

**PARK HILL UNITED METHODIST CHURCH
EIGHTEENTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST
REV. JOHN L. THOMPSON
"WHY WE NEED TO FORGIVE"
Matthew 18:21-22
September 14, 2008
8:45 & 11:00 A.M. SERVICES**

There was a certain married couple that had many sharp disagreements. Yet somehow the wife always stayed calm and collected. One day her husband commented on his wife's restraint. **"When I get mad at you," he said, "you never fight back. How do you control your anger?"**

The wife said: **"I work it off by cleaning the toilet."**
The husband asked: **"How does that help?"**
She said: **"I use your toothbrush!"**

A man was bitten by a dog. Later it was discovered that the dog had rabies. This was back when there was no cure for rabies. His doctor brought him the bad news. **"Everything possible will be done to make you comfortable," he said, "but we can't offer any false hope. My best advice to you is to put your affairs in order as soon as possible."**

The dying man sank back in shock, but finally he rallied enough to ask for a pen and paper. He began writing furiously.

An hour later, when the doctor returned, he said, **"Well, it's good to see you've taken my advice. I take it you're working on your will."**

"This is no will," said the man. **"It's a list of people I plan on biting before I die."**

Our subject today is forgiveness. How many times must I forgive someone who has hurt me, abused me, or exploited me? That is Simon Peter's question. How many times? Would seven times be enough?

Peter thought that he was being generous. After all, the rabbis of his day taught that only three times were required. They said, **"Forgive three times, but not the fourth."** Peter was taking what the rabbis commanded, multiplying it by two, and adding one more for good measure! Seven times, Peter thought, should be plenty enough forgiveness.

But it was not enough for Jesus. In answer to how many times we should forgive Jesus said, "I tell you, not seven times, but seventy-seven times. In some translations it says "seventy times seven." In other words, forgiveness is limitless. This is important because some of us are probably thinking, **"That's a lot, seventy times seven. But at least the four hundred ninety-first time, I can bop him one real good."**

The point Jesus is making is that there is to be no limit to our forgiveness. Forgiveness is at the heart of Christian faith. We are not to hold grudges, carry

resentments, and harbor bitterness. It is a teaching at the center of everything we believe about Christ. And yes, it's a tough teaching.

Refusing to forgive can be deadly. We can choose to forgive or we can choose to carry around for a lifetime feelings of bitterness, resentment, simmering hatred. The choice is ours!

Someone has said that harboring resentments is like taking poison and waiting for the other guy to die. Someone else has said that letting hatred simmer within us, eating at our emotions and our body, is like burning down our house to get rid of rats. C. S. Lewis once observed that he had finally forgiven a man who had been dead for more than thirty years. We still know people today who have been carrying negative feelings around for thirty years or more. So often, the other person is not even aware. When we refuse to forgive, we hurt ourselves most of all.

Many years ago there was a famous Brink's robbery? It happened in Boston, Massachusetts in January 1950. The robbery netted nearly \$3 million, an extraordinary amount of money fifty-eight years ago.

The culprits in this robbery were apprehended, but do you know how? Well, eleven days before the statute of limitations was to expire on the robbery, clear out of the blue, one of the robbers confessed. His motive? Anger! Revenge! The other members of the gang had let him down. This was his way of payback. He went to prison with the rest of them.

When we carry anger and resentment toward someone else, the person we really hurt is ourselves. Philip Yancey writes: **"Not to forgive imprisons me in the past and locks out all potential for change. I thus yield control to another, my enemy, and doom myself to suffer the consequences of the wrong. I once heard an immigrant rabbi make an astonishing statement. 'Before coming to America, I had to forgive Adolf Hitler,' he said. 'I did not want to bring Hitler inside me to my new country.'**

Forgiveness is one of the best gifts we can give ourselves. It is healing to forgive. We need to purge ourselves of our negative feelings toward a co-worker, toward a family member, toward an ex-spouse or an ex-partner who has hurt us--for our own well-being.

Forgiveness is a choice. You can choose to forgive. John Edwards has been phoning former staffers and supporters apologizing for deceiving them about his affair, which is now public knowledge, but apparently he isn't receiving much forgiveness. Should forgiveness be forthcoming when the wrongdoer apologizes and asks to be forgiven?

David Augsberger wrote a book a few years ago about anger. He noted that anger is a choice. He said the only thing we don't have a choice about is the adrenalin which is being pumped into our bodies.

Jesus told a parable about a man who owed his king ten thousand talents. That's about the equivalent of ten million dollars. The king was ready to have the man, his wife, their children and all their possessions sold to satisfy the debt. The man came begging on his knees to the king to ask for more time. The Scriptures tell us that the king was moved with compassion and completely forgave the man his debt.

That same man had someone who owed him some money--about twenty dollars. He seized this man by the throat and told him to pay up. And when the fellow did not, this man who had been forgiven his debt of ten million dollars had the fellow thrown into prison for failing to pay his debt of twenty dollars.

Someone reported this to the king and he called the man in again. ***"Here I forgave your debt, should you not have forgiven the debt that was owed to you?"***

Sometimes our hurt can go so deep, we feel we cannot let go of it. But we can--and we must for our own well-being. If there's someone you need to forgive, do it,--not for their sake, but for you own.

Stephen Felker tells a story of two friends who were walking through the desert. During some point of the journey they had an argument, and one friend slapped the other one in the face. The one who got slapped was hurt, but without saying anything, wrote in the sand, **"Today my best friends slapped me in the face."**

They kept on walking until they found an oasis, where they decided to take a bath. The one who had been slapped got stuck in the mire and started drowning, but the friend saved him. After he recovered from nearly drowning, he wrote on a stone, **"Today my best friend saved my life."**

His friend asked him, **"After I hurt you, you wrote in the sand and now, you write on a stone, why?"** The other friend replied **"When someone hurts us we should write it down in sand where winds of forgiveness can erase it away. But, when someone does something good for us, we must engrave it in stone where no wind can ever erase it."**

Has anyone hurt you? I would love to be your pastor to help you choose to forgive because forgiveness is one of the best gifts you can give yourselves.