"Pardoning the Wicked and Overthrowing the Righteous"

"It is not good to show partiality to the wicked, Or to overthrow the righteous in judgment" (Proverbs 18:5).

We have just completed a season of the year that begins in late November and runs through about January 20. Not the holiday season, not winter, not ski season, but the season of presidential pardons, which comes about every 4 years. There is no doubt that this action has been abused over the years, with Presidents showing favoritism and dubious judgment.

There have been some notorious individuals and notable names on the list of presidential pardons, such as George Steinbrenner and Brigham Young. But the purpose of this article is not to debate the merits of any specific presidential pardon, because none of these pardons, however egregious some of them may be, compares with the most outrageous pardon in history. That pardon was not granted by an American president but instead by a Roman governor. And it did not take place in America in the last few years but in Jerusalem about 2,000 years ago. As the writers of the Gospel note, at the time of the Passover, the Roman governor at the time, Pontius Pilate, would grant clemency to a Jewish man slated for execution. Matthew records this for us in Matt. 27:15-26. In this case, Pilate gave the people two choices. One was named Barabbas, who was in prison with insurrectionists and had committed murder in the uprising against Rome. The other was Jesus Christ. We are going to see that, once again, we have a pardon that is made as a totally political decision, whatever would gain favor with the people. On the one hand, we have a prisoner who Matthew referred to as a "notorious" prisoner, John calls him a "robber" in John 18, Mark 15 refers to him as a rebellious insurrectionist and Luke in his 23rd chapter mentions that he is a "murderer." On the other hand we have the innocent son of God, who never committed a single sin. The crowd called for Barabbas to go free and for Jesus to be crucified. And so it was that Barabbas was pardoned and the innocent Son of God died in place of a murderer – the most outrageous and horrific pardon in history.

However, the story continues, for on that day, when the most cowardly and reprehensible pardon was ever made, we have the beginning of events that would provide for the ultimate and greatest pardon ever to be offered. And it was God Himself, our Creator, our Ruler and King, who will issue this pardon. And since it is from the judgment and will of God, there will be no politics, no partisanship, no favoritism in this pardon - it is for all. After the unfair and illegal trial of Jesus, after His crucifixion, death, burial, resurrection, and ascension, His disciples go forth throughout the world and reveal this pardon to all of mankind. This pardon is not offered to one individual, or a select few, but to all men. It is offered to Saul of Tarsus, despite his being the zealous murderer of Christians. It is offered to Pilate, despite his sinful and cowardly actions. It is offered to the Roman soldiers, about whom Jesus said: "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they do" (Luke 23:34). The pardon is offered to Osama Bin Laden, Adolf Hitler and every evil man who ever lived. If it is not, then Paul was in error when he told Timothy that God "desires all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth" (1 Tim. 2:4). And that pardon is offered to you and me, despite every evil thing we have ever done. And we can be assured that God knows every single one of them, including the ones we try to hide. That's why we need a pardon, "for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (Rom. 3:23). This pardon is not for political or selfish reasons, but because God loves us. Rom. 5:6-11. Our pardon was secured at the expense of the crucifixion of God's own Son.

But you must receive that pardon for it to be effective. Of all the names of men previously mentioned in this article, only Saul of Tarsus received the pardon as offered. Why? Because unlike what many religious teachers will tell you, it is not unconditional. We must comply with the conditions set forth to receive the pardon.

The world understands this. All of us understand the logic, reasoning, and conditions surrounding a pardon for a crime.

George Wilson was convicted of robbery and was pardoned by President Andrew Jackson. He refused the pardon. His refusal created an uproar. It was debated, even going into our nation's court system, as to whether or not a presidential pardon could be forced upon someone. It went all the way to the Supreme court. They ruled: "A pardon is a deed, to the validity of which delivery is essential, and delivery is not complete without acceptance. It may then be rejected by the person to whom it is tendered; and if it is rejected, we have discovered no power in this court to force it upon him." Our supreme court understands that a pardon cannot be forced upon someone but must be accepted. George Wilson refused the pardon, so they hung him. That was not a smart move on his part.

President Lincoln's intentions were to pardon confederate leaders, but he was assassinated. Over the next several months President Andrew Johnson waffled on the issue but eventually offered pardons to confederate leaders if they would comply with certain conditions. Confederate leader Jefferson Davis said, "It has been said that I should apply to the United States for a pardon, but repentance must precede the right of pardon, and I have not repented." So he did not receive the pardon. (Nothing much happened to him, there was a small group of Americans who wanted Confederate leaders tried for treason, but most of the war-weary nation just wanted to go home and get on with their lives).

This line of reasoning, that conditions must be complied with before a pardon is received, is common sense to us. But we throw that reasoning out the window when applying it to religion. False teachers tell us that there are no conditions to be met, simply accept Christ as your personal savior. Other false doctrines teach that some men are simply "chosen" or "predestined" to be saved while others are eternally lost, and there is nothing anyone can do about it. But God's word indicates otherwise, and the law of pardon from God is the same as the standard as a presidential pardon, one must accept and comply with the conditions of the pardon in order to receive it.   Let us humble ourselves and accept God's terms for pardon. This means believing He died for your sins and rose from the dead. This means confessing Jesus as the son of God. Rm 10:9-10. This means acknowledging your sin and changing your life, making God the ruler of your life, asking for forgiveness, and being baptized, immersed to be raised a new creature. Acts 2:38; Mark 16:15-16. I urge you to receive that pardon while it remains available. Do not be defiant like George Wilson, nor as prideful as Jefferson Davis, because for you, one day, the offer of pardon will expire.

We have offered to us the greatest pardon that has been or ever will be offered, because the penalty we bear was paid by the life, the blood, of our savior Jesus Christ. That is the incredible mercy of God. Before the mob stood the sinless Creator of mankind in the meekness of a sacrificial lamb. The choice was simple, Barabbas or Jesus, and in their worldliness the mob chose a robber and murderer over the Son of God. We can say that we would never be like that mob before Pilate, or prideful like Jefferson Davis or defiant like George Wilson, but in actuality we sometimes are. Jesus stands before us saying "Take My yoke upon you ... for I am meek and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls," and every time we reject that offer of pardon and instead answer Pilate's question by choosing Barabbas, which we do by choosing the pleasures of this life over Christ, we reject the most precious pardon that has ever been offered. As the Psalmist said in the 42 Psalm, "How long will you love what is worthless"? Instead, won't you humble yourself and accept God's terms of pardon?

--Jim Hammock (Lubbock, TX)