

"Widerstehe doch der Sünde" BWV 54

1. Widerstehe doch der Sünde,¹
Sonst ergreift dich ihr Gift.
Lass dich nicht den Satan blenden;
Denn die Gottes Ehre schänden,
Trifft ein Fluch, der tödlich ist.²

1. Do resist sin,³
Or else its poison will take hold of you.
Do not let Satan bedazzle you,
For those who disgrace God's honor
Will meet a curse that is deadly.

2. Die Art verruchten⁴ Sünden
Sind zwar von aussen wunderschön;⁵
Allein man muss
Hernach mit Kummer und Verdruss
Viel Ungemach empfinden.
Von aussen ist sie Gold;
Doch, will man weiter gehn,
So zeigt sich mehr⁶ ein leerer Schatten
Und übertünchtes Grab.

2. The nature of wicked sins
Are indeed wondrously beautiful from the outside;
Afterward, however, one must,
With grief and chagrin,
Feel much affliction.
From the outside, it [sin's nature] is gold;
But if one proceeds further,
Then what instead⁸ comes into view
Is a phantasm⁹ and whitewashed sepulchre.¹⁰

¹The earliest surviving source of Bach's cantata (from the 1710s) is not in his handwriting, and it contains several readings that are different from contemporary printed texts, including a complete cantata cycle by the poet from 1711 and booklets connected with a setting possibly by other (unknown) composers. Some variant readings from these printed editions have been adopted in modern editions of Bach's cantata. We have used the readings from the sources of the cantata, as there is no evidence that Bach's setting ever corresponded with the printed librettos. Out of musical or liturgical motivations, or both, some modern performances add a closing chorale stanza, but there is no evidence (and no real cause to suspect) that Bach's cantata ever had more than the three movements given here.

²The poet's surviving printed text reads "Trifft ein Fluch, der tödlich trifft" ("meet a curse that strikes deadly"), a wording which may have been rejected for Bach's cantata on account of the double use of "trifft." The poet's word choice, however, does make a proper rhyme with "Gift" in line 2.

³"Widerstehe der Sünde" does not simply mean "resist sinning" (i.e., keep yourself from doing sinful acts), but rather "resist the broadly encompassing power of 'original sin'" (see the end of fn. 17, below).

⁴This line is apparently meant to be understood as "Die Art [von] verruchten Sünden." The plural verb "sind" in the next line is difficult to explain given the singular "Art."

⁵The wording of lines 1–2 in the earliest surviving source of Bach's cantata is "Die Art *verruchten* Sünden *sind* zwar von aussen wunderschön" ("The nature of *wicked* sins *are* indeed wondrously beautiful from the outside"). The poet's printed text, however, reads "Die Art *verruckter* Sünden *scheint* zwar von aussen wunderschön" ("The nature of *demented* sin *appears* indeed beautiful from the outside"). Modern editions of Bach's cantata, on the other hand, read "Die Art *verruchter* Sünden *ist* zwar von aussen wunderschön" ("The nature of *wicked* sin *is* indeed beautiful from the outside").

⁶The wording in the earliest surviving source of Bach's cantata is "So zeigt sich [*viel*]mehr ein leerer Schatten" ("Then what *actually* / *in fact* / *rather* / *instead* comes into view"). The poet's printed text and modern editions of Bach's cantata read "So zeigt sich *nur* ein leerer Schatten" ("Then what *only* comes into view"; or, "Then *all it is* that comes into view"). The reading in Bach's cantata source is perhaps more sinister. See also fn. 8, below.

⁸"Mehr" is apparently being used here in one of its older senses, as a synonym for "vielmehr" ("rather," "in fact," "actually").

⁹The expression "ein leerer Schatten" (literally, "empty shadow") is a synonym for "ein Scheinwesen" ("a phantasm," i.e., an apparently substantial form that is not really there).

¹⁰The notion of "whitewashed sepulchres" (Luther Bibles, "die übertünchten Gräber") comes from Matthew 23:27. These are tombs that were painted over, which makes them (just like "hypocrites") beautiful from the outside though ugly and filthy on the inside.

Sie ist den Sodomsäpfeln gleich,
Und die sich mit denselben⁷ gatten,
Gelingen nicht in Gottes Reich.
Sie ist als wie ein scharfes Schwert,
Das uns durch Leib und Seele fährt.

It [sin's nature] is like Sodom-apples¹¹
And things of their ilk;¹²
[They] do not belong to¹³ the kingdom of God.¹⁴
It [sin's nature] is like a sharp sword¹⁵
That runs us through, body and soul.

3. Wer Sünde tut, der ist vom Teufel,
Denn dieser hat sie aufgebracht.
Doch wenn man ihren schnöden Banden
Mit rechten¹⁶ Andacht widerstanden,
Hat sie sich gleich davon gemacht.

3. Whoever commits sin, he is of the devil;
For this one [the devil] has brought it [sin] forth.¹⁷
But when one resists its [sin's] odious bonds
With true acts of devotion,
It [sin] has marched off, immediately.¹⁸

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(transl. Michael Marissen and Daniel R. Melamed)

⁷“Mit *denselben*” (dative plural; literally, “[with *those* selfsame [i.e., the Sodom-apples]”) is the wording in the earliest surviving source of Bach’s cantata. The poet’s printed text and modern editions of Bach’s cantata read “mit *derselben*” (dative singular, literally, “with *that* selfsame [i.e., sin’s nature]”).

¹¹The “Sodom-apple” is a fruit that, as widely noted in ancient legend, looks appealing but dissolves into ashes when grasped.

¹²“Sich gatten” is an uncommon metaphor, mostly employed for the connecting of pairs of contrasting abstract nouns (e.g., “sin” and “humanity”), and predominantly in verse where the poet needs a rhyme for the word “Schatten” (“shadow”).

¹³“Gelingen,” in this context, apparently does not mean “to attain” or “to reach.” Here the word most likely means “to become one’s property,” just like in Leviticus 27:24, which in the Luther Bibles of Bach’s day reads “Aber im Hall-Jahr soll er wieder gelangen an denselben, von dem er ihn gekauft hat” (“But in the Year of Jubilee [every fiftieth year] it [the field one has bought that is not a part of the fields of his own (ancestral) possession] shall again become the property of that same person from whom he had bought it”).

¹⁴In some renderings these lines are translated to say that humans who engage with sin will not “*achieve* God’s kingdom.” This is a fundamental misunderstanding, as Lutheranism by definition would never speak of heavenly salvation in terms of human accomplishment—as something that can be “achieved.” A central, fixed tenet of Luther’s Reformation was that salvation is justified only by the unmerited gift of faith through God’s grace. See also fn. 15, below.

¹⁵Via its oblique biblical language, this line is meant to remind people that they cannot do anything to “heal/save” themselves. In the Luther Bibles of Bach’s day, Sirach 21:4 reads “Eine jegliche Sünde ist wie ein scharfes Schwert, und verwundet, dass niemand heilen kann” (“A sin of any kind is like a sharp sword, and [it] wounds in such a way that no [mere] person can heal”). The only person said to be able to heal/save people is the human-and-divine Jesus, through his wounds on the cross (1 Peter 2:24).

¹⁶This is the wording in the earliest surviving source of Bach’s cantata. The poet’s printed text and modern editions of Bach’s cantata read “Mit rechter Andacht” (“with true devotion”).

¹⁷The past tense of the verb “aufbringen” is used here in its sense of “to be the first to do a thing and at the same time to establish a custom of doing this thing.” Lines 1–2 draw on 1 John 3:8, “Wer Sünde tut, der ist vom Teufel; denn der Teufel sündigt von Anfang” (“Whoever commits sin, he is of the devil; for the devil sins from the beginning”). This notion of “from the beginning” was understood to originate in the Garden of Eden in Genesis 3:1, where the “serpent” (taken to be the devil, Satan) convinces Eve to disobey God, thereby bringing sin into the world and establishing “original sin” as humanity’s inheritance; after the fall of Eve and Adam, sin is “born into” people as human beings.

¹⁸“Sich davonmachen” (or, “sich davon machen”) here is a synonym for “abtragen” (“to trot off/away”) or “ausrücken” (“to make off”; or, “to march off/out”); also, “sich davonmachen” is sometimes used as a euphemism for “sterben” (“to die”).



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