

The Same Things

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[0 : 00] Please turn with me to Philippians chapter 3 and verse 1, where the Apostle Paul writes to the Christians in Philippi, To write the same things to you is no trouble for me and is safe for you.

To write the same things to you is no trouble to me and is safe for you. When we come to a church like ours, an evangelical reformed church, what should we expect to hear?

If we had lived in first century Philippi and had gone on many occasions to hear the Apostle Paul preaching, what would we have heard? The answer is that we'd have heard the same thing over and over and over again.

In this verse he says, To write the same things to you is no trouble to me and it's safe for you. Paul had a hobby horse in his preaching.

Whether you heard him once or a thousand times, he'd be saying the same thing every time. So when we come to a church like ours, we should expect to hear that same thing over and over and over again.

[1 : 21] It was once said of a preacher who was obsessed with the issue of cradle or adult baptism that he preached about baptism from every text in the Bible, even the book of Job.

Now the pulpit isn't a place for personal obsessions. Or is it? Given that from Philippians chapter 3 verse 1, it's obvious that the Apostle Paul was obsessed by the same things such that he spoke about them and wrote about them all the time.

To do so for him was no trouble. And in his opinion, for his audience, it was safe. No trouble is a figurative speech called litotes. We say about Glasgow, it's no mean city, which really means that the preaching of the same things gave him great delight, the exact opposite of what he meant, of what he said.

And to be safe means that when Paul preached about these same things, he knew it was beneficial, good, and healthy for the people of God to hear them.

Paul played a fiddle with only one string. He wrote and preached about the same things over and over and over again.

[2 : 48] Perhaps some grew tired of his repetition, so they went looking for new teachers to whom they may listen. But in doing so, they strayed from the safe ground Paul was preaching, and many of them made shipwreck of their faith.

What then should we expect to hear when we come to a church like ours? The answer is the same things.

Preachers who are fiddlers with one string. Now, in this chapter, Paul tells us what these same things are, which to him are no trouble and for us are safe, the same things which are to be the obsession of every preacher, and we should expect to hear every time we come to church.

There are four of them. Knowing, believing, growing, and hoping. Knowing, believing, growing, and hoping. Let's not be disappointed when we hear nothing else from our pulpit other than these four. In fact, let's hold our preachers accountable if they fail to preach these same things over and over and over again.

[4 : 05] The first of these same things is knowing. Knowing. Paul begins this chapter with the history of his pre-Christian life as a Pharisee.

He talks about his upbringing, his education, his way of life. He was a model of Jewishness. List them in his CV. He'd get any job going in the Israel of the day.

To all appearances, for that's what it was, external appearance, he was, in his own words, a Hebrew of Hebrews. As to the law of Pharisee. As to zeal of persecutor of the church.

As to righteousness under the law, blameless. This is how, to use modern words, Paul self-identified. In terms of what he appeared to be.

But then comes a change, introduced in verse 7 with the word, but. But, whatever gain I had, I counted loss for the sake of Christ. And he continues.

[5 : 04] Indeed, I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus, my Lord. Imagine a set of scales.

On one side of the scales are all the things that we've done. All we appear to be. Everything we'd happily put down in our CV. Our ethnicity.

Our upbringing. Our qualifications. Our careers. Our credits. Our religion. On the other side of the scales is just this one wee thing. Knowing Christ Jesus, our Lord.

Which side weighs heavier, such that it should be the preacher's obsession and demand our effort, time, and attention? For Paul, and I'm sure for all of us.

It is on that one side he calls the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus, my Lord. Put his ethnicity to one side.

[6 : 10] To preach about his ethnicity troubled him. Put his achievements on that side. To preach about his achievements was not a safe thing for his listeners.

What delighted Paul's soul and what was healthy and beneficial for his listeners was to know Christ Jesus as Lord. That is the first same thing we should expect to hear in a church like ours.

The surpassing worth, or perhaps as some of us prefer from the NIV, the surpassing excellence of knowing Christ Jesus, my Lord.

There's Paul's delightfully safe obsession. And so it must be ours also. And that's going to mean we're going to exalt Christ in all our preaching.

Whether we're in Genesis or Isaiah, the Psalms or the Gospels, the Prophets or Revelation, a sermon which does not expound and exalt Christ, is not worthy of the title sermon.

[7 : 17] Jesus said of the Bible, these are the scriptures that testify about me. And surely our sermons, if they are to be biblically faithful, are also to testify about him.

So they'll cover topics such as Christ's pre-incarnate majesty, the mystery of his birth, the perfection of his life, the sacrificial love he demonstrated on the cross, the power of his resurrection, the glory of his heavenly exaltation.

These are the same things we can and must expect to hear week by week, sermon by sermon, in a church like ours. Christ himself, his life and person and work.

It's like a diamond held up to the sun, light refracting through all its faces, producing the most wonderful colors. The preacher may himself be dull, but the Christ he exalts is brighter than the rainbow.

And week by week our knowledge about Christ will grow as more hues and shades are added to the picture of his gracious and his loving lordship. Our minds will be filled with him such that, like a thirsty deer in the wilderness, we gasp to learn more about him.

[8 : 32] It's not troublesome for us to hear the same things about Jesus. In fact, when we don't hear about Christ in the church, we leave empty and disappointed.

But for all that knowing about Christ Jesus fills our minds, the most important thing according to Paul in verse 7 is knowing Christ Jesus.

For after all, we can know much about a person without knowing them. On the popular TV quiz show Mastermind, you often encounter a contestant whose specialized subject is the life of a historical figure about whom they know much.

But they don't know that person. And so for all their knowledge about them, they're at best at disadvantage. By contrast, to know about Christ is one thing.

But to know Christ is greater by far. After all, the devil knows far more about Jesus than any of us presently do. It is knowing Christ himself which is the truly surpassing excellence with which the Apostle Paul is utterly obsessed.

[9 : 50] Christianity is not a religion about Jesus Christ. It is a relationship with Jesus Christ. The more we know about him, the more we love him.

The more we love him, the more we want to know about him. The reason the 17th century, and I've never met this guy so I'm doing a mastermind on us all. 17th century Scottish preacher Samuel Rutherford was so popular in his day.

It was summed up by an English visitor to his conignmentation in Anwarth who, having heard him preach, said about him, Rutherford showed me the loveliness of Christ. He showed me the loveliness of Christ.

It should be the driving obsession, should it not, of every preacher to exalt Christ and to commend to his listeners the surpassing worth of knowing him.

And it should be the eager expectation of every listener that he or she will hear Christ being exalted from every text of Scripture and be personally enthused to grow deeper in his or her knowledge and experience of him.

[11 : 02] My former professor, Donald MacLeod, gave this advice to us as a student. His advice was this, preach a big Christ.

Preach a big Christ. And we asked him, well, given the complicated situations, pastoral situations we might find in our congregations, is this enough?

And he said to us, preach a big Christ. And then we asked him, well, what about if our congregations are struggling and we're really struggling ourselves?

And he said, preach a big Christ. We know this is Donald's vision for ministry, which is again why his preaching is so very popular. It is an obsession which must occupy every faithful preacher to follow the Apostle Paul in preaching a big Christ.

And we're preaching a big Christ, not so much that our minds may be filled, but our hearts may be warmed. And that we may experience what's been called the transforming presence of Christ in us and with us.

[12 : 15] And the point's this. If we leave this service tonight wanting to know Christ better, if we leave this service tonight wanting to know Christ better, this service will have done us well.

It will have done us well. The first of the same things is knowing. Second, believing. Believing. Philippians 3.9 is an incredibly important verse, highlighting the second of the same things we should expect to hear week by week in our church.

And 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.

Now, there are two prominent words in this verse. Righteousness and faith. Both are used two times. Righteousness and faith. Concerning righteousness, Paul talks first of a righteousness of my own.

That righteousness he tried so hard to obtain through his observance of the Jewish laws. And he said in verse 6 that concerning that righteousness, he was under the law blameless.

[13 : 34] But secondly, he talks in verse 9 of a righteousness from God. That perfect righteousness which alone belongs to God, but which Paul received not through his observance of the law, but which depends on faith.

Faith which he has already described as faith in Christ. So this then is the first contrast Paul is setting up in this verse.

He's describing two different religions really. One, which attempts to work its own righteousness through its observance of man-made human laws, and in so doing reach up to God.

That's the first religion. The second, depending for righteousness, for its righteousness, depending for its righteousness, upon faith in Christ, and in so doing, God reaches down to us.

The first religion is all about what we have done for God. That's what Paul used to be. The second is about what God has done for us through Christ. That's what he is now.

[14 : 49] The first is all about works. The second is all about faith. So here then is the second thing we must expect to hear week by week in a church like ours.

The futility and emptiness of the first kind of religion, whereby our good works, whatever they may be, we try to present to God our own righteousness, and so be accepted by him.

And by contrast, the fullness and excellence of the second kind of religion, whereby faith in Jesus Christ, we receive the righteousness of God as a gift of his grace, exactly according to the hymn we sang, Upon a Life I Did Not Live.

Paul's passion in verse 9, you see, is to proclaim and emphasize the primacy of faith in Christ. It's faith in Christ, not works for Christ, which make us righteous before God.

It is not what we do for God, be that ever so much, but what God has done for us in the cross and resurrection of Christ, which makes us righteous.

[16 : 04] Week by week, we should hear from this pulpit a call, not a call to do more for God, so that one day God might accept us into his kingdom, but week by week, week by week, we should hear from this pulpit a call to believe the gospel, through which we're assured that in Christ, God has already accepted us.

Every sermon, however short, however long, taken from the Old or New Testament, should point us, not just to Jesus, but call for faith in him.

He's here so I can embarrass him. Phil Stogner, sitting at the back. He's a preacher with one string, the gospel. All he ever talks about, the gospel, the gospel, the gospel, which is what we're talking about here.

The same thing. In this context, it's a challenge to faith. The exposition of how it is that through faith in all that God has done for us, all God has for us in Christ becomes ours, and how it's faith and faith alone that saves.

It's only right that we leave this place week by week with a challenge to believe in Christ rigging in our ears and convicting our hearts. Those of us who've been Christians for decades need to hear this entirely as much as those of us who are not yet Christians because it's so easy to forget that it's not my praying and it's not my reading and it's not my service for God which is the basis of my standing before God.

[17 : 45] It is through faith in Christ we receive, by grace, the righteousness of God himself. It's faith, faith, and faith again.

That's the same thing that's delightful for a preacher to proclaim and it's safe ground upon which all of us may stand. The third same thing is growing, growing.

The Christian life is one of change and forward momentum. John Bunyan put it so well in the title to his famous book *The Pilgrim's Progress*.

The old Christian hymn also puts it well. I have decided to follow Jesus no turning back, no turning back. In *Philippians 3*, verses 13 through 14, Paul writes, forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.

Here the Apostle Paul is describing what we call Christian growth or growth in grace. The call of the gospel is a call to grow as a Christian.

[19 : 15] I recently read this quote, I like it, every saint has a past, every sinner has a future. Every saint has a past, every sinner has a future.

The future for us as we continue to mature in our faith is growth, change, and progress. And this then is the third of the same things we should expect to hear in this church.

that the call of the gospel is not to stagnation, but to life, not to lukewarmth, but to spiritual zeal. It's the call to continual transformation and change, to growth in grace.

As Christians, we may have already come a long way, but there's so much more ground to cover. there are so many more sins in our lives to be put to death.

There are so many more ways in which we need to learn about the love of Christ. There's so many more ways in which we learn, we need to learn how to express that love to others.

[20 : 24] There's so many more aspects of Christ's glorious grace to believe in and worship Him for. My uncle and aunt were extremely influential in my Christian life when I was a young Christian.

They ran and continued to run a gospel meeting every Sunday night in the Fisherman's Hall in the Highland Village of Borough, or the Holly, as we call it up there.

And there, Alex laughing because he's been there so he knows exactly. There's more free church ministers who preach the first sermon in the Holly than from any other place in the free church, I would argue. So there we would sing redemption hymns.

We would hear clear gospel messages calling for the immediate decision of faith. But I'll never forget one Sunday evening, oh it must be 30 years ago now, maybe more, when my uncle Ross picked up his guitar.

I didn't even know he could play the guitar. Picked up his guitar and he and my auntie Margaret, sung a hymn with the following lyrics. They're a bit dodgy, but they're good lyrics. I'm pressing on the upward way, new heights I'm gaining every day, still praying as I onward bound, Lord plant my feet on higher ground.

[21 : 48] That song and the earnestness with which they sang it, remains with me. They're not listening so I can say this.

When Lisa and Samuel went up last year to visit, visit my auntie Margaret and uncle Ross and Lisa went out and introduced herself to my auntie Margaret. She walks in the house and there's auntie Margaret.

30 years after singing that song and auntie Margaret's got this big badge on her chest having come from the scripture union class in school with the words Jesus loves you on it.

I'm pressing on the upward way, new heights I'm gaining every day, still praying as I onward bound, Lord plant my feet on higher ground. That song remains with me to this day and convicts me afresh of my daily need for Christian growth, to press on that upward way, to gain new heights of faith and for prayer and prayer to God to plant my feet in higher ground, to be dissatisfied with the progress I've already made, to strain toward what lies ahead.

Are there any here tonight whose faith has grown stagnant? Expect week by week in view of the upward call of God in Jesus Christ to be challenged to keep growing in our faith, to keep pressing on that upward way, to gain new heights every day, to pray that God would plant our feet on non-keshic higher ground.

[23 : 29] When we encounter difficult times in life as we all do, let's use them as springboards to a deepening faith in Christ. when we encounter new opportunities to learn about God, to grasp them with both our hands.

When we're challenged to express our faith in ways that are far outside our comfort zone, to depend upon the Holy Spirit's help and to embrace the fear and do it anyway.

But more than anything else, just to get on with the daily ways in which our faith grows, namely through prayer and reading the Bible.

So we must not be surprised if week by week this is the message we hear. Where we are is good as Christians, but let's keep going and let's keep growing in our faith.

Knowing, believing, growing, and lastly, hoping. Hoping. The last two verses of Philippians 3 are achingly beautiful. Our citizenship is in heaven and from it we await a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ who will transform our body, our lowly body, to be like His glorious body by the power that enables Him to subject all things, even unto Himself.

[24 : 54] You know, the longer we go on in our faith in Christ, the older we become. The more we realize how frail and broken we are. We're slowing down.

We're not able to do the things that we once did. We may become frustrated. Our minds perhaps aren't quite as sharp as once they were, well, minds not anyway, and our bodies begin to weaken.

But for all that, we have this one strong hope. Not that kind of uncertain hope possessed by someone who buys a lottery ticket and hopes to win, but a sure, uncertain assurance.

The Lord Jesus Christ is coming to transform our broken, lowly, and weakened bodies so that they shall become like His.

For all that the present is painful as Christians. We have a future and it is indescribably glorious. The Bible teaches that a day is coming when Christ will come again.

[26 : 06] And for that day, you know, we strain in our dreams and imaginations trying to picture what it will be like for the sky to be torn apart and for Christ to appear in glory at the head of heaven's armies.

that even if He should come when we're not alive, in death He shall come for us. And our bodies so weakened by age and disease shall once again be recreated after His glorious image.

Here is the hope of the gospel. This world is not all there is and we will not live for its paltry and unsatisfying pleasures. We're hoping for better days than these when Christ shall transform us and grant us everlasting joy and peace in His glorious presence.

Perhaps this is an aspect of the same things we do not sufficiently focus upon because in the prosperous West, let's face it, most of us are happy with our lot in life.

But if we could but see how frail, lowly, and mortal we really are and we could see the glory we'll have in Christ it would change our perspective in life and turn us away from the petty concerns and squabbles in which we so often engage toward the most important of things.

[27 : 36] All the tears we shed here all the things that turn our hair gray all the things that place wrinkles on our brow all these funerals we attend all these diseases we suffer from all these griefs they'll all be gone one day and replaced by the wholeness and joy of God's everlasting presence.

Behold He will make all things new and the crown in our heads will shine like a million flawless diamonds in the light of the sun. What more motive do we need to keep going and growing in our faith in this that one day one day coming soon we shall all see Jesus Christ and we shall be like Him.

we can expect to hear these same things week in week out but far from tedium these things delight us because we know that not only are they the things we need to hear but as Christians they are the things let's face it we want to hear.

There is no greater pleasure for us as Christians than to hear about Christ to hear about faith to hear about growth to hear about hope not yet Christian or a lifetime Christians these are the same things the church of Christ has preached these 2,000 years and we trust and pray shall preach until that great day when God will roll up time and space in Himself and our feet shall surely be planted on the higher ground of His eternal peace you want to call it a hobby horse you want to call it a one string fiddle we do not apologize for these same things for like a harbor in a stormy sea they alone are safe ground for us let us pray heavenly father we thank you for the gospel that gospel which is the beginning the middle and the end of our lives as Christians we never go past the cross as if to say it belongs somewhere at the beginning of our

Christian life and now we've moved on to deeper things reserved for more mature Christians speculative questions our lives are the cross we delight to hear about the love of our Savior for us we love to hear about the mercy of God in Christ we love to hear of how we're accepted by you not on the basis of our efforts and achievements our status and reputation but on the basis of faith in Christ Jesus Lord we long for the day when Christ shall do these unimaginable things described in your word tear open the fabric of the sky and appear at the head of the armies of heaven resplendent in the glory and majesty of his exalted honor keep our eyes focused on these things [31 : 17] Lord cursed be any who stand in this pulpit and do not preach these same things that have been preached from this pulpit for 110 years we ask these things in Jesus name Amen ■ Lulu