

There has been quite a bit of discussion about the record of President Barack Obama's record with regards to issuing pardons and commutations of criminal sentences. On the one hand, before he left office he set a new record for commutations – 1715, mostly low-level drug offenders whose sentences were reduced. On the other hand, he issued the third fewest pardons of any president – 212. Only George W. Bush and George H. W. Bush issued fewer, according to Department of Justice records.

The difference between a commutation and a pardon is significant: A commutation shortens the sentence of a convicted offender still incarcerated but does not change the fact of the conviction or imply innocence. A pardon does not signify innocence either, but it does give full legal forgiveness, set aside any ongoing penalty and restore all civil rights to the person.

Pardon shows the mercy of God

"Pardon," you probably know, is a term also used in theological discussions as a synonym for divine forgiveness of sin, an action God alone may do. Like its legal equivalent, divine pardon sets aside the penalty for one's wrongdoing.

If you're looking for the word "pardon" in our reading from Romans, however, you won't find it. In fact, the word only appears in the Old Testament. That's not to say that the New Testament writers didn't talk about pardon. They did, but they used other vocabulary, 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 through Jesus 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 their life with God was to continue, there had to be some means of restoring the covenantal relationship. God granted pardon as that means.

Moses, for example, recognized that pardon was indeed the only way for the relationship to continue after great sin on the part of the people. 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" (Exodus 34:9).

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

What's more, 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).

The pardon of the prodigal

Although 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, 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.

We are all in need of pardon

The general sense of Scripture is that all of us have messed up. "All we, like sheep, have gone astray and turned to our own way" (Isaiah 53:6). So, we need a pardon, and we know it.

Fortunately, God is a pardoning God. And 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", especially the Ten Commandments. But who among us keeps them perfectly? 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.

Doing business by forgiveness

Here's another way to grasp the meaning of pardon: Back in 1982, in 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.

He hadn't kept the best of records, but he estimated that collectively, some 1,200 customers owed him perhaps as much as \$10,000 (which is more than \$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 wonderful about his spirit when he said, "I mean to do business by forgiveness."

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 an open heart and a song of repentance, and God stands ready to offer full pardon and restoration every single time!

Pardons Unlimited. It's what God does. It's who God is.

Pastor Keith