

# A Sermon on Indulgences and Grace

Martin Luther  
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**First**, you should know that some new teachers, such as the Master of Sentences, St. Thomas [Aquinas], and their disciples, divide [the Sacrament of] Penance into three parts: contrition, confession, and satisfaction. And, although this distinction and opinion of theirs is scarcely or not at all to be found based in Holy Scripture or in the ancient holy Christian teachers, nevertheless we will pass over this for now and speak using their categories.

**Second**, they say that indulgences do not involve the first or the second part, that is, contrition or confession, but rather satisfaction.

**Third**, satisfaction is further divided into three parts, that is, prayer, fasting, and almsgiving. Thus, prayer includes all kinds of works proper to the soul, such as reading, meditating, hearing God's word, preaching, teaching, and the like. Fasting includes all kinds of work that mortify the flesh, such as vigils, working, [sleeping on a] hard bed, [wearing rough] clothes, etc. Almsgiving includes all kinds of good works of the body and mercy toward the neighbor.

**Fourth**, all of these [teachers] hold for a certainty that indulgences take away these very works of satisfaction that ought to be done for sin or are required to be done. For an indulgence is supposed to take away all these works so that nothing good remains for us to do.

**Fifth**, among many [teachers] it is an open and unresolved debate whether indulgences also take away even more than such good works as are required, namely whether they also remove the punishment for sin that God's righteousness demands.

**Sixth**, for the moment I will put their opinions aside without refuting them. This is what I say: No one can defend the position with any passage from Scripture that God's righteousness desires or demands any punishment or satisfaction from sinners except for their heartfelt and true contrition or conversion alone—with the condition that from that moment on they bear the cross of Christ and practice the aforementioned works (but not as imposed by anyone). For this is what God said through Ezekiel [18:21 with 33:14–16, paraphrase]: “If the wicked turn away from all their sins . . . and do . . . right, so will I no longer think on their sins.” Thus, in the same way he himself absolved Mary Magdalene [Luke 7:36–50], the paralytic [Mark 2:1–12], the woman taken in adultery [John 8:1–11], etc. I would like to hear who would prove the opposite—besides the fact that some doctors have made this up.

**Seventh**, in point of fact one finds that God punishes some according to his righteousness or through punishment impels them to contrition as in Psalm 89:30-33: “If his [David’s] children forsake my law . . . then I will punish their transgressions with the rod . . . but I will not remove my steadfast love from them.” But this punishment is in no one’s power to lessen, except God’s alone. Indeed, God will not relax such punishment but instead promises to impose it.

**Eighth**, for this reason, because no one has a name for this made-up punishment [of Scholastic teachers] and does not know what it is, therefore if this penalty is nothing, then the above-mentioned good work [of procuring indulgences] is nothing.

**Ninth**, I say that even if this very day the Christian church decided and decreed that indulgences took away more than the works of satisfaction did, nevertheless it would still be a thousand times better that no Christian buy or desire indulgences, but instead that they would rather do works and suffer punishment. For indulgences are and may continue to be nothing other than the neglect of good works and salutary suffering, which a person should rather choose than omit—even though some of the new preachers have invented two kinds of sufferings: *Medicativae*, *Satisfactoriae*, that is, some suffering is for satisfaction and some for improvement. But, praise God, we have more freedom to disdain this kind of prattle than they have freedom to dream it up. For all suffering, indeed, everything God lays upon Christians is for their betterment and benefit.

**Tenth**, nothing is being said [by arguing] that the punishment and works may be too much, that the individual may not complete them because of the shortness of life, and therefore there is need for indulgences for such a person. I respond that this has no basis in fact and is pure fiction. For God and the holy church impose on no one more than they are able to carry, as St. Paul also says [1 Cor. 10:13, paraphrase]: “God will not let [anyone] be tested beyond [what that person can endure].” And this heaps no small insult upon Christianity when someone accuses it of imposing heavier burdens than we can bear.

**Eleventh**, although the satisfaction set in canon law is still on the books—that for each mortal sin seven years of satisfaction is imposed—nevertheless Christianity must let these very laws go and impose nothing more than what they allow each to bear. Much more, given that this [rule] is not in force, should one take care not to impose more than any one person will be able to bear.

**Twelfth**, it is fine to say that the sinner with residual punishment should be directed to purgatory or to indulgences. But more must be said about the basis and underpinnings for this.

**Thirteenth**, it is a tremendous error when people imagine that they can make satisfaction for their sins, which God instead always forgives gratis out of

immeasurable grace while desiring nothing for this [grace] except that one live well from then on. Whenever Christianity demands something further, it may and should set such a thing aside and not impose anything heavy or unbearable.

**Fourteenth**, indulgences are tolerated for the sake of the imperfect and lazy Christians, who either do not want to practice good works in a lively way or want to avoid suffering. For indulgences do not demand improvement but tolerate and accept such people as imperfect. For this reason, one should not speak against indulgences, but one must also not speak in favor of using them.

**Fifteenth**, a person who gives to build St. Peter's [in Rome], or whatever else is mentioned [in indulgence preaching], purely for God's sake is acting in a far better and more certain way than those who take an indulgence for it. For it is dangerous when they give such a gift for the sake of an indulgence and not for God's sake.

**Sixteenth**, a work shown to the poor is much better than one given toward [constructing] a building, and it is also much better than when an indulgence is given for such a work. For, as stated above, a good deed done is much better than many avoided indulgences, however, mean avoiding many good works, or else nothing is avoided.

Furthermore, so that I may instruct you correctly, please note the following. If you want to give something, you ought above all else (without considering St. Peter's building or indulgences) give to your poor neighbor. When it comes to the point that there is no one in your city who needs help (unless God deigns it, this will never happen!), then you ought to give where you want: to churches, altars, decorations, or chalices that are for your own city. And when that, too, is no longer necessary, then first off—if you wish—you may give to the building of St. Peter's or anywhere else. Moreover, you should not do this for the sake of an indulgence, for St. Paul says [1 Tim. 5:8], "And whoever does not provide for . . . family members, is no Christian and is worse than an unbeliever." And avoid those who tell you differently, who deceive you or who search for your soul in a moneybag. And when they find a penny in the purse, it is dearer to them than any soul whatsoever.

Suppose you say, "Then I will never again buy an indulgence." I respond, "That is what I already said above. My will, desire, plea, and counsel are that no one buy an indulgence. Let the lazy and sleepy Christians buy indulgences. You run from them."

**Seventeenth**, indulgences are neither commanded nor recommended. Instead they count among the things that are permitted and allowed. Therefore, it is not a work of obedience and also not meritorious but instead a departure from obedience. Therefore, although one should not hinder someone from buying them, nevertheless one should draw Christians away from them and arouse and encourage them to do those works and [suffer those] punishments that indulgences avoid.

***Eighteenth***, whether souls are rescued from purgatory through indulgences, I do not know and I also do not believe it, although some new doctors [of the church] say it. But it is impossible for them to prove it, and the church has not yet decided the matter. Therefore, for the sake of greater certainty, it is much better that each of you prays and works for these souls. For this has more value and is certain.

***Nineteenth***, in these points I have no doubt, and they are sufficiently grounded in the Scripture. Therefore, all of you should have no doubts about it and let the scholastic doctors alone. Taken altogether, they do not have enough with their opinions to put together a single sermon.

***Twentieth***, although some (for whom such truth really damages their treasure chests) now want to call me a heretic, nevertheless I consider such blathering no big deal, especially since the only ones doing this are some darkened minds, who have never even smelled a Bible, who have never read a Christian teacher, and who do not even understand their own teachers but instead remain stuck with their shaky and close-minded opinions. For if they had understood them, they would have known that they should not defame anyone without a hearing and without refuting them. Still, may God give them and us a right understanding! Amen.