



The Good News

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Indulge Me

By Michael McCleary

You may have been told at some time that purchasing an indulgence from the Catholic Church was a means of receiving forgiveness for a sin an individual had committed. However, this is not accurate according to the Catholic Encyclopedia Vol. VII.

In short, the Catholic perception of sin is two-fold: the guilt of sin, which only God can remove, including any spiritual penalties, and the temporal debt for sin, which is required by Divine justice and can be paid by good works in this life, or through the purifying fires of purgatory in the next. Basically, we see the spiritual end of sin and the physical debt due because of sin. So, what is an indulgence? In the Middle Ages, the Catholic church was the source of much of the social welfare; healthcare, money, food, etc. However, these actions required a large amount of money. So, in the 13th century, the Catholic Church came up with this logic: since, after the removal of sin, temporal punishment is required, and this temporal punishment can be dissolved by the doing of good works, why not substitute *someone else's* good works for the good works the sinner is required to perform? The indulgence substituted all the combined merits of Jesus, Mary, and the saints, including the Catholic clergy, for the good works required of the individual believer. This "treasury" of good merits is supposedly limitless, because Jesus was limitlessly good, as well as Mary, and the saints. The Catholic church is the overseer of this treasury and can allocate these merits to cover the physical debt that others owe for sin so that they do not have to personally perform these good works now, or in purgatory. So, we see that an indulgence did not forgive sin, but rather it assumed sin had already been forgiven, and then the indulgence covered the physical debt that remained.

Is there any truth to these teachings in the Bible? It is true that Jesus was righteous and did not sin. We cannot say the same for Mary, or any other "saints" for "all have sinned and fall short..." (Rom. 3:23). In addition, we do not read anything about the "merits" of Jesus being able to cover some physical debt we owe to sin. Nor can we find anywhere the concept of a physical debt

owed because of sin. We sin, we repent, we ask forgiveness (if we have already been baptized), we are forgiven, and that is the end of it. Granted, John called on Israel to bring forth "fruits worthy of repentance" (Luke 3:8), but this was simply to show that they had changed their hearts to accept the will of God. Perhaps the most striking contradiction to the true Word is the basis upon which these concepts are found: purgatory. The entire purpose of indulgences was to save the soul from having to repay the debt of sin in the fires of purgatory; this is not a biblical concept. Nowhere does Jesus or the apostles say anything regarding a mid-way point to heaven in which we are given the chance to prove ourselves worthy by repaying the debt of sin that we couldn't repay during our physical lives.

Yet, there is also one more point to make concerning this. The Catholic concept included the idea that the good works, or merits, of a person can be substituted in the place of another. In the aforementioned verse, Israel was called on to bring forth fruits...not the priests performing them in the place of the people, but the people themselves. In James 2:27, James talks about what true religion is: to take care of the orphans and widows and to keep oneself unspotted from the world. No one else can accomplish this in our stead. Just because we pay the preacher to "do the work" does not excuse us from doing our work also. His good deeds, or anyone else's, cannot flow onto the rest of the congregation. We all have our own works to do.

This concept is often adopted in the religious world by so many churches, Catholic and Protestant alike. This can even seep into the thoughts of the faithful people of Christ. How many people will lose their souls because they thought their obligation to do "good works" was being fulfilled by others paid to do them? Will there even be some of the church of Christ among these? Let's make sure that we are grounded, acknowledging the truth of God's word and the authority behind it, doing our own good works for the Lord.