

Church History - Martin Luther & the Problem of Indulgences

by David Guzik

David Guzik's sermon explores Martin Luther's challenge to the Roman Catholic Church regarding indulgences and the pivotal moments of the Reformation.

Duration: 34:16

Scripture: Psalm 119:11, Proverbs 3:5-6, Acts 5:29, Romans 1:16, Galatians 1:10, 2 Timothy 3:16-17, 1 Peter 3:15

Topics: "Church History", "Reformation Theology"

Description

In this sermon, the speaker discusses the historical event known as the Diet of Worms, where Martin Luther stood before Emperor Charles V to defend his beliefs. The speaker highlights the significance of this event and the impact it had on the Reformation. They mention the presence of a large crowd and the emperor's connection to Isabella and Ferdinand of Spain. The sermon also touches on Luther's response to the question of whether he would recant his views, emphasizing his refusal to back down and his determination to stand firm in his beliefs.

Transcript

Praise the Lord. Okay, we're talking about the Reformation, and we're talking about Martin Luther. Last time, we talked about the selling of indulgences.

Let's remember what the sale of indulgences was all about. The person had to be what they considered to be a Christian. Now, what they considered to be a Christian was someone who was a member of the Roman Catholic Church.

Because, in their thinking, you weren't really saved by Jesus. You were saved by the Church, or you were saved by Jesus through the Church. Number two, there was two kinds of penalty for every sin.

There was the spiritual penalty, and there was the temporal penalty. Now, the work of Jesus took care of the spiritual penalty of your sin, so that's why you needed that. But the temporal penalty of sin, you had to pay yourself.

And the whole thing of indulgences was just another way of doing penance. Really, when you get right down to it, the whole issue is centered around the bigger issue in the Christian life of forgiveness. What is forgiveness all about? You know, how are you forgiven? Well, the Bible's pretty clear.

We're forgiven by the completed work of Jesus Christ on our behalf. It's not God just winking at our sin, but the penalty has been paid because of what Jesus did on the cross. So, this is very clear scripturally, but it wasn't clear to the people in the Roman Catholic Church, especially at that time.

So, you had this big sale of indulgences, and Martin Luther protested against it, especially against the salesmanship of a man named John Tetzel. Remember that? Master salesman. His great slogan was, As soon as the money in the box rings, the soul from purgatory springs.

Sale of indulgences was a flashpoint, so what did Martin Luther do in response to the sale of indulgences? He wanted to invite a debate on the issue. Let's have a scholarly debate, and what was one way that you could invite a debate on an issue back then? Put up a list. Understand what a thesis is.

Theses are propositions. It's a way of saying, this is what I think. You disagree with me? Let's talk about it.

And so, he put up 95 statements saying, this is what I think. This is how I feel about this issue. If you disagree with me, then you come talk to me about it.

He nailed up those 95 theses on the church door at the church at Wittenberg there in Germany, which I suppose today is probably some kind of shrine or something. I don't know if that church is still standing or not. I wonder.

Interesting. I know the city is still there. It's in what used to be East Germany.

Now it's the unified Germany, of course. But, you know, it's still there. Now, what was the Roman Catholic response to this? Well, as you might imagine, the first person to debate Luther on this was John Tetzel.

Tetzel wanted to come and debate Luther on the issue and, you know, let's do it. But Tetzel wasn't a scholar. Tetzel was a salesman.

I mean, if you matched a used car salesman with a pretty brilliant scholar in a debate, you probably wouldn't resolve much, would you? It would be pretty unsatisfying, the result of the debate. So Luther and Tetzel debated the issue, but it really didn't get anywhere. I mean, it's just, you know, it was a battle of wits and Tetzel came unarmed.

You know, it was just... Luther expected that the Pope would agree with him about the indulgences issue and that the Pope would, in general speaking, be grateful that Luther had exposed this corruption. When Martin Luther started this, the furthest thing in his mind at all was to make some kind of break with the Roman Catholic Church. He just saw a church that was messed up in some ways and he wanted to make some changes and so he brought these and, you know, again, understand this wasn't some personal opinion.

It wasn't some, you know, personality thing at work here with Luther. What Luther basically came out and he said, he goes, Look, this is wrong scripturally. Show me where you are correct or show me where I am incorrect scripturally.

Let's talk about it on these kind of terms. Now, when the debate with Tetzel didn't go anywhere, then there was a renowned scholar named John or Johann. I mean, Johann is just a Germanified way of saying that.

Eck. Now, this guy was a scholar and he and Luther had a very pointed debate and they got back and they battled forth hammer and tongue and they could not come to a place of agreement that the issue was still

bleeding. It was still pulsating when Luther and Eck finished their debate.

But basically what happened was that the Roman Catholic Church solidified its position against Martin Luther. Now, this is the thing about Luther and this is one of the reasons why God ordained that this man be so instrumental in this movement. Luther was a guy that when you pushed him, he would push right back.

He was a combative man. And so, you know, he relished. He looked forward to a good fight.

So it was, hey, you know what? I'm not going to back down from this. You have to show me from the scriptures where I'm wrong on this. I'm not backing down.

I'm not just going to give up on this. And so the church solidified its position. Luther solidified right back.

And again, all of this was, let me make sure I got the year on this right. What year are we talking about here? We're talking about 1517. So for a few years, the issue just kind of swirls around, right? October 31st, 1517 is when Luther nailed the 95 Theses to the door.

So you have a couple years of just kind of going back and forth, you know, debating with Tetzl, debating with Eck. The church solidifies its position. Remember something, that the church is a bureaucracy, and bureaucracies don't necessarily move quickly.

So all this time, Luther is gaining a well-deserved reputation as a guy who's kind of making a stand against the church. This was exciting to people because they could see the corruption of the church. It was also exciting to some political people because there were some very notable political people in Germany at that time who didn't like the church and its authority, and they were very grateful for Martin Luther's opposition to the Roman Catholic Church.

You've got to remember that at this time, you know, you've got Germany here. Germany is a mishmash of little principalities and cities and petty rulers, and this or that. You know, so you've got a lot of independent political guys, and so some of them get very excited about what Martin Luther's doing.

By the time you come to the year 1520, the Pope issues a decree. Now, do you know what you call a papal decree? You call it a papal bull. Isn't that great? A papal bull.

It comes from the Latin of bulla, which means a seal. Not the kind of seal you see in a circus, the kind of seal that goes on a document. And so the papal bull condemned Luther's view.

Well, again, they had pushed Luther enough to where he was, you know, he was making his stand on this. And what Luther did was when he received his copy of the papal bull condemning his views, he publicly burned it. That's heavy.

That's heavy to take this document from the Pope publicly condemning you, publicly declaring you a heretic, and he burns it. And when he burned it, he cried out to the Pope, you know, who was hundreds and hundreds of miles away, symbolically, of course. He said, as you have troubled the Holy One of the Lord.

He didn't mean himself, he meant Jesus Christ. As you have troubled the Holy One of the Lord, may eternal fire trouble you. So this is heavy.

You can see that in these years, between 1517 and 1520, a lot was going on in the heart and in the life of Martin Luther, right? He was becoming more confident in his understanding of the Scripture. He was becoming more solidified in the idea that the Pope could be wrong. Now, this is a very important point.

Because for a long time, the doctrine of papal infallibility held sway. The Pope can't be wrong. So, does that mean, okay, there you are, you're sitting down with the Pope and watching a baseball game.

And you say, you know, that Mark McGuire, man, he sure did an amazing thing when he set that record, hitting 70 home runs in 1998. And the Pope says, he didn't do that in 98. He did it in 97.

What are you talking about? You get in this big argument with the Pope over what year it was that McGuire hit 70. And you say, no, you know what, Pope, let's look it up. Right now, man, get out the baseball almanac, let's look it up.

And you look it up, and the Pope says, what do you know? I'm wrong. Now, is that what it's talking about? No, that's not what it's talking about. It's talking about the Pope when he speaks ex cathedra.

In other words, it doesn't mean that every word that comes out of the Pope's mouth is infallibly true. But ex cathedra is a Latin word that means from the throne. And when the Pope speaks from his papal throne, when he speaks as the Pope issuing a formal decree, and this is the way Roman Catholics explain it, it's not so much that the Pope can't be wrong, it's that God won't allow him to be wrong.

God will not allow the Pope to be wrong. So, for a Roman Catholic, that settles it. And I say that, you know, kind of with a bemused smile today.

Because if there's anything that's typical or interesting in the Roman Catholic Church, as we take a look at it right here in 1999, especially the Roman Catholic Church in America, by and large, Roman Catholics do not respect the authority of the Pope. Not at all. They think that the Pope can be wrong on a lot of stuff.

It's very, very common for a person who's a Roman Catholic today to disagree with particular doctrines from their church. Now, to someone who's a traditional Roman Catholic, this is horrifying. How can you disagree with some of the doctrines of the church? All of them come ex cathedra from the Pope.

All of them come from God. So, you don't have a right to pick and choose and to agree or disagree. So, anyway, here we are.

And this idea obviously came within Martin Luther's mind, it came within his heart, that the Pope could be wrong. And so, that led him to make such a dramatic statement there in 1520, when he said to the Pope, as you've troubled the Holy One of the Lord, may eternal fire trouble you. Now, what do you do then if you're the Roman Catholic Church? Well, you need to settle the issue.

You need to call together what they call a council or a diet. Not the kind of diet where you eat. That's a Latin word meaning a council, a congress.

So, they called together what's known as the diet of worms. Now, that's a weight loss diet there for you, isn't it? This was in 1521. And what they did was they commanded Martin Luther to appear before this council.

And they said, okay, we're going to give you one last chance. You're going to appear before this council. They're going to determine whether or not your writings are scriptural or unscriptural.

Actually, they weren't there to determine that because they already knew that, right? But what it is, is this is going to be your formal opportunity to recant. Your formal opportunity to repent. If you don't repent when we give you this opportunity, then you're in a lot of trouble.

Now, not too long before this, remember what happened to a guy named John Hus. He was invited to a council, right? He was guaranteed safe passage, right? Who guaranteed it to him? Yeah, the emperor. The emperor at the time.

Guaranteed safe passage. Guaranteed that you can safely come, that you can safely leave. You know, this is a theological thing.

We need to get this determined. A lot of people warned Hus, don't go. But he went.

And what happened? They condemned him as a heretic. And they did not respect this promise they had made to him, a safe passage. They arrested him, threw him in a dungeon, and they burned him as a heretic.

By the way, remember one of the previous things we read about Martin Luther. He said, I was in full agreement. I would have been in full.

Of course, he wasn't alive at the time, I believe. But he said, you know, looking back on it, I would have been one of the people who would have been willing to burn Hus at the stake. That's how strongly he believed in the rightness and the authority of the church.

In any regard, here you are at the Diet of Worms, and a lot of people are warning Luther not to go based on what happened to John Hus several decades before. But Luther went. And when he went, there were huge crowds lining the way.

This is four years since Luther nailed up to the church door his 95 theses. And the issue has become a big issue now. People knew that there was one guy standing against the church.

And whether you thought he was right or wrong, man, it was interesting. For them back then, it was bigger than the O.J. trial. Same kind of thing.

People taking sides, people off in the commentary, this, that, the other thing. I mean, whether or not you agreed with him or disagreed with him, man, this was compelling. This was something really interesting.

So huge crowds lined the streets of Worms as Martin Luther comes in there. And then, you know, they go and they go to start the council, the Diet of Worms. And who was presiding over the council? The emperor of the Holy Roman Empire.

Emperor Charles V. Now, you know who this guy was? This guy was the son of Isabella in Ferdinand of Spain. Remember the people sent Columbus off and everything? This was their son. And this guy was the biggest political figure in all of Europe.

Not everything in Europe was under the jurisdiction of the Holy Roman Empire, which is one of the more clever comments on history, I think, we said it before, was neither holy, nor Roman, nor an empire. But this great political confederation known as the Holy Roman Empire, Emperor Charles V, he said... Now, that would be intimidating to Luther right there. The man is sitting in charge of it.

There were 24 dukes, 30 archbishops, bishops, and abbots, and then seven ambassadors and papal nuncios. All in all, there were 206 people of rank, some kind of title, some kind of office, sitting in on Martin Luther at this... Could you imagine if you were Luther walking into this thing? The only way it could have been more impressive was to have the pope himself there. But he wasn't going to come for that.

So this was heavy. The council was presided over by John Eck, the guy who had debated Luther before. So Eck is there, Luther is there, the room is crammed full.

Not only do you have these 206 people, but you've got as many spectators as you can possibly cram into that room. This is exciting, exciting stuff. The pope at this time was a very worldly guy.

And so he thought... I think the pope describes this at one time as a squabble between monks. He didn't really get it, why this was such a big deal. So here you are.

You've got Martin Luther. I'm sure he's sitting, or maybe he's called to stand at some point. And there's a table with a stack of books on it.

These are books and pamphlets and writings that Martin Luther has written. Now, in those four years, he had written some works. Some of them very critical of the Roman Catholic Church.

You know, he's building up steam in these four years since the 95 Theses. He's being egged on. I mean, he's really come out and said, hey, there's a lot of changes that need to be made.

So, Eck points to a stack of books, and he asks Martin Luther if he'd written them. I guess Luther said, yeah, I wrote those books. He asked Luther if he was willing to retract what he wrote in those books.

Because what he wrote in there was dangerous. It was heresy. You know what Martin Luther said? He looked at everybody around there.

He looked at Damper. He looked at Eck. He looked at all the people, title and office.

And he said, can I have some time to think about this? I need some time to think about this. I don't want to act rashly on such an important question and offend God's word. So, John Eck said, fine, great.

We'll adjourn for the day. Tomorrow, you come back and you tell us. Pretty heavy, right? I mean, now it's even more drama in the whole situation.

Luther went to his room, and he prayed for almost all the night. And he just pleaded before God. He sought God.

He looked for strength from the Lord. And it was obviously a very, very difficult thing. And so the next day, April 18th, 1521, perhaps the most important day in Martin Luther's life.

They call him up, and they say, well, come on. What's the deal? What are you going to answer? Now, he gave a pretty good speech, and then this is the conclusion of the speech that he made. He said, therefore, we must fear God.

I do not say this because it's necessary for such high authorities as youse to be instructed by my teaching or admonition. With these words, I commend myself to your most serene majesty and to your lordships, humbly begging you not to suffer me to be rendered odious without cause, but the persecution of my

adversaries. I have spoken.

In other words, he's saying, listen, no, I'm going to stand on these things. I'm going to say, now, please don't dismiss me rashly. Please don't say anything.

He goes, there, that's all I've got to say. Now, Eck answers back, and Eck is angry. He says, listen, you've kind of skirted around the issue here.

You haven't gotten around down to it. You haven't really made it clear to us. You give us a simple answer.

Are you going to recant or not? And in his first answer, Luther did really kind of skirt around the issue. I mean, he talked to this and that, but he didn't really plainly, simply, straightforwardly answer the question, are you going to recant these views or not? He kind of said, well, I think I'm going to do this, but please don't make such a hasty judgment, you know this. He said, what's it going to be? This was his answer.

This is the answer that made Luther famous. He said, therefore, your most serene majesty and your lordships, since they seek a simple reply, I will give one that is without horns or teeth and in this fashion. In other words, they said, Luther, you've been too critical of us up here.

Okay, well, you want one plain, simple, no horns, no teeth, here it is. He says, and this is his statement, I believe in neither Pope nor councils alone, for it is perfectly well established that they have frequently erred as well as contradicted themselves. Unless then I shall be convinced by the testimony of the Scriptures or by clear reason, I must be bound by those Scriptures which have been brought forward by me.

Yes, my conscience has been taken captive by these words of God. I cannot revoke anything, nor do I wish to, since to go against one's conscience is neither safe nor right. Here I stand, I cannot do otherwise.

God help me, amen. That's pretty dramatic. Well, you want a plain answer? Here you go.

It says, number one, I don't believe in Popes or councils alone. They've been wrong. I believe in Popes and councils when they agree with the word of God.

That's it. Number two, he says, unless you can show me from the Scriptures or from plain reason where I'm wrong, I'm not changing a thing. Because I believe what I believe because it's what the Bible teaches.

My conscience has been taken captive by these words of God and I am not budging from this. And then he says very dramatic words. Here I stand, I cannot do otherwise.

God help me. And you can imagine that as soon as Luther said that, can you imagine what it was like in the room? A roar went up. You know, people were outraged.

All the officials were outraged. I'm sure he had some sympathizers sitting in there. You know, they cheered.

The other people were just outraged. I mean, this was just like, ah, I can't believe that you said this. The emperor left the proceedings disgusted when Luther said that.

He just walked out. The next day, the emperor told some others. He said, I don't see how a single monk can be right in the testimony of a thousand years of Christian to be wrong.

Now, Luther was allowed to leave safely a week later on April 25th. I don't know what happened in that week. I wish I knew.

I mean, I'd probably find out. But man, he left a week later. But very soon, the emperor placed what they called a ban on Martin Luther.

And what this meant, this man is in the bad graces of the Roman Catholic Church. Anybody who feeds him, gives him something to drink, or provides any kind of shelter or help to this man, anybody who helps this man in any way is excommunicated. You do not help this man.

So they placed a ban on him. So what happened? Luther left Worms on April 25th. And he starts doing what? Well, time to go home, making his way back to Wittenberg.

So he's riding his horse along with some guys, you know, ready, you know, making his way back to Wittenberg. All of a sudden, in the forest, they find themselves surrounded by a group of men with weapons. They stop their little group traveling, they scoot away Martin Luther, and they say, you're coming with us.

And they kidnap him and take him away. I'm sure that at first they must have thought, we're goners, man, what's going on? But very soon it became clear to Luther, this was being engineered by some of his political friends for his protection. And he was being stolen away by a guy named Frederick, Frederick the Wise, who was the leader, the political ruler, Frederick the Wise, of one of these areas in Germany.

And Luther went away with him, and you know what he did? Well, Frederick the Wise had a castle, a castle at a place called Wartburg. And Luther hid at that castle, hid out there, for, gee, how long was it? For a period, I don't know, I didn't have a thing, I think it was at least a year. Luther hid out there, and they gave him kind of secret names, and he lived there.

They did this for his own protection, so that he could just live and get along, and get along this first furor that had risen up, until there was the systems in place that could keep him safe. Now, what did Luther do during this year or so at Wartburg Castle? Well, he wrote, and one of the most important things he did was he wrote a new translation of the New Testament into German. Which, by the way, is still used by German-speaking peoples today.

It's like the King James Version in the German language. Luther's translation of the New Testament. Later, he finished it up and did an Old Testament, too.

But he did a very important translation of the New Testament into German. Again, which was important, because the Roman Catholic Church was not into giving the Bible to the laity in their common language. Now, there was an interesting meeting in the year 1530 in a city called Augsburg, where there was one last attempt to try to patch things up between the people who were following Luther's movement, which became known as Lutheranism, the followers of Martin Luther, and the Roman Catholic leaders.

At this final meeting in Augsburg in 1530, it was the last attempt to try to patch things up. Now, Luther had his colleague there to present his views, and his colleague's name was Philip Melanchthon. We'll get into a little bit of Melanchthon later.

This was Luther's colleague and successor, actually. Although, what's interesting about Melanchthon is he was a very different guy than Martin Luther. In some ways, I don't think he was a very worthy successor of

Martin Luther.

Luther was a very combative man. Melanchthon was a very conciliatory man. He was probably the right guy to have at this meeting, right? You want a guy who's going to seek reconciliation.

Melanchthon presented the Lutheran views as non-offensively to the Roman Catholics as he could. You know how it is. You can state what you mean in a way that makes it sound actually very, very close to what your opponent means.

There's a way you can do this that has a real conciliatory attitude. That's how Melanchthon presented this. But you know what? The Roman Catholic Council still demanded concessions that Luther would not make.

If you want to say it was in the year 1530 that the division became final, that there's no turning back on it, none at all whatsoever. Next time, we'll talk a little bit more about... Well, what we'll probably do is spend some time talking about other reformers like Calvin, like Zwingli, like Melanchthon, and then we'll spend a little bit of time talking about the doctrines of the reformers. One of the things I did in college was I did a paper on whether or not you could consider the Reformation, especially Luther's Reformation, the Reformation in Germany, let's say, whether or not you could consider the Reformation in Germany a revival.

And you know what? I don't think so. Not in the way that you commonly think of a revival that sweeps through, where tons of people get saved, where there's a real change and an enduring change in the moral and spiritual character of a community. You know what? Martin Luther lived out his final years incredibly discouraged that people did not respond to his message and that people's lives didn't seem to be any different morally or spiritually than before.

I mean, he knew that the things he stood for scripturally were true and there was no hesitation about that. But I don't think you can consider the Reformation in Germany to be a real revival. Now, it's interesting, if you take a look at what happened, for example, in Calvin's Geneva, you could probably make a better case that that was revival because there you really had a community transformed by the power of the gospel.

But not so much in Luther's Germany. Luther was very discouraged that all his stand for the truth didn't seem to make much of a difference in the lives of many, many people. Although it planted the seeds for future revival.

There's no doubt about that. I mean, what Martin Luther did was irreplaceable. Absolutely irreplaceable.

But it wasn't a complete work in and of itself. Now, one of the things that went on with Martin Luther was, and we'll talk about this in a much greater debate, much greater things. You have the Lutherans here, then you have the Catholics here, then you have the Anabaptists here.

And I think that Luther's reaction and his response to the Anabaptists was terrible. I think it's terrible what Luther did to the Anabaptists. We'll talk about that coming up soon.

But what Luther did to the Anabaptists, what I think was terrible, and a lot of it was based just in his kind of hot-headed, combative character and nature, which was necessary for this break, but I think got him into trouble with this break. Of course, the Anabaptists did a lot of things to shoot themselves in the foot.

There's no doubt about that.

When things first started getting rolling in the Reformation, I don't know if this was before or after the Diet of Worms, Luther was very excited about having a different kind of attitude towards the Jews. And he said, hey, let's bring them in. These are God's people.

Let's bring them in. And it was great. He recognized the shameful things that the Church had done.

But then, some of his Protestants, some of his Lutherans, went to Judaism. Not a lot, but a handful. This really chapped Luther's heart.

And he felt betrayed by the Jewish community. And suddenly, Martin Luther was calling for the burning of synagogues, for the persecution of Jews. And believe me, some of it got done in his name.

I'll tell you one of the saddest things is that, obviously, this is the kind of thing that gets deeply ingrained in a German culture. Adolf Hitler, who was by no means a Christian. I mean, by no means.

True Christians opposed Adolf Hitler. But, Adolf Hitler could come to power wrapping himself in the cloak of German Christianity. Saying that in battling the Jew, he was doing the will of God.

And he made quotes exactly to that effect. So, yeah, that's a terrible, terrible thing. Well, let's pick it up again next week.

Lord God, we thank you for this time together in your Word. Well, Lord, really not so much your Word, but looking at your Word as it's been written in the pages of history. And Father, we pray that you would give us some of the courage, some of the great willingness to stand for the truth that this marvelous man, Martin Luther, had.

Lord God, we thank you and praise you in Jesus' name. Amen.

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