**THE FUNDAMENTAL PROBLEM WITH PARDONS**

Regardless of which party holds the White House, at the end of a Presidential term, there are a number of pardons extended. These pardons are always controversial. The reason, of course, is obvious: when a criminal is pardoned, it seems as if an injustice was done. Ideally, such pardons should be given sparingly. They should be reserved for those who have been falsely accused and convicted; those whose sentences were overly harsh; or perhaps those who have reformed in a significant way. However, according to the Constitution, when it comes to federal crimes, the President has virtually unlimited pardoning power. In other words, no matter how much some may complain about a specific pardon, there isn’t much they can do about it. With that said, my topic is not “politics.” Instead, I want to use this as a springboard to discuss DIVINE pardon – also known as “the forgiveness of sins” (Ep.1:7).

**First, as King of the universe, God has unlimited pardoning power!** Well, He has unlimited power, period! And His unlimited power extends even unto the forgiveness of sins (cf. Mt.9:6).

**Second, when God pardons, it is NEVER for those falsely accused!** Why do I say this? Because we are ALL guilty of sin; and the wages of sin is death (Rm.3:23; 6:23). We *deserve* our punishment; and yet, God pardons!

**Third, when God pardons, SOME might say an injustice has been done!** A guilty person has been set free; justice was (allegedly) thwarted. Simply put, grace is not fair! It is not fair that you and I can just walk away from our sins; and yet this is what we enjoy in Christ Jesus. Praise be to God!

**Fourth, a pardon says that there is a role for mercy, as well as justice!** But there is an obvious “tension” between mercy and justice. When justice is served, there is no mercy shown (Deut.19:11-13). When mercy is shown, there is no justice, for the sin is not punished (Ps.103:8-10). Hence, these two ideas of mercy and justice are fundamentally at odds. So, the question becomes: *How can God mercifully pardon sinners who DESERVE Hell, and yet remain just?* And THAT is the fundamental problem with pardons (see the title of this article).

**Fifth, the tension between justice and mercy is resolved by an atonement!** Notice: “being justified freely by His grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God set forth as *a propitiation****by His blood,*** through faith, to demonstrate His righteousness, because in His forbearance God had passed over the sins that were previously committed, to demonstrate at the present time His righteousness, *that He might be* ***just*** *and the* ***justifier*** of the one who has faith in Jesus” (Rm.3:24-26). The blood of Christ allows God to be both “just” (condemning sin) and “justifier” (forgiving sin). The word “propitiation” (v.25) can also be translated *“sacrifice of atonement”* (cf. NIV). Now, let’s make some important observations about that “sacrifice of atonement.”

An atonement is NOT the actual punishment for sin. To give your punishment to someone else would be a serious miscarriage of justice! That, in itself, would be a sin (Ezk.18:20). Instead, atonement is a ***“substitute”*** for punishment; it does what the punishment would have done. Specifically, an atonement shows *condemnation* of sin (Rm.8:3); and it *deters* further sin (2Cor.5:14-15). Hence, an atonement is ***alternative*** way to uphold the law (i.e., to be just), while simultaneously extending mercy (i.e., to justify sinners). *Simply put, God cannot be accused of injustice for pardoning sinners,* ***because His own Son shed His blood for them!***(Mt.20:28; 1Tm.2:5-6)

And yet the blood of Christ was not OUR punishment for sin (i.e., Hell). Instead, He was sufficiently wounded, bruised, chastised, and striped – giving a “nod” to justice (Is.53:5); yet allowing God to extend mercy by pardoning sin. Pardon is not punishment; it is ***avoiding*** punishment! If Christ had endured OUR punishment, there would have been no real pardon at all; and a great injustice would have done to the Son of God by His own Father. Finally, if OUR punishment was given to Christ, we could ***never*** be lost; for the punishment for our sin has already been given out. In this context, to punish us again would be tantamount to “double jeopardy!” (As an aside, that is the very basis for Calvin’s concept of “once saved, always saved.” But in contrast, see Hebrews 10:26-31.)

The fundamental problem with pardons is resolved in Christ. In His cross, we see the “genius” of God (Rm.11:33-36); for He devised a way to be both just and justifier of those who believe (Rm.3:24-26)!

--Lanny Smith