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March 9th: Proverbs 8 & Philippians 3

March 8, 2021



Alastair Roberts

Wisdom in the creation. Counting all as loss to gain Christ.

Reflections upon the readings from the ACNA Book of Common Prayer (<http://bcp2019.anglicanchurch.net/>).

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Transcript

Proverbs 8. Does not wisdom call? Does not understanding raise her voice? On the heights beside the way, at the crossroad she takes her stand, beside the gates in front of the town, at the entrance of the portal she cries aloud. To you, O men, I call, and my cry is to the children of man. O simple ones, learn prudence! O fools, learn sense! Hear, for I will speak noble things, and from my lips will come what is right, for my mouth will utter truth.

Wickedness is an abomination to my lips. All the words of my mouth are righteous. There is nothing twisted or crooked in them.

They are all straight to him who understands and right to those who find knowledge. Take my instruction instead of silver, and knowledge rather than choice gold. For wisdom is better than jewels, and all that you may desire cannot compare with her.

I, wisdom, dwell with prudence, and I find knowledge and discretion. The fear of the Lord is hatred of evil, pride in arrogance and the way of evil, and perverted speech I hate. I have counsel and sound wisdom.

I have insight. I have strength. By me kings reign, and rulers decree what is just.

By me princes rule, and nobles, all who govern justly. I love those who love me, and those who seek me diligently find me. Riches and honour are with me, enduring wealth and righteousness.

My fruit is better than gold, even fine gold, and my yield than choice silver. I walk in the way of righteousness, in the paths of justice, granting inheritance to those who love me, and filling their treasuries. The Lord possessed me at the beginning of his work, the first of his acts of old.

Ages ago I was set up, at the first before the beginning of the earth. When there were no depths I was brought forth, when there were no springs abounding with water, before the mountains had been shaped, before the hills I was brought forth, before he had made the earth with its fields, or the first of the dust of the world. When he established the heavens, I was there.

When he drew a circle on the face of the deep, when he made firm the skies above, when he established the fountains of the deep, when he assigned to the sea its limit so that the waters might not transgress his command, when he marked out the foundations of the earth, then I was beside him, like a master workman, and I was daily his delight, rejoicing before him always, rejoicing in his inhabited world, and delighting in the children of man. And now, O sons, listen to me. Blessed are those who keep my ways.

Hear instruction and be wise, and do not neglect it. Blessed is the one who listens to me, watching daily at my gates, waiting beside my doors. For whoever finds me finds life, and obtains favour from the Lord.

But he who fails to find me injures himself. All who hate me love death. Proverbs chapter 7 presented us with the forbidden woman and her appeal to the gullible young man in the street.

The young man's choice of a woman is a prominent theme throughout the opening nine chapters of the book of Proverbs. It functions as a theme that frames the entirety of the book. Chapter 8 presents us with another woman making her appeal to the son, Lady Wisdom.

Her appeal here recalls her initial appeal of chapter 1 verses 20 to 21. Wisdom cries aloud in the street. In the market she raises her voice.

At the head of the noisy street she cries out. At the entrance of the city gates she

speaks. Bruce Waltke argues, despite their contrasting styles, that we should read this chapter with the preceding chapter as a diptych, two panels that need to be read alongside each other.

Wisdom's appeal is contrasted with that of the adulterous woman in chapter 7. Waltke writes, The unchaste wife moves covertly at dusk, and speaks falsely. Wisdom moves publicly and speaks direct and authoritative truth. Unlike the smooth, seductive, but deceptive speech of the strange woman, Wisdom's is straight, right, and true, not twisted or crooked.

The foreign wife leads her victims to slavery, impoverishment, and death. Wisdom's speech leads her followers to kingship, wealth, and life. The foreign wife inhabits the earthly and mundane.

Wisdom soars in heaven above space and time. Both rub shoulders in the city and appeal for the love of the uncommitted gullible youth, the unchaste wife erotically. Wisdom spiritually.

The house of the unfaithful wife is a death trap. The mansion of Wisdom is the abundant life. A critical decision to love Wisdom before entering the city is urgent to nerve the putty-like simpleton against the foreign woman.

To gain his love, Wisdom extols her virtues and her rewards. In the juxtaposition of the appeal of the forbidden woman and of Lady Wisdom, the hearer is encouraged to allow the comparison of Wisdom to a woman, addressing a young man in search of love, to inform the understanding both of the nature of the quest for Wisdom and the nature of the quest for love. The quest for Wisdom has the character of a pursuit of the heart.

Wisdom requires the devotion of one's desires and affections to her, not merely brain power. Where the heart is not set upon Lady Wisdom, the smartest mind will give itself to tangled webs of rationalizations and lies. Likewise, the quest for Wisdom requires an appropriate attitude to matters of love.

When the young man goes out in search of love, he is, whether he recognizes it or not, pursuing either the woman Folly or Lady Wisdom. There are few more important matters than the question of the person to whom you will give your heart. And this is a question that the young man will unavoidably face as he seeks to leave his father and mother and be joined to a wife.

If he chooses the wrong woman, he will be caught in her folly. One of the tragedies of King Solomon was that, despite his surpassing Wisdom, his heart was turned away by his wives, as we see in 1 Kings chapter 11 verses 1-4. There we learn that his wives turned away his heart.

His love for his many wives led him to serve other gods and his heart was not true to the

Lord. On the other hand, if a man marries a wise wife, she can be the making of him, confirming him in the path of Wisdom herself, whose character she displays. The wise wife is the man's great counsellor, the one who will encourage and give him companionship on the path of righteousness.

Wisdom's address, with which this chapter opens, is given in a raised voice, at the heights by the way, maybe on the top of the walls. It is at the crossroads, beside the gates and at the entrance of the doors. Wisdom speaks to those who are on the way, especially at the places where directions are chosen and where people enter in or go out.

These are sites of decision and transition. Her address is to the simple and to the fools. The simple are those who are untaught, gullible, naive or unformed.

The fools are those who are culpably ignorant, who are not merely immature but those who have adopted, to some degree or other, the path of folly. The simple are spoken to as those who need to be taught prudence. The fools as those who need to receive instructive correction.

In verses 6-11 Wisdom presents her hearers with reasons why they should listen to her. Her hearers should be attentive because her speech is a source of what is right, good, beautiful and true, and she abhors and rejects all evil. None of her words are twisted or deceptive.

Everyone with understanding will find her to be a sure guide. In this description the hearer learns Wisdom's character and the fact that her words can be trusted and relied upon. The rewards of heeding her are immense.

The value of her instruction exceeds that of the costliest metals and jewels. She is incomparable in her worth, and a man should value her above everything else in his heart. It is worth noting at this point that descriptions given of Lady Wisdom at such points get taken up later in chapter 31 and referred to the excellent wife.

For instance in verse 10 of that chapter. An excellent wife, who can find? She is far more precious than jewels. In verses 12-14 she enumerates her qualities and gifts.

She is intimately associated with knowledge and discretion. Knowledge is a grasp of reality and its operations. Discretion is shrewdness in deliberation and in the forging of plans.

This is a quality that can be expressed in righteous and wicked ways. At various points in the book the wicked are said to have this particular quality. Earlier in the book we were told that the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom.

Here the fear of the Lord is connected with the hatred of evil. The antithesis of such

hatred of evil is revealed in the second half of verse 13. Pride, arrogance, the way of evil and perverted speech.

The fear of the Lord is characterized by humility, but also by an abhorrence of what is contrary to his character. Those who are proud and arrogant will always find folly most palatable. It flatters them and it confirms them in their ways.

The fool always wants to be confirmed in his own way. He has little interest in the difficult task of seeking out the right way. Wisdom communicates counsel, effective strategy, perception and insight and strength.

The person with wisdom is greatly strengthened by her. Kings reign by her because effective rule and power requires insight. The reception of counsel, knowing how to act so as to have the desired results.

The wise king may accomplish more with wisdom by his side than a foolish king with vast armies. Wisdom also grants judges and lawgivers insight into what is right in situations that are obscure and veil to others. The wise man can bring wise words to bear upon a situation in ways that pierce the gloom and throw once veiled matters into a clear light.

We might here think of Solomon's judgment concerning the two prostitutes in the dispute over the child. If the son wishes to be powerful, effective and just, he must pursue wisdom. If the young man is called to love wisdom, wisdom assures him that if he seeks her, she will be found by him and that his love will be reciprocated.

The statements here should remind us of those in chapter 3 verses 13-18. Wisdom's lovers are rewarded with her remarkable gifts and bounty. Wisdom is desirable in herself, but also desirable on account of the rich blessings that she offers.

Her treasures are with her, enjoyed by those who cleave to her, but lost by those who abandon her. Those who pursue wealth without wisdom will often seek it through wickedness or violence, like the young man who joins the gang in chapter 1. Such persons will often only enjoy wealth for a short season until in their folly they surrender it. The righteous man who seeks wisdom above all else can enjoy enduring wealth as a consequence of his quest.

Even though this is not what he was most focused on achieving, wisdom grants such a blessing to her lovers. In the description of wisdom back in chapter 3, the description of her value and of the riches that she offers is followed by the following statement in verses 19-20. The Lord by wisdom founded the earth.

By understanding he established the heavens. By his knowledge the deeps broke open, and the clouds dropped down the dew. Here in chapter 8, wisdom moves to discussing her part in the original creation, her primordial character.

If the Lord created by wisdom it makes sense that all effective action in the world must occur according to her. Here we are told that the Lord brought forth wisdom at the outset of his creation, the very first act of his founding of the world. She was established in her rule even before the earth came into being, when all was still formless and void.

As the Lord fashioned the creation, wisdom was right beside him, constantly alongside him and delighting in his work. The meaning of verse 30 is debated by scholars. Many translations and scholars argue that wisdom is presented as a master workman.

Others like Leo Perdue argue that it is not a reference to wisdom as a master craftsman or artisan, but wisdom as a little child that rejoices and dances before the Lord. Wisdom is personified as a sort of child brought forth by the Lord that plays exuberantly throughout his creation. Michael Fox in a particular version of this understanding argues that it should be understood as saying I was with him growing up, wisdom being described as like a daughter of the Lord.

Welke argues for wisdom being constantly or faithfully before the Lord. Others have argued that wisdom here is spoken of as the instrument of the Lord. I find Fox's interpretation, I was with him growing up, to be the most compelling.

The Lord delights in this daughter-like wisdom and wisdom rejoices before him. The portrayal of wisdom here emphasizes the youth, the playfulness and the vivacity of wisdom. Fox writes, Reading this mythos in naturalistic terms, it means that the delight of intellect suffuses all that wisdom embraces, the artisan's pleasure in his or her craft, the counsellor's satisfaction in working through a dilemma, the author's elation in the success of effort, and the scholar's exhilaration in partaking of the law and learning of tradition, in exploring the unknown and in growing in knowledge.

Perhaps the joy of learning is what the author primarily has in mind, since he is directing his words in the first instance to young men who need encouragement in their pursuit of learning. Wisdom, for the Book of Proverbs, is delightful. It itself is a principle of delight.

The Lord delights in wisdom and those who pursue wisdom will find her to be a source of great joy. Wisdom has a particular relationship with humanity. Of all of the creatures of the Lord, it is humanity in particular that can enter into a relationship with wisdom.

This theme is developed in later wisdom literature, for instance in the Book of Wisdom or the Wisdom of Solomon, written in the first century BC. In chapter 8, verses 2 and following we read, Wisdom has been my love. I courted her when I was young and wanted to make her my bride.

I fell in love with her beauty. She glorifies her noble origin by living with God, the Lord of all who loves her. She is familiar with God's mysteries and helps determine his course of action.

Is it good to have riches in this life? Nothing can make you richer than wisdom, who makes everything function. Is knowledge a useful thing to have? Nothing is better than wisdom, who has given shape to everything that exists. Do you love justice? All the virtues are the result of wisdom's work.

Justice and courage, self-control and understanding. Life can offer us nothing more valuable than these. Do you want to have wide experience? Wisdom knows the lessons of history and can anticipate the future.

She knows how to interpret what people say and how to solve problems. She knows the miracles that God will perform and how the movements of history will develop. So I decided to take wisdom home to live with me, because I knew that she would give me good advice and encourage me in times of trouble and grief.

The writer continues this theme in verses 17-18, and so I thought it over. To be wedded to wisdom is to live forever. To love her is to be perfectly happy.

To do her work is to be rich beyond measure. To share her company is to have sound judgment. To converse with her is to be honored.

Then I was determined to take wisdom as my bride. The sort of figure that wisdom represents has been a matter of considerable debate over the history of the Church. Is wisdom an actual entity or just some sort of personification? If it is an actual entity, is it personal or quasi-personal? Is it a divine entity or being? Is it a personification of an attribute of God? Is it one of the persons of the Trinity? If it is a personification, what reality justifies this personification? Historically many have associated the figure of wisdom with the second person of the Trinity, the Son, and with the principle of the Logos.

The identification of wisdom in this passage with Christ was a very commonly held position among the patristic writers, and Proverbs chapter 8 played an important role in debates about the deity of Christ. Not all patristic writers identified wisdom with the Son, however. For instance, Irenaeus in Book 4, chapter 20 of *Against Heresies* identifies wisdom with the Spirit.

Imagery has its own logic and grammar, and gendered imagery is a good example of this. It can be tempting for modern readers to believe that we can take an a la carte approach to biblical imagery. However, imagery is chosen very carefully.

It has certain connotations. In scripture, male and female consistently stand for different things. Men and women are fundamentally different in their symbolic potential.

Fox asks the right sort of questions when he considers what would be lost if wisdom here was a man. What if wisdom was the Lord's firstborn son, calling mankind to listen to him? Fox immediately notes two things that would be lost. He writes, the first loss would be

the tint of eros in the mutual attraction of wisdom and humanity in chapters 8 and 9. The alternative male figure, he writes, would lack an eros-like attraction to match the draw of Lady Folly, whose slattern call emulates the explicitly sexual pull of the strange woman.

He goes on, a deeper difference would be that this personage would inevitably acquire a different kind of authority, one not quite suitable for describing the way wisdom works in the world. A male with Lady Wisdom's qualities would be too much like a monarch. A firstborn son of God would be like his deputy, like the Davidic king in Zion, who rules the kings and the judges of the earth through his God-given might, and who not only teaches justice, but actively executes it.

Lady Wisdom is not a king figure. She is powerful, and she is the principle of just dominion, but she does not herself exercise rulership. Instead, others rule by her.

Her influence is verbal, working through persuasion and appeal to affection, not through exercise of office and power. Her power and appeal come from the just workings of the universe and the good sense of individual minds, rather than from the constraints and compulsions of political institutions. As we go through the Book of Proverbs, we see Wisdom presented as a wise wife, as one who is a grand hostess, as a lover who appeals to young men, as someone who builds a house and provides for people.

The Book of Proverbs is about the relationship between the royal son and Wisdom. It's framed in terms of the quest for a good wife. The book juxtaposes the way of folly, the foolish woman that leads to destruction, with Lady Wisdom and the noble wife, who should both be desired and sought.

The book ends with the portrait of the noble wife. Lady Wisdom is a sort of royal consort. The prince's relationship with Wisdom is presented as erotic in character.

It's comparable to the relationship between a man and his wife. The figure of Wisdom, or Sophia, has inspired a great deal of theological speculation. I do not believe that it is appropriate to think of Sophia or Wisdom as a divine person, nor do I think that we should identify this figure with the sun.

Nevertheless, I think that the figure of Wisdom represents a personification of something real, perhaps best thought of as the operations of the Holy Spirit within the world. The Holy Spirit gives life and breath to all things. The exuberance, the vitality, the delight and the dynamics of life are all established by the imminent working of the Spirit that animates the whole creation.

Those who are anointed by the Spirit have wisdom and live with the grain of the creation. Christ is the Logos, the Word, the one who gives structure and order to the creation. He is also the Royal Son who receives the Spirit without measure.

The Holy Spirit is His Spirit, the one who indwells and animates. The Holy Spirit is not

Wisdom. However, Wisdom is, I believe, one way of speaking about the imminent work of the Holy Spirit within the creation.

In the verses that conclude this chapter, Wisdom drives home her message. Reminding her hearers of the blessedness of those who walk in her ways, she charges her hearers to heed her and not to neglect her words. They must be devoted to her on a daily basis.

Every day they must wait at her gates and by her doors. Perhaps we are to associate this with the Feast of Wisdom in the following chapter. She declares, whoever finds me finds life and obtains favour from the Lord.

The significance of this verse becomes more apparent when we read chapter 18, verse 22. He who finds a wife finds a good thing and obtains favour from the Lord. The wise son is to seek for wisdom as his wife and to seek for a wife a wise woman.

If he fails to do so, it will be himself above all others that he is harming. In her devastating final sentence, Wisdom declares that all who hate her love death. They may not think it, they may think that they love freedom and autonomy, but when the time comes it will be revealed that what they were really pursuing all that time was death and their own destruction.

As we saw in chapter 1, when that destruction comes upon them, Wisdom will mock at them. A question to consider, where else in the scripture might we see the figure of Wisdom or other figures related to her? Philippians chapter 3 Philippians chapter 3 Philippians chapter 3 Philippians chapter 3 Philippians chapter 3 In most translations, Philippians 3 begins in a surprising manner. We are at the midpoint of the letter, but the first word of the chapter is finally.

While some have speculated that we have two separate letters of Paul that have been merged together, there are far less extreme explanations, such as the possibility that the Greek term used here might better be translated, and so, serving to reiterate the exhortation of chapter 2 verse 18. The opening statement probably concludes the preceding section before Paul switches to another point. Beyond the surprising opening, some scholars have argued that the shift in Paul's argument at this point is a further indication that we are dealing with combined letters rather than a single one.

However, the shift is by no means as abrupt as some argue, and indeed there are some robust thematic ties between chapters 2 and 3, a point that people like N.T. Wright have made in considerable detail. Christ's voluntary emptying himself of his prerogatives parallels with Paul's own emptying himself of his Jewish prerogatives in this chapter. It might well also set the stage for the concluding statement of this chapter, as we will see.

While Paul seems to have either written to or taught the Philippians on some of these matters already, teaching them the same lesson again is not onerous for Paul, while

guarding the Philippians against potential dangers will be of great value to them. He warns the Philippians against some group of Jews in a way that is little short of startling. He refers to these people as dogs, evildoers, and as those who mutilate the flesh.

Each of these terms would be more commonly expected to be a reference to Gentiles, outsiders to the covenant people of God. Dogs were unclean scavengers, evildoers were those who broke the law, non-observant Jews and pagan Gentiles. Perhaps most shocking, the word for mutilation plays off the word for circumcision.

In the Old Testament circumcision was the sign of the covenant and membership of the people of God. However, mutilation of the flesh was a practice of paganism, strictly forbidden to Jews. Males whose genitals were mutilated were also excluded from the assembly of Israel.

However, here people who would usually associate themselves with circumcision are described not as the circumcision, but as the mutilation. Paul's statement here would have a clear shock effect. His shocking challenge to his Jewish opponents continues in verse 3. Not only does he refer to them as the mutilation, he also claims the title of the circumcision from them.

We, Jews and Gentile Christians, who worship by the Spirit of God, who glory in Christ Jesus and put no confidence in the flesh, are the true circumcision. Presumably Paul is alluding here to the reality of the new covenant, promised back in Deuteronomy chapter 30 verse 6. And the Lord your God will circumcise your heart and the heart of your offspring, so that you will love the way you may live. The true eschatological people of God are marked out not by circumcision and observance of the ceremonies of the Jewish Torah, but by the Spirit of God and true worship.

Paul points out, against those seeking to place confidence in the flesh, that if they want to play that game, he could easily beat them at it. He makes a similar argument in 2 Corinthians chapter 11 verses 21-22. But whatever anyone else dares to boast of, I'm also dare to boast of that.

Are they Hebrews? So am I. Are they Israelites? So am I. Are they offspring of Abraham? So am I. In a popular reading of these verses of Philippians, Paul was once the stereotypical Pelagian. He believed that he could earn God's favour through his ethical exertion. After his encounter with Christ on the road to Damascus, Paul came to the awareness that his own righteousness, his moral effort, was insufficient and that instead of trusting in his own good works, he should trust in the perfect divine righteousness of Christ instead.

This reading is a compelling one in many respects. On the surface of things, it seems to make sense of the passage, and more importantly, it articulates a deeply Christian logic, a truth that has proved liberating for countless persons over the centuries, declaring the

fact of God's free acceptance of us in his Son. On closer examination, however, cracks start to appear.

One of the first things that might trouble the reader holding this interpretation is that, of the things that Paul formally counted gain, most of them do not actually have to do with his own works. Rather, a number of them describe advantages that Paul enjoyed purely by virtue of his birth or ancestry. Whatever we might say about his later Torah observance and zeal, being circumcised on the eighth day, being an Israelite, being a member of the tribe of Benjamin, and having impeccable Hebrew pedigree, were largely accidents of Paul's birth, unrelated to anything that he himself had done.

Instead of serving as signs of moral attainment, these biographical details were indicators of covenant status, signs that Paul was situated, or so he once thought, on the inside track of God's purposes and blessings. We need not, of course, just switch from a reading focusing entirely upon performance to one that speaks only of status. Both of these things are present.

However, matters come into clearer focus when we understand the sort of identity that Paul once boasted in, not least because similar sorts of identities continue to exert a powerful force in our own world. If the identity that Paul is describing here is not that of the classic legalist, what is it? I believe we could think of an analogous sort of identity in the patriot. Paul wasn't that unlike the patriot who takes pride in the fact that he is, say, a true Englishman, as opposed to all those unwelcome immigrants.

His family has been present on English soil way back before 1066. His forefathers have fought for their country in various wars. From as early as he can remember, he has been steeped in English culture.

He flies the cross of St George from the top of his house. He has a painting of the Queen over his fireplace. He attends church in his local Church of England parish.

He proudly buys British and he follows the fortunes of the English cricket team. He might have been a Russian, a French, a Turk, or a Prussian, or perhaps Italian, but in spite of all temptations to belong to other nations he remains an Englishman. The performance of such a patriot isn't undertaken to earn English status, but to demonstrate and broadcast his claims to it, to mark him out from those who aren't Englishmen or who are lesser Englishmen, and more fully to ground and celebrate his sense of identity in it.

The roots of Paul's former identity lay in the Torah, the law that was given at Sinai, Israel's covenant charter, its Magna Carta as it were. As Paul committed himself to the Torah and its way of life, he was showing himself to be a true Israelite. The flesh which he speaks of probably refers to something broader than sinful human nature alone.

It also encompasses the familial and social networks to which people belong. Paul's

attitude towards this status is striking. He now regards it as dung and as a loss for the sake of Christ.

For the sake of Christ, Paul suffers the loss of all things, surrendering them so that he might be found in Christ. Rather than the status that he once so highly valued, Paul now wishes to pursue the status of being in Christ, a status that entails being conformed to Christ's death in order to share in his resurrection. When we step back and look at the picture that emerges, analogies between Paul's account of his own story and that of Christ's humility in taking the form of a servant in chapter 2 become quite obvious.

Both Paul and Christ enjoyed a privileged status and both regarded that status as something that they would not take advantage of, giving up privilege for the sake of service in the way of the cross. Being conformed to Christ entails sharing the shape of his story, refusing to aggrandize ourselves in our privileged statuses and our power and following the path of service instead. At this point, an analogy between the identity that Paul describes and our various privileged forms of status might become apparent to us.

Although Paul the legalist trying to earn his own salvation might not strike so close to home to some of us, Paul the privileged person who is called to adopt an entirely new posture towards his privilege might prove to be uncomfortably so. Privilege, although a term that is often misused, is a powerful reality in our social, civic and political life. Whether the privileges in question arise from our race, our gender, our nationality, our ethnicity, our language, our socio-economic status, our class, our education, our age, our physical ability or some other factor or combination of factors, we need to become aware of the advantages that we enjoy over others, often merely by virtue of the accident of birth.

These are all ways in which we can habitually take confidence in the flesh. They can be ways in which, like Paul prior to his conversion, we assess our worth. In the face of God's grace given to us in Jesus Christ, and in the light of the example that Christ gives to us in his self-humiliation, we must think of those things from which we formerly derived a sense of self-worth very differently.

Paul, as if tallying up the value of his assets, suddenly assigns all of his former riches of status he once so prized, all that was once assessed as gain, to the loss column. On account of this assessment, he is willing to suffer the loss of all of his losses, in order that he might gain Christ, who is the only true gain. Christ was found in human form, now Paul seeks to be found in Christ.

Just as Christ took the form of a servant, and emptied himself of his prerogatives, so Paul must do the same. Formerly, he had depended upon a righteousness of his own that came from the law. While the law was a gift of God, it seemingly marked out Torah-observant Israelites in a way that led many to believe that their standing with God was founded upon their own worthiness in some sense, not so much as something that they

had earned, but as something that was fittingly given to them over others.

However, the true source of standing with God is not Torah reception and observance, but the free gift of God that comes through the faith of Christ. The faith of Christ here is a faith that is entirely ordered around Christ. It is a faith that receives the free gift of Christ.

It is a faith that looks to Christ. It is a faith that bears the impress of Christ's own faithfulness, and follows in the path that he himself set. Paul speaks of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus in verse 8, and in verse 10, unpacks the meaning and significance of this, relating it to the reception of the righteousness of God.

To know Christ and the power of his resurrection is to know God's righteousness. The resurrection was the vindication or the justification of Christ. It was God's publicly enacted sentence in Christ's favour that actively declared that Christ was in right standing with God.

Christ was, as Romans 4.25 teaches, raised for our justification. We currently share in his vindication by the Spirit, in anticipation of our own justification on the last day. However, sharing in Christ's resurrection vindication requires our sharing in his sufferings, and being conformed to him in his death.

We must be emptied of ourselves and our prerogatives, if we are to receive the one who emptied himself for us. We might here think of Galatians 2.20 I have been crucified with Christ, it is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.

We might also think of Paul's teaching in Romans chapter 6, where he speaks of our being united with Christ in a death like his in baptism, so that we will be assured of our being united with him in a resurrection like his. Baptism declares and portrays what is true of the Christian, that through union with Christ by faith, and passing into participation in the reality of his death, we are assured of enjoying the vindication in his resurrection, being declared righteous in the present, in anticipation of the verdict that will be declared over us and our works at the last day. Paul recognises that he is still on the way, he has not arrived yet.

Complacency is dangerous. In union with Christ we have a reality filled assurance and anticipation of the final verdict in our favour. That verdict, however, has yet to be declared, so we should not be presumptuous, but should faithfully press on.

We aren't ultimately the ones winning this for ourselves. Christ's laying claim on us precedes anything that we do. Our pressing on in faith is merely a response to his grace to us.

Paul compares this to a race that must be run. The runner must not look back, but must

fix his eyes firmly upon the prize and put every muscle into the struggle to obtain it. Paul has been concerned throughout the letter to ground the Philippians in an appropriate way of thinking.

He speaks of the mindset that he has just described in himself as characteristic of the mature. Those who do not yet think this way should grow into such an understanding as they mature in their faith. It is important that, even though we haven't attained our final goal yet, we hold on to what we have attained and don't lose ground once gained.

As he often does, Paul presents himself as an example for the people to whom he is writing to follow. Paul imitates Christ, and others should imitate him as a worked example of what this looks like. Imitation is a key element of Paul's ethics.

Christ doesn't just give us laws or instructions, but a pattern in himself to follow, and patterns to follow in his ministers too. His ministers must set this pattern for the people that they minister to. Their behaviour gives people a clear sense of what faithfulness looks like in practice.

So often it is in the lives of faithful saints that the truth of the gospel most powerfully impresses itself upon us. We have also seen in this chapter that Paul presents his pattern of behaviour as both like Christ, as described in the preceding chapter, and also as an entrance into Christ's life. Choosing patterns to follow is really important, because few are faithful in a way worthy of our emulation, and there are a very great many whose way of life is entirely contrary to Christ.

Paul says that we must keep our eyes upon those who live according to the right pattern, while recognising those who walk as enemies of the cross of Christ. Walking as an enemy of the cross of Christ is living in a manner that is entirely opposed to the pattern of life that Christ left for us, in his emptying of himself and his going to the cross. Christians must follow the way of the cross, taking up their own crosses, whatever these crosses might be, and walking in Christ's steps.

Those who reject the way of the cross have their final end in destruction. By contrast, as the faithful people of God, we should follow the cross-shaped pattern that Christ left for us, and have our citizenship in heaven. We expect Christ's revelation from heaven to vindicate us, transforming our bodies to be like his glorious resurrection body, so that we will share in his status and glory.

These closing verses might have especially resonated with the Philippians, and as N.T. Wright has suggested, may have presented them with an indication of the form that their self-emptying might have to take. Philippi was a Roman colony, which meant that its citizens had the great privilege of having citizenship in the city of Rome too. This is a status that many of them would have greatly prized, much as Paul had once prized his identity as a Torah-observant Jew.

Like Paul, however, the status they once so valued must be reassessed in the light of something that greatly exceeds it in worth. Philippians, you think your Roman citizenship is of immense value and sets you above others? Well, your real citizenship is in heaven, where we look not to Caesar but to Christ as our Lord and Saviour. Thinking in such a way and acting in terms of it might require the Philippians to empty themselves of some of the privileges that they once so valued as Roman citizens, counting them as loss in order to gain citizenship of a far greater city.

A question to consider. What might be some of the things that, like Paul's identity as a Torah-observant Jew, or the Philippians' identity as Roman citizens, we might be called to empty ourselves of in order to gain Christ? What might this emptying of ourselves or counting as loss look like in practice?