

# Indulgences



When Christ died on the cross He made reparation for our sins and paid the eternal consequences for our sins. Only Christ was able to pay the infinite price that was necessary for our redemption. We are completely unable to do so.

Because of the sin of Adam (original sin) mankind inherited a sinful nature. The consequence of the sin of Adam is why we feel pain, become ill, our bodies age and eventually we die. These are the temporal (temporary) effects of the sinful nature inherited from our first parents.

While only Christ was able to make reparation for the eternal effects of our sins, punishment in hell, we can make reparation for the temporal effects of sins that stain our soul. In fact we must make reparation either in this life or after death in purgatory where our soul is purified from all the effects of sin.

"And the Lord said to Moses, "Say to the people of Israel, when a man or woman commits any of the sins that men commit by breaking faith with the Lord and that person is guilty, he shall confess his sin which he has committed and he shall make full restitution for his wrong, adding a fifth to it, and giving it to whom he did the wrong." Numbers 5:5-7

Likewise when we sin against God we must make full restitution. Though God forgives the eternal punishment due to sin temporal punishment remains.

One passage demonstrating this is 2 Samuel 12, in which Nathan the prophet confronts David over his sin of adultery and murder:

"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).

We normally focus on the eternal penalties of sin, because they are the most important, but Scripture indicates 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).

In Revelation 21:27 we read that nothing unclean can enter heaven. In Hebrews 12:23 we are given a vision of heaven where we approach God, Jesus, angels and the "spirits of just men made perfect." If our soul is unclean, how can we enter heaven? How are the spirits of justified men made perfect? The state where this purification takes place is purgatory and that is where the doctrine of Indulgences is applied.



One of the ways to understand the meaning of an indulgence is the image of a window broken by a young boy. His parents forgive him but he must pay to have the window repaired. So that he can pay for the cost of the repair he agrees to work around the house for twenty dollars a month. His parents estimate he will need to work twelve months to raise the funds. After six months the parents, because they love their son and see that he is faithfully making payments, tell their son that he is no longer required to pay. They forgive the rest of his debt. In other words, they grant him an indulgence.

**Catechism 1471** 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 prescribed conditions through the action of the Church which, as the minister of redemption, dispenses and applies with authority the treasury of the satisfactions of Christ and the saints.

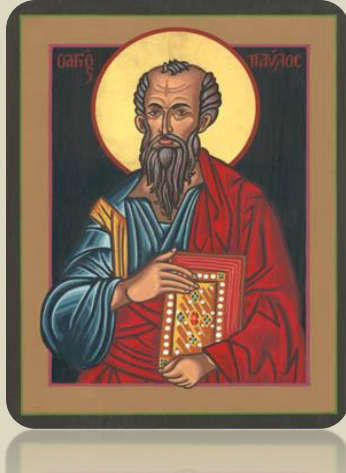
An indulgence is partial or plenary according as it removes either part or all of the temporal punishment due to sin." The faithful can gain indulgences for themselves or apply them to the dead.

**Catechism 1478:** 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."

An Indulgence will shorten the time we spend in Purgatory and is granted to us by the Church and it comes from the "Treasury of the Church". All of the suffering that Christ went through is in the Treasury of the Church. Throughout Church history, all the suffering of the martyrs is in the Treasury of the Church. In other words their suffering is in such abundance that their suffering can be applied to us through an indulgence so that we don't have to suffer as long in purgatory.

While different than an indulgence, we can also offer our sufferings for the benefit of others as Saint Paul clearly tells us:

“Now I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake and in my flesh I complete what is lacking in Christ’s afflictions for the sake of his body that is the Church, of which I am a minister.” Colossians 1:24



What could be lacking in Christ’s afflictions? What is lacking is our participation in Christ’s sufferings which can be offered up for the living for their conversion to Christ and to those in purgatory for their sanctification and for our sanctification as well.

Paul’s sufferings while on earth as well as the sufferings of all the saints now in heaven become a part of the “Treasury of Merit” from which we can acquire an indulgence granted by the Church.

Because we are members of the Body of Christ we can gain indulgences from the Church for ourselves or apply them to those in purgatory to shorten their time of purification.

**Protestant Objection:** Christ did it all on the cross. Indulgences take away what Christ did. He died for our salvation.

**Catholic Answer:** Catholics agree that Christ did it all. He died for the sins of the whole world but Indulgences have nothing to do with our salvation only our sanctification.

Scripture tells us that nothing unclean, not even a liar, can enter heaven. (Revelation 21:27)

Jesus said we must be perfect as our heavenly Father is perfect. (Matthew 5:48)

We must be perfect, we must be sanctified to be in heaven with God and Catholics believe that purification of the soul takes place in purgatory. An indulgence removes some or all of the time for purification by applying the sufferings of Christ and the saints to us and to those in purgatory.

**Protestant Objection:** Peter says: "Forasmuch as you know that you were not redeemed with corruptible things, as silver and gold ... but with the precious blood of Christ" ... 1 Peter 1:18,19. Nobody is redeemed with indulgence money."

**Catholic Answer:** Indulgences have nothing to do with our redemption only our sanctification. Scripture tells us that we are "heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ, provided we suffer with him in order that we may also be glorified with him. " Romans 8:17

Our suffering is part of our sanctification process. We can extract, from the over- abundant suffering of Christ and the saints in heaven, an indulgence granted to us through His Church that will shorten our time of suffering, that is, shorten our time of purification in purgatory.

**Protestant Objection:** Indulgences are a license to sin. You can buy your way out of hell.

**Catholic Answer:** An indulgence is not permission to commit sin, not pardon for a future sin. Indulgences remit only temporal punishment in purgatory. They cannot remit the eternal punishment of hell.

The word ‘indulgence’ comes from the Latin ‘indulgentia’ or ‘indulgeo’ which means to be kind or tender. Christ through His mercy has granted indulgences by His Church through Her authority to “Bind on earth what is bound in heaven and loose on earth what is loosed in heaven.”



In response to the Protestant objections to indulgences the **Council of Trent** (1545-1564) issued a decree that clarified the Church's teaching on indulgences and provided stringent guidelines to eliminate abuses. It also declared anathema those Catholics who denied the authority of the Church to grant indulgences.

"Since the power of granting indulgences was conferred by Christ on the Church (cf. Matthew 16:19, 18:18) and she has even in the earliest times made use of that power divinely given to her, the holy council teaches and commands that the use of indulgences, most salutary to the Christian people and approved by the authority of the holy councils, is to be retained in the Church, and it condemns with anathema those who assert that they are useless or deny that there is in the Church the power of granting them. (Sess. 25, *Decree on Indulgences*)

Before Vatican II Indulgences were listed not as partial or plenary but in term of "years." You would read that a certain action of piety would remit a five year indulgence. Because of the confusion this caused, the Church changed the time to "partial" and "plenary." In the early centuries of the Catholic Church a person would do his penance in public and most times at the doors of the Church. For example, if a person confessed the sin of adultery his temporal punishment might that he would kneel, every Sunday during Mass, on the steps outside the Church for five years. As the centuries passed the Church decreed that a pilgrimage, certain prayers or a single act of piety would gain an indulgence that was equal to the five years of penance of the early Christian kneeling outside the Church. That is what was meant by a "five year indulgence." There is no "time" as we know it in heaven, hell or purgatory because they are "outside" of time.

A partial indulgence removes part of the temporal punishment due for sins already forgiven.

A plenary indulgence is a complete release from the temporal punishment due for sins already forgiven.

To gain a partial indulgence, you must perform with a contrite heart the act to which the indulgence is attached.

A *plenary indulgence* can be gained only *once a day*. In order to obtain it, the faithful must, in addition to being in the state of grace:

- have the interior disposition of complete detachment from sin, even venial sin;
- have sacramentally confessed their sins;
- receive the Holy Eucharist
- pray for the intentions of the Supreme Pontiff.

Indulgences *can* always be applied either to oneself or to the souls of the deceased, but they cannot be applied to other persons living on earth.

To read more on Indulgences go [HERE](#) **Next topic:** The Reformation Timeline

Recommended book: *Manual of Indulgences*