

ROMAN CATHOLICISM

In the Light of Scripture

by

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CHAPTER FIFTEEN

INDULGENCES

IN THE THIRD CENTURY, when those who had been excommunicated by the church for apostasy under persecution, sought reinstatement in the church, the bishops laid down conditions of penance and the performance of certain works of merit as evidence of true repentance. After the completion of these works the penitents might be restored to fellowship by regulated steps. Those who superintended this discipline were authorized by the bishops either to shorten or lengthen the probationary period and to reduce or increase the severity of the penance imposed, as circumstances required. Although this was done, no one at the time regarded the punishment imposed as being atoning in its nature: it merely expressed the displeasure and severity of the church because the offender had brought its good name into disrepute.

Nevertheless, from this practice of probation and penance gradually arose the granting of indulgences, the scope of which little by little was extended to cover other sins, and not that of apostasy only. The claim made was that, since the pope was the Vicar of Christ, and head of the church, he could draw upon the “Treasury of the Church,” and use the extra-merit of the saints to make good the deficiencies of Catholic believers who were suffering in purgatory because of sins for which full satisfaction had not been made to God—just as the Lord, when on earth had possessed the power to say to the woman taken in adultery, **“Neither do I condemn thee; go and sin no more.”**

The three essentials for sacramental absolution are laid down as penitence, confession, and satisfaction.

The latter, called “temporal punishment,” is required after absolution has been granted in order to satisfy the justice of God whose laws have been broken. If not given in this life by fasting and prayers, etc., then it must be paid in purgatory.

Indulgences apply, not to Hell, which is irremediable, but to this temporal punishment in purgatory. Various indulgences are available, differing in character.

There are plenary or complete indulgences, which give exemption from penalties both in this life and in that to come in purgatory.

There are limited indulgences, by which exemption is given for a specified time—ten, twenty, or thirty days, and so on.

Indulgences differ also as to place.

- Universal indulgences are for use in all the churches everywhere.
- Particular indulgences are for use in specified churches or shrines.
- Immediate indulgences are of immediate efficacy for those using the rosary or wearing scapular.
- Personal indulgences are either for oneself or for a specified group.

The pope claims the power to grant any of these indulgences either to the whole church or to any individual member. In 1903 the pope gave delegated authority to other priests, permitting cardinals to give indulgence for two hundred days, archbishops for one hundred and bishops for fifty, each in his own diocese. The granting of indulgences is still current practice in the Church of Rome.

Many Catholic historians admit that the use of indulgences has been grossly abused in the past, giving rise to serious criticism. Thus it was in 1517, when money was needed for the rebuilding of St. Peter's at Rome, Tetzel was sent to sell indulgences in Germany. He openly proclaimed,

“As soon as your money falls into the box,
the soul is released from purgatory.”

The Roman Catholic Church may not sell indulgences in the open market today, as once she did, but nevertheless money received in other ways for indulgences forms a large part of the church's income.

Take for instance her many jubilee years, with the indulgences attached to pilgrimages to Rome. The first of these was instituted by Boniface VIII in 1300. It took the form of a plenary indulgence granted to all the faithful who visited the Roman Basilicas of St. Peter, St. Paul, St. Mary Major, and St. Lateran, and received the Sacraments of Penance and the Holy Eucharist. It is stated that in that year more than two million people visited Rome, contributing vast sums of money.

These jubilee years were to be centennial, but as 1350 drew near the citizens of Rome besought Pope Clement VI to declare another jubilee for that year. Apparently they as well as the pope had found the jubilee highly profitable. The fifty-year interval was reduced to thirty-three by Urban VI in 1389, and to twenty-five by Paul II in 1470, and so has continued until recent times, except that from 1500 and onward the time of the jubilee has been extended beyond the year, so that those who could not make the pilgrimage during the actual year could come later and still enjoy its benefits. Those unable to come at all could secure the indulgence by contributing as much money as they were able.

On August 15, 1953, Pope Pius XII at the Feast of the Assumption proclaimed an extra jubilee to commence on December 8, the Feast of the Immaculate Conception. This, with the jubilee of 1950 and the extension of 1951, makes three jubilees within five years! Besides these jubilees there are special festivals, pilgrimages to various churches and holy places, providing opportunities to accumulate merit, and secure indulgences. For this travesty of truth Rome seeks to find some support from the Scriptures. She builds her doctrine on Matthew 16: 19:

Whatsoever thou shalt bind on earth shall be bound in heaven; and whatsoever thou shalt loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven.

Her false interpretation of this verse lies at the very root of her errors. She completely disregards the fact that it makes not the slightest reference to purgatory, nor has anything to do with it. Even if for argument's sake, we were to admit that Peter and the other apostles had this authority vested in themselves, there is no proof that the pope now has it.

She also builds her doctrine on I Corinthians 5:3-5 and II Corinthians 2:10, 11.

For I verily, as absent in body, but present in spirit, have judged already, as though I were present, concerning him that hath so done this deed, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, when ye are gathered together, and my spirit, with the power of our Lord Jesus Christ, to deliver such a one unto Satan for the destruction of the flesh, that the spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord Jesus (I Corinthians 5:3-5).

To whom ye forgive any thing, I forgive also: for if I forgave any thing, to whom I forgave it, for your sakes forgave I it in the person of Christ; Lest Satan should get an advantage of us: for we are not ignorant of his devices (II Corinthians 2:10, 11).

The church at Corinth was regarding lightly the sin of one of their members, and Paul was commanding them to excommunicate him. The purpose of this was to bring him to repentance and to salvation. As a matter of fact the church did excommunicate him (see II Corinthians 7:6-11; II Corinthians 2:10, 11). The whole church inflicted the punishment, and not a pope, and the whole church was exhorted to receive him back. Note that the Greek word here translated “**forgive**” is the same as that used in Ephesians 4:32, “**forgiving one another**,” meaning to be gracious. It is not the word used in Mark 2:7 (“**Who can forgive sins but God only?**”) or I John 1:9 (“**He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins**”), which means to absolve.

Fill up that which is behind of the afflictions of Christ (Colossians 1:24).

Paul does not here claim for himself extra merit, to be placed in the “Treasury of Merit” for the assistance of souls in purgatory. He was writing from prison, where he was suffering for preaching the Gospel which his Lord had provided at the cost of His sufferings on Calvary. The Lord Jesus had told His disciples that they would be hated of all men for His name’s sake, and so indeed it came to pass, with them and with Paul. (See II Corinthians 11:23-28 where Paul recalls the suffering he had already endured as a preacher of the Gospel).

Not only is there no support in Scripture for the use of indulgences, but as previous chapters of this book have already shown, it condemns them. Starting from a false premise, fallacy after fallacy is added until the whole doctrine is one gigantic falsehood.

It starts with the assumption that our Lord gave to Peter, not authority to preach repentance and forgiveness of sins through Christ—as Peter in fact did—but power to forgive sins on his own behalf, though there is not a single record of his ever having done this.

It assumes that Peter had the power to pass on an authority which he never possessed to the pope of today through a long line of so-called successors, not a few of whom were notoriously ungodly men.

It assumes that even after priestly absolution, the soul still has to enter a purgatory of which the Bible knows nothing, to give “satisfaction” for sins, which the atoning blood of Christ was not able to provide.

It assumes that man can work out a merit of his own by good works, sufficient not only to cover his own deficiencies, but also to cover the deficiencies of others, which is a flat contradiction of what the Bible teaches.

It speaks of a Treasury of Merit, and therein it speaks truly, for though the phrase “Treasury of Merit” is not found in the Scriptures, the fact is there, for we are told that “**Christ . . . by his own blood entered in once into the holy place, having obtained eternal redemption for us**” (Hebrews 9:12).

We are therefore bidden **to come boldly unto the throne of grace to obtain mercy and find grace to help in time of need** (Hebrews 4:16). But nowhere in the Bible is there a hint of any merits of the saints or of devout souls on earth being stored there, available to cover the sins of others. That is a Romish fiction.

It invests the pope with suppositious power to dispense suppositious human extra-merit, to deliver souls from the fires of a suppositious purgatory.

And all of this is to be granted for money, if not by the open sale of indulgences as in Tetzel's day, then by the indirect methods of jubilee years, special festivals and pilgrimages, masses for the dead, for which payment has to be made.

Our Lord said, "**A rich man shall hardly enter into the kingdom of heaven**" (Matthew 19:23). But Rome alters this to mean, "A poor man shall hardly enter into the kingdom of heaven," for he has not the wealth that Rome requires for her indulgences.

Our Lord said, "**The poor have the gospel preached to them**" (Matthew 11:5), and almost the last words of the New Testament are, "**Let him that is athirst come. And whosoever will, let him take the water of life freely**" (Revelation 22:17).

Note the inconsistency. If purgatory is to purge away the dross, and purify the soul to make it fit to enter Heaven, of what avail can indulgences be for souls in whom that process is not yet complete?

If plenary indulgences are really plenary, that is, complete, what need is there to pray for the dead, or pay for masses for their release after plenary indulgence has been given?

~ end of chapter 15 ~

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