



Growth Sheet

Life in Christ and Christian Virtues

Colossians 3:12-14

How Do I Grow as a Christian?

People who have believed in Christ have this incredible privilege: they have been “raised with Christ” (Colossians 3:1). In other words, the death-smashing, resurrection power of Christ becomes *theirs*. But this leaves us with some vexing questions: What do I do about my old sin habits? How do I begin showing that the life of Christ is at work in me, changing my attitudes, behavior, and relationships? In short, *how do I grow as a Christian?*

Colossians 3 deals with this very topic—Christian growth. In the first four verses, the Apostle Paul explains the *possibility* of Christian growth. It is *possible* because we have, by faith, been “raised with Christ” (3:1). In the rest of the chapter and into chapter 4, he explains the *practice* of Christian growth. This practice has two parts: putting *off* vices associated with our old way of living (3:5-11), and putting *on* virtues associated with the life of Christ (3:12-14).

Putting these vices and virtues side by side, helps us see how starkly they contrast. The vices, on the one hand, *distort* and *disrupt* (through sexual immorality, slander, anger, deceit, etc.). The virtues, on the other hand, *bring beauty and harmony* (through kindness, forgiveness, love, etc.). This aligns with what Paul taught earlier about Jesus. He is the Creator and Sustainer of what *is* (Colossians 1:15-17); but he also becomes the Creator and Sustainer of what *should be*—reconciling all things to himself (Colossians 1:18-20). Jesus brings beauty and harmony to what has been distorted and disrupted, and those who have his life should do the same.

Our relationship with Jesus informs our relationships with others.

This study will focus on Colossians 3:12-14: the virtues of Christian growth as they affect our relationships with others. The central idea is that *our relationship with Jesus informs our relationships with others*. You’ll notice a pattern within the list of virtues. **(1)** The first four virtues inform how we treat others (compassionate hearts, kindness, humility, and meekness). **(2)** The next three virtues (patience, forbearance, and forgiveness) inform how we respond when others mistreat us. **(3)** The final virtue (love) crowns all the other virtues. It informs both how we treat others, and how to respond when others mistreat us.

Our relationship with Jesus informs . . .

1. How we treat others

A person with a **(a) compassionate heart** feels deeply when they see the needs of others. Jesus perfectly exemplified this virtue (Matthew 9:36; 15:32; Luke 7:13). A person who is **(b) kind** is not just nice; rather, they turn these feelings of compassion into action. They do something positively useful for the person in need. God demonstrates this quality by doing good for people that leads

them to repentance (see Romans 2:4). A **(c) humble** person is not trying to prove themselves to be superior to others. Instead of measuring their worth by comparing themselves with others, they accept their worth in their relationship with God (see 1 Peter 5:6). A person can be **(d) meek** only if they are humble. Humbly confident in their relationship with God, and not trying to prove anything, they are free to treat others with courtesy and gentleness.

2. How we respond when others mistreat us

These virtues would be easier if everyone had them. But since we often fail to display these virtues, another set of virtues is necessary when we mistreat or are mistreated. We need **(a) patience** when someone acts in such a way that wearies or exasperates us. We need to **(b) Bear with one another** (graciously put up with) in order to keep small grievances from blowing up into major confrontations. The rule implied in the sequence of virtues here is this: *forbear if you can; and if you can't, forgive*. The person who is wronged must have the humility and courage to speak with the person who offended them. **(c) Forgiveness** is the hardest of all. The person who forgives must promise never to hold that offense against the person. It does not mean that the person who was hurt automatically returns privileges (such as trust) to the person who did the wrong. But forgiveness *does* mean that the one who forgives rejects the impulse to harbor hatred and seek revenge.

3. How we act toward others at all times

The crowning virtue is *love*. It “binds everything together in perfect harmony” (3:14). If the other virtues are bricks, love would be the mortar holding them all together, making them strong and useful. Love integrates all Christian virtues into a coherent whole. This love means love for God and others, for love for others is impossible unless one truly loves God.

But how is it possible for us to have these virtues? They all run contrary to our self-centered nature! The answer is woven throughout the list of virtues. We can treat others with kindness, etc. because we have a relationship with Christ: we are “God’s chosen ones, holy and beloved” (3:12). We can forgive “as the Lord has forgiven” us (3:13). We can love because we have been loved.

Discussion and Application

1. Consider three social institutions—a family, a church, and a city—and imagine what they would be like if they displayed the sort of virtues listed here. What would stay the same? What would be different?
2. What features of our human nature makes these virtues so difficult for us?
3. Notice that these virtues are not given as bare commands. (“Be like this!”) Instead, they are grounded in *who we are* as Christians. To help us understand the importance of this, consider what it would be like to try to live out these virtues *without* any reference to who we are in Christ. (Consider reading the passage, leaving out the following words: “as God’s chosen ones, holy and beloved . . . as the Lord has forgiven you” (3:12, 13).
4. How can you discern the difference between an offense you may *forbear* and an offense you must *forgive*?
5. What is true about Jesus—who he is and what he has done—that can motivate and enable these virtues in our lives? What are some practical ways we can remember to focus on him so that we *can* live out these virtues?