

A Pardoning God

Samuel Davies (1723–1761)

Great God of wonders, all thy ways,
Are matchless, Godlike, and divine;
But thy fair glories of thy grace,
More Godlike and unrival'd shine,
Who is a pardoning God like thee?
Or who has grace so rich and free?

Crimes of such horror to forgive,
Such guilty daring worms to spare,
This is thy grand prerogative,
And none shall in the honour share.
Who is a pardoning God like thee?
Or who has grace so rich and free?

Angels and men, resign your claim,
To pity, mercy, love, and grace;
These glories crown Jehovah's name,
With an incomparable blaze.
Who is a pardoning God like thee?
Or who has grace so rich and free?

In wonder lost with trembling joy,
We take the pardon of our God,
Pardon for crimes of deepest dye,
A pardon bought with Jesus' blood.
Who is a pardoning God like thee?
Or who has grace so rich and free?

O may this strange, this matchless grace,
This Godlike miracle of love,
Fill the wide earth with grateful praise,
And all the Angelic Hosts above,
Who is a pardoning God like thee?
Or who has grace so rich and free?

ΤΩ ΚΡΟΝΟΥ ΚΑΙΡΩ

In the Nick of Time

About Pardon

Kevin T. Bauder

News reports this week are buzzing with President Joe Biden's pardon of his son, Hunter. Convicted on firearms and tax charges, the younger Biden was awaiting sentencing as his father neared the end of his presidential term. The president had insisted repeatedly that he would let justice run its course, and that he would not pardon his son. In spite of these assurances, President Biden announced that he was pardoning Hunter not only for the convictions over tax evasion and lying to a licensed firearms dealer, but also for any other federal crimes that he may have committed or taken part in from January 1, 2014, through December 1, 2024.

Interestingly, the termination hour of the pardon was still future at the time it was announced. The president may not have realized what he was doing, but he effectively granted his son impunity to commit any sort of federal crime over the next several hours. Whether Hunter took advantage of this permission is not known. What is known is that the pardon covered all crimes, actual or potential, acknowledged or unacknowledged, during the specified period.

Even some pundits on the Left have expressed perplexity over the pardon, and those on the Right have voiced outrage. One commentator even titled his report, "The Biden Crime Family Gets Away with It." Some have attributed a cynical motive to the pardon: by protecting his son, President Biden puts a stop to any potential investigation that might explore his own wrongdoing.

We need not suggest such a sinister impetus to explain the president's action. Normal paternal affection is a sufficient rationale. All other things being equal, what father would not wish to keep his child from spending years in prison? If we had the power, which of us would not be tempted by love to cancel our son's penalties for wrongdoing, even if those penalties are deserved?

But all other things are not equal. Assuming the best of motivations for President Biden—love for his son—he still cannot rightly act without heeding other concerns. Chief among those is a concern for justice. The charges against Hunter Biden were not trumped up. His prosecution was not some



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form of vengeful lawfare. Hunter broke just laws, and those laws had just penalties attached to them.

Injustice disturbs moral balance. Moral balance can only be restored through judgment and retribution. Justice is not about rehabilitating wrongdoers, recompensing victims, reducing recidivism, or restraining crime. Those are good and useful things, but they are not justice. No, justice is about judgment and retribution. There is no justice without judgment, and there is no judgment without retribution.

Therein lies the problem with Hunter Biden's pardon. In this case, parental mercy comes at the cost of public justice. No one seems to be suggesting that Hunter was wrongfully convicted. He himself pled guilty to three felony charges of tax evasion. To some extent, every taxpayer was harmed by his conduct. More seriously, he held a just law up to contempt. There were no mitigating circumstances. Consequently, the presidential pardon has thwarted justice.

The contest in this case is between love and justice. The president was caught on the horns of a dilemma: he could show love, or he could uphold justice, but he could not do both. What he chose to do was to seize one horn of the dilemma. He chose in favor of love. While we might sympathize with him, we cannot justify him. He has betrayed his office.

Justice does not allow judges the option of ignoring the law, and the point of law is to assign penalties to infractions. If this principle applies to human judges and other sworn to uphold the law — and it does — then how much more does it apply to the Judge of all? The Judge to whom we must all render account?

We know that we are lawbreakers. We have sinned and come short of the just requirements of God's standard (Rom 3:23). Furthermore, God's law attaches a penalty to our misdeeds: "the wages of sin is death" (Rom 6:23). Much as He loves us, God is not free simply to overlook our lawbreaking. If He failed to inflict the penalty, He would be untrue to His law, which would make Him untrue to Himself. He would not be God.

So how can God as Judge issue pardons to sinners? Indeed, how can He pronounce sinners righteous in His sight (which is what justification means)? Would not such a pardon and such a verdict be as inconsistent with justice as Hunter Biden's pardon is?

No, it would not. The reason that God's forgiveness does not violate justice is because the full penalty of the law was inflicted upon Christ on the cross. In the moment of His passion, Jesus became our substitute, took our place, and died our death. In other words, the full penalty of the law has already been paid, so that when we believe on Christ, God can rightly cancel our guilt.

There is no justice without judgment, and there is no judgment without retribution. The retribution for our sins — our lawbreaking — was laid on Jesus, and He paid it fully. He endured all that God's just law demanded.

If we have believed upon Christ, then we, too, have been pardoned. In fact, we have received more than pardon. We have received a verdict of *righteous* for Jesus' sake. God has charged our guilt against Jesus, and He credits Jesus' righteousness to us.

God is infinitely just. God is also infinitely loving. In His wisdom, God found a way to be true both to His love and to His justice. He is "just, and the justifier of him which believeth on Jesus" (Rom 3:26).



This essay is by Kevin T. Bauder, Research Professor of Historical and Systematic Theology at Central Baptist Theological Seminary. Not every one of the professors, students, or alumni of Central Seminary necessarily agrees with every opinion that it expresses.
