The series is intended to make available to students the most important texts required for an understanding of the history of political thought. The scholarship of the present generation has greatly expanded our sense of the range of authors indispensable for such an understanding, and the series will reflect those developments. It will also include a number of less well-known works, in particular those needed to establish the intellectual contexts that in turn help to make sense of the major texts. The principal aim, however, will be to produce new versions of the major texts themselves, based on the most up-to-date scholarship. The preference will always be for complete texts, and a special feature of the series will be to complement individual texts, within the compass of a single volume, with subsidiary contextual material. Each volume will contain an introduction on the historical identity and contemporary significance of the work or works concerned, as well as a chronology, notes on further reading and (where appropriate) brief biographical sketches of significant individuals mentioned in each text.

For a list of titles published in the series, please see end of book
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and they can do it like any other job. [376:] and get their living by it. As has already been said, love of one’s neighbour has no regard for self, neither does it consider whether what is to be done is important or trivial, so long as it is for the good of one’s neighbour or the community. 66

Finally, you might ask: can’t I use the Sword for myself and my own concerns, provided I am not out for my own good, but merely intend that evil should be punished? My answer is that such a miracle is not impossible, but very unusual and dangerous. 67 It may happen where the Spirit is present in fullness. We do indeed read in Judges 15[11] that Samson said: ‘I have done unto them as they did unto me.’ But against this is Proverbs 24[29]: ‘Do not say: I will do unto him, as he has done unto me.’ And Proverbs 20[22]: ‘Do not say: I will repay his wickedness.’ Samson was required by God to plague the Philistines and save the children of Israel. And even though he used his private concerns as a pretext for declaring war against them, he nevertheless did not do it to avenge himself or to seek his own advantage, but to help [the Israelites] and punish the Philistines. But no one can follow this precedent unless he be a true Christian, filled with the [Holy] Spirit. Where [ordinary human] reason wants to do likewise, it no doubt pretends that it is not seeking its own advantage, but the claim will be false from top to bottom. The thing is impossible without grace. So if you want to act like Samson, then first become like Samson.

Part Two

How far secular authority extends

We now come to the main part of this sermon. We have learnt that there must be secular authority on this earth and how a Christian and salutary use may be made of it. Now we must establish how long its reach is, and how far it may stretch out its arm without overreaching itself and trenching upon God’s kingdom and government. This is something about which we need to be quite clear. When [secular government] is given too much freedom of action, the harm that results is unbearable and horrifying, but to have it confined within too narrow a compass is also harmful. In the one case there is too much punishment, in the other too little. But it is more tolerable to err on the side of the latter; it is always better that a villain should live than that a just* man should be killed. There always are, and always must be, villains in the world, but there are few just men.

[377:] The first point to be noted is that the two parts into which the children of Adam are divided (as we have said above), the one the kingdom of God 68 under Christ, the other the kingdom of the world 69 under [secular] authority, have each their own kind of law. 70 Everyday experience sufficiently shows us that every kingdom must have its own laws and that no kingdom or government can survive without law. Secular government has laws that extend no further than the body, goods and outward, earthly matters. But where the soul is concerned, God neither can nor will allow anyone but himself to rule. And so, where secular authority takes it upon itself to legislate for the soul, it trespasses on [what belongs to] God’s government, and merely seduces and ruins souls. I intend to make this so unambiguously clear that no one can fail to grasp it, in order that our lords the princes and bishops may see the folly of trying to compel belief in this or that by means of laws and commands.

If someone imposes a man-made law on souls, compelling belief in what he wants to be believed, then there will probably be no word of God to justify it. 68 If there is nothing in God’s Word about it, then it is uncertain whether this is what God wants. If he himself has not commanded something, there is no way of establishing that it is pleasing to him. Or rather, we can be sure that it is not pleasing to him, for he will have our faith grounded solely in his divine Word; as he says in Matthew 18 [in fact 16:18]: ‘On this rock I will build my church.’ 72 And John 10[27]: ‘My sheep hear my voice and know me, but the strangers’ voice they hear not, but flee from them.’ From this it follows

66 Gemeinde, Luther’s generic term for a human collectivity, be it a congregation, parish, city or polity.

67 Another crabbled sentence: the meaning is, I take it, such a thing is not impossible, but so rare as to be almost a miracle, and it is dangerous to act in this way.
that secular authority drives souls to eternal damnation with such blasphemous commands. For this is to compel people to believe that something is certain to please God, when it is not certain at all; on the contrary, it is certain that it displeases God, since there is no clear [text in] God's Word to warrant it. For whosoever believes something to be right, which is in fact wrong or uncertain, denies the truth, which is God himself, and believes lies and error... 30

It is therefore utter folly for them to order us to believe the Church, the [Church] Fathers and the Councils, even though there is no [express] Word of God [for what they tell us to believe]. It is the apostles of the devil that issue that sort of command, not the Church. The Church commands nothing except what it is certain is God's Word. As St Peter says [1 Pet. 4:11]: 'Whoever speaks, let him speak according to God's word.' But they will never be able to show that the decrees of Councils are the Word of God. And what is even more ridiculous is when it is argued that, after all, this is what kings and princes and people generally believe. But, my friends, we are not baptized in the name of kings and princes and people in general, but in the name of Christ and of God himself. And our title is not 'kings' or 'princes' or 'people in general', but Christians. [378: No one can or should lay down commandments for the soul, except those who can point it on the way to heaven. But no human being can do that; only God. And therefore in those things which concern the salvation of souls, nothing is to be taught or accepted except God's Word.]

Another important point is this. However stupid they are, they must admit that they have no power over the soul. For no human being can kill the soul or bring it to life, or lead it to heaven or to hell. And if they will not believe us, then Christ will show it clearly enough when he says in Matthew 10:28: 'Do not be afraid of those that kill the body and after that can do nothing more. Fear rather him who, after he kills the body, has the power to condemn to hell.' Surely that is clear enough: the soul is taken out of the hands of any human being whatsoever, and is placed exclusively under the power of God. Now tell me this: would anyone in his right mind give orders where he has no authority? You might as well command the moon to shine at your behest. What sense would there be in it, if the people of Leipzig were to lay down laws for us here in Wittenberg, or vice versa? Anyone who tried it, would be sent a

dose of hellebore by way of thanks, to clear their heads and cure their cold. But this is just what our Emperor31 and our prudent princes are doing; they let the Pope, the bishops and the sophists lead them, the blind leading the blind, commanding their subjects to believe as they see fit, without God's Word. And then they still want to retain the title of 'Christian Princes', which God forbid.

Another way of understanding this point is that each and every authority can only act, and ought only to act, where it can see, know, judge, adjudge and change things. What kind of judge would it be that judges blindly in matters where he can neither hear nor see? But tell me this: how can a human being see, know, judge and change hearts? That is reserved to God alone. As Psalm 7:10 says: 'God searches the heart and bowels.'32 And again [Ps. 7:9]: 'The Lord is judge over the people', and Acts 10 [in fact 1:24; 15:8]: 'God knows the heart.' And Jeremiah 1 [in fact 17:9]: 'Wicked and unsearchable is the human heart. Who can search it? I the Lord, who search hearts and bowels.' A court has to have an exact knowledge of what it is to judge. But people's thoughts and minds cannot be manifest to anyone but God. And therefore it is impossible and futile to command or coerce someone to believe this or that. A different skill is needed here; force will not do. I am surprised at these lunatics [379:], seeing that they themselves have a saying: De occultis non indicat ecclesia; the Church does not judge in secret matters. Now, if even the Church, the spiritual government, only rules over matters that are public and open, by what right does secular authority, in its folly, presume to judge a thing as secret, spiritual, hidden as faith?

Each must decide at his own peril what he is to believe, and must see to it that he believes rightly. Other people cannot go to heaven or hell on my behalf, or open or close [the gates to either] for me. And just as little can they believe or not believe on my behalf, or force my faith or unbelief. How he believes is a matter for each individual's conscience, and this does not diminish [the authority of] secular governments. They ought therefore to content themselves with attending to their own business, and allow people to believe what they can, and what they want, and they must use no coercion in this matter against anyone.

30 The text continues pellucidally: 'holding that to be right [or just] which is wrong [or unjust, unworthy].'

31 Somewhat incautiously Luther here inculpates the Emperor in person; in Warnung an seine lieben Deutschen (Warning to his dear Germans), 1531, he went to some lengths to exonerate the Emperor, blaming instead the later's counsellors.

32 Luther is using an idiom which means: to submit to searching enquiry.
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Faith is free, and no one can be compelled to believe. More precisely, so far from being something secular authority ought to create and enforce, faith is something that God works in the spirit. Hence that common saying which also occurs in Augustine: no one can or ought to be forced to believe anything against his will.

Those blind and wretched people do not realize what a pointless and impossible thing they are attempting. However strict their orders, and however much they rage, they cannot force people to do more than obey by word and (outward) deed; they cannot compel the heart, even if they were to tear themselves apart trying. There is truth in the saying: Thought is free. What is the effect of their trying to force people to believe in their hearts? All they achieve is to force people with weak consciences to lie, to perjure themselves, saying one thing while in their hearts they believe another. And in this way [rulers] load on themselves the horrifying sins done by others, because all the lies and perjuries such [people with] weak consciences utter, when they are spoken under compulsion, fall back on the one who compels their being done. It would be much easier, although it may mean allowing their subjects to fall into error, just to let them err, rather than to force them to lie and profess [with their mouths] what they do not believe in their hearts. And it is not right to prevent one evil by doing another, even worse, one.

Do you want to know why God has ordained that the secular princes must come to grief in this horrible fashion? I'll tell you. God has given them perverse minds, and he means to make an end of them, just as he will make an end of their Spiritual Lordships. For my ungracious lords, the pope and bishops, should be [real] bishops and preach the

Word of God; but they have left off doing so and have become secular princes, ruling by means of laws that concern only life and goods. They have managed to turn everything upside down: they ought to rule souls with God's Word, inwardly, and instead they rule castles, towns, countries and peoples, outwardly, and torment souls with unspeakable murders. And the secular lords, who should rule countries and peoples outwardly, do not do so either; instead, the only thing they know how to do is to poll and fleece, heap one tax on another, let loose a bear here, a wolf there. There is no good faith or honesty to be found amongst them; thieves and villains behave better than they do, and secular government is sunk as low as the government of the spiritual tyrants. God has made them to be of perverse minds and has deprived them of their senses, so that they want to rule spiritually over souls, just as the spiritual authorities want to rule in a worldly manner. And [God's purpose in all this is] that they should thoughtlessly pile up on themselves the sins of others, earn his hatred and that of mankind, until they are ruined along with bishops, parsons and monks, all knights together. And then they blame everything on the Gospel, blaspheming God instead of confessing their guilt, and saying that it is our preaching that has done this, whereas it is their perverse wickedness that has brought it on them, and they deserved it and continue to deserve it; the Romans said just the same, when they were destroyed. And here you have God's judgement on these great men. But they do not realize it, in order that God's grave counsels may not be frustrated by their repentance.

But you will reply: doesn't St Paul say in Romans 13:1: 'Let every soul be subject to power and superiority? And Peter, that we are to be subject to every human ordinance? (1 Pet. 2:13)? You are quite right,
and this is grist to my mill. St Paul is speaking of superiors* and power*. But I have just shown that no one has power over the soul except God. St Paul cannot be speaking of obedience where there is no power [entitled to obedience]. It follows that he is not talking about faith and is not saying that worldly authority ought to have the right to command faith. What he is talking about is outward goods, about commanding and ruling on earth. And he makes clear that this is what he means when he lays down a limit to both power and obedience: 'Give to each what is due to him, tax where tax is due, customs duties where customs duties are due, honour where honour, fear where fear' [Romans 13:7].

In other words secular obedience and power extend only to taxes, duties, honour, fear, outward things. To the same effect [381]: 'Power is not a terror to good, but to wicked works' [Romans 13:3]. He is setting a limit to power: it is not to have mastery over faith and God's Word, but over evil-doing.

St Peter means the same when he speaks of 'human ordinance'. Now, human ordinance cannot extend to heaven and the soul, but only to the earth and the outward dealings of men with one another, matters about which men can see, know, judge, pass sentence, punish and acquit.

Christ himself summarizes all this with the admirable distinction [he draws] in Matthew 22 [21]: ‘Give to the Emperor the things that are the Emperor’s and to God the things that are God’s.’ If the emperor's power extended to God's kingdom and God's power, and were not something distinct and separate, there would be no point in distinguishing the two. But, as has been said, the soul is not subject to the emperor's power. He can neither teach nor guide it; he cannot kill it or bring it to life; he cannot bind or loose it, judge it or sentence it, hold it or release it. And yet he would need to [be competent to do all of these] if he were to have the power to legislate for it and issue orders to it. But as to goods and honour, here is his proper domain. For such things are subject to his power.

David long ago summarized all this in a short, fine saying in Psalm 113 [in fact 115:16]: 'He has given heaven to the Lord of heaven, but the earth he has given to the children of men.' In other words, as regards whatever is on earth, and belongs to the temporal, earthly kingdom*, man can have power from God. But whatever belongs to

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heaven and to the eternal kingdom, is subject to the Lord of heaven alone. And Moses was mindful of this when he says in Genesis 1 [26]: ‘God said: let us create men, that shall rule over the animals and the fish in the water and the birds in the air.’ All this conceives no more than outward rule to men. And in sum, what is meant is, as St Peter says in Acts 4 [in fact 5:29]: 'We must obey God rather than men.' And with this he is evidently setting a limit to secular authority. For if we were bound to do everything those with authority in the world tell us to do, there would be no point in saying 'We must obey God rather than men.'

So, if a prince or a secular lord commands you to adhere to the papacy, to believe this or that, or to surrender books, then your answer should be: it is not fitting for Lucifer to sit next to God. My good Lord, I owe you obedience with my life and goods. Command me what lies within the limits of your authority, and I will obey. But if you command me to believe, or to surrender my books, I will not obey. For then you [will have] become a tyrant and overreach[ed] yourself, commanding where you have neither right or power*. If he then takes away your goods and punishes you for your disobedience, then blessed are you, and you should thank God for counting you worthy to suffer for the sake of his Word. Let the fool rage; [382:] he shall surely find his judge. But I say to you: if you do not resist him and let him take away your faith or your books, then you will truly have denied God.

Let me give you an example. In Meissen, Bavaria and the Mark, and in other places too, the tyrants have issued a decree, ordering [all] copies of the New Testament to be surrendered to their officers. What subjects [of these rulers] must do is this: they must not surrender a page, not even a letter, on pain of their soul. Whoever does so, is surrendering Christ to Herod; is a murderer of Christ, as Herod was. They should suffer their houses to be forcibly* [mit Gewalt] invaded and ransacked, whether it is their books or their goods that are taken. Evil is not to be resisted, but suffered. Of course, you should not approve what is done, or lift a finger or walk a single step to aid and abet them in any way, nor should you obey. These tyrants act as worldly* princes are meant to act. Worldly princes is what they are. But the

* Luther is here adopting the more cautious version of the scholastic doctrine concerning *ultra suas*, according to which a ruler does not cease to be a ruler for ultra suas acts, but is simply to be disobeyed in respect of these particular acts.

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4* I have preserved Luther's translation of the Vulgate's *Caesar as Kaiser* (Emperor), since I think he welcomed the anachronistic implicit reference to the Holy Roman Emperor. Cp fn. 31.

4 In this passage, translating *selbstlich* as 'secular' would lose altogether the connection with the following lines, where the connection with the 'world' (Welt) and 'worldliness' is explicitly made. Cf. Glossary: secular.
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world is God’s enemy, and therefore they must do what is at variance with God, but congenial to the world, in order to retain their honour and remain worldly princes. And so you should not be surprised at their raging and stupidity against the Gospel. They must be true to the titles they bear.

You should know that a prudent prince has been a rare bird in the world since the beginning of time, and a just prince an even rarer one. As a rule, princes are the greatest fools of the worst criminals on earth, and the worst is always to be expected, and little good hoped for, from them, especially in what regards God and the salvation of souls. For these are God’s jailers and hangmen, and his divine wrath makes use of them to punish the wicked and maintain outward peace. Our God is a mighty lord, and this is why he must have such noble, well-born, rich hangmen and beadle’s, and will have them receive riches, honour and fear from everyone in heaped measure. It is his divine will and pleasure that we should call his hangmen ‘gracious lords’, fall at their feet and be subject to them in all humility, so long as they do not overreach themselves by wanting to become pastors instead of hangmen. If a prince should happen to be prudent, just or a Christian, then that is one of the great miracles and a most precious sign of divine favour on the land. But in the ordinary run of things, what Isaiah says in 3[4] holds good: ‘I will give them children for princes, and gawpers shall be their lords.’ And Hosea 13[11]: ‘Shall give you a king in my wrath, and out of disfavour take him away again.’ [38:3] The world is too wicked to deserve princes much wiser and more just than this. Frogs must have storks.

But you will again object that secular authority does not compel belief; it merely, by the use of outward means, prevents people from being led astray by false doctrine. How else could heretics be restrained? The answer is: it is for bishops to do that; that task has been assigned to them and not to rulers. The use of force can never prevent heresy. Preventing it requires a different sort of skill; this is not a battle that can be fought with the sword. This is where God’s Word must fight. And if that does not win, then secular power can certainly not succeed either, even if it were to fill the world with blood. Heresy is a spiritual thing; it cannot be struck down with steel, burnt with fire or drowned in water. God’s Word alone can conquer here; as St Paul says in 2 Corinthians 10[47]: ‘Our weapons are not carnal ones, but are mighty in God, to destroy all the counsels and eminences that rise up

against the knowledge of God, and they take captive all the senses in the service of Christ.’

And indeed neither faith nor heresy are ever stronger than when mere force, rather than the Word of God is used against them. For [in that case] people take it for granted that force is not being used in the cause of right, and that those who use it are acting unjustly, precisely because they are acting without God’s Word and because they cannot think of any other way of furthering their aims except by mere force, like animals that have no use of reason. Even in secular matters force cannot be used unless guilt has first been established by reference to the law. And it is all the more impossible to use force without right and God’s Word in such high, spiritual matters [as heresy]. What clever princes they are! They mean to drive out heresy, but cannot attack it except with something that gives it new vigour, bringing themselves under suspicion and justifying the heretics. My friend: if you want to drive out heresy, then you must first hit on a way of uprooting it from the heart, and breaking its hold on the will. And you will not do that by using force; you will merely strengthen it. What point is there in reinforcing heresy in hearts, even if you do weaken it outwardly by shutting up people’s mouths or forcing them to pretend? God’s Word, on the other hand, enlightens the heart and with that all heresy and error will fall away by themselves.

It is of this way of destroying heresy that the prophet Isaiah spoke when he prophesied (Isaiah 11[4]): ‘He will strike the earth with the rods of his mouth, and will kill the godless with the spirit of his lips.’ [38:4] You can see from this that it is words that will bring about the death and conversion of the godless. In short, such princes and tyrants do not know that fighting against heresy is fighting against the devil who takes possession of hearts by means of error. As Paul says in Ephesians 6[12]: ‘Our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against spiritual evil, against the princes that rule this darkness etc.’ And therefore as long as the devil is not rejected and driven out of the heart, destroying his instruments by fire and sword has as much effect on him as fighting against it with a straw would have on lightning. Job dealt with all this

43 In this sentence and the three following, Luther is contrasting Gewalt, which is here translated as ‘mere force’ (although Luther also uses it to mean ‘power’ and ‘authority’ [see the Introduction, p. xv]), and Recht, which may mean either ‘what is right’, ‘justice’, or ‘law’. Since a translator is forced to make a distinction in express words where Luther makes none, the verbal continuality of Luther’s original is lost. See Glossary: law.
amply when he said (Job 4:18): ‘The devil looks on iron as mere straw and fears no power on earth.’ And experience teaches the same. For even if all Jews and heretics are burnt, no one is vanquished or converted thereby, or ever will be.

But a world such as this one must have this sort of rulers; heaven forbid that anyone should ever do their duty! Bishops must abandon the Word of God and make no attempt to rule souls with it. Instead they must command the secular princes to rule souls by the sword. The secular princes for their part must allow usury, robbery, adultery, murder and other kinds of wickedness to go unchecked, and indeed commit such things themselves, and leave it to the bishops to punish them with letters of excommunication. And in this way everything is stood on its head; souls are ruled by steel, bodies by letters. So worldly princes rule spiritually, and spiritual princes rule in a worldly manner. What else is there for the devil to do in this world, except to play tricks on his subjects and masquerade as in a carnival? These, then, are our ‘Christian princes’, the ‘defenders of the faith’ and ‘hammers of the Turks’. Able men, on whom we can rely! And they most certainly will achieve something by their admirable cleverness: they will break their necks and reduce their lands and subjects to misery and penury.

I have a piece of good advice for these misguided people. Beware of the little saying in Psalm 106 (in fact 107,40): Effundis contemptum super principes [I ex puro ut his contempt on princes]. I swear to God: if you ignore this little text, and it comes into effect against you, you are lost, even if every one of you were as mighty as the Turk; and all your snorting and raving will not help you. To a considerable extent it has happened already. There are few princes whom people do not regard as fools or criminals, and their actions bear out that judgement; the common man is becoming knowledgeable and a mighty plague on princes (which God calls contempt) is spreading amongst the common people and the common man. My fear is that there will be no way to stop it, unless princes begin to behave like princes and to rule reasonably and cautiously. People [385:] will not put up with your tyranny and arbitrariness any longer; they cannot and they do not want to. My good lords and masters, take heed. God [himself] will not put up with it any longer. This is no longer the world it was when you hunted

and drove your people like game. So put aside your blasphemy and violence; take care that you act justly and let God’s Word have free passage; it will, it must and it should, and you cannot stop it. If there is heresy, then let it be overcome by God’s Word; that is how it should be. But if you go about drawing the sword on every occasion, then beware of someone coming along who will tell you to put your sword away, and not in God’s name either.45

But what if you were to say: how are Christians to be ruled outwardly, seeing that there ought to be no secular Sword amongst them? [Surely] there must be superiors amongst Christians too? My answer is that there neither can, nor ought to be any superiors amongst Christians. Rather, each is equally subject to all the rest, as St Paul says in Romans 12:10: ‘Each is to regard the next person as his superior.’ And Peter (1 Pet. 5:5): ‘Be ye all subject one to another.’ And this is what Christ wants (Luke 14:10): ‘If you are invited to a wedding, take the lowest place of all.’ Among Christians there is no superior except Christ alone. And how can there be superiority [or inferiority] when all are equal, and all have the same right, power, goods and honour? No one desires to be another’s superior, for everyone wants to be the inferior of the rest. How could one establish superiors amongst such people, even if one wanted to? Nature will not tolerate superiors when no one wants to be, or can be, a superior. But where there are no people of [the latter] sort, there are no true Christians either.

What of priests and bishops? Their government is not one of superiority or power, but rather a service and an office. For they are not higher or better than other Christians. And therefore they ought not to impose any laws or commands on others without their consent and permission. Their government, on the contrary, is nothing but furtherance of the Word of God, guiding Christians and overcoming heresy by means of it. As has been said, Christians can be governed by nothing except the Word of God alone. For Christians must be governed in faith, not by outward works. But faith cannot come by human words, only by God’s Word. As St Paul says in Romans 10:17: ‘Faith comes by hearing, but hearing comes through the Word of God.’

45 I think this is an allusion to Christ’s words to Peter in the Garden of Gethsemane, Matthew 26:52; Luther is saying that it will not be Christ who tells rulers to put away their swords, but the common man.

46 This is a reference to Luther’s crucial (and highly ambiguous) doctrine of the ‘priesthood of all believers’, on which see the Introduction, pp. 1–16.
Those who do not have faith are not Christians and do not belong to Christ’s kingdom, but to the kingdom of the world, to be coerced and ruled by the Sword and [386:] by external government. Christians [on the other hand] do everything that is good, without any compulsion, and have all they need in God’s Word. But of this I have written much and often elsewhere.

Part Three

Now that we know how far [the competence of] secular authority extends, it is time to consider how a prince should go about exercising it. [I am writing this] for the sake of those who want to be Christian rulers and lords, and who give some thought to their own salvation; there are very few of that sort. Christ himself describes the character of secular princes when he says in Luke 2:2[25]: "The secular princes rule, and those who are superiors use force".47 For when they are born or chosen as rulers, they imagine themselves entitled to be served, and to rule by force. Now, whoever wants to be a Christian prince must abandon any intention of lordship over people and using force. For all life that is lived and sought after for one’s own benefit is cursed and damned: damned are all the works that do not come from love. And the works that spring from love are those that are not done for one’s own pleasure, benefit, honour, comfort and well-being, but rather those which are aimed wholly at the benefit, honour and well-being of others.

And hence I shall say nothing here about worldly matters and laws. There are far too many law-books already and the topic is [too] broad. In any case, if a prince is not himself more prudent than those who advise him about the law, and does not understand more than is to be found in the texts of the law, he will surely govern as the proverb (Prov. 28:16[6]) says: 'A prince who lacks prudence shall oppress many with injustice.' For however good or equitable the laws might be, they are all subject to this exception: they cannot prevail against necessity.48 Therefore the prince must keep the laws as firmly under his own

47 A very strange translation, not the one that occurs in later versions of Luther’s New Testament.

48 A commonly used maxim, originally from Canon Law: Decretum Gratiani Pr. 11, causa 1 qu. 1, dict. sexta cap. 39, pars v: Quia enim necessitas non habet legem, sed ipsa sibi facit legem...
people are mine; I shall do as I please. But rather: I belong to the people and to the land; I ought to do what is advantageous for them. I am not to see how I can lord it over them, but how they may be protected and defended, and enjoy the blessings of peace. He is to set Christ before his eyes and tell himself: here is Christ, the greatest of princes, and yet he came to serve me. He did not set about getting power, wealth and honour from me; he considered only my neediness, and used all his efforts to secure power, wealth and honour for me through him and in him. And I shall do the same. I shall not seek my own advantage at my subjects' hands, but theirs, and I will serve them in my office, protect them, listen to them, defend them, and govern only for their benefit, not for mine. A prince should therefore dispense with his might and superiority, as far as his heart and mind are concerned, and attend to the needs of his subjects as if they were his own. [388] For this is what Christ has done for us, and these are the real works of Christian love.

To this, the reply will be: in that case, who would be a prince? The prince's office and station* would be the most wretched on earth, full of toil, trouble and discomfort. And what would happen to all the princely delights, the dancing, the hunting, racing, gaming and all the other worldly* pleasures of that sort. My rejoinder is that I am not telling secular princes how to live, but how to be Christians, to attain heaven. Everyone knows that a prince is a rare bird in heaven. Nor am I saying all this because I hold out hope that the secular princes will accept it. I say it in case there is anyone at all among them who would like to be a Christian and wants to know what he should do. But of one thing I am certain: God's Word will not be guided and twisted to suit princes; rather it is princes who are to be guided by his Word. It is enough for me if I show that it is not impossible to be both a prince and a Christian, even if it is rare and difficult. And if princes did take care that their dancing and hunting and racing did no harm to their subjects, and in other respects, too, exercised their office towards them in love, God would not be so hard as to begrudge them their dancing and hunting and racing. But such princes would soon find out that if they were to take care of their subjects as their office demands, many a dance, race and game would have to go by the board.

Second: a prince should beware of those mighty potentates, his councillors. His attitude to them should be to despise no one, but also to trust no one, at least not to the extent of leaving everything to him. For God cannot tolerate either [contempt or total trust]. He once spoke through an ass, and therefore no human being, however lowly, is to be held in contempt. But equally he let the greatest of the angels fall from heaven, and therefore no man is to be [wholly] trusted, however wise, saintly and great he might be. But all are to be heard and the prince shall wait to see through which of them God will speak and act. For the greatest evil at the courts of princes is when a prince hands over his understanding as a captive to the great men and the flatterers, and neglects to supervise things himself. If a prince is deficient here, and fools around, it is not just one person who suffers but the whole country. And therefore a prince is to place his trust in the mighty and to let them act, but in such a way as to keep the reins in his own hands. He ought not to think himself safe or allow himself to fall asleep, but should see for himself, traversing his territories on horseback (as Jehosaphat did), keeping an eye on his governors and judges. That way he will find out for himself [389:] that no one is to be trusted completely. You should not think that anyone else will take as good care of your goods and lands as you will, unless he is filled with the spirit and a good Christian. A natural man will not do it. But you do not know whether any [particular] individual is a Christian or how long he will remain one, and therefore you cannot rely on anyone completely.

You must be especially wary of those who say to you: my gracious Lord, why does Your Grace not place more trust in me than this? Who shall serve Your Grace etc.? Such a man is most certainly not pure [in his intentions] and his aim is to become master of the country and to make you his puppet. For if he were an upright and just* Christian, he would be pleased that you do not trust him, and would praise and love you for watching him closely. Godly conduct like his can and will bear your inspection, and indeed anyone's. As Christ says in John 8 [in fact 3.21]: 'Whoever does good, comes into the light so that his works may be seen, for they are wrought in God.' But the former [sort of] person is out to deceive you and to act in darkness, as Christ says [John 3.20]: 'Whoever does evil, shuns the light, that his works may not be punished.' So beware of him. And if he complains, say to him: I am guilty of no injustice towards you. God will not have me trust myself or anyone else. Reproach him for it and for making you a mere human being. [In fact, I would not put all my trust in you] even if you were an angel. Even Lucifer was not to be trusted, and therefore I shall not trust you completely either. For we should place our trust in God alone.

Let no prince imagine that his condition will be better than that of
David, the model for all princes. He had a councillor, Ahithophel by name, who was so wise that Scripture says of him that what Ahithophel declared counted as much as if God himself had been asked for counsel. And yet he sank so low that he would have betrayed and killed David, his own prince. And so David had to learn that no one at all is to be trusted. Why do you imagine God allowed such a frightful example to happen and to be recorded, unless it be to warn princes and rulers of the greatest peril and misfortune that can befall them, and to teach them to trust no one.\(^5\) It is a wretched thing when flatterers reign at courts, and when princes rely on others and render themselves captive to them, letting them do as they please.

But you may object that if no one is to be trusted, how is any country and its people to be governed? The answer is that you do have to take the risk of entrusting people with offices, but you must not trust them or rely on them, but on God alone. [390:] You must treat those to whom you have given office as people who may fail, and so you must continue to keep watch and not allow yourself to be lulled into sleep. A coach driver trusts his horses and carriage, but he does not let them drive themselves. He keeps the reins and the whip in his own hands, and stays awake. Remember the old sayings which were learnt from experience and can be depended on: 'When the cat's away, the mice will play.'\(^5\) In other words, nothing goes right if the master does not attend to things in person and relies on advisers and servants instead. And this is as God wants it; he allows it to happen so that rulers are compelled to attend to the duties of their office themselves, just as everyone else must do their own job, and every creature must do its own work. Otherwise rulers would become fatted pigs, of no use to anyone but themselves.

Third: Let a prince take care how he meets out justice to wrong-doers. Punishing some without ruining others [who are innocent] calls for the greatest prudence and wisdom. Once again, I know of no better model than David. He once had a captain named Joab, who treacherously murdered two other captains, both just men, and so he deserved death twice over. And yet David, while he lived, did not kill him, but

\(^{57}\) Luther's expression has come apart here and I have glossed it in my translation. It will be noted in passing that the standard claim of reformers that they adhered exclusively to the literal meaning of Scripture is pure polemic and itself must not be taken literally.

\(^{58}\) Luther here offers a selection of popular saws which appear to have no English equivalent and have been omitted from the translation.

ordered his son Solomon to do it [after David's death]. This was doubtless because David could not do it himself without causing even more harm and upheaval. A prince must punish the wicked in such a way that in 'picking up the spoon he does not tread on the plate and break it', and does not plunge his whole country and its people into chaos for the sake of one [person's] head, and fill the land with widows and orphans. For the same reason, he must not follow those advisers and 'armchair soldiers'\(^5\) that would push him into wars with arguments like: are we to put up with such insults and injustice? It is a very bad Christian who will put a whole country at risk for the sake of a castle. In short, the prince in such cases must act after the maxims: a person who can't wink at faults, doesn't know how to govern. So let this be his rule of conduct: where an injustice cannot be punished without a greater injustice, he should not insist on his rights\(^*,\) however just his cause. He is to look to the injustices suffered by others and not the damage he suffers himself, considering what others will suffer if he exacts punishments. What have all those women and children done to deserve becoming widows and orphans, just so that you can take your revenge against a worthless mouth or a wicked hand that has done you harm?

Here you may ask: is a prince not to wage war [at all]? And are his subjects not to follow him into battle? That is a broad question, but the short answer is this. The Christian way is that no ruler is to wage war against his overlord, be he the King, the Emperor or any other liege-lord.\(^5\) If one of these takes something, let him take it. For superiors\(^*\) are not to be resisted by force, but only by witnessing to the truth.\(^5\) If they take any notice, well and good. If not, you are guiltless and you suffer injustice for God's sake. But if your opponent is your equal or your inferior, or a foreign ruler, then you should first offer him justice and peace, as Moses taught the children of Israel. If he will not settle, then do the best you can and resist force with force, as Moses well
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describes in Deuteronomy 20:10ff. But here you are not to consider your own advantage, and how you can remain ruler, but your subjects, whom you owe help and protection, so that the work is done out of love. Since your whole country is placed in danger (by war), you must consider whether God will help you, so that everything does not go to wrack and ruin; and even if you cannot help making some widows and some orphans, you must at least prevent total ruin, and nothing but widows and orphans [being left].

The subjects for their part owe obedience and must set their lives and goods to it. For in such a case everyone must risk his goods and even himself, for the sake of his neighbour. And in such a war, it is a Christian act, and an act of love, to kill enemies without scruple, to rob and to burn, and to do whatever damages the enemy, according to the usages of war, until he is defeated. But beware of sins and of violating women and maidens. And when the enemy is defeated, then those who surrender and submit are to be shown mercy and granted peace. In other words, act according to the maxim ‘God helps the strongest.’ Abraham did so when he defeated the four kings (Genesis 14:15). Of course, he killed many and did not show much mercy until the victory was his. A case like this should be regarded as something sent by God, so that for once the land is swept clean of villains.

But what if a prince is in the wrong? Are his people obliged to obey him even then? No, because no one has a duty to act unjustly; we must obey God (who will have justice prevail), rather than men [Acts 5:29]. But what if subjects do not know whether their ruler is in the right or not? As long as they do not know and cannot find out, although they have made every effort, they may obey without danger to their souls. For in such cases, one must follow the Law of Moses in Exodus 21:13, where he writes that a murderer who has unknowingly and unintentionally killed someone shall flee to a free city and there be absolved by the courts. And whichever side is beaten, whether it be in the right or the wrong, must take it as a punishment from God, but the side that fights and wins, in such a state of ignorance, must regard the battle as if someone fell from a roof and killed someone, and leave the matter with God. To God it is all one whether he deprives you of your goods or life by a just or an unjust lord. You are God’s creature, and he may do with you as he pleases, as long as your conscience is innocent. And thus God himself excuses King Abimelech (Genesis 20:6), when the latter took Abraham’s wife. Not that the act was right, but he did not know that she was Abraham’s wife.

Fourth, and this should perhaps have been the first point: as we have said above, a prince must also act like a Christian towards God. That is, he ought to subject himself to him in complete confidence and ask him for the wisdom to rule well, as Solomon did. But I have written a great deal elsewhere about faith and confidence in God and there is therefore no need to say any more now. And so we shall leave it at that and sum up. A prince ought to comfort himself in four different ways. First: towards God with real confidence and heartfelt prayer. Second: to his subjects with love and Christian service. Third: towards his counsellors and great men, with free reason and unbound understanding. Fourth: towards evil-doers with condign gravity and severity. In that way his condition will be outwardly and inwardly right, pleasing to God and men. But he must anticipate a great deal of envy and suffering. As illustrious a man as this will soon feel the cross lying on his neck.

To end with, an addendum in reply to those who have written treatises about *restitution*, that is, returning wrongfully acquired goods. This is a work for the secular Sword, about which much has been written, often with unnecessary severity. But I shall state the whole thing briefly, and eliminate all the laws and all the severity in one swoop. There is no law to be found for this, except the law of love. If you are called on to decide a case where one party ought to return something to another, and both are Christians, then the matter will soon be settled. For neither will deny the other what is his, and neither will demand it of him. But if one of them is a Christian, namely the one to whom restitution is due, then again the decision is easy. For he will

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56 The text referred to enjoins the massacring of all males and the enslavement of the women and children of a conquered population. Since I see no evidence that Luther meant deliberately to reverse the more merciful standards of conduct prevailing, I must suppose that his disposition to pretend to have learned anything worth knowing from the Bible and not the 'sophists' or the 'whore reason' led him to cast about for a suitable text in the OT without in this case finding anything suitable. *Vim in repeller* (to resist force with force) is of course from the Romans, not from the Bible.

57 The sense here requires some connecting clause like: 'if a war meets all these preconditions...'.

58 Luther had left the word in Latin in his text, hence the explanatory clause. The topic was, and remained, a favourite with the scholastics, normally handled in commentaries on Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, Secunda Secundae, qu. 62 and qu. 78, and it is to such discussions that Luther is here referring. It included the vexed question of borrowing or lending money at interest.
not demand its return. Equally, if it is the Christian who must return something, he will surely do so. But whether either of them is a Christian or not, this is how you ought to decide. If the debtor is poor and is unable to make restitution, whereas the other person is not poor, then you should allow free rein to the law of love and acquit the debtor. For the other party also is obliged by the law of love to remit the debt and even to give more, because of the other's need. But if the debtor is not poor, then let him make restitution, as far as he can, be it the whole, or half, or a third or quarter, as long as you leave him his house, food and clothing for himself, his wife and his children. For you would owe him these in any case, if you were able to provide them; much less should you take them away, since you do not yourself need them, and he cannot do without them.

But if both are unchristian, or if one of them will not allow matters to be judged according to the law of love, then you should leave them to find another judge, and tell the unchristian creditor that he is acting against God and natural law, even if he gets the harsh judgement in his favour [that he seeks] from a human judge. For nature teaches the same as love: I ought to do what I would have done unto me. And therefore I may not rob another, however good my claim, since I myself do not want to be robbed. What I would wish in such a case is that the other person should relinquish his right; and therefore I ought also to relinquish mine. And this is how ill-gotten gains should be treated, whether they were come by secretly or openly, so that love and natural law will always prevail. For when you judge in accordance with love, you will distinguish and decide all things easily, without law-books. But if you remove the law of love and nature, you will never hit on what is pleasing to God, even if you had swallowed all the law-books and the lawyers. On the contrary, the more you think about [what you learn from them], the more insane you become. Good judgement is not to be found in books, but from free good sense, as if there were no books. But it is love and natural law, with which all reason is filled, that confer such good judgement. From the books come oppressive and uncertain judgements. Let me give you an example.

There is a story told of Duke Charles of Burgundy. A nobleman captured his enemy. The wife of the captive came to ransom him. The nobleman said he would give the man back to her if she slept with him. The woman was virtuous, but wanted her husband released, and so she went and asked her husband whether he should do it to get him freed.