John Tetzel, Dominican Indulgence Vendor

*6.H.2 Understand the political, economic, and/or social significance of historic events, issues, individuals or cultural groups.*

*6.C.1 Explain how the behaviors and practices of individuals and groups influence societies, civilizations, and regions.*

An indulgence is a pardon from punishment for sins. In the Catholic faith every sin must be cleared during an individual’s life or after his death. The first indulgence was given by Pope Urban II in 1095 to all people who participated in the Crusades and confessed their sins. Indulgences were then offered to people who could not attend the Crusades but offered to pay money instead. By the 1200s The Catholic Church claimed it had a treasury of “good deeds from Christ and the saints” that can be used for individual indulgences. Finally in 1517 Pope LeoX authorized indulgence vendors to sell indulgences to help pay for the construction of St. Peter’s Basilica.

John Tetzel was a Dominican friar who made his way through Germany as an indulgence vendor. In the marketplace of each town, Tetzel would offer this sermon:

Listen now, God and Peter call you.  Consider the salvation of your souls and those of your loved ones departed.  You priest, you noble, you merchant, you virgin, you matron, you youth, you old man, enter now into your church, which is the Church of St. Peter.  Visit the most holy cross erected before you and ever imploring you.  Have you considered that you are lashed in a furious tempest amid the temptations and dangers of the world, and that you do not know whether you can reach the haven, not of your mortal body, but of your immortal soul?  Consider that those who are contrite and have confessed and made contribution will receive complete remission of all their sins.  Listen to the voices of your dear dead relatives and friends beseeching you and saying, "Pity us, pity us.  We are in dire torment from which you can redeem us for a pittance."  Do you not wish to?  Open your ears.  Hear the father saying to his son, the mother to her daughter, "We bore you, nourished you, brought you up, left you our fortunes, and you are so cruel and hard that now you are not willing for so little to set us free.  Will you let us lie here in the flames?  Will you delay the promised glory?" Remember that you are able to release them, for *as soon as the coin in the coffer rings, the soul from purgatory springs.*  Will you not then for a quarter of a florin receive these letters of indulgence through which you are able to lead a divine and mortal soul into the fatherland of paradise?

How can people be forgiven for the sins they committed?

What are the dangers of the world and the consequences that they bring?

Who is Tetzel addressing during his sermons?

Where are the souls of the dead relatives?

How can people help their dead relatives according to Tetzel?