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**Put on then, as God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, compassionate hearts, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience, bearing with one another and, if one has a complaint against another, forgiving each other; as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. And above all these put on love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony. And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in one body. And be thankful.**

**(Colossians 3:12–15)**

## Introduction

It's that time of year again—the time for New Year's resolutions. It's the time when we commit to do better, but know we'll fail in our resolutions by the end of January. EllipticalReviews.com surveyed two thousand people last year to create a top-ten list of resolutions for the year. Here is the published result:

1. Diet or eat healthier (71%).
2. Exercise more (65%).
3. Lose weight (54%).
4. Save more and spend less (32%).
5. Learn a new skill or hobby (26%).
6. Quit smoking (21%).
7. Read more (17%).
8. Find another job (16%).
9. Drink less alcohol (15%).
10. Spend more time with family and friends (13%).

The list is predictable, but one of the striking aspects of it is that nine of the top ten resolutions are completely self-focused. This is not surprising, of course, only striking. Humans are, by nature, self-focused creatures, and when we think of the need to do better in certain areas, the first thing that comes to mind is often ourselves.

But what if our resolutions were others-centred? What if we committed, rather than only improving ourselves, to do better at New Testament one anothering? The product of one anothering obedience, of course, would be self-betterment, but what if our goal was not only self-improvement, but also the edification of others? What if our resolve was to love one another, pray for one another, forgive one another, or exhort one another? Or what if our resolution – and this is the focus of the study at hand – was to bear with one another?

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You are probably familiar with the famed poem that so often captures the way we really view church life:

To dwell with saints above,  
oh, that will be glory!  
But to live below,  
with the saints we know,  
well, that's another story!

That little ditty reveals the raw honesty that we often feel about church life, even if we won't admit it. We chuckle at the sentiment it expresses because we know that it flies in the face of what the New Testament envisions for local church life. The New Testament, on at least two occasions (Colossians 3:12–13; Ephesians 4:1–3), tells us to bear with one another – and to do so in love.

In the Colossians context, this command is placed right alongside the command to forgive one another, and while they are related, the two commands are not exactly the same. In this study, I want to focus primarily on the command to bear with one another, asking several important questions about what it means, how it is to be obeyed, whom we are commanded to bear with, why we are commanded to do so, and how we can practically bear with one another.

## The Revelation of the Command

We must begin by unpacking what the command actually is. The instruction that Paul gives is for Christians to be actively “bearing with one another” (v. 13). But what does it mean to bear with one another?

The Christian Standard Bible translates the phrase as “accepting one another,” while the New American Standard Bible opts for “showing tolerance for one another.” The Greek term literally means “to hold oneself against,” which, figuratively speaking, means to put up with. The Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament defines it as “to put up with something annoying or harmful.” Spiro Zodhiates suggests that it means “to have patience with, in regard to the weaknesses of anyone.”

These definitions are important, because they show that the term is not synonymous with “forgiving each other,” even though the terms are related. The distinction is important: Forgiving one another has to do with actual, sinful offences, while bearing with one another has to do with differences between Christians. The command is not to shrug off sin, but to lovingly tolerate differences of personality, perspective, conviction, and interpretation between you and your fellow church members.

Some time ago, I was listening to a podcast in which the American host was talking about a visit he made several years ago to London's White Hart Lane, which was the former home stadium of the English Premier League football team Tottenham Hotspur. This man had purchased tickets to the game between Spurs and Arsenal. An Arsenal fan himself, he showed up alone to the ground, kitted out in full Arsenal regalia, only to discover that he had accidentally purchased a ticket in the section of the stands populated by Spurs fans.

He was dismayed to find that security would not let him into the stadium until he agreed to wear a jacket covering his Arsenal shirt, remove any other Arsenal gear, and sign an agreement indemnifying security from any injuries he might sustain as an Arsenal fan in a sea of Spurs supporters. He recalls sitting in absolute terror as Arsenal took an early lead in the game, too timid to voice his support for his team for fear of repercussions at the hand of zealous Spurs fans. Apparently, Spurs and Arsenal fans don't exactly bear with one another.

This should never be the case in the church. In the church, Spurs fans and Arsenal fans can get along. (After all, Manchester United is the heavenly team!) Dog people can bear with cat people (because bird people are the weird ones anyway!). Apple users can tolerate Android users (because it's okay for Android users to be wrong!).

Christian husband, you can bear with your wife – even when she leaves the light on after exiting the room. Christian wife, you can tolerate your husband who hasn't yet discovered the precise location of the washing basket.

Calvinists can bear with Arminians, and credobaptists with paedobaptists. Church members can bear with one another, even if they prefer different translations of the English Bible.

Shy church members can put up with more outgoing members. Reserved church members can bear with more brash church members. Personality clashes in the church need not – *must not* – be deal breakers. A fellow church member may rub you up the wrong way, but Paul instructs us to bear with one another. If someone sins against you, you must confront them, and if they repent, you must forgive them. But if your differences are matters of personality, perspective, conviction, or interpretation, you can and must bear with one another.

This is what Paul was getting at when he instructed Euodia and Syntyche to “agree in the Lord” and when he asked his “true companion” to help them in this regard (Philippians 4:2–3).

## The Reason for the Command

Paul specifically states the reason that this command must be obeyed: because Christians are “God’s chosen ones, holy and beloved” (v. 12). The glorious truth that we are in Christ both empowers us and gives us reason to bear with one another.

Bearing with one another is an increasingly rare trait in the age in which we live. Spouses refuse to bear with one another and so the divorce rate skyrockets. Women are unwilling to bear with the discomfort and inconvenience of pregnancy and childbirth and so abortion rates increase. Church members will not bear with one another and so Christians hop from church to church rather than settling down and showing tolerance for one another.

There is a sense in which this refusal to accept one another is understandable among unbelievers, but those who are in Christ have both the reason and the power to obey this instruction. You must bear with others as a Christian because you are commanded to do so, and you can do so because Jesus Christ, who himself put up with others, sets the example and provides the power to do so.

You will remember the story of Jesus on the mount of transfiguration with Peter, James, and John. While those three were beholding this glorious vision of Moses and Elijah communing with Christ, their fellow-apostles were battling, unsuccessfully, with a demon at the foot of the mountain. When Jesus descended the mountain with his three friends, the father of the demonised boy ran to him, begging him to help his son. Jesus replied, “O faithless and twisted generation, how long am I to be with you? How long am I to bear with you?” And yet he did not throw up his hands in exasperation and remove himself from the situation. Instead, he said, “Bring him here to me.” Then “Jesus rebuked the demon, and it came out of him, and the boy was healed instantly” (Matthew 17:14–21). Jesus knew what it was like to be frustrated at dealing with the foibles of others, and if anyone had reason to not bear with others, it was he. But he patiently bore with those who very soon would not bear with him.

If you are a Christian, you have Christ’s righteousness credited to your account (2 Corinthians 5:21). That means that you *can* obey as he obeyed, for he already obeyed on your behalf. You have the power to do what Paul here instructs. And since you are one of God’s “chosen ones, holy and beloved,” you do not have the choice to disobey what he commands and what he empowers you to obey.

## The Recipients of the Command

Next, we want to consider who should be the recipients of our obedience to this command. Again, Paul is explicit: “bearing with one another” (v. 13). Contextually, “one another” means fellow members of the local church – *every* fellow member of the local church.

It can be easy to bear with those who are quite like you and whose personality and habits don’t irritate you. It is harder to do it with those who get up your nose. But if the person who gets up your nose is another Christian, and particularly if he or she is a member of your church, you are under obligation to bear with him or her.

We all have our friends in the church – and there’s nothing wrong with that. (Even Jesus had his close friends among the Twelve.) If we are honest, we probably all have our “enemies” too!

The story is told of a little girl who, after repeatedly wronging her siblings, was given an unusual punishment. Since her parents thought that she was behaving as if she wanted no part of the family, they set a small table for her by herself, just a few metres away from the family dinner table. At dinner that night, while the rest of the family gathered around the dinner table for the meal, she sat by herself at her own table. After the father had given thanks for the food, she was heard to pray, “And thank you, Lord, for preparing a table for me in the presence of my enemies!”

You may have chuckled at that precisely because you know the sentiment. You know what it is like to gather for worship with those whom you consider virtual enemies. That is an attitude that is inexcusable in the local church, where we are called to both bear with and forgive one another. If your “enemy” is also a Christian, and particularly a member of your church, you *must* bear with that person.

## The Realisation of the Command

But how do we go about obeying the command to bear with one another? This is an instruction that is not easy to obey, and deliberate effort must be exerted. Thankfully, Paul gives us some steps to ensure that we are able to bear with (and forgive) one another. To bear with one another requires “compassionate hearts, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience” (v. 12). These things, says Curtis Vaughan, “point to those qualities of life which, if present in the community of believers, will eliminate, or at least reduce, frictions.”

“Compassionate hearts” properly refers to pity and tenderness expressed toward the suffering and miseries of others. The word literally describes that deep-seated, in-the-pit-of-your-stomach feeling you have for someone or something really dear to you. It is not a detached, superficial emotion – a decision to show pity to someone because you’re told to

do so. It's the kind of compassion that Joseph felt in his gut toward Benjamin – compassion that overcame him so deeply that he needed to excuse himself so as not to be seen weeping (Genesis 43:30). It's the kind of compassion that he later felt for his older brothers, who had deeply wronged him (Genesis 45:1–15).

Such deep, heartfelt compassion is Godlike (Luke 6:36) and Christlike (Matthew 9:36).

“Kindness” speaks of a sweet disposition. The word is elsewhere contrasted with “severity” (Romans 11:22), which literally means “to cut off.” When we are tempted to cut off those who rub us the wrong way, the Scripture calls for us to treat them with kindness. The word describes a kind of mellowing – Jesus used it when he said that his yoke is “easy” (Matthew 11:30). Kind people are as concerned about the good of their neighbour as their own – as Barnabas was when he sold a piece of property he owned to give to his brothers and sisters in need (Acts 4:36–37).

Once again, kindness is characteristic of God (Romans 2:4; Titus 3:4) and ought, therefore, to be characteristic of God's people.

The word translated “humility” was originally a derogatory insult for low-mindedness and grovelling servility. In the first-century Greco-Roman world, it was not considered a virtue to put others first, but the New Testament transformed this perceived vice into a glorious and cherished virtue (Ephesians 4:2; Philippians 2:3ff; 1 Peter 5:5).

Once again, it should come as no surprise to see such humility in Jesus Christ, who was “gentle and lowly in heart” (Matthew 11:29).

“Meekness” or gentleness speaks of considerateness. The concept of restraint is included. MacArthur defines it as “willingness to suffer injury instead of inflicting it.” Those who are meek and gentle do not lash out at others who are different to them and who rub them the wrong way.

As before, we easily recognise this characteristic in Jesus Christ (Matthew 11:29), who did not fight back when he was arrested and tried, but meekly allowed himself to suffer injury rather than inflicting injury.

“Patience,” as it is used in the New Testament, generally refers to a reluctance to get back at others, to avenge wrongs done to oneself. Where we are tempted to lash out in revenge toward those who wrong us, this virtue calls us to patiently tolerate the wrongdoing and the wrongdoer. As Barclay says, “This is the spirit which never loses its patience with its fellow-men. Their foolishness and their unteachability never drive it to bitterness or wrath.”

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Patience is characteristic of God, without whose patience nobody would ever be saved (2 Peter 3:15). Paul understood his calling to be an example of Christ's perfect patience with sinners (1 Timothy 1:16).

Is it any surprise that these five virtues are exemplified in God and in the Lord Jesus Christ? Is it any surprise that we are called to follow Christ's example in this regard (1 Peter 2:21–23)? We readily enough accept, as a general statement, that we are called to lives of compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience, because that's what Christians do. But notice here that we are called to display those qualities in bearing with others. It is easy to display the character of Christ toward those we like; it is not as easy to display it to those who rub us the wrong way. But that is precisely what Paul instructs us to do here.

So how do you bear with those who somehow (but not sinfully) rub you the wrong way? You do so by showing the compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience of Christ. If you develop these qualities, by the power of the Spirit, you will be able to accept one another even though you don't naturally get along.

## The Results of the Command

Next, Paul offers some insight into the results of obedience to this command (and its sister command to forgive one another): "And above all these put on love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony. And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in one body. And be thankful" (vv. 14–15).

In a sense, "love" encapsulates all the above qualities: compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience. Where these qualities are embraced, love reigns. And when love reigns in a church, the church experiences "harmony," "the peace of Christ," and "thankful[ness]."

How do you know when a church is obeying the command to bear with one another? Is it a church where harmony, peace, and thankfulness are present? If it is, then that church is well on the road to bearing with and forgiving one another. If not, there may still be some way to go.

## The Resource for the Command

Perhaps this sounds impossible. Perhaps you will admit that you are more likely to respond like a Spurs fan to an Arsenal fan in the wrong seating area at White Hart Lane. How are we supposed to obey this command? Thankfully, all the resources we need to bear with others are found in Christ.

For to this you have been called, because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, so that you might follow in his steps. He committed no sin, neither was deceit found in his mouth. When he was reviled, he did not revile in return; when he suffered, he did not threaten, but continued entrusting himself to him who judges justly. He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, that we might die to sin and live to righteousness. By his wounds you have been healed. For you were straying like sheep, but have now returned to the Shepherd and Overseer of your souls.

(1 Peter 2:21–25)

If you are a believer, you have not only the example of Christ, but the power of Christ to follow his example. By human standards, it seems foolish to bear with those who irritate you, but gospel standards are very different from worldly standards. The same Jesus who bore with sinners, and who even forgave sinners when they sinned against him, promises his people the power to bear with and forgive others.

But that power is promised only to those who are Christ's. Are you? If you are not in Christ, the power you need to bear with one another is found in the gospel. If you will repent of your sins and embrace the Lord Jesus Christ as your Saviour, you can know of God's power to obey his commands.

But perhaps you are in Christ and you still find it difficult to bear with one another. How do you tap into the power that is available through Christ? Let's look at one final text as we draw to a close. For that suggestion, consider Jesus' words addressing the opposite attitude to bearing with one another:

Judge not, that you be not judged. For with the judgement you pronounce you will be judged, and with the measure you use it will be measured to you. Why do you see the speck that is in your brother's eye, but do not notice the log that is in your own eye? Or how can you say to your brother, "Let me take the speck out of your eye," when there is the log in your own eye? You hypocrite, first take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your brother's eye.

Do not give dogs what is holy, and do not throw your pearls before pigs, lest they trample them underfoot and turn to attack you.

Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives, and the one who seeks finds, and to the one who knocks it will be opened. Or which one of you, if his son asks him for bread, will give him a stone? Or if he asks for a fish, will give him a serpent? If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father who is in heaven give good things to those who ask him!

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So whatever you wish that others would do to you, do also to them, for this is the Law and the Prophets.

(Matthew 7:1–12)

We could spend an entire study on this text alone, but I just want to draw your attention to one practical element here that will help you in your quest to bear with others.

These twelve verses really form one thought in the Sermon on the Mount. Jesus begins by urging his followers not to judge people hypocritically, but to judge them in order to help them (vv. 1–6). He is not telling his hearers to categorically never judge, but to judge only when your goal is to help others. He underscores this in the closing verse of the paragraph: “So whatever you wish that others would do to you, do also to them, for this is the Law and the prophets” (v. 12). In other words, as you would like others to come alongside you and help you in your shortcomings, come alongside them and help them in their shortcomings.

But notice the section in the middle (vv. 7–11) about prayer. What do these verses have to do with coming alongside others and helping them in their shortcomings? Here is the connection: When we see shortcomings in others, we are tempted to judge them condescendingly and avoid them. It takes special power to be able to come alongside and help them. So where do we find that power? We find the power in prayer.

Notice that Jesus here does not say pray for the person you are helping (though it is not wrong to do that), but to pray for yourself. You need the gift of God’s power to not judge others, but to bear with them in a way that you can actually help them. So ask God for that gift! Pray to God and ask him to help you bear with others so that you can actually help them. There is tremendous power in prayer.

## Conclusion

So what will be your New Year’s resolution? Will you resolve to exercise more? Then do it! Will you resolve to eat healthier? Then do it! Will you resolve to spend more wisely? Then do it!

But as you find time to make resolutions, think also about others. Resolve to be more committed to one another. Resolve to bear with one another, as Christ bears with you. And resolve to pray to God for the power to do so, for his glory, and for the good of his people in the local church.

AMEN