

REFORMATION 500 WEEK 5: HEIDELBERG CATECHISM, QUESTIONS 12-15

Question 12: Since, then, by the righteous judgment of God we deserve temporal and eternal punishment, how may we escape this punishment and be again received into favor? **God wills that His justice be satisfied; therefore, we must make full satisfaction to that justice, either by ourselves or by another.**

The only way for sinful man to escape God's just punishment of sin and be restored to God's favor is "if satisfaction be made on the part of man by a sufficient punishment for his disobedience," a punishment which "is equivalent to that which is eternal" [Daniel 9:24; Hebrews 9:12]" (Ursinus).

Question 13: Can we ourselves make this satisfaction? **Certainly not; on the contrary, we daily increase our guilt.**

We cannot satisfy God's justice because "we sin continually, and in sinning we increase our guilt and the displeasure of God toward us." Plus, "our guilt being infinite, deserves an infinite punishment – one that is eternal, or that is equivalent to everlasting punishment.... But we cannot make satisfaction by a punishment that is eternal, because then we would never be freed from it [Psalm 130:3]" (Ursinus).

Question 14: Can any mere creature make satisfaction for us? **None; for first, God will not punish any other creature for the sin which man committed; and further, no mere creature can sustain the burden of God's eternal wrath against sin and redeem others from it.**

Man sinned; and therefore, man must be punished. It would be unfair if other creatures, whether angels or animals, should be eternally punished for something of which humanity is guilty (Heb. 2:14-18; 10:4). Furthermore, no creature, not even a sinless creature, could endure and survive the heavy weight of God's wrath against sin. "God is a consuming fire" (Deut. 4:24). If the creature being punished in our place cannot survive the punishment, then how can that creature deliver us from the punishment?

Question 15: What kind of mediator and redeemer then must we seek? **One who is a true and righteous man, and yet more powerful than all creatures, that is, one who is also true God.**

The only substitute capable of fully satisfying God's justice for us, is one who must be a perfect man and yet more than a mere man. He must be God also. Our substitute must be a person who is both God and man, so that he may truly be a middle person, and mediator between God and men (1 Timothy 2:5); one who will bring it to pass that God loves men, and men love God, so that an eternal peace or agreement is established between them (Isaiah 54:10). As we will see, Jesus Christ the God-Man has offered the all-pleasing sacrifice to fully satisfy God's justice.

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REFORMATION 500 WEEK 5: LUTHER'S 95 THESES

Now that Luther's soul was finally filled with peace, having been set free from slavery of trying to earn his salvation, he began to see the many abuses in the Church and boldly spoke out against them. The first abuse he addressed was indulgences.

To understand indulgences, we need to understand the Roman Catholic sacrament of penance. Those who commit a mortal sin and lose the saving grace they received in baptism can be restored to a state of justification through *penance*. When one confesses his sins to a priest, he receives absolution (pardoning of sins and release from eternal punishment only), after which he must perform works of satisfaction (e.g. prayers, fasting, giving alms, going on a pilgrimage) to remove the temporal punishments of sin and be restored to a state of justification. If the faithful die without satisfying all the temporal penalties of sin, before they can enter heaven they must satisfy those penalties by suffering the purifying fires of purgatory.

To make penance easier for people, and as a way to raise more money for the Church, the Pope signed letters of indulgences, which the penitent could buy to give himself and his loved ones a shorter stay in purgatory. The granting of indulgences was based on the doctrine of *works of supererogation* – works done beyond the demands of God's law – which earned extra-merits and were laid up in heaven. Christ by His perfect holiness had done more than was necessary for the salvation of man. The saints also had added much to this overflowing treasury of merits. By drawing upon this fund in heaven, the Pope, as the treasurer, dispensed indulgences for money.

Johann Tetzel (1465-1519), a Dominican friar and preacher, was the Grand Commissioner for indulgences in Germany. He was in the neighborhood of Wittenberg, shamelessly selling indulgences to help raise the equivalent of millions of dollars needed for Pope Leo X's project to rebuild Rome's Cathedral of St. Peter. Luther could not be silent. As a preacher, a pastor, and a professor, he felt it to be his duty to protest such abuse, for the people were being deceived for eternity!

On October 31, 1517, the eve of All Saints' Day (one of the most frequented feasts), Martin Luther nailed his Ninety-Five Theses to the bulletin board on the door of the Castle church in Wittenberg. Out of love for the truth, he was inviting his students and other professors to debate the virtues of indulgences.

"The first Thesis strikes the keynote: 'Our Lord and Master when he says, *Repent*, desires that the whole life of believers should be a repentance.... Luther distinguishes, in the second Thesis, true repentance from the sacramental penance and understands it to be an internal state...rather than isolated external acts.... [Thesis 62] 'The true treasury of the church is the holy gospel of the glory and grace of God'" (Schaff, 7:159). "Why doesn't the pope empty purgatory for the sake of holy love and the dire 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?" (Thesis 82).

No one accepted Luther's challenge, and no discussion took place. But the *Theses*, written in Latin, were copied, translated, and spread throughout Germany and Europe in a few weeks. "They had a tremendous and immediate effect. They almost stopped the sale of indulgences" (Kuiper, *The Church in History*, 165). *Almost*.

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