We seem to be on something of a roll these days in terms of readings about which I would rather not preach. Today I looked for multiple ways to avoid preaching on the topic of forgiveness, but kind of like advertisements for Gruber Law Offices and news of Aaron Rogers’ torn achilles, I could not avoid it. In our reading from Genesis, we have Joseph forgiving his brothers for selling him into slavery. In Paul’s Letter to the Romans, he does not directly address forgiveness but he does talk about not passing judgement, which is a component of forgiveness. Then, in Gospel of Matthew, we have Jesus telling us that we need to forgive a person who sins against us seventy-seven times. And just in case we are thinking that on the seventy eighth time we can really cut loose Jesus goes on to tell a parable about a slave who does not forgive another slave. It ends with this rather ominous line: “And in anger his lord handed him over to be tortured until he would pay his entire debt. So my heavenly Father will also do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother or sister from your heart.” So just to summarize, if you do not forgive you will be tortured. But of course, the threat of punishment is not the only reason we are to forgive.

However, before we get into all of that, I should probably explain why I did not want to preach on this topic in the first place and that reason is that I find forgiving incredibly difficult. I am just not very good at it. I mean I am still a little miffed at my third-grade teacher and I had her during the Carter administration. And while I am not good at forgiveness what I am really good at is coming up with reasons for why my lack of forgiveness falls into a very special category that is somehow outside of what we are told today. But it is all there, wrapped up in a neat little bow. We are told of not just the necessity of forgiving but that there will be serious consequences if we do not forgive. God’s opinion on the subject does not really seem to be open for interpretation. It would kind of be like debating the meaning of a stop sign. And because of the clarity of the text what I would like to do in the next few moments is look at why forgiving is so hard and also why we are missing out when we do not forgive.

Now before I go on, I want to emphasize that my frame of reference for this difficulty in forgiving is me. Perhaps you have no problem forgiving people. Maybe when someone cuts you off in traffic you ask God to bless them and then follow them home so that you can buy them a latte at Starbucks. And if that is the case and this is not a particular problem of yours maybe you can just listen so that you can help a friend. Also, one more thing before we go on, I am mainly going to be focusing on cases where the person who has offended has not sought us out and asked for our forgiveness.

Alright so with all of that out of the way let’s talk about why it is so hard to forgive. In my humble opinion the root of this difficulty in forgiving is misplaced authority. What I mean by this is our sense of justice and right and wrong are based solely on ourselves. Someone has done something that offends and by the fact that they have not asked for forgiveness or groveled lets us know that there is an imbalance in the universe. A debt that is owed to us has not been repaid and the only way to keep any semblance of justice is to remain angry with the other person. And in some ways, there is a certain neatness to this understanding. It is a kind of grievance double entry bookkeeping. As you know in double entry bookkeeping every entry to an account requires a corresponding and opposite entry to a different account. So, in terms of our lack of forgiveness, it is required because we have an offense on one side of the ledger and with no contrition to put on the other side of the ledger, anger and unforgiveness must be substituted to make up the other side of the transaction. For if we were to lose one side of the entry our accounting would start to look one of those crypto companies whose founders are in jail. And while it all makes sense when it is viewed from our level there is one major flaw – it is a rotten way to live. I mean as best I know there has never been the advice given to someone experiencing depression that they should sit down and count their grievances. And so going back to my double entry bookkeeping example the proper way to resolve wrongs that have been done to us is to replace the grievance with forgiveness. You can still have an entry on both sides of the ledger but not the kind that makes you miserable.

One interesting thing about this topic is that it is a place where Christianity and secular society seem to come together. In psychology as well as in the church there is an understanding that holding onto grievance and anger is a very bad and unhealthy thing to do. We may offer different reasons about why, but at the end of the day we agree. And so again, if this is the case why is it so hard? It’s not an issue like the sabbath where secular society is constantly infringing and telling us something completely different. Here we are all singing from the same hymnal. Certainly, there are people who love grievance both inside and outside of the church, but they will never say as much. They will be like me and explain that their lack of forgiveness is the result of their very special situation which cannot be resolved in ways that may be appropriate for the rest of society. But interestingly even in this world of self-justification there is agreement about the rules. Everyone knows that we should forgive. If we did not, we wouldn’t go to all the trouble of finding exemptions for ourselves. So, the issue is not getting people to agree on the rules but rather the issue is with getting us to follow the rules. In terms of forgiveness, we need to get rid of the conjunction but. As in “Yes I know we need to forgive but not things that horrible.” I know that I personally can be a master of rationalization. I can twist things to such an extent that I can fool myself into believing that my lack of forgiveness is really what Jesus wants. But the problem is we worship a God who from the cross asked for those who crucified him to be forgiven. I mean I feel as if people have done some pretty rotten things to me, but no one has ever ginned up false charges against me, nailed me a cross and watched me die. So, we really can’t say that when God asks us to forgive, he does not know of what he speaks.

And this gets us back to the need to change perspective – to take ourselves out of the center of the moral universe. When we have a very small perspective, we will live very small lives. Lives filled with pettiness and spite. But the fact is people do bad things, ourselves included. I would imagine that there is someone out there who is still mad at me for some callous statement I made during the Clinton administration. We all can offend as well as be offended because we are sinful. But as we say in the Lord’s Prayer, forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us. In order to receive God’s forgiveness, we must also forgive. Our sinful nature fights this reality, but it is the only way we can fully live into the calling that God has placed upon our lives so that we may be his own this day and forevermore.