

# Martin Luther (2): Forgiveness

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[ 0 : 00 ] 1 John 1 and verse 9 1 John 1 and verse 9 The location was the door of the university chapel in Wittenberg in Germany.

The man was the German monk Martin Luther. On this date, in this place, through this man, God began the most remarkable revival of the Christian religion since the days of the apostles.

What we call the Protestant Reformation. Luther, outraged at what he perceived to be an offense against Christ, drew up 95 statements, or as he called them, theses, which he nailed to the university door of the church in Wittenberg on October the 31st, 1517.

He wrote them in Latin with an invitation extended to the leadership of the Roman Catholic Church of his day to debate them with him.

But soon after, his followers published them in German, which made the 95 theses of Martin Luther available and accessible to the common man.

[ 2 : 13 ] This lit the touch paper of the Reformation, a movement which is still growing in our own day. We might well ask the question, what was the impact of the Reformation?

To which we might fairly answer, it's too early to say. But pray tell, what was it that Luther perceived as such an offense against Christ that he posted his 95 theses?

Luther had been sent as a monk to Rome in 1512 and was appalled by the low standards of morality he saw among the priests and church leadership there. But he didn't write the 95 theses to complain about that.

It was something altogether more serious. Something which attacked the very foundation of the gospel of justification by faith in Christ, which he had come to love and cherish. And we looked at last weekend.

It was the sale of indulgences. The sale of indulgences. The word indulgences was a stench in his ears and it grieved his heart.

[ 3 : 24 ] It was his outrage at the issue of indulgences which prompted the 95 theses and the movement we call the Protestant Reformation.

But again tell me, is the issue of the sale of indulgences really so wrong? In what way does it attack the very foundation of the gospel of justification by faith in Christ?

Furthermore, what does this debate within 16th century Roman Catholicism have to do with us, evangelical reformed Christians living in 21st century post-pandemic Glasgow?

Surely little or nothing. My aim this morning is not to deliver to you a theological lecture, nor is it to give you a lesson in history.

My aim is to warm your hearts by reminding you that forgiveness is free to you because it was expensive to Jesus.

[ 4 : 30 ] And you need pay nothing for your eternal life because Jesus has already paid it all upon the cross. So this morning as we put our thinking caps on, I want us to consider two things.

First of all, the problem with indulgence. And secondly, the freedom of forgiveness. Again, let me reiterate, my aim this morning is to warm your hearts by reminding you that forgiveness is free to you because it was expensive to Jesus.

And you need pay nothing for eternal life because Jesus has paid it all upon the cross. First of all then, the problem of indulgence.

The problem of indulgence. Now the Roman Catholic Church into which Luther was baptized and of which he had become a monk had for hundreds of years taught a system called indulgences.

Indulgences. Now I'm going to try to explain this to you although you understand that having not been brought up as a Roman Catholic, I know very little about what they believe today and I do not want to be disrespectful to any of them.

[ 5 : 47 ] The indulgence system requires us to believe or understand rather, not believe, but requires us to understand three things. First, the existence of an afterlife which is neither heaven nor hell.

A place called purgatory where humans are sent after they die to pay off the debt they owe to God due to the sins they've committed during their life. Only perhaps after thousands of years of paying off the debt of their sin to God in purgatory could these human beings then go to heaven.

Purgatory is a place of pain and punishment where you pay off all the debt of the sins you have committed during your life. You make satisfaction for these sins in purgatory.

So good people, like us, spend only a few years in purgatory paying off the debt of our sins because we ain't committed many sins. Whereas really bad people, like terrorists, they might spend tens of thousands of years in purgatory before they had paid off their debt in full.

Purgatory. Second thing you need to understand about the indulgence system is the idea of merit. Merit. Especially righteous people, like the saints, build up a stock of good works or merit.

[ 7 : 14 ] Imagine a bank account, right? Many of you are students, so imagine your bank account, right? And because of our sin, we are always in debt in our bank account.

But the bank accounts of the especially holy saints, especially Mary, the mother of our Lord, because of their good works and because of their special holiness is always in surplus.

So we, common people, who are in debt and lack merit because of our sin, these special saints have surplus merit because of their good works and their holiness.

So, purgatory, merit. The third thing you need to understand about the indulgence system is the idea of penance. Penance.

Penance for sin was one of the seven sacraments and continues to be of the Roman Catholic Church. Penance consists of four stages. Contrition, being sorry for your sin.

[ 8 : 20 ] Confession, to a priest. Absolution, from the priest, the announcement of your forgiveness. And fourthly, satisfaction, where you make up for the sin you have committed according to what the priest tells you to do.

Now, in the 12th century, the Roman Catholic Church, that's penance, in the 12th century, the Roman Catholic Church began to teach the idea that if you wanted to avoid the satisfaction element of penance, in other words, paying God back for the thing you'd done wrong, an indulgence was sufficient.

By way of an indulgence paid to the church, you could access the surplus of merit stored away by the saints, especially by Mary, the mother of our Lord, and that surplus of merit paid for the satisfaction that you were due to make.

In the early days of the indulgence system, church leaders urged knights to go on the crusades on the basis that the merits of the saints would be given them depending on how many Saracens they killed.

As the years rolled on from the 12th to the 16th century, three things developed. The first, is that the church began to speak of indulgences not only as paying for the satisfaction of your sins here and now, but also the length of time you would spend in purgatory after you had died.

[ 10 : 05 ] That length of time would be shortened. So let's say, for example, you'd lived a very immoral life and you would have spent 10,000 years in purgatory paying off that sin. Now, if you accessed the merit of the saints stored away by the saints through engaging with the church's indulgence system, you might not have to spend any time suffering in purgatory at all.

The second development was, not only could you pay the church an indulgence for the satisfaction of your own sins to reduce the length of time you spent in purgatory, the payments were extended to include your loved ones.

In other words, by engaging in the indulgence system, you can buy off time in purgatory for your loved ones. And then, thirdly, indulgences move from things you could do for the church, like going on a crusade, to monetary contributions.

So, indulgences could be bought, like we would buy stocks and shares. You could access the surplus of merit stored away by the saints, especially Mary, the mother of our Lord, by giving money to the church.

That was the state of the Roman Catholic Church in early 16th century Europe. The church into which Luther was baptized and of which he became a monk. Now, we're getting somewhere here, right?

[ 11 : 38 ] In the early 16th century, the Roman Catholic Church was busy erecting St. Peter's Basilica in Rome, which still stands today. Maybe some of you have seen it for yourselves.

Now, it costs money to erect huge buildings and engage the services of great architects and artists like Michelangelo. To pay for it, the popes authorized this sale of indulgences.

That through the monetary contributions of the faithful, accessing the surplus merits of the saints, St. Peter's could be built in Rome.

Now, in 1515, in Luther's region of Germany, there was a Dominican friar called Johann Tetzel. He traveled around the area like a snake oil salesman, selling indulgences.

The phrase he would ring out whenever he arrived in a town, village, settlement, would be this. As soon as a coin in the coffer rings, the soul from purgatory springs.

[ 12 : 50 ] As soon as a coin in the coffer rings, the soul from purgatory springs. In other words, you put money into this money box, Johann Tetzel's money box, and by papal access to the surplus merits stored away by the saints, it serves as the satisfaction for your sins and for the sins of those you love and is able to release your loved ones who have died from thousands of years of suffering in purgatory.

So I hope you're all with me so far, right? To Martin Luther, who had so recently discovered the historic doctrine of justification by faith alone and Christ alone from Romans 117 as we saw last week, this was a stench in his nostrils.

He despised Johann Tetzel's snake oil salesman techniques as soon as a coin in the coffer rings, the soul from purgatory springs. He was so jealous for the glory of God and so on the 31st of October 1517 having written 95 statements against the sale of indulgences, he posted it on the door of the university church in Wittenberg and the rest, as they say, is history.

Let me read you just three of these theses. Number 62, Luther's words, not mine. The true treasure of the church is the most holy gospel of the glory and grace of God.

That's the true treasure of the church. Not the buildings, not a huge big basilica in Rome, but the most holy gospel of the grace and glory of Christ. Thesis 65, the treasure of the gospel are nets with which one formerly fished for men of wealth.

[ 14 : 47 ] In other words, the gospel is all about fishing for human beings. Not for the money, but for human beings. Thesis 66, the treasures of indulgences are nets with which one now fishes for the wealth of men.

No longer are you trying to win souls for Christ, you're just trying to fleece them of your money. Perhaps you can understand why when these theses were printed in German and distributed to the common man, there was outrage in Germany because the common people realized that they were being fleeced by the church which in the name of the forgiveness of their sins was selling them snake oil.

Okay, so perhaps you're thinking to yourself, how could anyone have ever believed this stuff? I think probably there are some who still do, but how could anybody possibly believe that you can pay for your sins to be forgiven, or that anything you can do can satisfy God's justice?

How could anyone possibly believe this? Well, I was recently sharing the idea for this sermon with Phil Stogner, who surprised me, as he often does, by what he told me, that he found himself continually trying to pay indulgences.

not in the sense of having anything to do with purgatory, but in the sense of trying to make satisfaction for his own sins. Phil made me think, as he really often does, really enriching experience, of the ways in which we as Christians, living not in 1517 Germany, but in 2021 Glasgow, try to make satisfaction for our own sins, how instinctively we try to pay God back for the bad things we've done, how we instinctively try to pay off our debt to God by our own efforts, be that moral effort, religious observance, or a new determination to be more devoted to God than ever we have been before.

[ 17 : 00 ] Phil made me realize that we are so mired in legalism and the system of merits that we genuinely think that we can pay God back for the bad things we have done in the past by in the future living a better life.

So we think that by promising that we'll never swear again, we can make up for a lifetime of swearing. That from now on, by being uber generous to the church, we can make up for a lifetime of greed and avarice.

And Luther says to us, no, that's Tetzal's money box rigging in your ears. If you think that anything you do, anything at all, by those things you can make satisfaction to God for your sins, you are engaging, you're indulging in indulgences, and you're no better than the common man who put the coins into Tetzal's coffers.

things. So let me ask you, it's all very well, I'm sick of being in churches where people take digs at the Roman Catholics, but they're not happy about having digs at themselves.

The important thing for us today is this, what are some of the ways you try to make it up to God for the wrong things you do? work more, try harder, given how serious a thing sin is, that it costs the precious life blood of the Lord Jesus Christ himself, and how our sin grieves the infinitely holy heart of an infinitely holy God, do you really think that we can satisfy God with our holy works, or our holy coins?

[ 18 : 52 ] it's that mindset you see that's wrong, that mindset that thinks it can do something, anything, to win God's favor.

It's not a grace mindset, it's a legalistic mindset, the default setting of our human souls. And so for as much as we scratch our heads and we wonder how any 16th century Roman Catholic could be quite so glib to believe such nonsense as Johann Tetzal was trying to sell them, if we think that by anything we can do or anything we can give to make satisfaction for our own sins, we are no better at all.

And ultimately, that is the evangelical problem of indulgence. Secondly, hopefully a bit more briefly, the freedom of forgiveness, forgiveness.

The freedom of forgiveness. There is in 1 John 1 verse 9 a word which at first sight doesn't seem to belong here.

If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. The word is just or righteous.

[ 20 : 17 ] It's a righteous thing. God does to forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all our unrighteousness on the condition that we confess our sin to him.

Now, I would have thought that the better word to use here would have been merciful or gracious, that God is merciful and gracious to forgive us our sins, that he is faithful and gracious to forgive us our sins.

But no, the forgiveness of our sins according to 1 John 1 verse 9 is not so much a condition of the grace or mercy of God, but a condition of his justice, faithfulness, and righteousness.

If this was the only verse we had in the whole Bible concerning the forgiveness of sins, it would be enough to explode the idea of indulgences out of the water. Forgiveness is entirely from God.

The only condition laid down in this verse which we must meet is the confession of our sin. That's the only condition. Not embarking on a crusade against the Saracens, not putting any coins into Johann Tetzal's box.

[ 21 : 34 ] Which of us deserve the forgiveness of our sins? Which one of us can contribute anything toward the payment of divine satisfaction? Can't buy our good works, we win God's favour?

Can we buy our gold, pay God back for the wrong things that we have done? If we could, then it would show how little we thought of God's infinite holiness and the infinite offence of our sin.

And so, the legalist within me would have thought to himself that John would have far better been placed using the words merciful and gracious to describe God's forgiveness of our sin.

But under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit of God, John uses the words faithful and just. Of course, then the question arises, to whom is God being faithful and just in forgiving our sins and cleansing us from all unrighteousness?

To whom is he being faithful and just? And also, when I say that confession is the condition of our forgiveness and cleansing, is that strictly true?

[ 22 : 47 ] Let me give you some answers and stop asking you all these questions. We'll do so in the context of the three stages of indulgences. First, there's no such place as purgatory.

We have no biblical mandate for building any kind of theology around there being a kind of afterlife which is neither in heaven nor in hell. The writer says in Hebrews 9 27, it is appointed for man to die once and then to face judgment.

There's no intermediate stage where we pay off our debts to God by our sufferings before we access heaven's glories. Secondly, we are all the saints of God by faith in Christ Jesus.

The New Testament does not identify especially holy people it calls saints as opposed to the rank and file Christian. We are all saints in Christ Jesus.

But supposing even there were such especially holy people, they'd still be sinners. Only Christ is perfect, the rest of us are all sinners.

[ 23 : 59 ] Either God is right when he says there is no one righteous, no not even one, or he's wrong. The so-called saints are entirely in as much debt to God as we are.

There is no surplus of merit we can call upon them to supply, to atone for all the sins we've committed. 1 John 1 verse 9 does not say if we call upon the merits of the saints, God is gracious and merciful to forgive us our sins.

And then thirdly, each of us are accountable for our own actions and sins. I am not accountable for your sins and you are not accountable for mine.

I cannot pay off the debt of your sin, you cannot pay off the debt of mine. As Paul says in 2 Corinthians 5, 10, we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ so that each one may receive what is due for what he has done in the body, whether good or evil.

So far, so good. We're some way to understanding why the practice of indulgences is so wrong. And yet there's one aspect of the indulgence system which goes right to the heart of both answering the question of the problem of John's usage of faithful and just in this verse and deals with an aspect of how the medieval Roman Catholic church got it right.

[ 25 : 27 ] And it was precisely this aspect which Martin Luther understood and made the selling of indulgences so repugnant to him. Bible open before you scroll down the text till you get to 1 John 2 verse 2 where Jesus is called the righteous one.

The righteous one. This text is true, is full of truly astonishing gospel truths far too many to enter in this morning but it's this phrase, Jesus Christ the righteous one which lies at the heart of why the selling of indulgences is so wrong.

The medieval church got it right when it suggested that sinners could call upon the infinite merit of another for the forgiveness of their sins.

What they got wrong was that the infinite merit to forgive our sins does not come from other sinners like saints or holy people.

It comes from Jesus Christ himself. Jesus Christ our mediator, the righteous one in whom there was no sin. His righteous life fulfilled and satisfied all the demands of the covenant of works.

[ 26 : 51 ] And his righteous life offered up upon the cross for us satisfies God's just demands against our sin. When in 1 John 1 verse 9 we read the words about God being faithful and just, we want to ask the question, to whom is he being faithful and just?

And the primary answer to this question is not to us. To us he is being gracious and merciful. The primary answer to this question is that he is being faithful and just to Jesus Christ his righteous son who having lived a perfect life, died a sinner's death to pay the price of our sin.

If God did not forgive our sin when we confessed, he would be being unfaithful and unjust to the infinite righteousness and just the satisfying life and death of his son.

It is to Jesus God is being faithful and just in this verse. And that's what Luther realized. That's what made the sale of indulgences so repugnant to him and prompted his writing of the 95 thesis.

If we have to pay anything to God, anything at all, to satisfy his justice, be it money, be it our good works, whatever it is, then the perfectly righteous life of Christ, the sacrificial death of Christ, and the victorious resurrection of Christ was not enough to take our sin away.

[ 28 : 32 ] More was required. To put a coin into Johann Tetzel's box is to spit on the cross. It is to vomit on the life of Jesus.

It is to defecate on his empty tomb. That is how disgusting a thing an indulgence is. when we're confessing our sins, it is as if we are calling on the infinite merit of the Lord Jesus Christ to make satisfaction for our sin.

Or rather, more correctly, we are calling upon God to apply the infinite satisfaction which Jesus has already made for our sins to us.

If God refused, he would be unfaithful and unjust to his son, Jesus Christ. He'd be calling upon us to pay double.

Let's face it, which one of us can ever go anywhere near to offering God what Jesus did? these are monumentally dangerous ideas, either in this world or the world in which Jesus lived.

[ 29 : 56 ] Jesus has done it all. It is either finished on the cross or there is more still to do. What then need have you for Johan Tetzel's money box?

What need then do we have for the good works we perform in an effort to appease the righteousness of God? No, as Christians, our good works are a response to the best news possible, news so good that it cannot be believed that our debt to God has been fully paid by Jesus Christ's death on the cross.

This is the gospel. Satisfaction has been made. Too good not to be believed. I'm going to close by asking you to do a bit of visualization in your head.

Imagine Johan Tetzel and he's dressed up in 16th century Dominican friar garb. Everything goes round in circles. I'm sure it'll come back at some point.

And he's coming down the aisle here and he's approaching you in church this morning right where you're sitting. And he looks into your eyes.

[ 31 : 17 ] He's got a mask on as well because it's pandemic days. And he shakes his money box in front of your face and he says, as soon as a coin in the coffer rings, the soul from purgatory springs.

what are you going to say to Johan Tetzel to make him go away? What are your 95 theses?

It begins, must it not, here in 1 John 1. If we confess our sins, God is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all our unrighteousness.

brothers and sisters in Christ, thank God for Martin Luther. But more than anything else, thank God for the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Let us pray. Heavenly Father, it would seem impossible that anyone could believe that putting a coin into Johan Tetzel's box could pay for the satisfaction of our sins before you.

[ 32 : 36 ] And yet, as evangelical Christians living in the 21st century, whilst we may not put a coin into a box being carried by a Dominican friar, yet still we try to make satisfaction for our own sins before you.

We make these promises. We say, well, I'll try and make up for the swearing that I've been engaging in for the past 20 years by never swearing again. And I'll try and make up for all the ways that I have upset my wife, my spouse, by being good to her in the future.

Whatever way, Lord, in which we try to pay you back, forgive us, for it is as though we spit upon the perfect life of your son, we vomit on the cross of your son, and we defecate on the empty tomb of your son.

Help us rather to have hearts warmed by the truth that Jesus has paid it all. In whose name we pray. Amen.