Have you seen pictures of marathon runners? Concentration and determination seem to ooze from every pore. These people set their hearts and minds on one thing—finish this race. They focus on the next step, the next checkpoint, until the race is complete. They shed pounds, unnecessary clothing or anything else that might slow them down. Attach their official number and they are ready to run.

As Christians, we are to live like marathon runners. We are to take off anything that slows us down and set our hearts and minds on the finish line.

1. As a child, how did setting your heart on a certain toy or gift affect how you acted and what you thought about?

2. Read Col. 3:1-11. What do you think Paul means by *things above* and *earthly things* (Col. 3:1-2)?

3. How can we set our hearts and minds on things above rather than on earthly things?

In what current situation are you facing this choice?
4. What reasons and incentives does Paul give us for having this kind of orientation (Col. 3:1, 3-4)?

5. What do the things we are to "put to death" have in common (Col. 3:5)?

6. Why do you think greed is viewed as idolatry (Col. 3:5-7)?

7. How can we keep God's perspective on immorality and greed when our culture accepts them as the norm?

8. Our old ways of reacting are compared to a garment we took off at conversion (Col. 3:8-10). Why is each type of behavior inconsistent with our new life in Christ?
9. What has been the effect on you and others when you have fallen back into these old motives or actions (Col. 3:5, 8-9)?

10. Although we may still struggle with these sins, what resources for change do we now have (Col. 3:9-11)? How are these resources better than determination and "trying harder"?

11. In Col. 3:11 Paul lists the distressing divisions between people in the Colossian culture. How would becoming aware of Christ in other Christians help us to eliminate our cultural divisions?

12. Paul has shown the necessary blending of our emotions, mind and will in order to live like people who have been raised with Christ. Pray for help in the area where you feel weak. Spend time thanking God for the changes he has already made in you.
Marathon runners not only shed anything that might slow them down, they also dress carefully. They choose the best running shoes and the most comfortable shorts and shirt possible.

After telling us what to get rid of, Paul now speaks about the new clothes we are to wear because of our new life in Christ.

1. When you were a child, what was one behavior your parents insisted on just because you were a member of their family?

2. Read Col. 3:12-17. Why does Paul begin by reminding us of who we are in God's sight (Col. 3:12)?

3. Why is the description "God's chosen people, holy and dearly loved" (Col. 3:12) not dependent on our feelings or efforts (Col. 1:12-14; Col. 2:9-10)?

4. How would putting on the "new clothes" described in Col. 3:12 make your church or group distinct from your culture?
5. Paul recognizes that grievances occur even in the church. How are his instructions for handling grievances different from the way our culture handles them (Col. 3:13-14)?

6. Paul also recognizes that Christians conflict with each other. How could conflicts be better managed with peace ruling (lit., "functioning like an umpire") in our hearts (Col. 3:15)?

7. What does it mean to let the word of Christ dwell in us richly (Col. 3:16; see also Ephes. 5:18-20)?

8. What opportunities exist in your church or group to teach, admonish and sing as described in Col. 3:16?

What opportunities would you like to create?

9. What is there about thankfulness that causes Paul to command it three different ways (Col. 3:15-17)?
10. How would doing everything "in the name of the Lord Jesus" transform what you have to say and do today (Col. 3:17)?

11. In contrast to the rules mentioned in Col. 2:16-23, how are these "new clothes" we are to wear appropriate expressions of the fullness we have in Christ?
Although Paul wrote to the church at Colossae from house arrest in Rome, the power of Christ was not chained. Throughout his refutation of heresy, Paul points out that Christ is the image of God, the sustainer, the source. Even if some new, attractive teaching seems substantial, it is hollow and deceptive next to the fullness of Christ. By demonstrating the supremacy of Christ, Paul hopes to refocus the attention of the Colossians "on things above, where Christ is seated at the right hand of God" (Col. 3:1).

Mixing Greek and oriental ideas and practices was so popular in the first century that we have a word for it: syncretism. Everybody wanted to mix his or her own blend of Greek, Roman, Persian, Egyptian, and other doctrines to suit personal taste. Judaism had already absorbed many Greek ideas, and when Gentiles embraced Christianity, they naturally wanted to mix their former beliefs and customs with their new faith.

By the time the Colossian church was established, a pattern was beginning to emerge among the religious recipes being mixed throughout the Empire. We call this semi-standard recipe "Gnosticism," although it was not standardized enough to be called that until the second century AD.

The Gnostics borrowed from at least four areas of tradition: the philosophy of Plato, oriental religion, Judaism, and Christianity. It was perhaps the "borrowing" from Christianity that was most disturbing to Paul, as those who brought such teaching were not just looking for listeners, but for converts. Among the teachings of the Gnostics were:

1. The material world is essentially evil or, at best, indifferent. If the material world is evil, then the body is evil. The body must be kept in place then, by rigorously holding it in check. How does one do this? "Do not handle! Do not taste! Do not touch!" (Col. 2:21). Paul probably was quoting from the catchwords of the false teachers.
2. Between God and matter lie a host of fallen (evil) spiritual powers, who now rule the world. Jesus was the first of these rulers; He rules alongside other spiritual powers, such as the constellations named in the signs of the Zodiac and the angels. Therefore, He is only one of many bridges to God.
3. Some human beings possess a divine spark, an inner self that is different from the soul (the Gnostics were these human beings, of course). This inner self is the true home of such people, which they may reach through a mystical knowledge, a true seeing and hearing.
4. Redemption is ultimately dependent on the individual’s self-understanding and the resulting freedom it provides, rather than on God. Hence the emphasis on knowledge of secrets rather than on faith.

Since Paul only alludes to their doctrines, we may have a hard time figuring out precisely what the false teachers were saying. However, we can make some educated guesses from what Paul criticizes and encourages. Some of the false doctrines were:

1. Ceremonialism. There were "strict rules about the kinds of permissible food and drink, religious festivals (Col. 2:16-17) and circumcision (Col. 2:11; Col. 3:11)."
2. Asceticism. Rules that Paul summarizes as, "Do not handle! Do not taste! Do not touch" (Col. 2:21) and "harsh treatment of the body" (Col. 2:23) were supposed to achieve purity.
4. Deprecation of Christ. Paul stressed Christ’s supremacy (Col. 1:15-20; Col. 2:2-3, 9) against those who taught that Christ was on the level of a created angel.
5. Secret knowledge. Salvation required not just faith in Christ but knowledge of certain mysteries (Col. 2:3, 8).
6. Reliance on human wisdom and tradition. See Col. 2:4, 8. These elements seem to be drawn from "an extreme form of Judaism" from pagan ideas that later became a system called "Gnosticism" (from the Greek word gnosis, "knowledge").