

# How do Indulgences Work?

In his apostolic constitution on indulgences, Pope Paul VI said: “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 defined conditions through the Church’s help when, as a minister of redemption, she dispenses and applies with authority the treasury of the satisfactions won by Christ and the saints” (Indulgentiarum Doctrina 1).

This technical definition can be phrased more simply as, “An indulgence is what we receive when the Church lessens the temporal (lasting only for a short time) penalties to which we may be subject even though our sins have been forgiven.”

When a person sins, he acquires certain liabilities: the liability of guilt and the liability of punishment. Scripture speaks of the former when it pictures guilt as clinging to our souls, making them discolored and unclean before God: “Though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be white as snow; though they are red like crimson, they shall become like wool” (Isa. 1:18).

God uses the Church when he removes temporal penalties. This is the essence of the doctrine of indulgences. Earlier we defined indulgences as “what we receive when the Church lessens the temporal penalties to which we may be subject even though our sins have been forgiven.” The members of the Church became aware of this principle through the sacrament of penance. From the beginning, acts of penance were assigned as part of the sacrament because the Church recognized that Christians must deal with temporal penalties, such as God’s discipline and the need to compensate those our sins have injured.

The Catechism of the Catholic Church states, “An indulgence is obtained through the Church who, by virtue of the power of binding and loosing granted her by Christ Jesus, intervenes in favor of individual Christians and opens for them the treasury of the merits of Christ and the saints to obtain from the Father of mercies the remission of the temporal punishment due for their sins.” The Church does this not just to aid Christians, “but also to spur them to works of devotion, penance, and charity” (CCC 1478).

*Source: <https://www.catholic.com/tract/primer-on-indulgences>  
For the full article and more explanation, visit the website above.*