prayer. Then, when our hearts are so turned to God that we are ready to let his divine will be done, whether he will or will not have us to be princes and lords, we must go beyond our duty, and offer the mad peasants an opportunity to come to terms, even though they are not worthy of it. Finally, if that does not help, then swiftly grasp the sword.

For a prince and lord must remember in this case that he is God's minister and the servant of his wrath (Romans XIII), to whom the sword is committed for use upon such fellows, and that he sins as greatly against God, if he does not punish and protect and does not fulfil the duties of his office, as does one to whom the sword has not been committed when he commits a murder. If he can punish and does not - even though the punishment consist in the taking of life and the shedding of blood - then he is guilty of all the murder and all the evil which these fellows commit, because, by willful neglect of the divine command, he permits them to practice their wickedness, though he can prevent it, and is in duty bound to do so. Here, then, there is no time for sleeping; no place for patience or mercy. It is the time of the sword, not the day of grace.

The rulers, then, should go on unconcerned, and with a good conscience lay about them as long as their hearts still beat. It is to their advantage that the peasants have a bad conscience and an unjust cause, and that any peasant who is killed is lost in body and soul and is eternally the devil's. But the rulers have a good conscience and a just cause; and can, therefore, say to God with all assurance of heart, 'Behold, my God, thou hast appointed me prince or lord, of this I can have no doubt; and though thou hast committed to me the sword over the evildoers (Romans XIII). It is thy

Word, and cannot lie. I must fulfill my office, or forfeit thy grace. It is also plain that these peasants have deserved death many times over, in thine eyes and the eyes of the world, and have been committed to me for punishment. If it be thy will that I be slain by them, and that my rulership be taken from me and destroyed, so be it: thy will be done. So shall I die and be destroyed fulfilling thy commandment and thy Word, and shall be found obedient to thy commandment and my office. Therefore will I punish and smite as long as my heart bears. Thou wilt judge and make things right.'

Thus it may be that one who is killed fighting on the ruler's side may be a true martyr in the eyes of God, if he fights with such a conscience as I have just described, for he is in God's Word and is obedient to him. On the other hand, one who perishes on the peasants' side is an eternal brand of hell, for he bears the sword against God's Word and is disobedient to him, and is a member of the devil. And even though it happens that the peasants gain the upper hand (which God forbid!) for to God all things are possible, and we do not know whether it may be his will, through the devil, to destroy all order and rule and cast the world upon a desolate heap, as a prelude to the Last Day, which cannot be far off - nevertheless, they may die without worry and go to the scaffold with a good conscience, who are found exercising their office of the sword. They may leave to the devil the kingdom of the world, and take in exchange the everlasting kingdom. Strange times, these, when a prince can win heaven with bloodshed, better than other men with prayer!

Finally, there is another thing that ought to move the rulers. The peasants are not content to be themselves the devil's own, but they force and compel many good people against their wills to join their devilish league, and so make them partakers of all of their own wickedness and damnation. For anyone who consents to what they do, goes to the devil with them, and is guilty of all the evil deeds that they commit; though he has to do this because he is so weak in faith that he does not resist them. A pious Christian ought to suffer a hundred deaths, rather than give a hair's breadth of consent to the peasants' cause. O how many martyrs could now be made by the bloodthirsty peasants and the murdering prophets! Now the rulers ought to have mercy on these prisoners of the peasants, and if they had no other reason to use the sword, with a good conscience, against the peasants, and to risk their own lives and property in fighting them, there would be reason enough, and more than enough, in this - that thus they would be rescuing and helping these souls, whom the peasants have forced into their devilish league and who, without willing it, are sinning so horribly, and who must be damned. For truly these souls are in purgatory; nay, in the bonds of hell and the devil.

Therefore, dear lords, here is a place where you can release, rescue, help.

Have mercy on these poor people [whom the peasants have compelled to join them]. Stab, smite, slay, whoever can. If you die in doing it, well for you! A more blessed death can never be yours, for you die obeying the divine Word and commandment in Romans XIII, and in loving service of your neighbor, whom you are rescuing from the bonds of hell and of the devil. And so I beg everyone who can to flee from the peasants as from the devil himself; those who do not flee, I pray that God will enlighten and convert. As for those who are not to be converted, God grant that they may have neither fortune nor success. To this let every pious Christian say Amen! For this prayer is right and good, and pleases God; this I know. If anyone think this too hard, let him remember that rebellion is intolerable and that the destruction of the world is to be expected every hour.

Source:

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