# The Catholic Church teaches that every sin produces two effects in our souls.

1. First, we incur the guilt of sin, which in the case of grave or mortal sin destroys supernatural charity within us and deprives us of communion with God, or eternal life with him.
2. Second, we incur temporal punishment, a spiritual debt to God.

The Catechism describes this as “an unhealthy attachment to creatures” (CCC 1472), a result of our having chosen something earthly over Him. In the Sacrament of Penance, the guilt of eternal punishment is

1. Forgiven by the individual’s confession, contrition and the absolution of the priest
2. Supernatural grace is restored, and the possibility of eternal life returns.

**But even then,**

The temporal punishment remains.

If that debt is not atoned for in this life, then it will have to be made up in purgatory.

## Perhaps an analogy to everyday life is helpful here.

If you lend me your car so I can go to work, but I go joy riding instead and bust up the fender, then I need to do two things as a result. I have to ask first for your forgiveness. But even after you forgive me, I still need to make up for the damage to your car that I have caused. In a somewhat analogous way, we could say that the temporal punishment is what we still have to make up in our relationship to God for the sins for which he’s forgiven us. An indulgence is a special spiritual favor from the Church that helps us atone for that in this life rather than after death.

# Some might question how the Church can do this.

As Catholics, we believe that what each of us does affects the rest of the Body of Christ. We often think of this in negative terms – that is, that our sins can spiritually damage others. But it is true also in positive terms as well; the good we do can spiritually benefit others.

When we obtain an indulgence, theologically we could say that what is happening is the Church, our Mother, is drawing upon and granting to a particular son or daughter a gift from her spiritual treasury. The “*Treasury of the Church*” is that infinite wealth of spiritual merit that the “whole Christ” offers to God – the glorious, salvific merits of Jesus the Head most especially, but also the merits of his Body, the communion of saints.

# What kinds of indulgences are there?

**Indulgences come in two basic types.**

1. A partial indulgence, as its name implies, removes some but not all of the temporal punishment we owe to God.
2. A plenary indulgence fully removes all punishment.

Indulgences are also sometimes distinguished by their “general grant,” that is, by the kind of act to which the spiritual favor is attached. There are indulgences related to particular prayers, to works of charity, to voluntary penitential practices, and to the public witness of the faith. Finally, indulgences can be obtained for oneself but also for those who have died, so they can be distinguished in that way.

## What are the differences between the indulgences?

To obtain either a partial or plenary indulgence, a person must be baptized, in the state of grace (at least at the end of the spiritual work to be done) and not excommunicated, and must have the general intention to actually obtain the indulgence itself.

The major distinguishing characteristic of a plenary indulgence is that, in addition to performing the prescribed act, the person must 1) receive Eucharistic communion, 2) make or have made a sacramental confession within a week or two, 3) pray for the intentions of the pope, usually done by one Our Father and one Hail Mary. Finally, 4) the individual must be free from all attachments to sin, even venial sin.

# What are the historical objections/abuses associated with indulgences?

Like many things in the Church’s history, abuses of indulgences have certainly been committed. Sometimes, indulgences were confused with the forgiveness of sin itself, or as a permission to commit sin, or even as a pardon of future sins.

Also, there has always been a somewhat tricky debate over whether an indulgence could be obtained, for oneself or for a person who has died, by the giving of money or other material goods. In fact, a major cause of the Reformation was a dispute about indulgences, not only their theological explanation but also even more so about the practical details of how they could be obtained, i.e., what purposes the money was used for, etc.

# What is different today?

Catholics and Protestants still today have differences of opinion about the theological grounds for indulgences.

For that reason, there is still some disagreement about what happened in the Reformation era itself and whether everything related to indulgences was an abuse, or only certain practices.

1. Today the Church emphasizes that indulgences are spiritual realities for spiritual purposes. For that reason, they cannot be obtained by someone who has a motive other than wanting to obtain the indulgence and who doesn’t have a contrite heart.
2. The Church also no longer assigns a specific length of time to indulgences, as it used to do, mostly because those lengths of time were widely misunderstood. In the old days, a particular prayer or work of charity might have a value, for example of 100 days. Many people thought that meant you would spend 100 fewer days in purgatory, but that is not the case. Instead, it meant the prayer or charitable work was equivalent spiritually to doing 100 days of penance here on earth.
3. Today, we do not refer to an indulgence’s time value anymore, just to whether it is partial or plenary.

# Are Indulgences to be believed?

YES! Indulgences are part of the Church’s infallible teaching. This means that no Catholic is at liberty to disbelieve in them. The Council of Trent stated that it “condemns with anathema those who say that indulgences are useless or that the Church does not have the power to grant them” (Trent, session 25, Decree on Indulgences).[[1]](#footnote-1)

# Is it like “buying your way to heaven”?

**No**, an indulgence is not a ticket to heaven.

1. Remember that, in Catholic teaching, **it is the presence of Sanctifying Grace that is the standard needed for heaven**. This grace is given by baptism but lost in mortal sin.[[2]](#footnote-2)

A person who dies with unconfessed mortal sin(s) would, outside of an act of perfect contrition, merit eternal separation from God. This would be the case *even if they had obtained many plenary indulgences in their lifetime.*

The Jubilee of Hope Indulgence removes the temporal punishment for all sins that have been confessed and forgiven for oneself, **but in addition**:

## An indulgence can also be offered for the soul of a deceased person and a plenary indulgence obtained for them would obtain for them:

**Release from Purgatory and Merit Entrance into heavenly glory!**

1. <https://www.catholic.com/tract/primer-on-indulgences> [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. If one commits a mortal sin after baptism, then in the Sacrament of Penance the guilt of eternal punishment is forgiven by the individual’s confession and contrition and by the absolution of the priest. Therein this sacrament restores Supernatural grace, and the possibility of eternal life returns. Even then, the temporal punishment remains. If that debt is not atoned for in this life, then it will have to be made up in purgatory. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)