

“If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.” (1 Jn 1:9)

✠ Lecture XVII: Penances & Indulgences ✠

✠ Penance in The Orthodox Concept:

Although penance would seem to be a punishment, its purpose is not to make retribution for sins, to pay back a debt, but is rather corrective, medicinal, and instructive to cure the sinner from his sinful habits, to instruct him regarding both the harmful nature of what he has been doing, and ways to change his life, so that he should not repeat his sin. Examples of penance are additional fasting periods, prostrations, and /or delaying the participation in communion.

- “If you endure chastening, God deals with you as with sons; for what son is there whom a father does not chasten?” (**Heb 12:7**)
- “When we are judged, we are chastened by the Lord, that we may not be condemned with the world.” (**1 Cor 11:32**)

✠ A Biblical Example:

St. Paul judged that the person who committed sexual immorality should be put away from the Church of Corinth, “For I indeed, as absent in body but present in spirit, have already judged (as though I were present) him who has done this deed ... put away from yourselves the evil person” (**1 Cor 5:3,13**) and when this person’s repentance was complete St. Paul wrote to them saying, “This punishment which was inflicted by the majority is sufficient for such a man, so that, on the contrary, you ought rather to forgive and comfort him, lest perhaps such a one be swallowed up with too much sorrow. Therefore I urge you to reaffirm your love to him” (**2 Cor 2:6-8**)

✠ Penance & the Divine Justice:

The purpose of penances is **NOT** to satisfy the Divine Justice for the following reasons:

- In the above biblical example we notice that St. Paul recommended the return of the repentant sinner to the Church that shows that the reason for the penance was merely to instruct and correct the person’s behavior.
- All the Church fathers have agreed that these penances are mere spiritual medicines and exercises and hence discontinued them once the desired result was obtained. Now if these practices were to satisfy the divine justice, why discontinue them before completion?
- If the purpose of penances were to satisfy the divine justice, they should have been applied to every single sin, but we notice that the Church reserves these practices for major sins only.
- Holy Scripture teaches us that our Lord Jesus Christ is the unlimited sacrifice that forgives our sins and satisfies the unlimited divine justice.

✠ Indulgences:

The Roman Catholic Church teaches that for the satisfaction of God’s justice, a man, even though forgiven in Repentance and Confession, must bear temporal punishments for his sin here on earth. They claim that the Sacrament of Repentance & Confession removes only the eternal punishment of our sins – we must do penance in order to remit the temporal punishment for our sins. If we fail to do that, we will have to do it in purgatory after we die (if we die in a state of grace). But since man is weak and infirm, in condescension to him, it is possible to free him from these temporal punishments by virtue of the superabundant merits of the Savior and saints, which constitute the treasury of the Church and to which the Pope of Rome has access. These indulgences are not usually given for free but are often sold for money! They claim that since the Church is one body, and each organ shares in the life of the whole body, so does each of the faithful can profit from the good works of the saints to make up for his/her sins.

✠ Orthodox Reply:

- This teaching has no basis whatsoever in Holy Scripture or Holy Church Tradition which teaches that the only way to forgive sin is through the Blood of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ not the merits of saints and angels.
- The merits of the Blood of our Lord are not to be bought with money but received through faith and good works.
- The good works and virtues of saints, even though abundant, cannot be overabundant to be distributed among people for the following reasons:
 1. We and all the saints are required to be perfect as our heavenly Father is perfect, “You shall be perfect, just as your Father in heaven is perfect” (**Mt 5:48**). Now since this requirement is unlimited, no saint can be said to have reached this perfection let alone share his/her virtues with others.
 2. Lord Jesus Christ said, “When you have done **all** those things which are commanded, say, ‘we are unprofitable servants. We have done what was our duty to do’” (**Lk 17:10**). Where, then, are the overabundant good works?
 3. St. Paul said, “Brethren, I do not count myself to have apprehended; but one thing I do, forgetting those things which are behind and reaching forward to those things which are ahead, I press toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus. Therefore let us, as many as are mature, have this mind; and if in anything you think otherwise, God will reveal even this to you” (**Phil 3:13-15**). This verse shows that a great saint like St. Paul is not considering himself to have reached the goal, which refutes any talk about overabundance of good works.
- This false teaching has caused the most harm to the Christians, as it was the main reason for the Protestant so-called Reformation and the scattering of the Christians into so many different denominations.

* This lecture is adapted from ‘*The Church Sacraments*’ by Archdeacon Habib Guirgess.