

# **Ministering to Catholics**

## **Forgiveness**

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The most important issue regarding our subject of ministering to Catholics surrounds the gospel and specifically the topic of forgiveness of sin. This class will cover the issues that have created confusion regarding forgiveness and how to help those Catholics we know come to a biblical understanding of the wonderful grace of the Lord in forgiveness of sin.

### **1. The issue of sin**

Catholics tend to have a view of themselves as having sin. This helps us in the ministry of the gospel since the need for forgiveness exists. The more devout a Catholic is the more likely the person will readily admit to their sinfulness. However, not all sin is the same to Catholics.

#### **a. Original sin**

Catholicism correctly views that everyone is born with the guilt of original sin, sourced in the first sin of Adam in the Garden of Eden. The sacrament of baptism is said to remove the stain of original sin, to free the person from sin and to bring rebirth as a son of God.

#### **b. Mortal sin**

The Roman Catholic Church teaches that there are two categories of sin being committed by mankind. The first category is known as mortal sin. This sin is called mortal from the Latin word for death because this sin kills the soul, resulting in spiritual death.

The Catechism of the Catholic Church says that three things are required for a sin to be mortal: “mortal sin is sin whose object is a grave matter and which is also committed with full knowledge and deliberate consent.” This shows why sometimes mortal sins are described as “grave sins.” Sins that are committed accidentally or without understanding are not mortal sins, even if the matter is grave.

There is no definitive list of the official mortal sins but most attempts at a list begin with the Ten Commandments. Most Catholics would equate mortal sins with a violation of one of the Ten Commandments. The sanctifying grace received at the sacrament of baptism is considered to be lost upon the commission of a mortal sin. The remedy is through the Church and the sacrament of penance.

c. Venial sin

The second category of sin according to Roman Catholicism is venial sin, from the Latin word for pardon. These sins are pardonable by God if the person confesses them to God with sincere repentance. Unlike mortal sins, they do not bring spiritual death but only weaken the spiritual vitality of a person, lowering their resistance to temptation. Venial sins are obviously viewed as less significant acts of rebellion against the will of God.

In practice, each person has his or her own view of the sin. Some of the commandments, such as murder, are more heinous than others such as coveting. Even when one of the commandments has been violated, a person will often believe they had a good reason and will believe it isn't a mortal sin. This sense of lesser sin is one reason why most Catholics do not participate in confession.

## 2. The issue of judgment

Sin brings judgment and in Catholicism there are degrees of judgment. A select few bypass judgment altogether and go directly to heaven. These are the saints and those who are martyred for their faith.

a. Hell

Catholicism believes in hell, which is the destiny for those who die without grace.

“The souls of those who depart this life in actual mortal sin, or in original sin alone, go down straightaway to hell to be punished, but with unequal pains.” (The Council of Florence).

In order to avoid hell, one must not have committed a mortal sin that was not absolved in the sacrament of penance.

b. Limbo

Limbo is not an official teaching of the Catholic Church, but it has been taught by many in the Church dating back to the fifth century. Limbo has been thought to be the place where unbaptized people who die go while they are under the age of reasoning ability.

The idea of limbo comes out from the belief that baptism is necessary to make one innocent and free from sin. It is the answer to the question about those who die without baptism.

Limbo was never declared an official teaching in any council or papal decree. In 2007, Pope Benedict authorized a paper entitled “The Hope of Salvation for Infants Who Die Without Being Baptized.” This paper provided “strong grounds for hope that God will save infants when we have not been able to do for them what we would have wished to do, namely, to baptize them into the faith and life of the Church.”

Yet the same paper wrote, “the theory of limbo, understood as a state which includes the souls of infants who die subject to original sin and without baptism, and who, therefore, neither merit the beatific vision, nor yet are subjected to any punishment, because they are not guilty of any personal sin. This theory, elaborated by theologians beginning in the Middle Ages, never entered into the dogmatic definitions of the Magisterium. Still, that same Magisterium did at times mention the theory in its ordinary teaching up until the Second Vatican Council. It remains therefore a possible theological hypothesis.”

The end of this is that many Catholics still think there is a place called limbo for unbaptized infants due to it being taught by so many trying to know the destiny of an infant who dies before baptism could occur.

### c. Purgatory

In Catholicism, if we die in a state of grace, devoid of mortal sin, then ultimate salvation is secure. However, unless they are a saint, a martyr or a baptized infant who died prior to being old enough to commit sins, they must make atonement for temporal punishment for their sins. This punishment, called purification, is done in “purgatory.”

“The truth has been divinely revealed that sins are followed by punishments. God’s holiness and justice inflict them. Sins must be expiated. This may be done on this earth through the sorrows, miseries and trials of the life, and above all, through death. Otherwise the expiation must be made in the next life through fire and torments or purifying punishments.” (Second Vatican Council)

The basis of this teaching comes from Church Tradition, such as the Catechism quote from Gregory the Great (d. 604), “certain offenses can be forgiven in this age, but certain others in the age to come.” The apocryphal of 2 Maccabees 12:45-46 is also cited where prayers are offered for the dead to be delivered from their sin. Interestingly, the sin referenced was the idolatry of soldiers, which according to Catholic doctrine would be a mortal sin damning them to hell, not purgatory.

There is no consensus regarding the nature or the duration of the punishment. The Church encourages prayer to hasten the process, including offering of Mass on behalf of one who has passed away.

### 3. The issue of forgiveness

How does one escape punishment? Jesus said, “Truly, Truly I say to you, he who hears My word, and believes Him who sent Me, has eternal life, and does not come into judgment, but has passed out of death into life.” Belief is the means by which God has delivered us by His grace, not our efforts, from the punishment of sin (Ephesians 2:8-9).

However, the Catholic understanding of what forgiveness is and how it is obtained is a major reason why so many Catholics are lacking in their understanding of the gospel message. The doctrine of penance and indulgences shows the manifestation of this error.

a. Penance

The sacrament of penance (also known as confession) is like baptism in that it supplies sanctifying grace to the soul. But unlike baptism, it is to be repeated and is much more involved to receive that grace that removes the guilt of sin. The Catholic Church teaches that people ought to attend confession at least annually. All mortal sin is to be confessed and confession of venial sin is encouraged.

In penance, the priest makes an evaluation of the individual's contrite attitude of his or her confession of sin. While Catholicism teaches that only God can forgive sin, He has entrusted the Church to be the instrumentality through which forgiveness is granted for mortal sin in the sacrament of penance. If the priest determines there is a contrite heart on the part of the confessor, he administers forgiveness by saying "I absolve you from your sins." This frees the person from eternal punishment.

The final requirement before a mortal sin can be forgiven is the sinner must do penance. In the words of the Catechism of the Catholic Church, "the sinner must still recover his full spiritual health by doing something more to make amends for the sin: he must 'make satisfaction for' or 'expiate' his sins. This satisfaction is called 'penance.'" The priest will provide some act, such as prayers to say or other good works, to complete the sacrament.

There are many very serious problems with the concept of penance:

- The New Testament provides no role for an intermediary to grant forgiveness for there is only one Mediator, Jesus Christ (1 Timothy 2:5).
- The addition of requirements of penance for forgiveness is adding works to secure forgiveness. There is a large difference between an active response of a sinner in thankfulness because of forgiveness and an activity by a sinner as a necessary part of receiving forgiveness.
- The very act of confession of specific sins is itself a work that is impossible to actually do. We are no more able to confess specific sins than we are able to avoid specific sins. Sinful people are entirely dependent upon the grace of God for forgiveness.
- All sin is mortal (Romans 6:23). There are no venial sins. Jesus taught that anger brings the same punishment as murder and lust the same as adultery (Matthew 5:21-30).

These problems are why so many Catholics are drawn to the true gospel of complete forgiveness through faith alone after being trapped in the uncertainty that a lack of a secure relationship with God brings. Whatever we gain or lose by our efforts can be reversed by our failures. "But if it is by grace, it is no longer on the basis of works, otherwise grace is no longer grace" (Romans 11:6).

## b. Indulgences

The Catholic concept of the works of penance to remove the guilt of mortal sin led to the development of works of indulgences to remove the punishment of venial sin. This punishment is considered to be not only in this life but also beyond this life in purgatory. In Catholic doctrine, punishment of purgatory is lessened by the use of indulgences. Special acts of piety bring credit from the “treasury of the Church” which is the merit of Christ, along with the prayers and good works of Mary and the saints. This credit can be applied to one’s own temporal punishment in purgatory or it can be applied to a deceased loved one, but not applied to any other living person.

According to the Catechism of the Catholic Church, an indulgence removes punishment for sin *already forgiven* when Pope John Paul II wrote that an indulgence is, “a remission before God of the temporal punishment due to sins whose guilt has already been forgiven, which the faithful Christian who is duly disposed gains under certain prescribed conditions through the action of the Church which, as the minister of redemption, dispenses and applies with authority the treasury of the satisfactions of Christ and the saints.”

This understanding of sin being forgiven but still suffering punishment by God for the sin is rather puzzling to say the least. The Catholic explanation is to (1) confuse natural consequences of sin on earth (i.e. going to prison) with divine consequences in the next life (God’s punishment) and to (2) confuse God’s goodwill to help His children to learn in this life (i.e., discipline, Hebrews 12:7) with God’s punishment for sinners in the life to come.

There is not need for punishment for the sake of purification for the believer upon death. Just as God predestined us apart from anything we do, and just as He called us apart from anything we do, and just as he justified us apart from anything we do, He will also glorify us apart from anything we do (Romans 8:30).

There are plenary (full) indulgences and partial indulgences. Partial indulgences remove part of the punishment associated with sin while plenary indulgences remove all of the current punishment associated with sin. Unlike partial indulgences, a plenary indulgence can only be gained once per day, unless at the hour of death. Before the Second Vatican Council indulgences came with an associated timeframe, such as forty days, seven years or even thousands of years, but this is no longer seen.

Conditions to receive a plenary indulgence are (1) A sacramental confession, (2) Eucharistic communion, (3) prayer for the pope and (4) the freedom from all attachments to sin, even venial sin. If a person completes the indulgence but fails to be free from all attachments to sin, a partial indulgence is granted.

Obviously, this last requirement is impossible to know for oneself or even to attain this point of perfection in this life. This inclusion of it shows the confusion over sin that exists within Catholicism. Things that are not sin at all (holy days of obligation) are considered grave sins and yet a person can be free from all attachments to sin.

According to the 1986 Catholic Handbook on Indulgences, indulgences include:

- Faithful devoting time to mental prayer is a partial indulgence.
- A partial indulgence is granted to those who devoutly sign themselves with the cross while saying the customary formula: “In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.”
- A partial indulgence is granted the Christian faithful who either teach or study Christian doctrine.
- Reading the Bible with veneration and as a form of spiritual reading is a partial indulgence, but if this reading lasts at least 30 minutes then a plenary indulgence is received.
- A partial indulgence is gained by visiting the Blessed Sacrament for the purpose of adoration. If this is done for at least 30 minutes a plenary indulgence is received.
- The Christian faithful obtain a partial indulgence when they make devout use of a devotional object (such as a crucifix or cross, a rosary, a scapular, or a medal) which has been rightly blessed by any priest or deacon. If the devotional object has been blessed by the Pope or by any bishop, the Christian faithful can obtain a plenary indulgence.
- A plenary indulgence is granted the Christian faithful who spend at least three full days of spiritual exercises during a retreat.
- A partial indulgence is granted the Christian faithful who devoutly visit a cemetery and pray, if only mentally, for the dead. This indulgence is applicable only to the souls in purgatory. This indulgence is a plenary one from November 1 through November 8 and can be gained on each one of these days. On the other days of the year this indulgence is a partial one.
- On any Friday during Lent a plenary indulgence is granted the Christian faithful who, after communion, devoutly recite “the prayer before the Crucifix” before an image of Jesus Christ crucified. On other days the indulgence is a partial one.
- A plenary indulgence is granted a priest celebrating his first Mass with a congregation on a scheduled day. The same indulgence is also granted the faithful who devoutly participate in that Mass.
- A plenary indulgence is granted when the rosary is recited in a church or oratory or when it is recited in a family, a religious community, or a pious association. A partial indulgence is granted for its recitation in all other circumstances.
- A plenary indulgence, which is applicable only to the souls in purgatory, is granted the Christian faithful who devoutly visit a church on All Souls Day (November 2).
- Indulgences attached to visiting a church do not cease if that church is destroyed and then rebuilt within fifty years in the same location.

The practice of indulgences had been de-emphasized for many years but has recently made a comeback under Pope Francis. Still, many Catholics are unfamiliar with the Catholic doctrine of indulgences. This way of thinking about doing something to gain favor from God nevertheless permeates the Catholic faith.

### c. Justification

The understanding of justification by grace through faith alone was at the core of the Reformation and divides Catholics from Protestants to this day. A biblical understanding of justification is where Christ's death paid for all our sin (1 Peter 2:24; 1 John 2:2) and we do nothing to cause this to happen, it is entirely by God's grace imparting faith to those dead in sin (Ephesians 2:1-10). Once saved, our good works are prepared by God for us to do. They do not affect our salvation in any way.

The Roman Catholic view is that justification, our right standing before God, is dependent upon what we do and not belief alone. Our baptism brings justification, our mortal sin ends justification, our confession and penance brings justification again. Catholics are unable to enjoy confidence in salvation since works are an essential part in the forgiveness of sin.

## 4. Conclusion

There is no question that the Catholic doctrine of sin, judgment, penance, indulgences and justification show that works have been included as an essential part of bringing forgiveness of sin. This alteration of the true gospel of Christ's death cancelling the penalty of sin (Colossians 3:13-14) through faith alone (Romans 1:17) makes for a different gospel, that Paul calls "anathema" or accursed in Galatians 1:6-9.

The error of adding the works of man to the message of forgiveness for sins is so significant that it makes one depend upon themselves rather than the Lord alone for the righteousness that comes through faith, leaving them in their sins.

The error of adding the works of man to the forgiveness of Christ eliminates any ability to have confidence in the simple words of Jesus in John 6:47, "he who believes in Me has eternal life."

The error of adding the works of man to the forgiveness of Christ affects the ability to forgive as God in Christ has also forgiven us (Ephesians 4:32). If Christ has forgiven us but still requires us to pay off the debt of our sin, then our response to people who ask us for forgiveness when they sin against us will be no different than worldly people who want restoration.

The error of adding the works of man to the forgiveness of Christ affects the ability to share the gospel with others, since the gospel has been corrupted.

Finally, the error of adding the works of man to the message of forgiveness for sins is so significant that it makes us unable to join in ministry with those who may truly believe in Christ but who remain in the Catholic Church. We cannot downplay the significance of adding works to the forgiveness of sin.