

FORGIVENESS AND INDULGENCES

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The foremost characteristic of God is His love and graciousness. For example in the early chapters of the Bible when God proclaimed His name, that is His character, to Moses in Exodus 34, He declared Himself to be "the Lord, a God full of compassion and gracious, slow to anger, and plenteous in mercy and truth; keeping mercy for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin: ..." It is true, and we must never forget it, that God punishes impenitent sinners, but He is very gracious to forgive those who repent. This truth rings like a bell clearly through the pages of Scripture. Thus David sings in Psalm 86 "Thou, O Lord, art a God full of compassion and gracious, Slow to anger, and plenteous in mercy and truth." and in Psalm 103 "Bless the Lord, O my soul; and forget not all his benefits; Who forgiveth all thine iniquities; Who healeth all thy diseases",

God's forgiveness of those who turn to Him in repentance and confession of their sins, is full and complete. The Bible reiterates this over and over again, using many different descriptions to emphasise this important and peace giving truth that God's forgiveness is full and complete. For example, Psalm 103 says "As far as the east is from the west, so far hath he removed our transgressions from us." In Micah 7 we read God "will tread our iniquities under foot: and thou wilt cast all their sins into the depths of the sea." Isaiah states "Thou hast cast all my sins behind thy back" and in Isaiah 44 God says "I have blotted out, as a thick cloud, thy transgressions, and, as a cloud, thy sins", and again "Though your sins be as scarlet they shall be as white as snow, though they be red like crimson they shall be as wool". And St. Paul states very vividly that for the forgiven man God does not reckon his sins to him, He accounts him as though he had not committed them. It seems as though the Bible exhausts the possibilities of language to make clear to us that when we are forgiven, our sins are completely blotted out from God's sight. This is a very blessed truth of the Christian Gospel in which we should continually rejoice, that through the death of Christ the fullness of forgiveness is granted to those who confess their sins and put their faith in Christ.

Unfortunately the Roman Catholic doctrine of indulgences obscures and indeed denies this truth of the fullness of forgiveness. The Roman Catholic Church teaches that the sins which Christians commit are not fully forgiven on confession. It teaches that the eternal punishment is forgiven for Christ's sake, but temporal punishment and satisfaction for these same sins must be made by us; either in this life or in purgatory. It will be seen that this teaching is not only against the Bible's view of the fullness of God's forgiveness, but also derogates from Christ's work on Calvary. For over and above the satisfaction that He there made on Calvary, it is said that we ourselves also must make additional satisfaction, without which the punishment of our sins cannot be forgiven.

The Roman Catholic Church teaches further that this temporal satisfaction and punishment which we ourselves must undergo because of our sins may be lessened and, indeed, completely forgiven by the obtaining of an indulgence or indulgences. These indulgences are issued by the Pope, for the remission of the temporal punishment said to be due for our sins, especially punishment in purgatory. As is well known, the historical cause of the Reformation was the granting of such indulgences in return for gifts of money towards the building of St. Peter's Cathedral at Rome. Nowadays indulgences are granted for a great number of things; for example, for a visit to Rome in the Holy Year, or for the wearing of certain badges or medals round one's neck, or for certain pious acts, or for the saying of certain prayers. An official list of things, the doing of which obtains indulgences, is published in Rome.

The theory of indulgences involves several errors. Firstly, the basic one I have mentioned, namely the teaching that in forgiving sins God does not forgive completely, only partially, leaving some of the penalty for ourselves to satisfy for. A second error involved is that the Church, instead of being the messenger of God's forgiveness by proclaiming the Gospel of forgiveness, is regarded as God's plenipotentiary, dispensing or withholding forgiveness, so that for a consideration it can dispense forgiveness by way of an indulgence. There is also a third error on which the theory of indulgences is based, namely the transference of merits from one person to another; for one of the grounds of indulgences is said to be the super-abundant merits of the saints which remain over and above the required amount of merit they needed for entrance into heaven and which is thus said to be at the disposal of the Church to be transferred by way of an indulgence to those whose merits come

short of the amount needed for Heaven, but of course merits cannot be totted up in this commercial sort of way. At this point another error enters, for the truth is that neither our merits, nor the merits of the saints, can get anyone to Heaven. We who would enter Heaven must trust in Christ alone, His merits alone are the ground for entrance there.

The theory of indulgences goes closely with the theory of purgatory, for indulgences are primarily for the purpose of remitting punishment said to be required in purgatory. But purgatory has no basis in Scripture, and is thus an imaginary place. Similarly, indulgences have no basis in Scripture, but are based on unscriptural tenets such as the transference of merits from one Christian to another, and especially on the concept that in forgiveness God does not forgive all the penalty. This, as we have seen, is contrary to the clear language of Scripture.

It is true that God as a father chastens His children whom He loves, in order that they might recognize and be sorry for their sins and so might grow more like their Saviour Christ, but the doctrine of purgatory and of indulgences is something different. It is not connected with the chastening of a loving father, but with the penalty imposed by the judge. However, this penalty, the Bible teaches, has been fully borne by Christ. As St. Paul says "Christ has redeemed us from the curse having become a curse for us", and as Isaiah puts it "the Lord has laid on Him the iniquity of us all".

The Roman Catholic Church makes a distinction between the forgiveness of those sins committed before baptism and the forgiveness of those committed after baptism. For those sins committed before baptism that Church follows the Bible teaching that there is full forgiveness; all the penalty, whether eternal or temporal, being forgiven through the death of Christ; but for sins committed by Christians after baptism, it teaches that part of the penalty is forgiven for Christ's sake and part is not forgiven, but has to be satisfied for by ourselves. This satisfaction, it is said, may be remitted by the pope, through the obtaining of an indulgence granted for a consideration of some good deed or another, such as the wearing of a medallion. However, the Bible knows no distinction in the forgiveness of sins, nor has it any teaching that we have to satisfy for some part of our sins ourselves, much less that the Church can dispense with this satisfaction by the issuing of an indulgence. All such theories have no basis in Scripture.

It is much to be desired that the Roman Catholic Church should extend its teaching about the full forgiveness of sins committed before baptism (which accords with the Bible), to the forgiveness of all sins, for then it would have no need of a purgatory or of indulgences. We should remember that it was about the sins of Christians committed after their baptism that the Apostle John wrote "If we confess our sins he is faithful and righteous to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness", and again, "If any man sin we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous, and He is the propitiation for our sins". This is the Bible doctrine of forgiveness, that all sins, whenever committed, are forgiven by God freely and completely if we turn from them, and confess them to Him, asking for mercy and forgiveness. The basis of that forgiveness is the complete satisfaction that Jesus Christ has made for our sins by His death on the cross. When God forgives sinners for Christ's sake He forgives them completely, not partially. He puts those sins behind His back, He blots them out as a thick cloud from His sight. He does not take account of the fact that we have committed them.

And so, freely forgiven by His grace, we have peace with God.