Matthew 18:21-35

Forgiveness is 70 times 7 times. We’ve heard this many times inside the church and perhaps even outside the church. We hear it in sermons, bible studies, Sunday schools, sometimes the casual talks when this subject comes up AND of course in the Lord’s Prayer. It is a familiar text, if not just that phrase. And perhaps this is too familiar to us that we just want to read this passage as quickly as possible so we can get to another section and be done with this 70x7 times business. I don’t know about you, but sometimes I feel uneasy reading this if I really think about these words of Jesus. Usually if I’m just reading without the brain in the head, then there’s no problem. But even without the brain, the demand is still there. 70x7 times! 7s and 10s are numbers of perfection and completeness! Perhaps you would have that same feeling and experience as me, being uneasy around this text and maybe some other texts as well. This is probably because we know we just can’t live up to that standard. It is simply beyond our ability and even beyond our willingness to do so. There’s really no wiggle room for this one. Not like murder, stealing, adultery, those “big” sins where we can sort of say, “God, I’ve tried my best, I’ve done what I can, and I haven’t really killed anyone, at least not physically.” Our pride will think that we’ve done a decent job in those area and we like to pat ourselves on the back and say to ourselves, “you are a good and faithful servant.”

But not so with this text. The demand is so absolute, so unconditional that it makes us squirm, feeling uneasy. If you have any such feelings of repulsion that you just want to get away as far and as fast as possible, then that’s the Law working in you. And here, the word law does not mean the commandments only, but it’s a theological term that we often use in the church. What the law does theologically is to accuse us of our sins. It will always accuse us no matter what because we will always fall short no matter what. We examine ourselves and we find that we don’t forgive as many times as we should. We don’t forgive as willingly as we should.

Now, why is that? I am not asking why we don’t forgive as we should. I’m asking why we have such attitude and feeling toward passages like these in the bible. Why do we, almost intrinsically, shun from this kind of text? Perhaps one of the reactions we have when we read this is that it’s simply unreasonable. It’s impossible and unrealistic. Sure God can forgive as many times as HE wants, but don’t expect me to do the same. I’m a sinner, I’ll admit that, so don’t make us do things that we can’t accomplish in the first place. And there are even some people who read these religious texts and will say “ah these things are passé, it’s outdated, it doesn’t apply to us now because we are more advanced, more civilized, more cultured than those people way back when.” And so sometimes we will read the bible because it’s a good thing to do, but we don’t really accept it.

And perhaps the major objection that we have is that it’s not fair. That’s probably what Peter had in mind also. The teaching in his days taught that you were only obligated to forgive up to 3 times. So for Peter to suggest 7 was incredible, at least in his mind it was. Certainly that’s what comes to our mind first also. It’s not fair! If a friend of yours comes and kicks you in the shin and afterwards apologizes, asking for your forgiveness, what would you do? You would probably forgive and ask him not to do it again. But the next day he comes and kicks you in the shin again and the whole process is repeated. If this goes on for the entire week, you would probably be a little bit frustrated. And by the end of that week, if you can still walk, you would most likely say to yourself and to this friend “enough is enough”. But no! Jesus commands us to forgive as many times as needed. Certainly this is not fair at all!

All the things I mentioned above are the sinful human pride revolting and rebelling against the word of God. We don’t like to hear things that we can’t do, especially when it accuses us of our weakness and sin. Here, we seem to misunderstand the reason behind forgiving unconditionally. Why should we forgive? The first response that we usually give is “because God commanded to”, and the implicit, a more subtle response along with that is, to guilt trip us. It’s to make us feel bad so that we will obey him. But what’s the good of that in making us feel bad about ourselves.

So perhaps it’s the opposite. By forgiving others, it will make us feel good, usually it makes us feel good about ourselves because we are so loving and kind. But if you are that person being kicked in the shin every morning, I don’t think you will feel too good about it even if you are being so forgiving. Forgiving does not feel good if you really think about it, because it’s not fair.

But is God trying to make us feel good by telling us to forgive people? Is this the reason for the unlimited forgiveness? Well I hate to tell you this every week, but it’s not about you or how you think or how you feel. That’s right, ultimately it’s all about God and what he thinks and what he has said IN JESUS CHRIST. It’s about what he or how he considers the sinner, because this is the religion for sinners, the guilty, those who can’t live up to the standards. This is how we were, was it not? You and me, we received forgiveness not because God had to do it. He was not obligated to save any of us. He was not commanded to do anything for us. He could have just put Adam and Eve to eternal hell and be done with sinners once and for all. If our sinning is like kicking God in his shin at least once a day, can you imagine how long he has been enduring our kicking? If you ask me, I would have wiped away humanity 70x7 times! (well, thank God I’m not god!)

So does this make God feel good? Of course not and that’s not the point at all. And this God didn’t just get kicked in the shin, but he was crucified to death. He was separated from God the Father, which was the worst punishment that one can ever get. That’s what hell is. Jesus who was in perfect union with the Father, the one who shared the closest relationship with God was separated because of us. Such a thought was so agonizing that it distressed Jesus to no end on the night when he was betrayed. The disciples of course had no idea what was about to happen, so they were happily sleeping.

Is this fair? Certainly not! But someone had to pay the price for breaking the commandments. You couldn’t pay it just as that miserable servant could not pay that 10,000 talents, which was about 200,000 years worth of work for a laborer. Yet the son pays for you. Notice too in the parable, that servant pleaded with the king, but he thought he could pay back if he had a bit more time. What was the king’s response? He had pity and compassion on the servant NOT because he was so earnest about paying back and certainly NOT because he was so repentant and asking for mercy and grace. That servant was asking for time NOT mercy. The king was compassionate on him because he was compassionate. He knows that the servant had no power whatsoever to pay him back, it’s humanly impossible even if he had 200,000 years!

So what am I getting at with all this? What I am trying to explain is the reason why we are to forgive 70x7 times. We forgive because it is for the benefit of the offender. Remember this text follows right after last week’s reading where Jesus tells the disciples they are to talk to the brother who have sinned against them IN ORDER TO WIN him back. The final purpose is always for the salvation of the sinner. That was the purpose of God forgiving us again and again, because he is compassionate on us to save us. This is the purpose, the reason, it is for our salvation and the salvation of all. Not so that we are fulfilling God’s laws or to make us feel good about ourselves, because it’s not about us. It’s about the person who is in danger of eternal separation because of their sin. And yet God has graciously invited us to participate in his work of salvation. He has invited us to join him in proclaiming the free forgiveness of sins in Christ Jesus!

Of course there are certain practical things that we need to keep in mind in all of this. The first and probably the most important thing is that the final salvation is only through the good news of Jesus Christ, which is the ultimate forgiveness. So if you can forgive unconditionally, but that person is not a Christian then you do not gain him spiritually. But through your patience and kindness and forgiveness, then God may use you to bring His gospel. This should always be our goal in dealing with one another, that is, to bring one another back to Christ.

Secondly, being a forgiving person does not mean you should be a stupid person. If someone actually does kick you in the shin every day, then maybe you should consider buying a shin guard to protect yourself. Being a Christian doesn’t mean that you should put yourself in harm’s way. It doesn’t mean that you should be abused by other people’s sins. This is why also, Jesus tells us to bring another person or even the church authorities to talk with the person. If he doesn’t listen, then count him as an outsider. Of course this is referring to a Christian context that happens in the church of Christ. We don’t do this for anybody.

And the last thing to keep in mind is that all of this is the work of God, not your work. We can forgive only because we have first been forgiven. If you don’t receive that grace from God, it will be a hard thing for you to forgive others. If you don’t see yourself just like anybody else in great need of mercy, then you will act like that wicked servant who makes himself lord over other servants. Therefore it is a good thing for us to remember and meditate constantly what it means to be a Christian. To be a Christian is not defined and determined by our lifestyle, but by what God has done and is still doing in and through us and that is, as Luther puts it in the 3rd article of the apostle’s creed: “In this Christian church He daily and richly forgives all my sins and the sins of all believers.” We are all equal in terms of our need and status before God. Therefore we pray that prayer in Mark 9:24 “I believe, help my unbelief!” and therefore we may also pray “forgive our trespasses as we forgive those who trespasses against us” or simply “forgive me, help my unforgiving!”