

# Piedmont Presbyterian Church



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Dear Brothers and Sisters,

“Pastor,” said the voice on the other end of the phone. “Pastor, doesn’t it say somewhere in the Bible that if somebody does something wrong, you have to forgive them? What verse was that?” A little conversation revealed that the person trying to recall this week’s passage from Matthew was in a tricky situation which they had arrived at as a result of “bad choices”- choices which had harmed several people and now the consequences of that harm were coming home to roost. The person wasn’t interested in forgiving anybody themselves, instead they were trying to persuade one of the people harmed to forgive them so that they could escape the fallout of what they had done. Jesus does indeed say we must forgive; yet the voice on the phone was trying to turn Jesus’ command into a weapon of manipulation against one of “the little ones” the command was meant to protect. The passage that voice was looking for is [Matthew 18:21-35](#), Jesus’ response when Peter pushes Jesus to quantify exactly how many times he had to forgive a brother who persisted in doing the wrong thing.

Last week on the lawn we talked about what it looked like when we engaged in the difficult conversations to address sin within the church. From the stories shared, it was clear that the church struggles with these conversations as much as it did in Jesus’ time; in our own lived experience we’ve seen how people’s desire to keep their power, insist on their own righteousness, and silence perceived enemies comes into play. Without a careful listening to God’s spirit, the goal of these conversations can become distorted into seeking punishment rather than restoring brothers and sisters to right relationship with each other and God. Peter seems to accept that some amount of effort needs to be made to address sin without disposing of the sinner completely, but in this week’s passage he seems to want to know exactly how far we need to go with forgiveness before we give up. Surely, at some point, his question seems to suggest, it’s o.k. to write a brother off as beyond hope. At some point, surely, it’s reasonable to go back to eye for eye, tooth for

tooth, and dish out the same amount of hurt and betrayal that has been received. Peter seems to ask “when can we stop seeing him as a brother, and start seeing him as the enemy? When can we say enough is enough, demonize him and take revenge?”

Peter suggest “seven times” as a reasonable limit. It’s very generous, considering the amount of sin seven times would allow a brother, but still easily countable on two hands. Jesus replies this isn’t nearly enough; he counters with seventy-seven, a number so large as being uncountable and impossible to track. Forgiveness in the church cannot be limited, it must be limitless. Instead of being able to count off the number of offenses with growing anticipation of not having to forgive again, we are asked to see forgiveness as a way of life, and cultivate boundless reserves. To underline his point, Jesus tells the story of a slave who had wracked up an impossible amount of debt that he owed his lord—so much debt that it could not be repaid in several lifetimes. When the lord pulls him in to account for the debt, he has pity on him, and forgives all of it. The forgiven slave then goes out and violently attacks a fellow slave who owes him a comparatively miniscule debt and imprisons him until he can pay up. When the lord hears of it, he changes his mind about forgiving the original debt, and hauls the debtor back in to be tortured until the last penny is paid. Jesus concludes this parable with an ominous warning, to make sure the message is understood, “So my heavenly Father will also do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother or sister from your heart.”

We often point this passage away from ourselves as Peter did in a “what if so-and-so did such-and-such” manner. We want to catch Jesus being wrong about this so we don’t have to look at our own lack of forgiveness, the ways we have violently demanded punishment of people who have offended against us. We want to ignore the size of the debt accumulating against our own account: the times we denied Jesus in our words or actions, the times we were hateful against a brother or sister, the times we were sin-serving instead of God-serving. But this is a story for all of us, to be reminded of that mountain of forgiven debt, to be reminded that God’s forgiveness washes out every sin. There is no threshold to cross where violence and punishment become permissible. We are to forgive because we are people already forgiven, not to insist on other people forgiving us, but to seek God’s help in extending forgiveness to the people around us. The voice on the phone was right, God tells us we must forgive. But the voice on the phone was requiring it as a debt overdue, just as the debtor slave pursued and jailed his fellow. Forgiveness is the generous and voluntary credit that reverses the debt. A gift freely given instead of a payment extorted. Instead of demanding forgiveness, the voice should have been asking, “who do I need to forgive?”

The love and peace of Jesus Christ be with you,

Pastor Sarah