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# *Better Relationships,* Better Life

Encouragement & Hope for Improving  
EVERY Relationship

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## 5. EMBRACE FIVE VIRTUES

*Compassion, Kindness, Humility,  
Gentleness, and Patience*

*Therefore, as God's chosen people, holy and dearly loved,  
clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness,  
humility, gentleness and patience.*

COLOSSIANS 3:12 NIV

*I*n his letter to the Colossians, the apostle Paul pours out his love and hopes for them. He expresses his desire for them to keep hold of the truth of the Gospel and the eternal hope they have in Christ. He also draws out the implications of those truths—namely, that through Jesus they can learn to love each other. And while he encourages them to focus on the eternal, he doesn't neglect the practical.

In fact, Colossians 3 contains a wealth of relationship-building advice. Paul advises that we put off anger, dishonesty, and other relationship destroyers. Then he tells us to put on five virtues: compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience.

### **COMPASSION: A PROMPT TO ACT**

Our first item of clothing is compassion. When we feel compassion for someone, we are deeply moved by their misfortune, moved to the point of helping in some way.

Although compassion is related to empathy and altruism,

they are not synonymous. We can empathize with someone's troubles yet not be moved to help them. Alternately, we may help without really feeling their suffering. True compassion combines both experiencing the emotions of "walking in someone's shoes" and responding to those emotions with caring assistance. In the context of our Christian life, we often express compassion to strangers through giving donations that feed the hungry, provide medicine for the sick, build schools for poor children, and send Bibles to persecuted believers.

Compassion also has a place in our interactions with spouses, friends, family, neighbors, and coworkers. In the course of any given day, you will encounter at least one person who is feeling stressed, anxious, overwhelmed, worried, depressed, grieved, troubled, or lonely. How you respond to them will have a big impact on your relationship.

God recently pointed out to me the importance of tuning in to the needs of others and being alert to opportunities to put on compassion. It was the end of a long day of work, school, and sports practice when we pulled up to the house. I heard a faint voice calling, "Hello, Pam," as I gathered my things from the car and reminded my four kids to take all of their books, lunch boxes, sports equipment, and jackets as well. I didn't have to turn around to know that it was Clara, an elderly neighbor, greeting us. I'm ashamed to say that my immediate impulse was to respond with a quick "Hi!" and then keep moving into the house. After all, I still had to make dinner, supervise homework and baths, walk

the dogs, and if we wanted to wear clothes the next day, get some laundry done.

And then the image of Clara's day flashed before my eyes. She lives alone—her husband has passed away and her kids have moved to other towns. Nearly every week she attends the funeral of a family member or friend, noting sadly that she's one of the few left this side of heaven. Beyond caring for her animals and reading the paper, Clara's days are pretty empty.

Tears came to my eyes as I turned around and said, "Clara, would you like to come in and have a cup of tea?" As I chopped vegetables and boiled pasta, Clara sipped her Earl Grey and talked to me about her day, her kids, her past. Around us homework, chores, and baths got done. I waved good-bye to her a little while later, not regretting at all that the dirty clothes were still in the hamper, because we had made one woman's day just a little brighter and less lonely.

This is compassion in action. It's Jesus seeing the crowds confused and helpless and responding by sending His disciples to point them to the Shepherd (Matthew 9:36–37). It's feeling someone's need and responding with the love of Christ. Through compassion we build connection.

### **KINDNESS: AN ATTITUDE OF KINSHIP**

In Colossians 3:12 we also read that we should clothe ourselves with compassion's close relative, kindness. The nineteenth-century preacher G. S. Bowes noted that the word *kindness* is derived from *kinned* and thus reflects a

disposition toward others as if they are of the same kin, or family.<sup>1</sup> Galatians 5:22 lists kindness as one of the fruit of the Spirit that God nurtures in us as we grow in our faith.

As an attitude, kindness recognizes the people around us as God's precious creations, with whom we share the same desires, aspirations, strengths, needs, and imperfections. The heart makes all the difference in whether an act will build a relationship. In other words, if we perform a "kind act" grudgingly, trust and respect in the relationship will not grow.

Researchers at the University of Maryland demonstrated the power of good intentions in a series of clever experiments.<sup>2</sup> In the first study, participants sat in a lounge chair equipped with a massage feature. Half of the group was told that the massage was turned on by another person; the other half was told that it was computer activated. When asked to rate how much they enjoyed the massage, those who thought that a person had flipped the switch consistently reported more pleasure from the massage.

Participants in the second experiment all received a lovely box of Valentine's chocolates. For some it came with a note that said "I picked this just for you. Hope it makes you happy." The other's note read, "Whatever. I don't care. I just picked it randomly." Guess whose chocolate tasted better? Yes, those who read the kind note experienced more pleasure *and* rated the candy as more delicious.

The third study raised the question of whether kind intentions can help minimize painful experiences. All participants received a mild electric shock. One group was told

that another person gave them the shock accidentally. A second group heard that it was maliciously done, and the third was told that someone shocked them “benevolently” to help them win money. This latter group, the one that received a shock with good intentions, rated the pain much less than those in the other two groups.

When we think about building blocks for better relationships, kindness has enormous power as it increases pleasure and decreases pain. When we recognize that the other person is our kin—whether it’s our spouse, best friend, child’s teacher, or the barista at our favorite coffee shop—we are more likely to give her intentions the benefit of the doubt. Kindness helps us overlook the little misunderstandings or mishaps in life instead of letting them blow up into full-fledged disagreements.

Perhaps more importantly, we can see that our kindness can have a huge impact on the happiness of others. When we make the effort to do and say things that say, “You are special to me,” we build them up and make our relationship stronger.

The mind-blowing part is that kindness even helps soothe painful experiences.<sup>3</sup> As much as we want to avoid it, there are times when difficult choices have to be made and both parties in the relationship may not agree. Sometimes you have to say no to something your child really wants but you know is not in his best interest. Sometimes you have to move for a better career opportunity, though it means living farther away from family. Sharing your intentions, that

you do not mean to cause pain, can make a huge difference in your relationship.

To build better relationships, cultivate a kind heart toward others. Remind yourself that everyone you meet is in fact your kin. If you are feeling frustrated with someone, consider that she may have benevolent intentions. Actively seek ways to regularly express kindness through your words and your actions, whether small or big. Most of all, pray for others, asking your heavenly Father to help you see others through His eyes.

### **HUMILITY: A FOCUS ON OTHERS**

Have you ever met a famous person, someone you greatly admire? I've personally never had that pleasure. However, several dear friends have met some of their heroes over the years. When they are describing these incidents, the inevitable question is "What was he (or she) like?"

More often than not, "humble" appears as part of the answer. That is, the person reporting the encounter is joyfully surprised to discover that, in addition to his other remarkable talents and qualities, her hero exhibits true humility. Despite all of his noteworthy accomplishments and success, he recognizes his humanness and the individual standing before him.

If we're to put on humility, it's critical to understand what exactly it is. Humility does not mean low self-esteem. That is, we are not to think of ourselves as unworthy, incapable, or incompetent. In fact, scripture reminds us many times that we



are children of the King. Rather, humility refers to a lack of pride or arrogance and a tendency to focus on others instead of ourselves. For Christians, it also includes recognizing our human limitations and faults yet understanding who we are in Christ.

Humility builds stronger relationships by how it fuels our actions. By taking the spotlight off of us and shining it on others, humility encourages us to be more generous and helpful.

A truly humble person, secure in her value as a child of God, doesn't feel like she has to win every argument or right every wrong against her. She can deal with relationship issues directly, confidently, and gently, focusing on the heart of the matter, rather than needing to defend her pride. She is quick to forgive, recognizing that she too has made mistakes, and is also quick to ask for forgiveness. She is open to learning from others, realizing that she doesn't have "all of the answers."

So how then do we clothe ourselves in this wonderful trait? We can start by studying the life of Jesus. Philippians 2:5–8 tells us, "Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross."

To strengthen our ability to relate to others with humility,

we must consciously choose to move our focus from ourselves to others, turning away from the temptation of pride and self-absorption and looking for ways to serve each other.

### **GENTLENESS: A RESPONSE THAT IS MILD**

Gentleness stands out among the five virtues in Colossians 3:12 as one that doesn't get much attention these days. We tend to gravitate toward those who respond to problems, conflict, or injustice in a decisive and sure way—more the superhero who uses his strength and skill to physically defeat the evil villain and less Jesus refusing to stone the woman caught in adultery (John 8:1–11).

Yet gentleness is one of the fruit of the spirit and a key to better relationships. Proverbs 15:1 says “A soft answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger.” A spirit that responds to others in a calm and mild way defuses difficult situations, much like a fan keeps a motor from overheating.

Gentleness creates room for a wise and thoughtful response to conflict. James writes, “But the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, open to reason, full of mercy and good fruits, impartial and sincere” (James 3:17). We find an example of this in the classic movie *It's a Wonderful Life*. The main character, George Bailey, is heading out of town on his honeymoon when he sees a crowd rushing toward the family business, The Bailey Building and Loan. Going in to investigate, he calmly suggests the people have a seat and reassures them that he will be back. His uncle shares that the bank has called in their loan and

people are rushing the bank to withdraw all of their cash. You can see the stress on George's face as he realizes the gravity of the situation. However, he doesn't join the general panic. Rather, he calmly explains to the crowd the nature of a building and loan, reminding them of a longer term perspective. His new bride hands him the money they've saved for their honeymoon, cash that the crowd can share until the bank reopens. George's gentleness not only saves the family business but also helps a good portion of the town survive the stock market crash. Perhaps more importantly, it builds his relationships with the townspeople.

In *God Whispers Your Name*, Max Lucado writes about how he chooses each day: "I choose gentleness. . . . Nothing is won by force. I choose to be gentle. If I raise my voice, may it be only in praise. If I clench my fist, may it be only in prayer. If I make a demand, may it be only of myself."<sup>4</sup> Indeed, force and harshness may bring short-term gains, but ultimately they destroy relationships. Gentleness, however, earns respect and builds trust. If others know you have clothed yourself with gentleness, they are freer to relate to you honestly and openly. They feel safe in trusting you, strengthening this pillar of your relationship.

### **PATIENCE: A RESISTANCE TO ANNOYANCE**

And now we are ready to complete our better relationships wardrobe with the virtue of patience. This may be the hardest one to put on in our fast-paced, need-it-now culture. We have become used to microwaved meals, instant downloads,

same-day shipping, and immediate Google answers. When we want (or need) something, we want it now. In fact, many of us are willing to pay more for instant gratification.

Yet what's good for Amazon doesn't build better relationships with family and friends. Insisting that you need to have things your way and to have them immediately creates friction. This impatience makes the relationship one-sided rather than mutual, leaving your spouse or friend feeling unloved, ignored, and resentful.

Rather, we must intentionally seek to clothe ourselves in patience, waiting without complaint. Jesus modeled this virtue in His interactions with His disciples. They often missed the point of His teachings or were too focused on mundane concerns. Yet He continued to work with them, to teach them, and to pray for them. Similarly, we choose patience when we refuse to criticize our coworker for making the same mistake a second time. We choose patience when we put off reading that last chapter of our great mystery because our son really wants to show us how good he is getting at free throws.

Perhaps you're thinking that patience is just something you are born with (or without) and you can't really change it. While we all vary in our innate levels of tolerance, we can learn to be more patient. Moreover, we can arrange our schedules and lives so that delays and minor setbacks have less of an impact. Here are five tips for growing in patience:

1. *Leave room in your schedule for the unexpected.* Stress reduces our capacity to tolerate delays or wait without

complaint. A tightly packed personal and family schedule creates tension and collapses like dominoes when, inevitably, something unexpected happens. On the other hand, a more open schedule leaves room for flexibility and a calm response to life's little mishaps.

2. *Leave room in your budget for the unexpected.* Financial stress is a major cause of marital conflict. When money worries are high, our fuses tend to be shorter. Giving yourself financial breathing room by minimizing debt and building savings creates a calmer atmosphere more conducive to patience.
3. *Make “patient” your resting state.* Have you ever walked into a coworker's office to ask her a question and she has given you that look? You know, the “I've had all I can take today, so you'd better not be bringing me a problem or more work” look? That's the opposite of having a patient resting state. Train yourself to approach each interaction with a fresh outlook instead of anticipating that this will be another test of your patience.
4. *When you feel impatience rising, take a step back. Look for a way to distract your attention.* Although it may feel like an impatient outburst comes out of nowhere, often there are signs that it's about to happen. I know for me the sure sign is when I start counting what has gone wrong that day or that week. If I start ticking off on my fingers how the dog chewed my favorite shoes on Monday, my assistant gave me the wrong

presentation for that important meeting on Tuesday, and the tenant called to say the sump pump broke again on Wednesday, you can bet that the pity party is about to start and my poor husband gets invited as the guest of honor. Recently, though, I've learned to stop myself at that point. If I refocus my attention on counting what I'm grateful for instead, or look for humor in the situation, my patience is restored.

5. *Look for a way to make the relationship stronger even in the midst of conflict.* When you are faced with a situation that's trying your patience, divert your energy from complaining to looking for ways to strengthen the relationship. That may mean coming up with creative ways to prevent the trying situation from reoccurring. Or it could be finding the good side of whatever is annoying you. I learned this lesson from the Psychology Department secretary, Wendy, at the university where I studied. Late on a Friday afternoon, I was rushing to get a paper submitted to a journal. The paper was written, but the formatting was a disaster. In desperation I went to Wendy for help. I felt bad asking her when it was so late and she was anxious to leave for the weekend. She willingly helped me though, formatting the article beautifully. She also went above and beyond by taking the time to show me how to format it easily and correctly myself the next time. I'm sure it would have been quicker for her to just make the changes without the

personal tutorial. Her patience paved the way for a friendship that has grown over the years.

### **DRESSING FOR RELATIONSHIP SUCCESS**

Where do you start to build better relationships and a better life? An important starting point is with you. By daily seeking to clothe yourself in compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience, you become a better spouse, friend, worker, and church member. Others see the light and love of Christ in you. They learn that you are trustworthy, someone with whom they can share, grow, and travel life's roads.