1. No one can understand Vergil's Bucolics unless he has been a shepherd for five years. No one can understand Vergil's Georgics, unless he has been a farmer for five years.

2. No one can understand Cicero's Letters (or so I teach), unless he has busied himself in the affairs of some prominent state for twenty years.

3. Know that no one can have indulged in the Holy Writers sufficiently, unless he has governed churches for a hundred years with the prophets, such as Elijah and Elisha, John the Baptist, Christ and the apostles.

Do not assail this divine Aeneid; nay, rather prostrate revere the ground that it treads.

We are beggars: this is true.

Notes:

1. This is a translation of WA, TR 5:168 (no. 5468) of a scrap of paper that Johannes Aurifaber (a.k.a. Johann Goldschmied) found when Luther died. Aurifaber wrote: "Luther ... wrote these words in Latin on a slip of paper and put them on his table. I, Johannes Aurifaber, wrote them down and Dr. Justus Jonas, Superintendent of Halle, who was at Halle at the same time, took the slip of paper with him." Unfortunately, this slip of paper has long since disappeared.

2. I have followed the account of the document as told by Aurifaber. There are, however, divergent accounts of what was on that scrap of paper. Since the original slip of paper has been lost, it is impossible to ascertain what Luther actually wrote. For other accounts, see WA 48:241 and TR 5:317 (no.5677). Although the wording differs slightly, the sentiment is the same.

3. The line in praise of Vergil's Aeneid is composed of nine feet of dactylic hexameter, the meter in which the Aeneid is written. It is most likely an adaptation or misquotation of two lines near the end of Statius' The Aeneid (12:816f), a poem also written in dactylic hexameter and profoundly influenced by Vergil's epic:

   Nee tu divinam Aendeida tempta,
   Sed Ionge sequere et vestigia semper adora.

Luther wrote:

   Hanc tu ne divinam Aeneida tenta,
   Sed vestigia pronus adora.

4. "We are beggars" is written in German; the rest of the document, in Latin.