

Disputation of
Doctor Martin Luther
on the
Power and Efficacy
of Indulgences

October 31, 1517

Translated by Lionel D C Hartley ©1976, Renewed 2002

Out of love for the truth and a desire to bring it to light, the following propositions will be discussed at Wittenberg, under the presidency of the Reverend Father Martin Luther, Master of Arts and of Sacred Theology, and Lecturer in Ordinary on the same at that place. Wherefore he requests that those who are not able to be present and debate orally with us, may do so by letter.

In the Name our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

1. Our Lord and Master Jesus Christ, when He said *Poenitentiam agite*, wished that the whole life of believers should be repentance.

2. These words cannot be understood to mean sacramental penance- That is to say, confession and satisfaction, which is administered by the priests.

3. Yet it means not an inward repentance only because there is no inward repentance which does not outwardly work many humiliations of the flesh.

4. Therefore sin's penalty continues as long as the hatred of self continues; for this is the true inward repentance, and continues until our entrance into the kingdom of heaven.

5. The pope does not intend to remit [and cannot remit] any penalties, other than those alone, which he has imposed either by his own authority or by that of the canons.

6. The pope cannot remit any guilt, except by declaring that it has been remitted by God and by acceding to God's remission; though, to be sure, he may grant remis-

sion in cases reserved to his judgement. If his right to grant remission in such cases were despised, the guilt would remain entirely un-forgiven.

7. God remits guilt to none whom He doesn't humble in all things at the same time and bring into subjection to His vicar, the priest.

8. The penitential canons are imposed on the living only, and, according to these canons, nothing should be imposed on the dying.

9. Therefore the Holy Spirit working through the pope is kind to us, because in the pope's decrees he always makes exception of the article of death and of necessity.

10. Wicked and ignorant are the actions of those priests who, in the case of the dying, reserve canonical penances for purgatory.

11. This changing of the canonical penalty to the penalty of purgatory is quite evidently one of the tares that were sown while the bishops were asleep.

12. In the past, the canonical penalties were imposed before, not after absolution, as tests of true contrition.

13. The dying are freed by death from all penalties; they are already dead to canonical rules, and have the right to be released from them.

14. The soul's imperfect health — imperfect love — of the dying of necessity brings with it great fear. The smaller the love, the greater the fear.

15. This horror and fear is sufficient of itself alone (to say nothing of other things) to constitute the penalty of purgatory, since it is very close to the horror of despair.

16. Hell, purgatory, and heaven seem to differ, as do despair, 'almost despair', and the assurance of safety.

17. With souls in purgatory it seems necessary that horror should grow less and love increase more.

18. It seems unproven, either by reason or by Scripture, that they are outside the condition of merit, that is to say, of increasing love.

19. Again, it seems unproven that they, or at least that all of them, are certain or assured of their own blessedness, although we may be quite sure about it.

20. Therefore by “full remission of all penalties” the pope does not mean actually “of all,” but only of those that have been imposed by himself.

21. Therefore those preachers of indulgences are in error, who say that by the pope’s indulgences a man is freed from every penalty, and saved...

22. Whereas he remits no penalty to souls in purgatory which, according to the canons, they would have had to pay in this life.

23. If it is at all possible to grant to any one the remission of all penalties whatsoever, it is certain that this remission can be granted only to the most perfect souls, that is, to the very smallest number of souls.

24. It must therefore needs be that the greater number of the people are deceived by that indiscriminate and high-sounding promise of release from penalty.

25. The power which the pope has, *in a general way*, over purgatory, is just like the power which any bishop or curate has, *in a special way*, within his own diocese or parish.

26. The pope does well when he grants remission to souls in purgatory by way of intercession but not by the power of the keys, which he does not possess.

27. They preach men to say that as soon as the penny jingles into the money-box the soul flies out (of purgatory?).

28. It is certain that when the penny jingles into the money-box, gain and avarice can be increased, but the result of the intercession of the Church is in the power of God alone.

29. Who knows whether all the souls in purgatory want to be bought out of it, as in the legend of Saints Severinus and Paschal.

30. No one is sure that his own contriteness is sincere; much less that he has attained full remission.

31. As rare as is the man that is truly penitent (such men are most rare), so rare also is the man who truly buys indulgences.

32. They, together with their teachers, will be condemned eternally, who believe because they have letters of pardon they may be sure of their salvation.

33. Men must be on their guard against those who say that the pope's pardons are that "inestimable gift of God by which man is reconciled to Him..."

34. For these "graces of pardon" concern only the penalties of sacramental satisfaction, and man appoints these.

35. They preach no Christian doctrine who teach that contriteness of heart is not necessary for those who intend to buy souls out of purgatory or to buy confessionalia.

36. Every truly repentant Christian has a right to full remission of the penalty and the guilt of sin, even without letters of pardon.

37. Every true Christian, whether living or dead, has a part in all the blessings of Christ and the Church; and this is granted him by God, even without letters of pardon.

38. Nevertheless, the remission and the participation in these blessings which are granted by the pope are in no way to be despised, for they are, as I said earlier, the declaration of divine remission.

39. It is most difficult, even for the very keenest theologians, at one and the same time, to commend to the people both the abundance of pardons *and* true contrition.

40. True contrition seeks and values penalties, but too-liberal pardons only relax penalties and cause or furnish an occasion for them to be hated.

41. Apostolic pardons are to be preached with caution, lest the people may incorrectly think them preferable to other good works of love.

42. Christians are to be taught that the pope does not want the buying of pardons to be compared in any way to works of mercy.

43. Christians are to be taught that the person who gives to the poor or lends to the needy does a better work than buying pardons;

44. Because love makes man better and grows through works of love; but through pardons man does not grow better, just freer from penalty.

45. Christians are to be taught that he who sees a man in need and passes him by, then gives his wealth for pardons, does not buy the indulgences of the pope, but the anger of God.

46. Christians are to be taught that unless they have more than they need, they are obligated to keep back what is necessary for their own families, and by no means to squander it on pardons.

47. Christians are to be taught that the buying of pardons is not of commandment, but a matter of free choice.

48. Christians are to be taught that, by granting pardons, the pope needs [and therefore wants?], their devout prayers for him more than the money they bring.

49. Christians are to be taught that they do not put their trust in them useful, but they do (put their trust in them and lose their fear of God) the pope's pardons are altogether harmful.

50. Christians are to be taught that if the pope knew of the exactions of the preachers of pardons, then he would rather that St. Peter's church should be razed to ashes, than that it should be built up with the skin, flesh and bones of his sheep.

51. Christians are to be taught that it would be the pope's desire, just as it is his duty, to give of his own money to very many of those from whom certain hawkers of pardons inveigle money, even if it means selling the church of St. Peter.

52. The assurance of salvation by letters of pardon is vanity, even though the commissary or even if the pope himself were to stake his soul upon it.

53. They are enemies of Christ and of the pope, who command the Word of God to be altogether silent in some Churches, in order that pardons may be preached in others.

54. The Word of God is injured when, in the same sermon, an equal or a longer time is spent on pardons than on His Word.

55. The pope must intend that if pardons, which are a very small thing, are celebrated with one bell, with single processions and ceremonies, then the Gospel, which is the very greatest thing, should be preached with a hundred bells, a hundred processions, a hundred ceremonies.

56. The "treasures of the Church," out of which the pope grants indulgences, are not sufficiently mentioned nor known among the body of Christ.

57. The fact that they are not temporal treasures is certainly evident, for many of the vendors only gather and do not pour out such treasures easily.

58. Nor are they the merits of Christ and the Saints, for even without the pope, these always work grace in the inner man, and the cross, death, and hell for the outer man.

59. St. Lawrence spoke according to the usage of the word in his own time when he said that the treasures of the Church were the Church's poor.

60. Without imprudence we say that the treasure is the keys of the Church given by Christ's merit;

61. For it is clear that for the remission of penalties and of reserved cases, the power of the pope is [of itself] sufficient.

62. The true treasure of the Church is the Most Holy Gospel of the glory and the grace of God.

63. But this treasure is naturally most detestable, for it makes the first to be the last.

64. On the other hand, the treasure of indulgences is naturally most acceptable, for it makes the last to be first.

65. Therefore the treasures of the Gospel are nets with which they would formerly fish for men of riches.

66. The treasures of the indulgences are nets with which they now fish for the riches of men.

67. The indulgences that the preachers hail as the "greatest graces", are known to be truly great in as much as they promote gain.

68. Yet they are in verity the very smallest graces compared with the grace of God and the piety of the Cross.

69. Bishops and curates are bound, with all reverence, to admit the commissaries of apostolic pardons,

70. But even more are they bound to strain their eyes and attend with their ears, lest these men preach their own dreams instead of the commission of the pope.

71. Let he who speaks against the truth of apostolic pardons be anathema and accursed;

72. But let he who guards against the lust and license of the pardon-preachers be blessed!

73. The pope justly roars against those who, by any art, contrive the injury of the traffic in pardons,

74. But much more does he intend to roar against those who use the pretext of pardons to contrive the detriment of holy truth and love.

75. It is madness to think that the papal pardons are so great that they can absolve a man (even if he had committed an impossible sin and violated the Mother of God)...

76. On the contrary, we say that the papal pardons are not able to remove the guilt of the very least of venial sins.

77. It is blasphemy against St. Peter and against the pope to say that even St. Peter, if he were now Pope, could not bestow greater graces.

78. On the contrary, we say that even the present pope, and any pope at all, has greater graces at his disposal, such as is written in I Corinthians 12: the Gospel, powers, gifts of healing, etc.

79. It is blasphemy to say that the papal cross, set up by the indulgence preachers and decorated with the papal coat-of-arms, is of equal worth to the Cross of Christ.

80. The bishops, curates and theologians who allow such talk to be disseminated among the people, will have an account to render.

81. This unchecked preaching of pardons makes it no easy matter, even for the educated, to rescue the reverence due to the pope from slander, or even from the shrewd questionings of the laity.

82. For example: "Why doesn't the pope empty purgatory, for the sake of holy love and of the desperate need of the souls that are there, if he redeems an infinite number of souls for the sake of miserable money with which to build a Church? The former reasons would be most just; the latter most unjust."

83. Again: "If it is wrong to pray for the redeemed, then why are mortuary and anniversary masses for the dead continued, and why does he not return or permit the withdrawal of the endowments founded on their behalf?"

84. Again: "What is this new piety of God and the pope, that for money they allow a man who is impious and their enemy to buy out of purgatory the pious soul of a friend of God? Why not rather, because of that pious and beloved soul's own need, free it for pure love's sake?"

85. Again: "Why are the penitential canons [long since in actual fact and through disuse abolished and dead] now satisfied by the granting of indulgences as though they were still alive and in force?"

86. Again: "Why doesn't the pope, whose wealth is today greater than the riches of the richest, build just this one church of St. Peter with his own money, rather than with the money of poor believers?"

87. Again: "What is it that the pope remits, and what participation does he grant to those who, by perfect contrition, have a right to full remission and participation?"

88. Again: "What greater blessing could come to the Church than if the pope were to do a hundred times a day what he now does once: i.e. confer on every believer these remissions and participations?"

89. "Since the pope, by his pardons, seeks the salvation of souls rather than money, why does he suspend the indulgences and pardons granted up to now, since these have equal power?"

90. To repress these arguments and misgivings of the laity by force alone, and not to resolve them by giving reasons, is to make Christians unhappy and to expose the Church and the pope to the ridicule of their enemies.

91. If, therefore, pardons were preached according to the spirit and mind of the pope, all these doubts would be readily resolved; nay, they would not exist.

92. Away, then, with all those prophets who say to the people of Christ, "Peace, peace," and there is no peace!

93. Blessed be all those prophets who say to the people of Christ, "Cross, cross," and there is no cross!

94. Christians are to be counselled that they be diligent in following Christ, their Head, through penalties, deaths, and hell,

95. And thus be confident of entering into heaven more through many trials than through the assurance of peace.

Translated by Lionel D C Hartley* from "*Streitgespräch auf der Energie und der Wirksamkeit von Nachsicht, Oktober 31, 1517*" in consultation with the Latin "*Disputatio pro Declaratione Virtutis Indulgentiarum.*" Cited in Hermann Boehlau, *D. Martin Luther's Werke: Kritische Gesamtausgabe*, Weimar, 1883, Pp 233-8
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