

How Many Times?

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Preacher: Johan Linder

[0 : 00] Thank you for having me today. It's great to be here for the first Saturday evening English! So that's a real honour and a privilege for me to be here. So some of you may not know me very well, so I thought that I would introduce you but the reason I'm doing that is because it's kind of in line with what I'm speaking about tonight and that is forgiveness.

And so I want to just talk a little bit about how I discovered that for myself because I didn't come from a Christian family and I come from a migrant family as well. So my family, when I was nine years old, my father and mother decided to move to Australia.

They had three choices. It was either Canada or the US or Australia and in the end they chose Australia and moved there. And so for me it was a huge adjustment, adjusting to a very different culture. I didn't speak English when we arrived so I had to learn to speak English.

And it wasn't easy because my parents, I think part of the reason my parents moved was because they didn't get along. My mother had a drinking problem and that only got worse when we moved countries.

And my father also had a mental health problem. He had paranoid schizophrenia. So that's not a good combination and it's not a great way to build a family on the other side of the world away from having any kind of support from family or friends or anything like that.

[1 : 38] So my parents split up after a few years in Australia. My mum disappeared basically. She ran off with another man and we stayed with my father who'd never cooked before and never washed clothes or had done anything like that.

So it was a big adjustment and it was also very difficult. It was lonely and hard. You know, my dad didn't have a lot of friends and we didn't have a lot of other people around us.

So it was quite lonely. When I was 15, a friend of mine at school who wasn't a Christian invited me to go to a Christian holiday camp.

And he said, oh, it's really good. We were in year 10. I was 15, a young boy in a boys school. He said, oh, it's great. It's a great camp. I went last year and there's girls there.

And I said, yeah, that's great. There's girls. Yeah. All right. And he said, and there's motorbikes. You can ride motorbikes every day. And I thought, yeah, that sounds pretty cool. Okay. I want to ride motorbikes. So he said, there's only one bad thing. You have to listen to the Bible every day for an hour.

[2 : 48] And I thought, well, to get to meet girls, ride motorbikes, I can put up with an hour of Bible every day because I didn't know anything about the Bible. I'd never been to church. So I thought, okay, well, we'll see what it is. But the atmosphere of the camp was very different to what I expected.

It wasn't rigid. It wasn't, you know, difficult. Well, the leaders were actually very loving and it just kind of opened my eyes. And I thought, wow, you know, I've never met Christians before.

And there was something about their love and their care for me. And I asked a lot of questions. So they invited me to go and listen to a speaker, Billy Graham, who was very famous in those days. He came to Sydney and did a huge crusade. And I listened to him and I thought, wow, it sounds pretty cool. This idea of I can have a relationship with God who made the whole world. I've never thought about that before.

And it sounds really interesting. And so the second time I went, I just felt that God spoke to my heart personally and said, you've got to make a decision. Are you going to go God's way or are you going to go your own way?

[3 : 53] And I thought, well, if I go this God's way, then if it's just all a fairy tale and it's made up, then I'll find out. So I thought, well, I'd give it a try. And so I went down the front and gave my life to

Jesus.

My life was so different. It was amazing. It was like I was walking on cloud nine for two months at least. You know, it was like a real high. But then after about six to 12 months, that was the time when I started struggling with a lot of the older things in my life.

You know, like even though I was only young, I was only 16 years old. But I still had a lot of anger. You know, I was very angry that my mother had just walked out of our lives. And, you know, we had all these problems.

My dad was drifting in and out of work. And I just felt like, you know, why do I have to inherit my parents' problems? You know, they created all these problems.

And I'm here. I'm going to suffer all the consequences. And I have to give it up. And, you know, I was quite angry about that. And, you know, I had to go through this process of realising that, you know, actually I don't deserve anything from God.

[5 : 09] He doesn't owe me any favours. And I need to learn to, you know, to forgive those around me, to have an attitude of just trusting that God will provide for me and lead me.

And that was a process that took quite a long time. But it was an important lesson for me to learn. And this whole idea of forgiveness is something that many people find very difficult, even Christians.

You know, sometimes we say, oh, yeah, I've forgiven them. But you haven't really. You're still holding things in your heart. And you're still angry at people. You're still angry at God. You're still angry because of what happened to you.

You still feel like a victim blaming other people for your own problems. Okay. And so I think this is a really important subject to address. And Jesus kind of addressed this head on, didn't he?

By telling this story, which is a very kind of, in a sense, it's a negative story with a negative outcome. But it's a warning. It's a warning for all of us that we can take a lot from.

[6 : 14] And so we're going to look at that. And this idea of forgiveness is something that's very, very central to both Christianity and also to the Jewish religion as well.

That God is willing to forgive us and be compassionate towards us when we turn to him. Because, you know, God ultimately oversees our lives and he has the right to rule over our lives.

Because why? Because he made us. So we belong to him. We are. He has the right of ownership to us. You know, if I make something in my backyard shed, I own that thing.

Okay. Belongs to me. And in the same way, we are God's creation. We are made in his image. And therefore, he owns us.

He has the right to rule over our lives. But, you know, we all reject him. We all have this tendency to want to push him away out of our lives, don't we?

[7 : 14] Do you ever do that? Do you do that? Do you kind of push God away and say, no, I want to do my own thing. Okay. I want to make the decisions. I want to do the things I want to do.

I don't want to do the things that I know that God wants me to do. Okay. We all have that tendency. And we don't always live in harmony with God or his purposes for our lives.

And that's why the world is so messed up. That's what Eve chose to do. She looked at the fruit and I thought it was so good. And it's, you know, it's good for gaining knowledge.

And I can be like God. But in the end, they had to suffer the consequences for that. And that's why there is so much conflict and pain and cruelty in our world.

Misunderstandings, abuse, family strife, power struggles. They all come from people choosing to live their lives rejecting God and his purposes for their lives.

[8 : 16] And some people live in open hostility. You see people who openly attack the idea. How could people be so stupid as to say there is a God who looks after you? And then there are other people who just quietly just shove it away and say, I just want to do my own thing.

Thank you. Don't get involved in that. And we see that a lot today. So sin is not just about one action. Okay.

Don't get started on, oh, is that particular thing sin? Or is that particular thing sin? Sin is our attitude towards God and wanting to push him out of our lives.

Okay. So it's like a genetic disease. Like, you know, if someone has a genetic disease, it's so hard to cure. You know, you can't just give them an injection and then they're fixed.

Okay. But it's something that's embedded so deeply into their genetic makeup that they can't escape it. We all have that disease. And it's called sin. It's a tendency to want to push God out of

our lives.

[9 : 20] And it shows itself in different ways, depending on our personalities, our individual desires, what we'd like to do, what we don't like to do.

But, you know, Satan can use that to pull us away from him and from what God wants us to do. And we often like to point fingers at other people and say, oh, you know, they're doing wrong.

How can they call themselves a Christian? Or, you know, they do so wrong. And we look at the weaknesses of others. But we're often very bad at looking at ourselves and thinking, where do I fail?

Where do I fall short? And how can I live a life that is more praiseworthy and more honouring to God in the way that I live my life out?

And so the most basic need that every one of us has is to be forgiven. Forgiven by God. Forgiven for all the hurt and the pain that we have caused others because of our own selfishness, our own greed.

[10 : 26] And there is only one way that that forgiveness can be achieved. That's through the death and the resurrection of God's son on our behalf.

God's sending his own son as a sacrifice to pay the price for our rebellion against God. For rejecting him. And you won't find that anywhere else.

You know, I worked in Thailand for 14 years. And I used to go preaching around the churches in Bangkok. Bangkok. And there was a church in northern Bangkok that was doing quite well.

And we're having lunch one day. I think I preached there and we're having lunch one day. And there's this lady that I've gotten to know quite a few times. And I said, Pa. That's the name for auntie in Thai.

I said, Pa, you know. You know, do you come from a Christian family? She said, no, no, no. How long have you been a Christian? Oh, I've been a Christian about five years now. And she was middle-aged.

[11 : 29] She was probably getting 40s, 50s sort of age. She was a mum. Her husband wasn't a believer at all. And I said, oh, what did you do? And she says, I sell in the market.

Just because Rung Sit is a big market in northern Bangkok. And she sells clothes there. And I said, oh, that's interesting. How did you become a Christian? And she said, well, when I sold in the market, I used to listen to the radio.

And I'd listen to Buddhist preachers. And I'd listen to preachers from all different religions. I'd listen to Muslim preachers. And I'd listen to Christian preachers. And after doing this for many years, I decided that I was going to give my life to Jesus.

And I said, oh, that's really interesting. And why is that? And I remember she looked at me with a smile and kind of a glint in her eye. She looked at me and she said, because only Jesus can forgive sins.

Only Jesus can forgive sins. Buddha can't forgive your sins. Muhammad can't forgive your sins. Jesus is the only one who can forgive your sins.

[12 : 33] He's the only one who can bring you back to the creator God. So I want to look at the story that Jesus told now of the clearest picture of forgiveness and how it can work itself out in our lives.

And before we do that, I want you to think of someone that you need to forgive. Might be someone in your family who's hurt you.

Might be someone in your group of friends or at work. Might be someone that you see every day. Or someone that you haven't met for a long time, but you still feel angry and bitter towards them. We all have people like that in our lives.

I know that we do. Every one of us. And if you don't, you are a very special person. Peter was one of them.

And obviously he had a problem with forgiving someone close to him. And so he comes to Jesus and he comes to Jesus and he says, Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother when he sins against me?

[13 : 38] Up to seven times. And I reckon, I mean, I'm just guessing here, but I'm guessing that it was probably someone else in the group of the disciples that they were traveling around with.

Because that's where they were spending all their time, right? There probably wasn't a family member because they'd already kind of left their families to follow Jesus around.

And so Jesus says, I tell you not seven times, but 77 times. Now, Peter probably thinks he's being very generous here because the rabbis of the day taught that you should only forgive someone three times.

Okay, so the Jewish rabbis says three times. That's enough. Okay, so Peter doubles it and adds one. Okay, seven times. Seven times. That should be enough, shouldn't it, Jesus?

You know, you're a rabbi, you know, and we know that your teaching is bigger and more magnificent than the Jewish teachers. So let's add a bit.

[14:47] And Jesus says, not seven times, but 77 times or, you know, 70 times seven. It's a little bit ambiguous about what Jesus is actually saying.

But that's not the point. The point is that he's saying there should be no limit. Okay? Lots and lots and lots. You've got to keep forgiving. Okay? You don't keep score.

That's what he's saying. You don't kind of tally it up and say, now I've forgiven him 76 times. 77 times. That's the last time and that's it.

Okay? Jesus isn't saying that. He's saying there shouldn't be any limit. And so then he tells the story to drive the point home. So there's a king. He wanted to settle accounts with his servants. One man was brought before him who owed 10,000 talents. Do you know how much 10,000 talents is? Do you know how much that is? Anybody know?

[15:47] In today's money. Okay? New Zealand dollars. Not American dollars. New Zealand dollars. How much do you think it might be? Okay? So one talent is worth about 20 years wages for a common labourer.

Okay? 10,000 talents? That's impossible. Okay? So 10,000 times 20 years. Okay?

Forget it. Hundreds of millions of dollars. All right? That's too much. This man could never, ever repay what he owed. And this is a picture of you and me before an almighty God.

We have sinned against a holy God. We have broken his commandments. We've wandered away from him. We have fallen short of his glory. And the debt we owe is beyond our ability to pay.

There is no way you are going to pay it. We are spiritual bankrupts. Each and every one of us.

Okay? It doesn't matter if you've grown up in a Christian home. It doesn't matter if you've been to church every Sunday in your whole life.

[16:51] Okay? You are bankrupt before God. And the king ordered that the servant and his wife and children be sold to repay the debt.

But notice what happens next. The servant fell on his knees before the king and begged for mercy and said, Please be patient. And I'll pay back everything. Now that was also impossible.

He couldn't do it. Everybody would have seen that. He couldn't pay it back. But the king, listen to this. The king took pity on him and cancelled the debt and let him go.

Free and clear. The entire debt wiped away. Now I'm falling behind here. I need to get my clicker out because I've forgotten to click. Here we go.

What are we up to? We're up to cancel. That's it. Okay. And this is what the gospel is all about. Having our debt cleared.

[17:51] This is what God has done to us through Jesus. When we were helpless. When we were hopeless. When we deserve judgment.

God in his mercy sent his son to die on the cross for our sin. And our debt has been cancelled. Not reduced. Not rescheduled.

Not postponed. Not giving some sort of lenient treatment. But completely cancelled. Paid in full because Jesus died on our behalf.

But the story doesn't end there, does it? This same servant who had just been forgiven. I need to turn it on.

Back one. Back one. He's been forgiven this astronomical debt. And he goes out and he finds his fellow servant who owns him a hundred denarii.

[18:53] Okay. How much is a hundred denarii? It's about a hundred days wages. Okay. What would that be? It's a significant debt. Like, okay, a hundred days.

That would be, how many days do you work in a month? Five or six? Six? A hundred days? What's that? A hundred? Yeah.

Four or five months work? Wages? Yeah? All right. I don't know how much you earn a month, but double it. Multiply by four or five. Still significant debt.

Like, it's not nothing. It's not like it's 50 cents or something like that. It's a significant debt. If somebody owed me \$10,000 or \$15,000 or whatever it is, I would want that money back. Okay. But compared to what he'd just been forgiven, hundreds of millions of dollars, what does he do? He grabs this man by the throat and he demands, pay me back what you owe me. [19:58] This fellow servant falls down and begs for forgiveness and he uses the very same words. He says, please be patient and I'll pay you back. But this forgiven servant refuses to ignore him.

He has the man thrown into prison. My friend, do you see the horror of it? Do you see the ingratitude? Do you see the hardness of heart that this person has? And this is what happens when we refuse to forgive those who have wronged us.

We forget the magnitude of what God has given us. We forget that we were enemies of God, rebels against his rule.

And yet he forgave us everything. Not because we deserved it, but because of his great love and his mercy for us. And when the other servants saw what had happened, they were greatly distressed and they reported it to the king.

And the king called the wicked servant back and he said, you wicked servant, I cancel all that debt of yours because you beg me to. Shouldn't you have had mercy on your fellow servant just as I had on you?

[21:08] And then comes the sobering conclusion. The king handed him over to the jailers to be tortured until he could pay back all that he owed. And of course, when you're in jail and you're being tortured, you don't have much chance of paying back debts.

And Jesus ends with these words. This is how my heavenly father will treat each of you unless you forgive your brother from your heart. Now, this doesn't mean that we earn our salvation by forgiving others.

Don't think like that. Salvation is by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone. But Jesus is saying that a truly forgiven heart becomes a forgiving heart.

The evidence that we have received God's grace is that we extend grace to others. Are you willing to do that? Are you willing to forgive other people around you?

Are you willing to do that 70 times, 7 times? Because when you live in a family, when you're married to someone, you're going to have to learn to do that. And if you don't do that, then it will drive your relationship apart.

[22:13] You have to learn to forgive again and again and again and again. Maybe you're sitting here today and there's someone that you haven't forgiven. Maybe it's a family member who hurt you deeply.

Maybe it's a friend who betrayed you. Maybe it's someone who abused you, cheated you or slandered you and said terrible things about you.

Now, I don't want to minimize what has been done to you. Okay? Some of you may have suffered terribly at the hands of others. I don't know. I don't know anything about your life and where you come from.

But I want to tell you something in love that holding on to that unforgiveness is like drinking poison and expecting the other person to die.

That's what it's doing to you. Because you're not hurting the other person. You're hurting yourself by holding on to that unforgiveness. So God is calling you today to release that person to forgive as you have been forgiven.

[23:24] Not because they deserve it. They probably don't. I'm not saying they do. But because God has forgiven you a debt far greater than anything else or anything that anyone could ever owe you.

Forgiveness doesn't mean that what they did was okay. It doesn't mean there are no consequences for them. It doesn't mean that they can't still be held responsible for some of those things that they've done.

It doesn't mean you have to put yourself in harm's way again. And to be open to someone doing the same thing again and again. But it does mean you release them from the debt. You let go of the bitterness and you trust that God will be the one who will judge that person in his own time.

I want to tell you a story just as I finish off about someone who had learned to do that in a very difficult way. And it's about a young lady.

Her name is Ling. And she lived in Cambodia. And if you know anything about the history of Cambodia, there was a time when a communist group called the Khmer Rouge took over the country.

[24 : 38] And they killed about almost a third of the population. A quarter to the third of the population was murdered. Particularly people who were educated and who held important positions.

So a lot of people were just slaughtered. And it was just a terrible time. It was in the 1970s in Cambodia. And so this young lady, Ling, she was 17 when the Khmer Rouge took over Cambodia in 1975.

And they promised her. They took the whole family and forced them to march through the jungle. And they told them that the family would return home in three days. But they never did.

For four years, Ling marched with thousands of others. Forced, you know, put into forced labor where they had to farm and do all kinds of different things.

Hiding her tears when they were mocked or beaten. Her parents, five of her brothers and sisters, and two young sons all died. Because of maltreatment, disease, hunger.

[25 : 51] Awful. Her husband died just miles from freedom as they were trying to get to the Thai border. Through landmines and through thick jungle and up and down cliffs and things like that.

At 21, Ling was a widow. She was an orphan because her parents had died. And she was childless, surviving by digging for roots and praying for crippled animals to eat in the jungle.

So she eventually made it across the border. But during this time, she lost her faith in the Khmer gods. In desperation, her heart cried out for a king god.

One she didn't yet know. One greater than any she'd worshipped before. And in 1979, four years later, after she was first taken away, in a Thai refugee camp, she picked up a book in her own language.

And it was the Bible. And in the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth, she read. Her heart pounded. This is the God I spoke to in the forest. The one who made the heavens and the earth.

[27 : 01] So eventually, God blessed her with a new life in America. She found a new husband. And she had two more sons. And even her sister Nari, who she thought was dead, were reunited.

But despite of all these blessings, anger and revenge consumed her thoughts. She just couldn't escape from them. And then one day, she read Romans 12, verse 19.

It is mine to avenge. I will repay, says the Lord. God was asking her to do something harder than surviving the killing fields, as they call them. She was asking her to forgive the Khmer Rouge.

It wasn't natural. But God wanted her heart completely white, cleansed from inner darkness. As she began to understand forgiveness, God healed her deep wounds.

Her mood lifted. She could play with her children again. And God filled her heart with hope and love. And today, Ling has gone back to Cambodia. And she cares for those who still suffer.

[28 : 07] Because the trauma still lingers among those who remembered that time and who survived. So the choice that we have is...

Will I forgive? Will you forgive? I mean, really forgive. Not just say, not just pretend that you've forgiven, but still holding on to that bitterness in your heart.

But honestly, really forgive from the heart. Because God has forgiven you. And therefore, you want to extend that forgiveness to others.

If you're holding on to resentment, bitterness, anger towards someone today, I want to urge you to bring it to the cross. Jesus hung on that cross and he prayed, Father, forgive them, for they don't know what they're doing.

And while he was being crucified, unjustly forgave. And that same power is available to you. Don't say, I can't. Because God can give you the power to forgive others.

[29 : 14] The Bible says that if we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. If you've never received that forgiveness, if you've never trusted in Jesus Christ as your saviour, you can do that today.

Acknowledge your sins. Believe that Jesus died for you, paid for your sin, and that he rose again. And receive his gift of eternal life. And if you know Christ, but you're harbouring unforgiveness in your life, then come to him now.

Ask him for the grace to forgive. Ask him to help you. He may do it. He might do it instantly, or it may take time. But if you keep working on it, I promise you that he will give you the power to do that.

So, I'm going to ask us to pray a prayer. And I'm not going to ask you to share.

I'm not going to ask you to say anything. But if you want to, I'm just going to read it. And then if you want to pray it with me, feel free to do that.

[30 : 36] And I'm just going to read it slowly. And then if you want to repeat it in your head after me, then feel free to do that.

Let's pray. Almighty God, forgive us for the bitterness in our hearts. For the times our anger has been directed at you.

For the grudges we have held. And for the way that we've doubted your loving care. Help us to forgive as you have forgiven us.

Teach us to love with the love you have shown us. Fill us with joy and delight in the good you have done us.

That we may live in your grace every day. Amen.