

# Primer on Indulgences from Catholic Answers

The claim that indulgences are not part of Church teaching today is false. This is proved by the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, which states, “An indulgence is obtained through the Church who, by virtue of the power of binding and loosing granted her by Christ Jesus, intervenes in favor of individual Christians and opens for them the treasury of the merits of Christ and the saints to obtain from the Father of mercies the remission of the temporal punishment due for their sins.” The Church does this not just to aid Christians, “but also to spur them to works of devotion, penance, and charity” (CCC 1478).

Indulgences are part of the Church’s infallible teaching. This means that no Catholic is at liberty to disbelieve in them. The Council of Trent stated that it “condemns with anathema those who say that indulgences are useless or that the Church does not have the power to grant them” (Trent, session 25, *Decree on Indulgences*). Trent’s anathema places indulgences in the realm of infallibly defined teaching.

The pious use of indulgences dates back into the early days of the Church, and the principles underlying indulgences extend back into the Bible itself. The principles behind indulgences are as clear in Scripture as those behind more familiar doctrines, such as the Trinity.

Before looking at those principles more closely, we should define indulgences. In his apostolic constitution on indulgences, Pope Paul VI said: “An indulgence is a remission before God of the temporal punishment due to sins whose guilt has already been forgiven, which the faithful Christian who is duly disposed gains under certain defined conditions through the Church’s help when, as a minister of redemption, she dispenses and applies with authority the treasury of the satisfactions won by Christ and the saints” (*Indulgentiarum Doctrina* 1).

This technical definition can be phrased more simply as, “An indulgence is what we receive when the Church lessens the temporal (lasting only for a short time) penalties to which we may be subject even though our sins have been forgiven.” To understand this definition, we need to look at the biblical principles behind indulgences.

## **Principle 1: Sin Results in Guilt and Punishment**

When a person sins, he acquires certain liabilities: the liability of guilt and the liability of punishment. Scripture speaks of the former when it pictures guilt as clinging to our souls, making them discolored and unclean before God: “Though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be white as snow; though they are red like crimson, they shall become like wool” (Isa. 1:18).

We incur not just guilt, but liability for punishment when we sin: “I will punish the world for its evil, and the wicked for their iniquity; I will put an end to the pride of the arrogant and lay low the haughtiness of the ruthless” (Is. 13:11). Judgment pertains even to the smallest sins: “For God will bring every deed into judgment, with every secret thing, whether good or evil” (Eccl. 12:14).

## **Principle 2: Punishments are Both Temporal and Eternal**

The Bible indicates some punishments are eternal, lasting forever, but others are temporal. Eternal punishment is mentioned in Daniel 12:2: “And many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life and some to shame and everlasting contempt.”

We normally focus on the eternal penalties of sin, because they are the most important, but Scripture indicates that temporal penalties are real and go back to the first sin humans committed: “To the woman he said, ‘I will greatly multiply your pain in childbearing; in pain you shall bring forth children’” (Gen. 3:16).

## **Principle 3: Temporal Penalties May Remain When a Sin is Forgiven**

When someone repents, God removes his guilt (Isa. 1:18) and any eternal punishment (Rom. 5:9), but temporal penalties may remain. One passage demonstrating this is 2 Samuel 12, in which Nathan the prophet confronts David over his adultery:

“Then David said to Nathan, ‘I have sinned against the Lord.’ Nathan answered David: ‘The Lord on his part has forgiven your sin; you shall not die. But since you have utterly spurned the Lord by this deed, the child

born to you must surely die” (2 Sam. 12:13-14). God forgave David but David still had to suffer the loss of his son as well as other temporal punishments (2 Sam. 12:7-12).

Protestants realize that, although Jesus paid the price for our sins before God, he did not relieve our obligation to repair what we have done. They acknowledge that if you steal someone’s car, you have to give it back; it isn’t enough just to repent.

Protestants also admit the principle of temporal penalties for sin, in practice, when discussing death. Scripture says death entered the world through original sin (Gen. 3:22-24; Rom. 5:12). When we first come to God we are forgiven, and when we sin later we are able to be forgiven, yet that does not free us from the penalty of physical death. Even the forgiven die; a penalty remains after our sins are forgiven. This is a temporal penalty since physical death is temporary and we will be resurrected (Dan. 12:2).

#### **Principle 4: God Blesses Some People as a Reward to Others**

In Matthew 9:1-8, Jesus heals a paralytic and forgives his sins after seeing the faith of his friends. Paul also tells us that “as regards election [the Jews] are beloved for the sake of their forefathers” (Rom. 11:28).

When God blesses one person as a reward to someone else, sometimes the specific blessing he gives is a reduction of the temporal penalties to which the first person is subject. For example, God promised Abraham that, if he could find a certain number of righteous men in Sodom, he was willing to defer the city’s temporal destruction for the sake of the righteous (Gen. 18:16-33).

#### **Principle 5: God Remits Temporal Punishments through the Church**

God uses the Church when he removes temporal penalties. This is the essence of the doctrine of indulgences. Earlier we defined indulgences as “what we receive when the Church lessens the temporal penalties to which we may be subject even though our sins have been forgiven.” The members of the Church became aware of this principle through the sacrament of penance. From the beginning, acts of penance were assigned as part of the sacrament because the Church recognized that Christians must deal with temporal penalties, such as God’s discipline and the need to compensate those our sins have injured.

In the early Church, penances were sometimes severe. But the Church recognized that repentant sinners could shorten their penances by pleasing God through pious or charitable acts that expressed sorrow and a desire to make up for one’s sin.

The Church also recognized the duration of temporal punishments could be lessened through the involvement of other persons who had pleased God. Scripture tells us God gave the authority to forgive sins “to men” (Matt. 9:8) and to Christ’s ministers in particular. Jesus told them, “As the Father has sent me, even so I send you. . . . Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained” (John 20:21-23).

Christ also promised his Church the power to bind and loose on earth, saying, “Truly, I say to you, whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven” (Matt. 18:18). As the context makes clear, binding and loosing cover Church discipline, and Church discipline involves administering and removing temporal penalties (such as barring from and readmitting to the sacraments).

#### **Principle 6: God Blesses Dead Christians as a Reward to Living Christians**

From the beginning the Church recognized the validity of praying for the dead so that their transition into heaven (via purgatory) might be swift and smooth. This meant praying for the lessening or removal of temporal penalties holding them back from the full glory of heaven. For this reason the Church teaches that “indulgences can always be applied to the dead by way of prayer” (*Indulgentiarum Doctrina* 3).

The custom of praying for the dead is not restricted to the Catholic faith. In the Old Testament, Judah Maccabee finds the bodies of soldiers who died wearing superstitious amulets during one of the Lord’s battles. Judah and his men “turned to prayer, beseeching that the sin which had been committed might be wholly blotted out” (2 Macc. 12:42). Judah also “took up a collection, man by man, to the amount of two thousand drachmas of silver and sent it to Jerusalem to provide for a sin offering. In doing this . . . he made atonement for the dead, that they might be delivered from their sin” (2 Macc. 12:43, 46).

Thus, Judah not only prayed for the dead, but provided for them the then-appropriate ecclesial action for lessening temporal penalties: a sin offering. Accordingly, we may take the now-appropriate ecclesial action for lessening temporal penalties— indulgences—and apply them to the dead by way of prayer.

These six principles, which we have seen to be thoroughly biblical, are the underpinnings of indulgences. But, the question of expiation often remains. Can we expiate our sins—and what does “expiate” mean anyway?

Some criticize indulgences by saying they involve our making “expiation” for our sins, something that only Christ can do. This criticism is unfounded, and most who make it do not know what the word “expiation” means or how indulgences work.

Protestant Scripture scholar Leon Morris comments on the confusion around the word “expiate”: “Most of us don’t understand ‘expiation’ very well. Expiation is making amends for a wrong.” (*The Atonement* [Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1983], 151). The *Wycliff Bible Encyclopedia* gives a similar definition: “The basic idea of expiation has to do with reparation for a wrong, the satisfaction of the demands of justice through paying a penalty.”

Certainly, when it comes to the eternal effects of our sins, only Christ can make amends or reparation. We are completely unable to do so, not only because we are finite creatures incapable of making an infinite satisfaction, but because everything we have was given to us by God. For us to try to satisfy God’s eternal justice would be like using money we had borrowed from someone to repay what we had stolen from him. This does not mean we can’t make amends or reparation for the temporal effects of our sins. If someone steals an item, he can return it. If someone damages another’s reputation, he can publicly correct the slander. These are ways in which one can make at least partial amends (expiation) for what he has done.

An excellent biblical illustration of this principle is given in Proverbs 16:6, which states: “By loving kindness and faithfulness iniquity is atoned for, and by the fear of the Lord a man avoids evil” (cf. Lev. 6:1-7; Num. 5:5-8). Here we are told that a person makes temporal atonement (though never eternal atonement, of which only Christ is capable) for his sins through acts of loving kindness and faithfulness.

NIHIL OBSTAT: I have concluded that the materials presented in this work are free of doctrinal or moral errors.

Bernadeane Carr, STL, Censor Librorum, August 10, 2004

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permission to publish this work is hereby granted.

+Robert H. Brom, Bishop of San Diego, August 10, 2004

# Does the Church Still Believe in Indulgences?

BY DR. ANDREW SWAFFORD | OCT 30, 2017

The 500th year anniversary of the Reformation is upon us, dating back to October 31, 1517, a date which marks Martin Luther's posting of his 95 theses. This action, however, was not of itself extraordinary. Posting theses—and calling for debate, and sometimes being critical of this or that Church practice—was something academics did then, as they still sometimes do today. We look back upon this event as a key turning point; but no one at the time would have said that Martin Luther had just launched the Reformation.

One of Luther's key complaints was over the sale of indulgences, with its obvious opening for abuse. While there were problems and reform was needed, one general question we can pose as Catholics is to ask what's the difference between Erasmus (a Catholic who sought reform) and Luther? That is, several Catholic thinkers had many of the same concerns as Luther, but sought to reform the Church from within, without breaking away.

In hindsight, the Church seemed slow to react to Luther, not realizing the full extent of what was unfolding; but had the Church reacted sooner, as one of my former graduate professors once proposed, perhaps Luther could have started a new religious order (and thus remained Catholic), one with an accent mark on the primacy of grace and some of his characteristic emphases. One thing I've said to Catholics who express a desire to leave the Church over perceived problems or sins of its members is to ask: Do you want to be part of the problem or the solution? In other words, leaving the Church is the easy way out; on the other hand, cultivating hard fought discipleship and communion with our Lord is the path to real reform which fosters the true health of the Church.

While the practice of indulgences at the time of the Reformation needed reform, the theology of indulgences runs very deep and actually unveils some of the most beautiful aspects of the Catholic Faith. In other words, *yes, the Church still believes in indulgences.*

## Two-fold Consequence of Sin

In order to come to grips with the Church's teaching on indulgences, one must first understand the Catholic teaching on the two-fold consequence/punishment of sin: namely, the *eternal* and the *temporal*. The eternal consequence of sin refers to hell, the permanent separation from God by persisting in a state of unrepentant mortal sin. Thus, the eternal aspect refers to whether or not we are *forgiven*. The temporal consequence of sin, on the other hand, refers to *the way in which our sins wound us*.

The way I often frame this for my students is to emphasize that God wants not only to forgive our sins, but to heal and transform us. If we were to imagine our sins as nails driven into a piece of wood, and forgiveness as the removal of those nails, we would still be left with holes in the wood where the nails previously were. In other words, the work of God is not complete upon mere forgiveness, but seeks to go further through healing and transformation accomplished by supernatural grace (i.e., filling in the holes of the wood). In this light, the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* explains: "These two punishments [eternal and temporal] must not be conceived of as a kind of vengeance inflicted by God from without, but as following from the very nature of sin" (CCC, 1472).

The classical moral philosophers understood this clearly: the choices we make—especially over a period of time—modify our character at ever-deepening levels. Just as an athlete, musician, or student of foreign language knows, practicing things the right way over a period of time inculcates deep habits, freeing us to be more adept at performing at a high level with consistency, with relative ease, and even with joy. But if we practice with poor mechanics (or poor grammar), we will eventually be more likely to do it the wrong way the next time. In this sense, practice makes—if not perfect—more and more permanent (for more here, see my book, *John Paul II to Aristotle and Back Again*).

To give one more analogy, sometimes when my kids get in trouble, they'll quickly say they're sorry—to which I respond both with my forgiveness *and* their punishment. And on occasion they have said, "Why do I need a punishment—I thought you forgave me?" As a theologian and a father, I explain that I give a punishment because I not only want to forgive them, but to heal and transform them. The punishment is not for them to earn my forgiveness back, but to redress the disorder wrought in their own souls by the wrongdoing. By analogy, then, my forgiveness is like dealing with the eternal consequence of sin; and the punishment I give is analogous to God's effort to address the temporal consequence of sin, the way in which our sin wounds us.

This twofold consequence of sin can be seen in two biblical examples, the wilderness generation and David. In Numbers 13-14 (when Moses sends the twelve spies into the Promised Land, ten of whom come back fearful and scare the people into not wanting to set foot in the Promised Land), God forgives them of their sin, but still metes out a temporal punishment, namely, the 40-year wilderness wandering (see Numbers 14:20-23). And after David has an affair with Bathsheba and has her husband Uriah killed, he confesses his sin to Nathan. Nathan assures David of the Lord's forgiveness, but also informs him of the temporal punishment to follow: the child conceived in the adulterous affair will perish (2 Samuel 12:13-14).

Both examples show us occasions where God offered his forgiveness, but still gave a "punishment," perhaps not unlike my parenting example above. God's forgiveness is one thing; his seeking to purify and transform his people is another. Thus, God seeks not only to forgive (eternal consequences), but to heal and transform (temporal consequences).

It's precisely because we believe in this dual consequence of sin (eternal and temporal) that we do penance, believe in purgatory, and embrace the doctrine of indulgences. And it's precisely because Protestants reject this two-fold consequence of sin that their theology has no room for any of these three.

Purgatory, for example, is not a second chance or a middle ground. Rather, purgatory is for those who die in friendship with God (i.e., the eternal consequence of sin has been dealt with), but not yet completely purified (i.e., some of the temporal consequence of sin remains). God begins his work of transformation in us now; if left incomplete upon death, he will complete it in a state called "purgatory" (see CCC, 1030, 1054). This transformation is necessary for us to enter fully into communion with God and the joy that it entails.

Importantly, indulgences have *nothing* to do with the eternal consequences of sin. That is, the Church has never taught anything like "you can buy your way to heaven." Rather, indulgences are a lessening of the *temporal* punishment due to sin. Analogously, it's as if I assigned one of my children a thirty-minute timeout and later reduced it to fifteen minutes.

Hence, the Catechism explains: "An indulgence is a remission before God of the *temporal* punishment due to sin, *whose guilt has already been forgiven*" (CCC, 1471, emphasis mine).

## Communion of Saints

The second pillar which underlies the doctrine of indulgences is the communion of saints—the unity we all share in Christ. No man is an island; both our sins and our merits affect the entire Body of Christ.

With regard to merit, it's important to recognize what this means. It is not a proportionate system whereby we do certain good works and simply earn our way to heaven, as if God literally "owed" us something. *Rather, Jesus merits our capacity to merit*, and the same is true of Mary and all the saints. It's not the work itself that merits, but the *relationship* established in and through Jesus Christ. In other words, good works done *in Christ*—as a son or daughter—are meritorious in God's eyes. It's sort of like a child "earning" an allowance. It's not the chore itself that earns the money, as if the employment opportunity were open to any kid on the block. It's the *familial* relationship that makes the allowance (or merit) possible in the first place. We "merit" by good works only because God has first adopted us into his family through the person and work of Jesus Christ, and so God looks upon these meritorious works as those of a son or a daughter, not a mere creature or servant.

This then leads us to the "treasury of merit," from which the Church draws upon to grant indulgences. This treasury refers to the infinite value of Christ's work (and by extension, the meritorious works of Mary and all the saints in Christ) in the eyes of the Father: "[T]he treasury of Church is the infinite value, which can never be exhausted which Christ's merits have before God" (CCC, 1476).

In the communion of saints, we all share in each other's merits: "In this wonderful exchange, the holiness of one profits others" (CCC, 1475).

What the Church does, then, in administering an indulgence is apply the treasury of merits (that of Jesus and all the saints) to one of her children, under certain prescribed conditions (e.g., reading the Bible for thirty minutes). Again, this application does not affect the eternal consequences of sin—i.e., it will not save one who is unrepentant and not in communion with our Lord. Rather, the application concerns the temporal consequences of sin, an application that flows from the unity of the family of God and the way in which the merits of one sibling (e.g., a saint) can be applied to others (e.g., the pilgrim Church on earth).

For a biblical analogy, we might look to Noah and Abraham. Notice how their individual righteousness affected so many others. For Noah, his three sons, and their wives all enter the Ark—because of Noah's holiness.

And through Abraham's act of righteousness, God promised to bless the entire world (see Genesis 22:16, 18). Indeed, one person can make a difference. We have no idea how important our smallest act of charity really is in the eyes of God.

Some acts which have indulgences attached to them are reading the Bible piously for at least thirty minutes; eucharistic adoration for at least thirty minutes; or making pilgrimages to various holy sites (e.g., the Holy Land). The same is true of Pope Francis' Year of Mercy and the visiting of designated holy doors, as well as various Jubilee years the Church has proclaimed.

Lastly, people often wonder about the "days" language with reference to purgatory—that is, why traditional piety used to associate indulgences with, say, 500 days off purgatory. The reason for this language is because purgatory is in some ways a continuation of the penance done here on earth, dealing with the temporal consequence of sin; and at certain times, for example in the early Church, earthly penances were very long. Thus, the temporal specification of an indulgence (e.g., 500 days) originated from the reduction of a penance that was being done here on earth. Since there is an analogy and continuity between the penance done here and purgatory, the time references were easily transferred to purgatory.

But since time doesn't function in purgatory the same way it does here, the Church no longer speaks in terms of how many "days" an indulgence takes off. Rather, the Church speaks of "plenary" and "partial" indulgences, "as [they] remove either part [hence, partial] or all [hence, plenary] of the temporal punishment due to sin" (CCC, 1471).

How can we better realize how important the drama of our lives really is in God's eyes, especially in the little things? No matter how "behind the scenes" we think our lives are, we are on the front lines of a spiritual battle that has eternal consequences, affecting not just us but the entire Body of Christ.