

The Book of Philippians, Teacher's Guide

Lesson 8: Knowing Christ Above All

Philippians 3:7–11

Teaching Aim (Teacher Orientation)

This is one of the richest doctrinal passages in the letter, and what is at stake is the very ground of our standing before God, the nature of saving righteousness, and the personal heart of the gospel. Paul renounces every righteousness of his own that came from law-keeping and embraces the righteousness that comes from God through faith in Christ. Your class must see clearly that we are made right with God not by earning it through our performance but by faith laying hold of Christ. At the same time, you must teach this as the New Testament does, that the faith which receives Christ's righteousness is a living, obedient faith, not a passive mental assent, and Paul's own pressing on toward the resurrection proves it. Hold these together so that students grasp both the freeness of the gift and the wholehearted, obedient faith that receives it.

This passage is also intensely formational, perhaps more than any other in Philippians. Paul does not merely state a doctrine of justification, he bares his heart. He counts everything rubbish, he aches to know Christ, to feel his resurrection power, even to share his sufferings. The doctrine is wrapped in love and longing. Your aim is not only that students understand righteousness by faith but that they catch Paul's hunger, that knowing Christ becomes their supreme treasure rather than one interest among many.

So aim at both targets. Teach the great exchange clearly, our record for Christ's righteousness, received through an obedient faith and not earned, and at the same time stir in your students the longing to know Christ himself above all, so that the doctrine becomes a romance and not merely a position.

Question 1

Student Question:

Paul says he counts everything as "loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord" (3:8), even calling his former gains rubbish. What does this teach us about the true value of knowing Christ compared to everything else?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Paul uses the language of profit and loss, the ledger of a merchant. Everything he once counted as gain, the credentials of the previous passage, he has moved to the loss column for the sake of Christ. This is not a reluctant sacrifice but a glad recalculation. Once he saw Christ's worth, the trade became obvious.

Notice the word he uses for his former gains, translated rubbish or refuse. It is a strong term, the word for garbage or worse. Paul is not merely saying his credentials matter less than Christ, he is saying that compared to knowing Christ they are fit for the trash heap. This is the extravagance of a man who has found something incomparable.

The key phrase is the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. The value is not in a doctrine or a benefit but in a person, in knowing him. Help students feel that Christianity at its heart is not the acquisition of religious assets but the gaining of Christ himself, who is worth more than all of them combined.

Connect this to Jesus' own parables of the treasure and the pearl (Matthew 13:44-46). The one who finds true treasure sells everything gladly, not grudgingly, because they have grasped its worth. The measure of how much we value Christ is what we are willing to count as loss for him.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The glad recalculation of all gains as loss for Christ
- Former credentials counted as rubbish next to knowing Christ
- The supreme value located in a person, not a benefit or doctrine
- Christianity as gaining Christ himself, not acquiring religious assets
- The treasure and pearl: the one who grasps Christ's worth gives all gladly (Matthew 13:44-46)

Discussion Prompts

- Why does Paul call his former gains rubbish rather than merely lesser goods?
- What does it mean that the supreme worth is knowing a person?
- How does what we count as loss for Christ reveal how we value him?

Question 2

Student Question:

What in your life currently competes with Christ for the top place, the thing you would find hardest to count as loss? What would it look like to begin reordering your treasures around him?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This self-examining question asks students to identify their rivals to Christ. Everyone has them, the good things we would find hardest to release, career, family, security, reputation, a relationship, a dream. The hardest to count as loss is usually the truest rival.

Help students test their hearts with Paul's ledger. What sits in their gain column so firmly that the thought of losing it produces fear or resistance? That resistance is not wrong in itself, these are often genuine goods, but it reveals where Christ may not yet be supreme.

Clarify what reordering means. Paul did not despise his heritage or stop loving his people, he reordered them under Christ. To count something as loss for Christ's sake is not to hate it but to refuse to let it rival him, to hold it as a gift under his lordship rather than as a treasure above him.

Press for one concrete reordering. Ask each student to name the one rival they would find hardest to release, and one way they could begin placing it under Christ this week, in prayer, in priorities, in a decision. The aim is to begin the recalculation Paul made, not to complete it in a day.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Identifying our true rivals to Christ, usually the hardest things to release
- Resistance to loss as a revealer of where Christ is not yet supreme
- Reordering, not despising, our genuine goods under Christ's lordship
- Beginning one concrete recalculation this week

Discussion Prompts

- What would you find hardest to count as loss for Christ?
- What does your resistance reveal about where Christ ranks?
- How could you begin placing that rival under his lordship this week?

Question 3

Student Question:

Paul longs to "be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God that depends on faith" (3:9). What is the difference between these two righteousnesses, and why does it matter where ours comes from?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Paul sets two righteousnesses side by side. The first is a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, a standing built on my own performance and record. The second is the righteousness that comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God. These are not two versions of the same thing, they are rivals, and everything hinges on which one we are wearing.

The phrase be found in him is vital. Paul does not want to be found standing on his own record when he stands before God, he wants to be found in Christ, wrapped in a righteousness that is not his own achievement but God's gift received by faith. This is the great exchange, our failure covered by Christ's righteousness.

Explain why the source matters so much. A righteousness of our own, even at its blameless best, is always too small, always uncertain, always able to be lost. The righteousness from God is

perfect, secure, and given. To rest on our own is to build on sand, to rest on God's gift in Christ is to build on rock.

Be precise to avoid misunderstanding. Paul is not saying our conduct does not matter, he will spend the rest of the chapter pressing on toward holiness. He is saying that our standing before God, our being declared right with him, rests on Christ's righteousness received by faith, not on a record we assemble ourselves. The righteousness God gives then transforms how we live, but it is received, not earned.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Two rival righteousnesses: our own from performance, and God's gift through faith
- Being found in Christ, wrapped in his righteousness rather than our own record
- The great exchange: our failure covered by Christ's righteousness
- Our own righteousness as too small and uncertain; God's as perfect and secure
- Standing received by faith, then transforming how we live, not earned by our record

Discussion Prompts

- What are the two righteousnesses Paul contrasts?
- Why does it matter so much where our righteousness comes from?
- What does it mean to be found in Christ rather than in your own record?

Question 4

Student Question:

Where do you still try to build a righteousness of your own, leaning on your performance to feel right with God? How would resting in the righteousness God gives through faith change the way you live before him?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This question presses the two righteousnesses into the student's daily experience. Even believers who affirm justification by faith often live as functional law-keepers, their sense of acceptance rising and falling with their performance.

Help students detect the symptoms of self-built righteousness, feeling close to God on the days they pray well and far from him on the days they fail, a treadmill of trying to earn what has already been given, an inability to rest. These reveal a confidence still anchored in self rather than in Christ.

Describe the freedom of resting in God's gift. When our standing rests on Christ's righteousness received by faith, our failures no longer threaten our acceptance, and our successes no longer establish it. We obey out of gratitude and love rather than to secure a standing we already have in Christ. This is rest, not laziness.

Press for one concrete shift. Ask each student where their sense of acceptance is still tied to performance, and invite them to preach the gospel to themselves there this week, that they are found in Christ, not in their record. The change is from striving to rest, and it must be practiced in specific places.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Affirming justification by faith while living as functional law-keepers
- Symptoms: acceptance rising and falling with performance, inability to rest
- Freedom when failures no longer threaten and successes no longer establish our standing
- Obedience flowing from gratitude rather than to secure acceptance
- Rest, not laziness, as the fruit of resting in Christ's righteousness

Discussion Prompts

- Where does your sense of acceptance still rise and fall with performance?
- What would change if your standing rested wholly on Christ?
- How is resting in God's gift different from laziness?

Question 5

Student Question:

Paul's consuming desire is "that I may know him and the power of his resurrection" (3:10). What does it mean to know Christ personally and to experience his resurrection power, rather than simply holding correct beliefs about him?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Paul's longing is relational, not merely intellectual. That I may know him, he says. The Greek word for knowing here carries the sense of intimate, personal, experiential knowledge, the knowing of a friend or a spouse, not the knowing of a fact. After all his years as an apostle, Paul still aches to know Christ more deeply.

This is a crucial corrective for religious people. It is entirely possible to know a great deal about Christ, to hold correct doctrine, to teach and defend the faith, and yet to have a thin personal knowledge of Christ himself. Paul wants the relationship, not just the right beliefs, and he models a hunger that never considers itself to have arrived.

Note what knowing Christ includes, the power of his resurrection. To know Christ is to experience the very power that raised him from the dead, now at work in the believer, breaking the grip of sin, giving life to what was dead in us, supplying strength to obey and to endure. This is not abstract, it is the living power of the risen Lord experienced in daily discipleship.

Help students see that this knowing grows the way any relationship grows, through time spent, attention given, trust exercised, and shared experience. The means of grace, prayer, the

Scriptures, worship, obedience, suffering, are the places this knowing deepens. Knowing Christ is the work of a lifetime and the joy of eternity.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Knowing Christ as intimate, personal, experiential, not merely intellectual
- The danger of knowing much about Christ while knowing him little
- The power of his resurrection at work in the believer now
- A hunger to know Christ that never considers itself arrived
- Knowing Christ deepened through prayer, Scripture, worship, obedience, and suffering

Discussion Prompts

- What is the difference between knowing Christ and knowing about him?
- How is the power of his resurrection meant to work in you now?
- Through what means does our knowing of Christ actually deepen?

Question 6

Student Question:

Be honest, has your faith become mostly about information, doctrine, and routine, or are you actually growing in knowing Christ himself? Name one way you could pursue knowing him more deeply this week.

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This question presses Paul's relational hunger into the student's own walk. Many sincere believers, especially long-time ones, have drifted into a faith of information and routine, where Bible study informs the head and church fills the calendar, but the heart's knowing of Christ has gone cold.

Help students diagnose honestly without despair. Signs of a faith reduced to information include prayer that has become rote or rare, worship that no longer moves the heart, and a Christianity that feels more like maintenance than relationship. Naming the drift is not condemnation, it is the first step back toward Christ.

Point them toward renewal. Knowing Christ more deeply is pursued, not stumbled upon. It grows through unhurried time with him, honest prayer, meditation on the Scriptures as a meeting with a person rather than a study of a text, and obedience that deepens trust.

Press for one concrete pursuit this week. A daily unhurried time of prayer, a Gospel read slowly to behold Christ himself, a discipline of speaking to him through the day. Ask each student to name the one practice most likely to thaw a cold or routine faith into a living knowledge of Christ.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The drift from knowing Christ into information and routine
- Signs: rote prayer, unmoved worship, faith as maintenance
- Knowing Christ as something pursued, not stumbled upon
- Meeting Christ as a person in Scripture and prayer, not merely studying a text
- One concrete practice to renew a living knowledge of Christ

Discussion Prompts

- Has your faith drifted toward information and routine?
- What are the signs of that drift in your own life?
- What one practice could deepen your knowing of Christ this week?

Question 7

Student Question:

Paul also longs to “share his sufferings, becoming like him in his death” (3:10). Why would a believer desire to share in Christ’s sufferings, and how is suffering connected to being conformed to Christ?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This is a startling desire. Paul wants not only resurrection power but also fellowship in Christ’s sufferings, becoming like him in his death. No healthy person seeks pain for its own sake, so we must understand what Paul means. He desires the deep union with Christ that suffering for him produces, and the conformity to Christ’s own self-giving love that comes through it.

Explain the logic of conformity. Christ’s path to glory ran through suffering and death, and the disciple is being shaped into Christ’s likeness. To follow Christ is to walk where he walked. Suffering for and with Christ is not a detour from Christlikeness, it is one of the chief means by which we are conformed to him.

Note the order in the passage. Resurrection power and fellowship in sufferings stand together, not opposed. The same union with Christ that brings his risen power also brings us into his sufferings. We do not get the crown without the cross, and Paul, far from avoiding this, embraces it as part of truly knowing Christ.

Help students reframe their own suffering. The hardships they endure for Christ, and even the ordinary sufferings of life borne in faith, are places of deep fellowship with him and instruments of conformity to him. This does not make suffering pleasant, but it fills it with meaning and even with a strange intimacy with the Lord who suffered.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Sharing Christ's sufferings as deep union with him, not pain for its own sake
- Suffering as a chief means of being conformed to Christ's likeness
- Resurrection power and fellowship in sufferings held together, not opposed
- No crown without the cross in the path of discipleship
- Suffering borne in faith as a place of intimacy with the Lord who suffered

Discussion Prompts

- Why would Paul desire to share in Christ's sufferings?
- How is suffering connected to becoming like Christ?
- How does this reframe the hardships you are currently carrying?

Question 8

Student Question:

Where is God using hardship, loss, or suffering to shape you into the likeness of Christ right now? Are you resisting it, or letting it do its work?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This question invites students to read their present hardships through the lens of conformity to Christ. Most of us instinctively resist suffering, asking only how to escape it, rather than asking what Christ might be forming in us through it.

Help students identify the hardship and the resistance. Naming the current suffering honestly, and naming the ways they are fighting or numbing it, opens the door to a different posture. The question is not whether the suffering is pleasant but whether it is being allowed to do its shaping work.

Distinguish letting suffering work from passive resignation. Letting it work means bringing it to Christ, asking him to use it, looking for the Christlikeness it might produce, patience, dependence, compassion, humility, and refusing to let it harden us into bitterness. This is active faith in the furnace, not mere endurance.

Press gently for one shift in posture. Ask each student to name a current hardship and to consider, honestly, whether they are resisting it or yielding it to Christ's purposes. Invite one concrete act of yielding this week, a prayer of surrender, a refusal of bitterness, a search for the lesson God may be teaching.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Reading present hardship through conformity to Christ rather than only escape
- Naming the suffering and the resistance honestly
- Letting suffering work as active faith, not passive resignation
- Refusing the bitterness that hardens, choosing the Christlikeness that softens

Discussion Prompts

- What hardship is God using to shape you right now?
- Are you resisting it or yielding it to Christ's purposes?
- What one act of yielding could you make this week?

Question 9

Student Question:

Paul wants the righteousness "that depends on faith" and presses on "that by any means possible I may attain the resurrection from the dead" (3:9, 11). How does this passage teach that we are made right with God through faith in Christ rather than by earning it, while also showing that this is a living, obedient faith that lays hold of Christ and keeps pressing on, not a mere "faith only" that rests passively?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This is the doctrinal summit of the lesson, and it deserves the fullest treatment, because two errors crowd in on this text from opposite sides. Paul is unmistakably clear that our righteousness comes from God and depends on faith, not on our own law-keeping. We do not earn our standing, we receive it in Christ. Establish this freeness first and firmly, against all legalism and self-righteousness.

Now guard the other flank, because this passage will not allow a passive faith only. Look at how Paul describes the faith that receives this righteousness. It is a faith that counts everything as loss, that strains to know Christ and his resurrection power, that shares his sufferings, and that presses on by any means possible to attain the resurrection. That is not a single mental decision followed by passivity, it is a whole life laying hold of Christ and pursuing him. The faith that justifies is a living, working, obedient faith, the very thing James describes when he says faith without works is dead (James 2:17-26).

Show how the New Testament holds these together without contradiction. We are saved by grace through faith, not by works we boast in (Ephesians 2:8-9), and yet we are God's workmanship, created in Christ for good works that we are to walk in (Ephesians 2:10). The faith that saves is the faith that obeys, the faith that hears the gospel, believes in Christ, repents, confesses him, and is baptized into him (Acts 2:38; Romans 6:3-4; Galatians 3:26-27), and then keeps walking with him. Faith and obedience are not rivals, obedience is faith in action.

Notice the striking humility of verse 11, that by any means possible I may attain the resurrection from the dead. Paul, the great apostle, does not speak as one with a guaranteed, automatic outcome regardless of how he lives. He speaks as a pressing pilgrim who must keep pursuing Christ to the end. This gently but decisively undercuts the presumption of once saved, always saved. Paul holds full assurance in Christ together with a real, ongoing pursuit, and so should we. Our hope is sure because Christ is faithful, and it is held by a faith that keeps pressing on.

Land it pastorally on both kinds of hearers. To the one tempted to earn salvation, say plainly, you cannot, and you do not have to, the righteousness is God's gift received by faith. To the one tempted to coast on a past decision, say just as plainly, the faith that saves is a living faith that lays hold of Christ and presses on, so keep pursuing him. The gospel humbles the self-righteous and awakens the complacent, and it offers both the same Christ.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Righteousness from God, depending on faith, not earned by our law-keeping (against legalism)
- The justifying faith described here as active: counting loss, straining to know Christ, pressing on
- Saving faith as a living, obedient faith, never a passive faith only (James 2:17–26)
- Grace through faith and the good works we are created for held together (Ephesians 2:8–10)
- The obedient response to the gospel: believing, repenting, confessing, baptism (Acts 2:38; Romans 6:3–4; Galatians 3:26–27)
- Paul's by any means possible (3:11) undercutting once saved, always saved presumption
- Full assurance in the faithful Christ held together with an ongoing pursuit of him

Discussion Prompts

- How does this passage show that righteousness is God's gift, not our achievement?
- How does the same passage show that justifying faith is living and obedient, not passive?
- What does Paul's "by any means possible" reveal about presuming on our salvation?

Question 10

Student Question:

Look back over the whole passage. Paul has been so captured by Christ that everything else looks like loss. Name one specific way Jesus is using these verses to form you, to make knowing him your supreme treasure and to deepen your hunger for him.

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This capstone gathers the passage into one personal response. Its great aim is not merely that students understand righteousness by faith but that they catch Paul's hunger, that knowing Christ becomes their supreme treasure. Help each student name where that hunger is being kindled.

Press for the specific. Not I want to value Christ more, but I will count this particular rival as loss, or I will renew this particular practice of knowing him. The recalculation Paul made was concrete, and so must theirs be.

Hold the two halves of the passage together in the response. Some students need to rest more fully in the righteousness God gives, ceasing to build their own. Others need to pursue Christ more actively, pressing on rather than coasting. The passage calls for both rest and pursuit, and the Spirit will press the needed one on each heart.

Close the lesson in prayer, asking God to make Christ the supreme treasure of your class, to clothe them in his righteousness, and to deepen their hunger to know him, to share his power, and to be conformed to him. Invite one concrete step this week that moves the love from admiration into pursuit.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Catching Paul's hunger, not merely understanding his doctrine
- Choosing one specific rival to count as loss or one practice to renew
- Holding rest in Christ's righteousness together with active pursuit of him
- Moving from admiration of Christ's worth to pursuit of him

Discussion Prompts

- Where is this passage kindling hunger for Christ in you?
- What one specific way is he becoming your supreme treasure?
- Do you most need to rest in his righteousness or to press on after him?