

Set your mind on things above, not on earthly things.

—Colossians 3:2

### LEARNING GOALS

1. To understand the difference between the Greek way of thinking and Paul's introduction to God's way of thinking.
2. To be able to use the word "virtue" correctly as God intended, not as man intended.
3. To be able to state what God expects of us.

### REFLECTION

In this section of Paul's letter he continues his theme of juxtaposition between living the "good life" in Christ as opposed to living the "bad life" of the world. In Paul's world, popular philosophy of the day centered on how one might know whether they were living "well" or "poorly." This judgment of one's life did not come from the wealth or material goods one had accumulated. Rather, the "good life" was one of beauty, friends, and family. The ability to appreciate the beauty of the world was key. The person who could, through thought, deed, or creativity, contribute to the betterment of the world would be considered truly living the "good life." Aristotle, in his *Nicomachean Ethics* (4<sup>th</sup> century BC) argued that the best life was one of virtue and higher understanding, which would lead to the best actions.

This ethical way of life was exemplified in the higher thinking of the day. The Romans borrowed heavily from Greek philosophy to understand how the good life might be lived. Virtue was always actionable, and actions were considered more important than

thought or feeling. A man who might think of harming his neighbor but would help him instead would have been considered virtuous. This is the world Paul speaks into.

Paul takes this idea of the “good life” and gives Christians a “better way” of looking at this good life. It is more than human invention, or human understanding, or even actions that leads to this life. Only through Christ can a human truly achieve or realize a life in this world that would be worth living. When Paul uses life and death language (“put to death, therefore...”), he is speaking to people who would understand what this means. He also, very intentionally, uses heart language over mind language to speak to the good life. The good life is not one of beauty or thought, but of compassion, humility, patience, and gentleness. But he doesn’t stop there, lest anyone believe that the good life is achieved by just *acting* virtuous. He tells the reader to put on love “above all these virtues.” He therefore moves the good life from the head (or merely actions) to the heart (read: soul or entire being).

His use of the word idolatry in verse 5 to describe the sins of the earthly nature is noteworthy. Idolatry to a Greek (Roman) would certainly not have been the same as idolatry to a Hebrew (Paul). We understand idolatry as that which keeps us from putting God first. The Greek (Roman) would have understood idolatry as that which kept him/her from fulfilling his/her potential in life. False gods are idolatry to us. Laziness or untapped potential would have been idolatry to the Greek. Putting yourself first would have been, in some instances, virtuous to the Greek. Paul calls these sins the product of our earthly nature. The Greek would have embraced the earthly nature!

So, this is a paradigm shift for Paul’s Greek audience. Putting to death the ways they used to walk in is the challenge to these people. The list of sins in verses 5, 8, and 9 is by no means meant to be exhaustive. The list of virtues in verses 12–14 also is not exhaustive.

In verse 9, Paul uses the “new self” against “old self” language to emphasize this change in heart and paradigm shift. It’s not just a new set of rules they are following; it’s completely changing their nature to that of Christ’s. That is why Paul writes in verse 11 that there is now no Greek, or Jew, and so forth. Those designations were the old

way of telling the difference between people. However, the new people, Christians, have no differences, so they don't need these designations.

Verse 13 is the key to the chapter and quite frankly the verse one should key in on when teaching this passage. All the other things Paul says about the old self versus the new self and how we react to the gift of Christ is summed up in verse 13. Again, forgiveness as a virtue does not emanate from us or because of us: it is because God forgave us first that we forgive others. Verses 15–17 flesh out what this new life and forgiveness look like. Teaching, admonishing, being thankful, having gratitude, and doing all in the name of the Lord are the outward reactions to the new inward life of virtue.

## LESSON PLAN

### 1. Engage

- a. Ask your class, "What do you think constitutes 'the good life'?"
- b. Different answers will be given (family, goods, helping others, etc.). Don't let people give a list; ask them to describe the good life: "What does the good life look like to you?"

### 2. Involve

- a. What does "raised with Christ" really mean? How does this affect your life daily, being raised with Christ?
- b. What does Paul mean by "earthly nature"? The sins listed in verses 5–9 come from our earthly nature, but if this is the "natural" state of man, how can these sins and desires be overcome? How can a person put to death these feelings?
- c. How do we reintroduce divisions (for example, Greek versus Jew) in our society today? Do we sometimes still have an "us versus them" mentality? How do we overcome this?
- d. Do we *really* believe verse 17? Do we *really* attempt to practice it?

### 3. Challenge

- a. Reflect on these ideas:
  - i. We are daily raised in Christ; it is not a one time event.
  - ii. We are to put sin to death in our lives daily; we are to resist and struggle daily.
- b. Live out verse 17 to the fullest with the knowledge that we are raised in Christ and we put sin to death.