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restoring relationships

Part 1 of a four-part series by **Rob Paech** and **David Schmidt**

Wouldn't it be great if there were a magic pill that would help us get over our long-held resentments and bitter grudges? Wouldn't it be great if there were an easy way to restore relationships and experience genuine reconciliation?

The fact is, though, reconciliation is hard work. It's hard work because it costs us something: humility, patience, generosity. Deep inside ourselves we resonate with the feelings of Zsa Zsa Gabor when she declares in *First Wives Club*, 'Don't get mad, don't get even. Get everything!'

That's the way of the world. The reality is, though, that when relationships are strained, damaged or broken, everyone involved

loses. Something inside us gets broken. That's why Jesus made such a big thing about living in forgiveness. It was so important that he said, 'For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you, but if you do not forgive others, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses' (Matt 6:14,15).

That's a big 'but!' There's a reason for it, though. Forgiveness lies at the heart of living free. Forgiveness is central to living in healthy communities. That's why Paul declares, 'Let no evil talk come out of your mouths, but only what is useful for building up as there is need, so that your words may give grace to those who hear. And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, with which you

were marked with a seal for the day of redemption. Put away from you all bitterness and wrath and anger and wrangling and slander, together with all malice, and be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ has forgiven you (Eph 4:29-32).

In *The Peacemaker*, Peacemaker Ministries president Ken Sande makes the following observation: 'Christians are the most forgiven people in the world. Therefore we should be the most forgiving people in the world.' Then why aren't we? Why do we often find it so hard to forgive? And why do we find it so hard to live in forgiveness? In short, it's because that's what our culture teaches us: don't forgive.

Forgiveness is not a feeling

Feelings are those interconnections that link with our psyche, with who we are. When our feelings are hurt, something inside us breaks. It seems to work like this: Aunt Jenny criticises my cat, and I feel hurt. I place that hurt in my heart and carry it around like a piece of baggage. Every time I see Aunt Jenny I add a little more baggage to my load, and over time it gets heavier and heavier. Even though I know it is weighing me down and preventing me from living life to the full, I choose not to let it go.

Forgiving is not forgetting

Forgiving someone is not the same as forgetting what the person did. You can't force yourself to forget something. Forgetting is a passive process; memories fade with both time and distraction, not by an act of the will.

The Bible does not say 'forgive and forget'. The closest it gets to saying that is a promise that God makes. He says that he chooses not to remember our sins: 'I am he who blots out your transgressions for my own sake, and I will not remember your sins' (Isa 43:25).

Forgiveness is not the same as forgetting and it's not the same as excusing. To excuse something is to say it doesn't matter. But your hurt does matter! So when you forgive someone what you are really saying is, 'You hurt me and what you did was wrong, but I will not hold it against you. I will not try to get back at you and I will not hate you for it.'

Forgiveness is a decision

Forgiveness involves a series of actions where we choose not to put any more stuff into the bag, and then to let the bag go. In *The Hiding Place*, Corrie ten Boon writes, 'Forgiveness is an act

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of the will, and the will can function regardless of the temperature of the heart'.

God's forgiveness did not wait for our repentance. He initiated and invited repentance by first offering forgiveness.

Forgiveness is costly

When we choose to forgive, when we choose no longer to bring up the past, it costs us something. But there is an irony in that: what it costs is far less than the life it gives back to us.

We can only forgive because of what Jesus has already done. Until we see that our value and worth is bound up in who Jesus declares us to be, in what Jesus himself has done for us, we can never truly live as forgiven people.

That is why Jesus' death on the cross is so central to our living lives of forgiveness. It is only because of what Christ has done, it is only as that becomes alive and real for us, it is only as we see our need for God's grace that we are empowered by his Holy Spirit to

live lives of abundant forgiveness.

Is there someone whom you need to forgive? Is there someone whom you haven't talked to in a long time because of what they did to you? Is there someone whom you refuse to trust because of what they did? Is there someone whom you avoid like the plague, you won't acknowledge, or you feel like snarling at? Is there someone from whom you are waiting for a confession before you offer forgiveness?

'As God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience. Bear with one another and, if anyone has a complaint against another, forgive each other; just as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive' (Col 3:12,13). ■

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