

Any good student of history will notice one famous (or infamous) presidential pardon missing from that list: the pardon of President Richard Nixon by President Gerald Ford (1974). Ford granted a pardon to Nixon for any crimes he might have committed during the Watergate scandal, even though Nixon was never charged with or convicted of federal crimes. This is known as a pre-emptive pardon.

Let me mention one other interesting case: in 1974, the Symbionese Liberation Army kidnapped Patty Hearst, the heiress to the Hearst publishing fortune. Hearst later joined with her captors and committed armed robbery. Captured by the FBI in 1975, Hearst received a seven-year prison sentence. President Jimmy Carter commuted the sentence and later convinced President Bill Clinton to issue Hearst a presidential pardon (2001).

What's the difference between a commutation and a pardon? A commutation shortens the sentence of a convicted offender still incarcerated, but does not overturn the conviction or imply innocence. A pardon does not signify innocence either, but it does give full legal forgiveness, setting aside any ongoing penalty and restoring all civil rights to the person.

"Pardon" is also a term used as a synonym for divine forgiveness of sin, an act of mercy God alone may grant. Like its legal equivalent, a divine pardon sets aside the penalty for one's wrongdoing. But if you go looking for the word "pardon" in our reading from Romans, you won't find it. In fact, the word 'pardon' doesn't appear anywhere in the New Testament. That's not to say that the New Testament writers didn't talk about pardon: they just used other words, including but not limited to "forgiveness." Paul, for example, writing here to the Romans, speaks of believers being "justified by faith." He's talking about our being made right before God when we receive Christ.

The actual word "pardon" may have received more attention in the Old Testament because Israel's story depends greatly on the covenant God made with the Israelites as a people. God promised to be their God, and God remained faithful to the covenant even when the people of Israel were not. Thus, if Israel's life with God was to continue, there had to be some means of restoring the covenantal relationship. God granted pardon as that means.

Moses recognized that pardon was indeed the only way for the relationship to continue after great sin on the part of the people, and thus, after the golden calf incident in the wilderness, Moses prayed: *If now I have found favor in your sight, O Lord, I pray, let the Lord*

go with us. Although this is a stiff-necked people, pardon our iniquity and our sin, and take us for your inheritance (Ex. 34:9).

But the Bible is clear that pardon is *the Lord's* prerogative; it can never be presumed by those who deliberately sin. The Book of Deuteronomy states that God will not pardon the Israelites if they think they can sin and be exempt from punishment (29:20). God's pardon is never automatic; but when granted, God's pardon is an expression of God's mercy.

While the Bible portrays God as wanting to pardon, it also includes calls for sinners to return to the Lord, which, in a sense, is the sinner making application for a pardon. As Isaiah puts it: *let the wicked forsake their way, and the unrighteous their thoughts; let them return to the LORD, that he may have mercy on them, and to our God, for he will abundantly pardon* (55:7).

Although, as we have said, the actual word "pardon" doesn't appear in the New Testament, the gospel of Luke does contain a great pardon story in Jesus' parable of the prodigal son. Looking at that parable quickly, we might assume that the moment of pardon was when the father threw a party to welcome the prodigal back home and back into the family, but that misses the deeper movements of human emotions.

For the prodigal, pardon had to begin in the far country when deep in the pits of his bad decisions and careless living, *he came to himself* (Luke 15:17) and remembered his father's love. Before the young man could find pardon, he had to confront himself and acknowledge, *I have sinned* (15:18), and then he had to return to his father. And when he did, the pardon he received was a full one. He was completely restored to his place in the family, and his father rejoiced.

The general sense of Scripture is that we have all erred and messed up. *All we like sheep have gone astray and turned to our own way* (Isa. 53:6). So we need a pardon, and we know it. Fortunately, God is a pardoning God when we demonstrate that we're willing to live within the covenant and boundaries God has set up with us for our own good. God, like any good parent - like the father of the prodigal son - wants us to live in a way that is good for us. To that end, God provides a manual, a "how-to" book or a set of directions for how to color within the lines. One such "manual" is the "law" (symbolized by the Ten Commandments), but who among us keeps that without fail? God knows it's pretty hard,

and so God offers us pardon as a way to stay in covenant even when we've failed miserably and spectacularly.

Here's another way to grasp the meaning of pardon: Back in 1982, a time of national recession, Ernest T.J. Peters, the owner of a variety store in Dover, New Hampshire, realized he was losing patrons because they owed him money. Peters wasn't the best record-keeper, but he estimated that collectively, some 1,200 customers owed him perhaps as much as \$10,000 (\$25,000 in today's money). He felt bad for his customers, though, knowing that many were out of work. So he took out a small ad in the local paper, which read, "To our charge customers: Your bill is paid in full. Start fresh with us. We will help you through tough times. Come back and become a customer again."

When interviewed by a reporter, Peters said he intended not to mention anyone's debt when he or she returned to the store. He acknowledged that his act was as much about his store's survival as about generosity, but he also revealed something right about his spirit when he said, "I mean to do business by forgiveness." Or, as Paul put it to the Romans in our reading: *We even boast in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received reconciliation* (5:11).

Given our tendency as human beings to wander astray from the will of God, it's obvious that God has issued more pardons than all of our U.S. presidents combined! Some will argue that this president or that president is a soft touch. Yet, it is God who is the ultimate Soft Touch. Come to God with a sincere heart and a song of repentance, and God will offer full pardon and restoration every time! Pardons Unlimited. It's what God does. It's who God is.

Prayer: Merciful God, I know that I have broken your laws and my sins have separated me from you. I am truly sorry, and now I want to turn away from my past sinful life toward you. Please forgive me, and help me avoid sinning again. I believe that your son, Jesus Christ died for my sins, was resurrected from the dead, is alive, and hears my prayer. I invite Jesus to become the Lord of my life, to rule and reign in my heart from this day forward. Please send your Holy Spirit to help me obey You, and to do Your will for the rest of my life. In Jesus' name I pray, Amen

PARDONS UNLIMITED

Sunday, March 19, 2017 Romans 5:1-11

According to a *USA Today* article, President Barack Obama will be remembered as "one of the most prolific grantors of presidential commutations in history." President Obama did rack up an impressive number of presidential commutations during his two terms: 1,385 commutations (more than any other president). He also granted 212 pardons.

George Washington, issued just 16 pardons. Abraham Lincoln pardoned, commuted or rescinded the convictions of 343 people: including 264 of 303 Dakota Indians who attacked white settlers in the Great Sioux Uprising of 1862. President James Garfield issued the fewest presidential pardons – none – but remember he died in office only six months into his first term. Franklin Roosevelt issued the greatest number of pardons: a staggering 3,687 during his twelve years in office.

Presidents, like state Governors, may commute prison sentences or grant full pardons for crimes committed. Unlike state Governors, however, only the President can grant a pardon for treasonous crimes. Here are some famous presidential pardons:

- **Roger Clinton** (2001): President Bill Clinton pardoned his brother of a drug conviction.
- **Caspar Weinberger** (1992): President George H.W. Bush pardoned the former Secretary of Defense, along with five other men implicated in the Iran-Contra affair.
- **George Steinbrenner** (1989): President Ronald Reagan pardoned the owner of the NY Yankees of charges related to illegal campaign contributions to the Nixon campaign.
- **Jefferson Davis** (1978): President Jimmy Carter pardoned the former President of the Confederacy and with an Act of Congress restored Davis' citizenship after 113 years.
- **Gordon Liddy** (1977): President Carter pardoned Liddy for his conviction relating to the Watergate burglary.
- **Jimmy Hoffa** (1971): President Richard Nixon pardoned the Head of the Teamsters Union of a conviction for jury tampering and mail fraud.
- **Eugene V. Debs** (1921): President Warren G. Harding pardoned the Socialist Party leader, of his conviction for making a speech that violated the Espionage Act.
- **Dr. Samuel Mudd** (1869): President Andrew Johnson pardoned the surgeon who set the broken leg of presidential assassin John Wilkes Booth.
- **Brigham Young** (1858): President James Buchanan pardoned the Mormon leader for his role in the Utah War between Mormon fighters and federal troops in the 1850s.