

Colossians 3:5-11. True spirituality means becoming like Jesus Christ. It's every true Christian's goal, but growth is hard. God works change within a believer, but a believer also has a responsibility to grow. What must he or she do? In a sentence: Absorb truth to renew the mind and then replacing old patterns with new ones.

As Jesus walked with His disciples to Gethsemane He said, "I am the Vine; you are the branches. Whoever abides in Me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit" (Jn 15:5). Israel was once a land dotted with vineyards to such a degree that everyone understood a little about viticulture. Jesus' disciples understood the picture. They were to Him as branches are to a vine. Only by abiding in Him, drawing strength from the Vine would they bear fruit pleasing to the Father.

Christ provides all the nourishment His people need. A believer that's growing in Him will produce fruit characterized by love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control (Gal 5:22-23). Abiding in Him is the key to growth, but so is pruning. Jesus explained, "My Father is the Vinedresser... every branch that does bear fruit He prunes, that it may bear more fruit" (Jn 15:2). The healthiest, most fruitful branches produce luscious grapes but also dense foliage. Foliage siphons the vine's nourishment from the fruit. Left without care, greenery will quickly overwhelm a branch to the point it bears little fruit at all. It needs pruning from a well-trained eye to see and cut off all that isn't fruitful. God the Father, our Vinedresser, prunes His people for this purpose (Rom 5:3-5; Jas 1:2).

So, God prunes His people, and His people must abide. Abiding sounds like a passive word, perhaps like a stroll in the park on a bright, sunny day. That wasn't Jesus' idea. He warned His disciples that abiding with Him would mean the hatred of the world and attacks from the devil (Jn 16:1-3, 17:15). A believer's own flesh trips them up as well (Rom 13:14). Abiding in fellowship with Christ from day to day is quite hard.

If you've been a believer for any length of time, you know that loving your enemies isn't natural. Joy in the midst of trial isn't easy. Life is rarely peaceful, patience is hard, etc. Bearing fruit that pleases God doesn't just happen. Growth requires work on our part.

Spiritual guides around Colossae were confident they had been growing in God. They seemed to live on a higher plane. They spoke of visions and divine encounters, appeared devout, and looked so spiritual. Yet, none of this matters. Paul wanted the Colossians to

realize that apart from Christ no one is spiritual, and apart from the hard work of abiding in Christ there is no growth. The spirituality of the guides in Colossae produced a kind of fruit, spiritual arrogance (Col 2:18). Love, joy, peace, patience, and the rest of these holy virtues are the fruit of true vine, Jesus Christ.

The Colossian church may have felt lacking, but in Christ, they were connected to the Vine and being pruned by the Father. Good fruit was being produced among them. They needed only to keep abiding. Practically, then, how do you abide in Christ? Paul encouraged his brothers in Colossae to remember certain truths and to replace the patterns of their old life with new ones.

ABSORBING TRUTH

Dr. Will Kennicott is a practical man in rural America. He works hard, provides for his family, and cares for his patients. Sinclair Lewis says in *Main Street* that the good doctor considered himself a Christian. Sadly, "he believed in the Christian religion, and never thought about it; he believed in the church, and seldom went near it."

"THE IMPRESSION IS ABROAD THAT CHRISTIANITY IS A PRETTY SPEECH, A BIT OF IDEALISM, A LOVELY DREAM, A STANZA OF POETRY, A PIECE OF SUNDAY ACTING, SOMETHING THAT THE PREACHER CAN SAY BY ROTE, AND TO WHICH THE SAINTS CAN SAY, 'AMEN'—AND NOT A SOBER, SERIOUS, WEEKDAY LIFE"

— CHARLES JEFFERSON.

When the truths of Scripture are abstract, a Christian won't grow. God desires His Word to be "stored up" or "treasured" deep within our hearts (Psa 119:11).

Paul wrote several truths throughout the first two chapters of this letter. Colossians three opens with another fact: "You've been raised with Christ" (v. 3:1). Having been saved by grace, a believer is united to the Lord, placed in a permanent fellowship with Him and sealed forever by the Spirit (Eph 1:13). You're in Christ; Christ is in you. Since you have this new identity, learn to live with it. But it's hard to do that if you don't think much about these things. Therefore, "set your minds upon things that are above" (v. 3:2). Know truth, and let it consume you. Think much about Christ, reflect upon all He's done in your salvation, study His Word, and strive to know Him. Truth is a powerful thing but only when its absorbed into a life.

Growing in Christ

OFF WITH THE OLD

Colossians 3:5—“Put to death therefore what is earthly in you: sexual immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire, and covetousness, which is idolatry.”

Renewing the mind with truth begins to change a believer, but change also involves choices. The author of Hebrews compares the Christian life to a race. He exhorts us to “lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us” (Heb 12:1). Renew your mind and then lay aside the dead weight—“put to death” sinful patterns.

The Christian race involves training but also the right clothes. An Olympic runner who shows up wearing steel-toed boots and a welder’s helmet won’t get far. Sure, he has the discipline and training, but he isn’t dressed to run. As Christians, Scripture tells us to take off the wrong clothes and wear what’s appropriate for running. While filling our mind with Scripture, we need to depart with the sins we enjoy and replace them with words and deeds consistent with Christ.

Some of the old clothes that the Colossians wore included: “sexual immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire, covetousness” (v. 3:5). “Sexual immorality” refers to illicit sexual activity. Prostitution was widely accepted, for instance. “Impurity” is broader, encompassing all sexual sin. “Passion”, “desire”, and “covetousness” look within the heart and speak of wanting or yearning for the previous sins.

Rome had produced a sex-saturated empire, and there’s no need to share the grotesque details. Had you lived your whole life in such a place, you would’ve become accustomed to wearing some very dirty clothes. And suppose you, like some in Colossae, received Christ as Lord. Suddenly, there’s a massive change... and a struggle. You’ve become a new person in Christ and want to reject the sins of your former life, but it isn’t easy. You’d worn the dirty clothes for so long that sometimes it feels natural to try them back on for size.

When Paul urged these believers “put to death” their old ways, we’re reminded that none of this is easy and that sin is serious. Our culture, like Roman culture, says otherwise: *Don’t be such a Puritan! God’ll forgive you.* Paul reminded the Colossians that God sees, hates, and judges sin (v. 3:6). Being united to Christ doesn’t mean we’re free to dabble in things that offend God (Rom 6:15-16). No, we’ve been given so

great a salvation, one that should fill our hearts with love. In light of God’s mercy, it’s only reasonable to strive to present all we are as “living sacrifices” to Him (Rom 12:1-2).

ON WITH THE NEW

Colossians 3:9-10—“Do not lie to one another, seeing that you have put off the old self with its practices and have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge after the image of its creator.”

The battle for practical holiness, for walking with Christ, for abiding in Him, for running the race, or for growing spiritually—it all begins in the mind and involves choices: “Putting off the old... put on the new, which is being renewed in knowledge.” Renewing the mind, putting off sin, and putting on righteousness isn’t a three-step growth program. Rather, it’s a triad—three parts equally necessary.

A triad? Well, if you study Scripture while walking in sin, don’t expect much. If you put off sin without putting on new patterns, you’ll eventually go back to the old ones. Growing in Christ is hard. In fact, ten or twenty years after salvation, even a lifetime later, you may still struggle with old ways. What’s truly encouraging is that “He who began a good work in you will bring it to completion” (Phil 1:6).

We know some of the Colossians’ old ways (v. 3:5, 8), but what does the new look like? What kind of change does Christ accomplish in His people? We don’t have an exhaustive answer here, but we do find something radical.

Colossians 3:11—“Here there is not Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave, free; but Christ is all, and in all.”

Jews looked down upon Gentiles. Romans rejected foreigners. Free landowners scoffed at slaves. History is riddled with distinctions. As Mark Twain once said, “The very ink with which history is written is merely fluid prejudice.” Christ, however, destroys this. A slave could teach wealthy landowners in the church. An uncivilized barbarian should fellowship with a Roman. This happened in the early church.

The Colossians struggled with the prejudices of their day. It was part of their old clothes and showed a deficiency in their church. Why? Because if you understand what it means to be in Christ, none of this matters. We’re just beggars before the King who’s granted us mercy.