

# Christians In An Unforgiving World

*Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.*

Date: 24 April 2022

Preacher: Campbell Brown

[ 0 : 00 ] Well, good evening. It's good to be here and it's good to see you all.

And if you could have your Bibles open in whatever format that is, and if you could look very quickly, I'll just read them, but verse 21 and 22.

Then Peter came up and said to him, Lord, how often will my brother sin against me? And I forgive him as many as seven times. Jesus said to him, I do not say to you seven times, but 77 times.

Well, why this? It's not the sort of thing that I would normally deal with. But the whole topic came up into my head because of a recent case of a premiership footballer who was filmed by his brother abusing an animal.

I don't know if you've seen it, but it was pretty brutal. And you hear him and his brother have a good laugh in the background.

[ 1 : 16 ] And it was a terrible thing to see. But the reason for mentioning it tonight was the response of his club and the chief executive of his club, who's a lady called Karen Brady.

And they did a couple of things. The first thing they did was that they roundly condemned his actions. They punished him for what he had done. But the thing I want to call out is what they did next.

And this is a direct quote from Karen Brady. And this is West Ham, by the way. But our values also extend to giving second chances for those who are remorseful and want to change.

Our policy around unacceptable behaviour has always been twofold, where possible to eradicate and rehabilitate. We believe in a society where the vast majority of people still value the fundamental human qualities of forgiveness and redemption.

I think that's an amazing statement. But sadly, I don't think it actually reflects the society in which we actually live.

[ 2 : 28 ] And I did a completely unscientific review of examples I could find, because this statement was, I felt, very encouraging. But when I tried to find similar examples, they were hard to come by.

But when I tried to find opposite examples, there were many. And just to pick out a few, there was a world-famous chef. He got a bad review. And after it, he said, I will never forgive that man.

With my hand on my mother's grave, I will get that man. Being a bit more topical, and I'm sure we all understand, President Sulewsky of Ukraine said, we'll never forgive Putin.

And there's a famous Frank Herbert quote, we will never forgive, and we will never forget. And that quote has been used over and over again in different ways and in different orders.

But to give some examples, there's a very famous poster after the Second World War and after the State of Israel was created. And it's a picture of the Holocaust, and that's the quote it used.

[ 3 : 33 ] We will never forgive, and we will never forget. And more recently, Joe Biden. Most of you know that I have a fascination for American politics for some reason.

But Joe Biden said after an ISIS attack, he said exactly the same thing. We will never forgive, and we will never forget. And I could go on and on. I could find loads of examples of these things.

Go online. There's whole websites devoted to it on the entire topic. And undoubtedly, the examples I've given are in most cases pretty extreme. And in most cases, the people have been horribly wrong.

And as far as I know, the guilty party is totally unrepentant of the wrong that they have done. Going back, the world-famous chef, yes, it was a vindictive and petty review of the world.

We look at President Selesny, and Russia are saying at the minute that they're invading Ukraine to stop the spread of Nazism. And you've got to remember that President Selesny is a Jewish man himself, so it's doubly offensive to him and doubly wrong.

[ 4 : 44 ] And then the attack that Joe Biden was referring to resulted in the death of many people and countless other lives destroyed of people that are left behind.

And there's much more insignificant things than these that we could talk about. Because, as I've said, we live in a harsh world. It's a world that doesn't give second chances to people.

At least in Europe, I don't think we do. It's a world where people do not forget. It's a world, I think, where people bear grudges that go through generations that break out families and societies and cause harm where they go.

It's a world where people want freedom to do whatever they want to do. But they won't give people the same freedom where it gets in the way of their desires.

I think it's a world where people want to throw away the key. It's a world where people feel wrong. They want the person of their person to suffer. So it's a harsh world.

[ 5 : 51 ] And then the question then becomes, as a church and as Christians, where should we be on this debate? And how should we act? And I think this passage that we read in Matthew is very useful in so many ways.

But just as a sort of brief introduction, I think I don't particularly want to talk about this tonight because it's not the focus of what I want to say. But in the context of this chapter, where it's Christians sinning against Christians.

But the principle, I think, holds true that our first instinct should always be of the redemption of the lost and the wrong. It's about identifying who they are.

It's about reaching out to them. It's about witnessing to them in verbal and nonverbal ways and getting them back on the right track. So I think that's the first thing. It's always about recovery of the lost.

That should be our first instinct. And as part of that is what I do want to speak about tonight. It's about this concept of forgiveness. And I think as Christians, what we should have, our spirit should be forgiving in its nature.

[ 7 : 04 ] It should be our spirit should just be like this. And the background to this particular question was that Peter asked the question in verse 21, how many times we should forgive?

And the very fact that Peter asked this question illustrated that his heart just wasn't right. His head was still in the space of his Jewish faith.

And the affliction that that faith put on people was the salvation of works. A religion which had many rules. A religion which kept count of these rules.

It was a religion where strict compliance was celebrated and boasted about. And those that couldn't, kept up, were scorned or put away or mocked.

And this is what Peter was implying here. He thought he was being really special by forgiving people lots more than everybody else. But what he was going to do here, he was going to list all these wrongs.

[ 8 : 09 ] He was going to tick them off one by one. And then when he reached his maximum number, forgiveness was going to stop. And he was going to change.

And Peter, Jesus, he stops that thought process dead. And what he's saying here is that you are to continually forgive the repentant sinner over and over again. You're not to count.

You're not to keep score. Because remember, God doesn't keep your score. So you mustn't either. And even when you think about this, this approach that Peter was talking about in a practical way.

How hard would that be? How much time would it take every day? And how destructive would that be to your own life and everybody else's life around you?

I would have a list on all the wrongs that everybody else had ever done to me. You would all have similar lists of all the wrongs that had ever been done to you. And you'd spend all your time ticking off the list of wrongs that had been apologized and adding to that list of wrongs that had been added.

[ 9 : 19 ] It would just come to dominate your life. It would be destructive for you. And it would be destructive to everybody around you. And it would be destructive to the church and the society that we all live.

So Jesus says, no. He says you're to be continually forgiving. You are to be a genuinely repentant person. Not in a way that counts.

But just in the way that you are. That you are to be somebody who forgives. Because that's the way you are. Now before I go on to say why we should be like this.

I just want to say that this doesn't mean that I've gone all liberal here. It doesn't mean to say that I'm speaking of some form of universal salvation or complete forgiveness to whoever for whatever happens.

Because the Bible is very clear that that's not the case. And the chapter that we read tonight, it's very clear on this point as well. Because it talks about the punishment that can be expected for leading others to sin.

[ 10 : 24 ] And that was a horrible, a horrible punishment. It also talks about individuals who are unrepentant within the church. And ultimately what happens is that if they don't repent, they're kicked out of the church.

They're excluded. Both as punishment for them, but to protect the church itself. So what I'm saying tonight about having a forgiving spirit doesn't mean to say that the unrepentant sinner has nothing to worry about.

Because that's not what the Bible says. But we are to be forgiving. We are to have a forgiving spirit. And the first question is why should we have one?

And the first reason this passage gives is because God, if you're a believer tonight, that he has forgiven you. And Jesus, in explaining this, uses a parable that starts at verse 23.

And the king in this parable, he had a debt. And it says it's 10,000 talents. Now, those of you who like to read lots of commentaries will find that if you read how much 10,000 talents was, that they spend a lot of time telling you how much it was.

[ 11 : 34 ] But none of them seem to agree how much it actually was. But the point was, it was a massive amount. It was a debt so big that the servant could never, ever pay this back.

It was so big that if he had 10 lifetimes to pay it back, he still couldn't pay it back. But it was also a debt that the servant did not dispute. That was owed.

And it was also a debt that the servant accepted that he could never pay. So the king decreed a punishment on him here. That both him and his family and all his possessions would be sold.

And him and his family would go into slavery. And the servant here, he begged forgiveness. He was on his knees. He was pleading for more time. And the king was so moved that he wrote off the servant's whole debt, this massive amount, so big that it's hard to even comprehend.

And this is like our sin and the debt that we have to God. Our sin is so bad. Our lives are so corrupted by sin that we owe a debt that we cannot meet and we can never pay.

[ 12 : 47 ] Even the most holy and righteous people that we know can never come close. Our sinfulness means that the very best of us is really bad.

And there's an insurmountable gap between our badness and God's goodness that we can never meet. And in those circumstances, all we can do is do what the servant did, that we can plead for mercy.

And we can beg for forgiveness. And we know because we have a loving God that if we do this genuinely, that he will forgive us. It's an amazing thing.

It's beyond comprehension that this massive debt that we owe to God because of our sinfulness can ever be written off in this way. But because of our loving Savior, it can and it is.

So the first reason that we should have this forgiving spirit is because we have been forgiven by God. And that is his example for us in our lives.

[ 13 : 51 ] The second reason why we should forgive others, because whatever debt of wrong that anyone has ever done to us, it is much smaller than any debt owed to God in this respect.

And to understand this, we have to go back to the parable because the servant who was forgiven the massive debt to God, who was given the massive debt to the king, was also owed money by another servant.

And again, the commentators disagree as to how much this was, but it was a material amount. But one today that we would cover by a sort of an unsecured loan that may take two or three years to pay back.

It's off that ilk. And the servant who owed this debt did exactly the same as the first servant did to the king. He recognized the debt. He asked for time.

He begged for a bit of mercy. But the first servant wouldn't give him time and had him thrown in prison. And the thing that I want you to notice here is that however badly, and what this parable is trying to say, that however badly you have been wronged, no matter how frequently it has happened, no matter what that issue is, the wrong that has been done to you is much less than the wrong that you have done to God.

[ 15 : 19 ] And therefore, if God has forgiven you a much greater debt, then it is totally wrong. It is irrational not to forgive a lesser wrong that is done to us from a repentant sinner.

It's a horrible thing. It's a cruel thing. It doesn't make sense. It's irrational. And Jesus tells us it is wrong. And he tells us our heart is wrong as well.

He loved us. He loved us so much that he forgave us our debt. And that forgiveness was indiscriminate. It was total. It was undeserved in every way.

And it was done out of a perfect and complete love for us. So if we truly believe we're part of God's family now, and we should have that same attitude to others, that we believe that we forgive that wrong done to us, because it's nowhere near the size and nature of what our heavenly Father has forgiven us.

So that's the first two reasons. We forgive because God has forgiven us. And we forgive because however bad it is, it's not as bad as what we've done to God.

[ 16 : 38 ] And I think as well what this parable points out is the terrible consequences of a failure to give. Because the king in the parable heard what the servant did to the other servant.

He increased the punishment. So not only did he sell them into slavery and sell all his things, but he was handed over to the jailer.

And what that implies was that he was tortured until the debt was repaid. And remember what that, remember he was in a situation where he could never repay this debt. So he was going to be tortured for the rest of his days because of what he had done.

And this, Jesus is strong here. This punishment was perfectly righteous when it was reinstated. And the increased punishment was perfectly righteous as well.

Because this man signifies somebody who's not a true believer at all. Because there's no such thing as a Christian who does not forgive. If you're like that, if you're somebody who can't forgive, well then your greatest need is for forgiveness yourself.

[ 17 : 49 ] You need to get down on your knees and you need to plead for forgiveness for the unpayable debt that you have with God. Because if you don't, the punishment that is referred to here is what you can expect for your failures.

It's strong. It's difficult language. But this is what Jesus is saying and warning. But I think the next point is it's very difficult to forgive.

We find it so hard at times. It's so hard to be continually wronged. It's so hard to be continually hurt. It's just so hard to go through that cycle of feeling the hurt.

Of approaching the individual. Dealing with that. Rebuilding trust. And then for it all to come down again. And to go through that. Sometimes the wrongs are just so big it feels impossible to do it.

And why is that? Well, because of the irrationality of your sin. And the blindness of your sin as well. And particularly the sin of pride. And if you go right back to the start of chapter 18.

[ 19 : 00 ] And look at the first couple of, and look at the first verse. At that time, the disciples came to Jesus saying, Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven? And it was pride.

That's where this all started out. The disciples were arguing about how great they are. And we don't know. But maybe as with all group of people, there's some people that rise to levels of leadership and control and influence.

Maybe there was an unofficial hierarchy developing within the group. There's a suggestion if you look back. Maybe that there's some jealousy of Peter. Because he had been getting a lot of attention before this.

He, after all, was the one who had walked in water. He was the one who had been told that he would be the rock in which God would build his church. But these men, they were like you and me.

They were nothing special. They were working people. They were fishermen. They were collectors. They were tax collectors. They were not the elite. And the Bible says very little about a few of them.

[ 20 : 08 ] And maybe some of them didn't have that much talent at all. And they weren't the superstars of the day. And here they were arguing about who would be the greatest in heaven.

And what they were doing was they were thinking of themselves and not others. They were thinking me first, not anybody else. And in the context of what I'm talking about tonight, because they were putting themselves first.

What mattered to them was the wrongs that were done to them. What mattered to them was their value and not the value of the others who had done them wrong.

What mattered to them was their hurt and not the consequences of the other person's sin on their lives. What mattered to them was not the sin that they had done to others.

But I've said the sin that was done to them. So it was their pride that made it hard to forgive because they were thinking of themselves first. And Jesus says no.

[ 21 : 11 ] He stops them in their tracks. He tells them to be like children here. And I find this very difficult to explain. But we have to be careful here because what Jesus is saying, he didn't mean somebody who was young, who was immature, who was maybe lacking, who was maybe had the features of a young child in terms of lacking attention and lacking knowledge.

What he meant was that they had to be humble. And how he did this was he called a child to him. Look at the interaction with Jesus and the child. He called the child to him.

And what happened is the child came to him without question or without condition. And children in this society were seen as the lowest of the low.

They were seen to be, they were to be seen and not heard in a modern way. So when this child was told to come, they came without question.

When a child was told to listen, they listened without question. When a child was told to obey, they obeyed without question. And that is the concept that Jesus was saying. And one of the commentators says, and I don't particularly like this, he says, be little.

[ 22 : 21 ] I think it's much better to say, be humble here. Realize who you are. And don't put yourself first. But realize who you are.

Because if you are humble and you have that right heart and that right relationship with God, we will be able to do all the things that this chapter says that we should do.

We should guard others. We should look out for others. We should go out and find others who have fallen away or gone down a wrong path. And for the purpose of today, we will be more able to forgive.

And why? Because we're putting their restoration above our heart. Another reason is, like Jesus, what will matter more is the pleasure of somebody turned back to God and put things right than the pleasure of justifying the wrong that has been done to you.

And with this humbleness, we will be exhibiting all the characteristics of being in the family of God. And finally, I did talk earlier about the consequences.

[ 23 : 36 ] But what I want to talk about now is the benefits of forgiveness. Because a forgiving spirit, it delivers so much, not just for the person who has done you wrong, but it also delivers so much benefits to you as well.

It will be delivering hope. And we're in a world that badly needs it. It's a terrible thing to be in a position where you've done something wrong and know that there's never any hope of rehabilitation.

It creates a hopelessness. It takes away the good reasons for changing your behavior. And it's a destructive and self-perpetuating vicious cycle.

So we need to forgive to bring hope into this world that has so little. We need to forgive because it brings, it creates a unity and love. Whereas before, there's enmity and conflict.

Be it a broken marriage or broken relationships in the family or broken relationships between nation states. Or you hear my accent, but broken relationship between different communities in the areas in which you live.

[ 24 : 53 ] And in the context of the church, a forgiving spirit makes it more powerful and more effective than one which is broken and disrupted internally.

And finally, I think as well, forgiveness brings freedom. Not just to the person who is in the wrong, but also to the forgiver as well.

Now, those of you who haven't read *The Hiding Place* by Corrie Tenenboom, you should. It's essential reading. And there's a situation in that book where she's speaking at a meeting after the war in Germany.

And she meets a man who was one of her Nazi prison camp guards who treated her and her sister horribly. And he came to shake her hand.

And she felt terrible because she couldn't gather the strength to forgive that man. And she says in her book, Jesus Christ has died for this man.

[ 26 : 00 ] Was I going to ask for more? Lord Jesus, I prayed, forgive me and help me to forgive him. Jesus, I cannot forgive him. Give me your forgiveness.

And she prayed that prayer. And Jesus did give her the strength to forgive. And later on, she went to say, To forgive is to set a prisoner free and to discover the prisoner was you.

So forgiveness is a command. It's the way a Christian should be. It brings hope in a difficult world where there isn't any. It gives a way out in a difficult world where there isn't any.

And it brings freedom for the wrongdoer from the sin that they have done to you. But also from the bitterness that can come in your own life if you don't.

So forgiveness, it's not a characteristic of the weak. As it's so often portrayed today. As Christians, we quite often like to be champions of law and order.

[ 27 : 09 ] We quite often like to propose the strictest and hardest punishments. And that's not what this chapter is saying. But it's saying that if somebody of a genuine repentant, well then we are people who will forgive.

And a forgiving spirit is a characteristic of somebody who's free. It's somebody who's strong. It's somebody who cares for people.

It's somebody who cares for the society in which we live. It's somebody who's genuinely concerned that wrongs will be put right. And it's somebody who wants to offer a way out to the hopelessness that we see all around us.

Because what seems to be happening is more and more that people think that it's good to be unforgiving. And it's a tough and strong thing to do.

And it's the right way to go. But going back to what I said right at the start, you can be cynical about what West Ham did. You can argue maybe that if the player had been impacted, it would have been one of their less gifted, problematic players that they may not have taken this choice.

[ 28 : 23 ] But West Ham got this right. Football club gets the concept of forgiveness more right than what the church has done on many occasions. Because when faced with an unforgiving world, what should we be?

We should be. Churches should be known as the place where people get a second chance and a third chance and a fourth chance and a fifth chance. We should be known as people who rejoice when people turn away from their error and from their wrong and try and put things right.

And the thing that stands aside is that we are happy when people repent, not when they're put away for a hundred years or whatever it happens to be.

And why are we like this? Because God has done this for us. And he demands that we do it for other people in the same position.

Amen. Amen.