Forgiveness And Pardon

Described

Forgiveness or pardon means the governmental-legal act of God the Supreme Ruler and Judge through which He frees or releases the sinner from the guilt, sentence and due punishment which the sinner has incurred as a rebel against Him.

Forgiveness also refers to a change in God the King’s emotional feelings towards the sinner.

Explained

Forgiveness is a characteristic activity of a perfectly loving and merciful God who takes no pleasure in the death and punishment of a sinner and who as a result is always ready to pardon the person once a satisfactory atonement for sins is made and the person responds in faith and repentance. Ezekiel 18:30-32 states: “…’Repent, and turn from all your transgressions, so that iniquity will not be your ruin. Cast away from you all the transgressions which you have committed, and get yourselves a new heart and a new spirit. For why should you die, O house of Israel? For I have no pleasure in the death of one who dies,’ says the Lord God. ‘Therefore turn and live.’”

Hebrews 9:22 declares unless there is shedding of blood – meaning a physical death, there can never be any forgiving of sin by God: “…and without shedding of blood there is no remission.” So God did not just act in grace and mercy alone when He forgave all believers’ sins. He also acted in perfect justice in the sense He had a totally innocent human, Jesus Christ die as a substitute for the penalty owing by all of us.

Guilt

The New Testament teaches that humans who are sinners by nature or who commit sin become guilty before God. But note “enochos” – the main Greek word for this guilt – is mostly related to the judgement of a judge in a court of law. Louw and Nida state “enochos” relates to “being guilty for having done wrong (primarily a legal term, being guilty and thus deserving some particular penalty)”. ¹ Bauer says “enochos” is used “mostly as a legal term – liable, answerable, guilty”. ²

The New American Standard Bible translates “enochos” once as “liable” and three times as “guilty” in Matthew 5:21-22: “You have heard the ancients were told, ‘you shall not commit murder’ and ‘Whoever commits murder shall be liable to the court.’ But I say to you everyone who is angry with his brother shall be guilty before the court; and whoever shall say to his brother, ‘Raca,’ shall be guilty before the supreme court…”

¹ Louw and Nida, page 776.
² Bauer, page 267.
God promises to forgive every sin except blasphemy against the Holy Spirit

In Matthew 12:31-32, Jesus promised that God would forgive all sins except blasphemy against the Holy Spirit: “Therefore I say to you, every sin and blasphemy will be forgiven men, but the blasphemy against the Spirit will not be forgiven men. Anyone who speaks a word against the Son of Man, it will be forgiven him; but whoever speaks against the Holy Spirit, it will not be forgiven him, either in this age or in the age to come.”

The sins God promises to forgive include murder, adultery, homosexuality, rape, manslaughter, divorce, bestiality, paedophilia, selling drugs, prostitution and so on. Even if you have committed any of these sins before or after becoming a Christian, God desires to forgive you of these.

The blotting out or obliteration of all recorded charges against us

Both the Old and New Testament refer to God blotting out His records of criminal charges against believers.

In Psalm 51:1, 51:9, Isaiah 43:25, Jeremiah 18:23 and Acts 3:19, God speaks of totally blotting out our sins. This blotting out of sins refers to the total removal from His legal record of all criminal charges previously held against us. In the original Hebrew, the word “blot” is “maha” which means “to wipe off, to wash out as ink might be…to blot out or erase, to blot out or pardon”. ³

Acts 3:19 says: “Repent therefore and be converted, that your sins may be blotted out…” The original Greek word for “blotted” here is “exaleipho”. “Exaleipho” means “remove, destroy, obliterate, in so far as the removal results from the blotting out of a written record”. ⁴

This means when we turn to God from our sins, our record of sins in heaven is obliterated. “Exaleipho” is also used in Colossians 2:14, when it speaks of God blotting out, through Jesus’ death, the certificate of debt legal record of our sins which God held against us. In Greek, the word “handwriting” in Colossians 2:13 is “cheiropographen” meaning “a certificate of debt” (N.A.S.B.) or “a handwritten statement, especially a record of financial accounts”. ⁵ In Matthew 6:12, Jesus called sins “debts” and in Matthew 6:12 and Luke 7:41, Jesus called sinners “debtors”.

Colossians 2:13-14 shows God’s forgiveness of our sins is closely tied to His total blotting out of our offences recorded on this certificate of debt which condemned us as criminals and rebels against Him.

God will remember our sins no more

Another associated wonderful New Testament truth is found in Hebrews 8:12 and 10:17 in which God promises to not remember the sins of believers anymore.

³ Wilson, page 43.
⁴ Bauer, page 272.
⁵ Louw and Nida, page 394.
The status-before-God and vital-living aspects

Colossians 2:13 declares: “And you, being dead in your trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, he has made alive with Him, having forgiven you all trespasses.” In its context, this verse is referring to the moment of conversion – the time we are made alive together with Christ. So this is when we receive forgiveness of all our intentional and unintentional sins and not just some of them. Colossians 2:13 refers to our legal standing or status in Christ before God the Supreme Ruler and Judge in relation to the forgiveness or pardon of our crimes against God.

But the above truth does not mean we should treat present known sin lightly. We should turn from and confess it as soon as possible. This is so we can maintain personal fellowship with God (see 1 John 1:6-7 and 9) and so this sin does not harden our hearts against Him (see Hebrews 3:12-14).

Pardon

God the Supreme Ruler and Judge has condemned all humans to eternal punishment because of their rebellion and crimes against Him and His love laws. When God pardons us, He pronounces that we are totally free from the guilt, sentence and punishment associated with our crimes.

The pardon of Barabbas by Pontius Pilate is an illustration of what our pardon by God means (see Luke 23:13-25). Barabbas was a murderer condemned to die. At the Passover Feast, Barabbas was granted a complete pardon by Governor Pilate, with Jesus Christ dying in his place. Barabbas accepted the pardon and enjoyed the benefits of Jesus dying in his place. (Barabbas would not have enjoyed the salvation benefits of Jesus’ death though unless he later turned from his sins to having faith in Jesus Christ.)

God’s pardoning of ourselves involves the remarkable situation of totally condemned guilty persons appearing before a perfectly just Supreme Ruler and Judge and admitting their guilt and the just nature of the punishments to which they have been sentenced, and then the Ruler and Judge legally totally pardon them. This is all the more striking in the fact the Ruler and Judge took their punishment on Himself in order to bring about this pardon.

Are there differences between pardon and forgiveness?

One view of pardon and forgiveness suggests these are two closely linked matters but have some major differences between them. In this view, pardon is a merciful, gracious governmental-legal judgement of God as King while forgiveness is more a personal loving act of a Father. Matthew 18:21-35 relates pardon to a King and Matthew 6:9-12 associates forgiveness with God being Father.

While there may be elements of truth in this distinction, God’s pardon is also personal and loving and His forgiveness is also a governmental-legal judgement. Forgiveness and pardon are two Biblical concepts which in their own limited ways explain part of what God has done about our guilt through His mercy and grace.
An error about forgiveness

One error about forgiveness teaches that believers have their sins forgiven but not remitted or cancelled, while unbelievers at conversion have their sins remitted or cancelled but not forgiven.

Such ideas do not have any foundation in the original Greek New Testament because the word “aphesis” is sometimes linked to conversion (see Acts 2:38 and 26:18) and sometimes to the whole of one’s Christian life (see Hebrews 10:18). Also, the Greek word “aphiemi” is linked to conversion and justification in Romans 4:7 and to post-conversion sins in James 5:15 and 1 John 1:9.

Bible Study Questions

1. Describe what God’s forgiveness means.
2. What does Hebrews 9:22 teach about God’s forgiveness?
3. When Matthew 5:21 refers to humans being “liable to the court”, what does this mean?
4. What does Matthew 12:31-32 teach about God’s willingness to forgive?
5. What do Psalm 51:1, 51:9, Isaiah 43:25 and Acts 3:19 mean when they refer to God blotting out our sins?
6. Explain what Colossians 2:14 teaches when it refers to the handwriting of requirements that were against us being wiped or blotted out.
7. Colossians 2:13 teaches that God has forgiven all of believers’ sins. Does this mean we can sin as much as we want without caring the least about this?
8. What does the Biblical concept of pardon mean?