



CONFIDENCE AND COMPETENCE

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 2 Corinthians 3:1-6
 Second Message
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Christians tend to make living the Christian life difficult and demanding. It appears that the more abstract we make things out to be, the more profound they seem to us. But in the New Testament, Jesus and the apostles seemed always to be simplifying matters. When the Pharisees asked Jesus, "What should we do that we may work the works of God?" his answer was rather surprising. He said, "This is the work of God, that you believe in the one whom he has sent." Man can't do God's work, is what Jesus was saying. It's arrogant to think we can. The only one who can do God's work is God. And the only way to do that work is to believe in the one he has sent and to keep depending on him. *"The just shall live by faith."* This is the message that is delivered over and over again in the Scriptures, both in the Old and New Testaments alike. The law was not given as an alternate way to get to know God; it was given as an expression of God's character so that God's people would know what the standard is.

Last week we began a study in one of the greatest passages in the New Testament, from the apostle Paul's second letter to the Corinthians. These four chapters in 2 Corinthians are the clearest explanation in all the Word of God of the secret of the apostle's phenomenal ministry. Here we learn the secret of both his confidence and his competence.

The apostle had to learn through some difficult circumstances the lesson that unaided humanity is quite useless. We often think of the prophets as fierce, stern faced, determined zealots who single-handedly took on the task of correcting a crooked world. But God rarely begins with people like that. He uses men and women who know their limitations. We bemoan our inabilities, but in reality, it is our ability that God fears. Powerful people are the most bothersome in this respect. They rush around in their own strength, overly optimistic, disgustingly fearless, feeling invincible and all-knowing. Generally, they end up getting in God's way. As Jesus reminded his disciples, "the flesh (human effort) counts for nothing."

The men and women who do God's work are the very ones who realize the impossibility of God ever using them.

The problem with many of us is that we're much too gifted. As my friend Dave Roper puts it, "we're perilously adequate." We go on our way, believing in ourselves and our own power and personality, relying on our own strength and show. But self-confidence is our stumbling block. He goes on, "We're so good at what

we do, we're no good at all. So God has to thwart our energy at its source. He wears down our noble resolve through the frustrations of life and wrings out of us every vestige of self confidence by disappointment and defeat. He allows our cherished projects to flounder; the wheels fall off our cleverly contrived programs; our dreams go belly up. He tutors us through our flops and failures until we learn that most precious of all God's premises: We can't!"

When Paul says later in this letter, "we are weak," he isn't spouting a pious cliché. As we will see today, he is humbly stating a fact.

As we have already noted, this section of 2 Corinthians is a digression in which Paul is defending his apostleship. The apostle was the target of a lot of criticism in his ministry. He wasn't one of the original twelve. Not being one of the regulars, he was never fully trusted. I'm not sure how this man who spent most of his time in jail, who had to get a second job to support himself, who admitted that he wasn't a great public speaker, and had an unimpressive appearance, would rate in today's church circles. The people in Corinth had trouble believing he was a real apostle.

Paul begins chapter 3 with these words:

Are we beginning to commend ourselves again? Or do we need, as some, letters of commendation to you or from you? You are our letter, written in our hearts, known and read by all men; being manifested that you are a letter of Christ, cared for by us, written not with ink, but with the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone, but on tablets of human hearts. (2 Cor 3:1-3, NASB)

At first reading, it does sound like Paul is bragging here. He has just spoken of his sincerity and authority. Now he says, in effect, "You think I'm bragging because I am talking about where I got my message and how I live my life. I'm not bragging, and you know it. I don't need any letters of recommendation to you." In those days, religious charlatans went from one church to another ripping people off. So the elders at the church of Jerusalem, and later, elders from other churches, began writing letters of recommendation so that itinerant preachers who were genuine would be accepted by the churches.

Paul was not against letters of commendation. In fact, he himself gave them. At the end of Romans 16 he gives a commendation of Phoebe; and in 1 Corinthians, he gives one to Timothy. Paul is not against letters of com-

mendation. But he finds it amazing, unbelievable, really, that the Corinthians would ever think he needed a letter of recommendation when he came back to them. After all, he had led them to Christ. Yet here they more or less infer to him that the next time he came it would be good if he brought some letters from John, Peter or James, or one of the “real” apostles.

Paul is asking them, “Do you really mean that? Don’t you understand? If you want a letter, just look at yourself. You’re an open book which I carry around in my mind and heart. I don’t have a piece of paper, but at any time during the day I can stop and think about what you once were like and what you are like now.” In fact, in 1 Corinthians he reminded them of what they once were, saying that some of them were fornicators, some adulterers, some homosexuals, some thieves, some alcoholics, cheats and liars, but they were cleansed, they were sanctified. That’s what they used to be. But God had given them a new heart.

“Now you want a letter of recommendation,” says Paul. “Well, just look at what happened to you. I served you. I lived out the fragrance of Christ among you. I preached the gospel to you. And your changed lives is evidence that God is writing on your hearts. The Spirit of God is taking his truth and making it real in your lives. You are an open book. People can open the pages of your lives and see the character of Christ.” Paul doesn’t want the credit. He says, “I didn’t do it. I just delivered the mail. But Christ wrote on your hearts. He didn’t use paper, or deliver it on stones, as he did with Moses on Mount Sinai. He wrote it on your hearts, and the ink he used was the Holy Spirit. God did the work.” Paul wants these Corinthians to understand that the changes that had occurred in their lives, the freedom they were experiencing, their deliverance from evil habits, all happened because Christ had changed them.

Notice the contrast Paul makes between the writing on human hearts of flesh with the writing on stone at Mt. Sinai. God wrote the decalogue, the Ten Commandments, on two tablets of stone. And that became the standard for Israel, the will of God expressed in a codified form. But there was no power in those tablets. You couldn’t just hold them up and exhort people to obey them.

We also know that Paul was not against the law; he loved it. The law was an accurate expression of the character of God. It was a good thing. The problem was not with the law, but with people’s hearts. They couldn’t keep the law back then—and we can’t keep it now. It wouldn’t do any good to hold up the Ten Commandments and exhort you to obey them. Actually, all that would do is make you want to sin (like the lady who objected to the posting of the Ten Commandments at the back of the church, because she said it put so many bad ideas in young people’s minds!). That’s exactly what the law does, if it is just a piece of concrete with writing on it. It can’t change anyone’s life, because it can’t change the heart. The problem with sin is that it is

within.

However, in both the Old and New Testament eras alike, when anyone submitted their will to God or to Jesus as Lord, their hearts were changed and they began to look like Christ. And, as we learned last week, the unforgettable effect of their life was like that of perfume. Perfume, if it is used properly, is very subtle. You don’t bathe in it. Unless it is subtle, it overpowers you. But there is something about someone who is counting on the Lord for their strength that results in a subtle influence. People can’t quite understand it; they can’t explain it. But it impacts them and they can’t forget it. Paul says that is the effect of the gospel being written on hearts.

This moves the apostle to go on and answer the question he had asked in chapter 2. Where do you get the power to live a life that has this unforgettable impact? His question was, “Who is sufficient for these things?” Where do you get the ability to have that kind of impact upon those around you? Do you get it from a school, a special course or seminar?

Now he comes to the answer. Verse 4:

And such confidence we have through Christ toward God. (3:4)

In other words, our confidence is that God did this. He wrote on our hearts and we are changing. Our lives are being renewed and conformed into the image of Christ. Verse 5:

Not that we are adequate in ourselves to consider anything as coming from ourselves, but our adequacy is from God, who also made us adequate as servants of a new covenant, not of the letter, but of the Spirit; for the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life. (3:5-6)

This is the great secret of the Christian life: Everything coming from God, nothing coming from ourselves. Do you want to know how to live the Christian life? Well, you can’t. Only God can do it. If we try to do it on our own, we may think we are doing all right for awhile (as we will see next week, there is a glory to self effort), but it soon fades away. But the presence of Christ within is an enduring thing that continues to grow in its manifestation as the fragrance becomes richer in time.

We make the Christian life way too hard. If you want to be a good Christian, we are told, you have to be disciplined. There is nothing wrong with discipline, but it has no power in and of itself. It can’t change you. But that is what we often hear. We are told we need to get up at five o’clock in the morning and read our Bibles for an hour. We need to memorize scripture, we are told. We need to share our faith every day. We need to go to church every Sunday. What a monumental drag! People who live like this are trying their hardest, but they are miserable. They’re upright, but uptight as well. Goodness for them is stern, demanding business. Their faith is like a dull habit. They have an appearance of right-

eousness, but they lack the qualities that arise from having contact with God, namely, love and grace.

As good as all of those disciplines are they are not what makes the Christian life effective. At best, all of those things are tools to help lead us to the only One who can change us—from within. And so the end is that we would be more and more God-dependent people, relying and depending on the life of Christ. That is what makes things happen.

As one commentator put it, “The new covenant does not abolish the law; it establishes it in the only place it will be effective—in the heart.” Under the old covenant, people didn’t have the resources to keep the law, so it was like a finger of accusation pointing against them. Until the law was internalized through the Holy Spirit it remained a “letter,” an instrument that kills.

That’s the problem with rules and regulations. They have no mechanism for overriding our natural tendencies to do wrong. All they can do is reveal those tendencies and say to us, “You should! You shouldn’t! You can’t!” The rest is up to us.

Do you want to change your life? Do you want to be more like Christ? Do you want to be more loving, more patient, more gentle, more thoughtful, more courageous, more kind, less defensive? Whatever you want in terms of character, ask for it and God will begin to give it to you. It won’t happen overnight, but he will begin to work. Over time we will find that we are less reactive, less disturbed over difficult circumstances, less shaken when things go wrong at work. We will find ourselves becoming more stable, less self-centered, more thoughtful of others, more concerned about drawing people out and listening to them rather than talking about ourselves all the time. God changes us little by little, not by self effort but by dependence upon him. He has to do it. We may choose, and we may have to act, and sometimes it looks like we are the ones who are causing the change, but underneath there is reliance upon God who does everything in us and through us. That is the genius of the Christian life. We grow by laying hold of God’s power within us.

The cable cars in San Francisco don’t have a motor inside them that makes them go. They have a clamp apparatus which is attached to a lever, and when the brake man pulls back on this lever, it clamps onto a cable that runs beneath the street. That is exactly what we must do as Christians. We have no power in ourselves. We are not going to change anything. We can’t change our own lives, never mind the world. But there is an endless cable inside, which is the risen life of our Lord Jesus, available to us. All we have to do is reach down and clamp onto that life. It is available to us to stand in the face of adversity, to do whatever it is we are called to do; to have the moral courage to make decisions that are tough but that we know are right. The power is there.

How did Paul learn all of this? The apostle was an unusually competent person. He had perhaps the keen-

est mind of all time. There was a time when he relied on all these things for success. In Philippians 3 he says that he was circumcised on the eighth day; of the people of Israel; of the tribe of Benjamin; a Hebrew of Hebrews; in regard to the law, a Pharisee; as for zeal, persecuting the church; as for legalistic righteousness, faultless. He was an Israelite indeed. He was the little engine that could! But he had to learn through a painful ten-year period that he was absolutely worthless in getting God’s work done.

After his conversion, Paul came to Damascus, thinking he was God’s gift to his generation. He felt perfectly suited to evangelize the Jews. And so he tackled the things that couldn’t be done...and he couldn’t do them. Instead of a revival, he precipitated a riot. The Christians in Damascus put him in a foul and stinking fish basket and lowered him over the wall and sent him away, pleading with him not to return lest he undo all that God had been doing. What an embarrassment! It was the worst day of Paul’s life—and *the best!* That’s the day he learned that he was, as he later put it, “nobody.” In time, he became somebody.

Dave Roper in his book, *Seeing Through*, writes: “It comes down to this: Every natural virtue, every endearing quality, every proclivity toward goodness comes from God. Without him we can do nothing. We must not only accept our limits, we must love them. They are God’s gift to us.” When we accept that fact we can rest in him who alone is wisdom, righteousness and power. God alone can do God’s work.

Jeremiah had described this in his prophecy long centuries earlier. He said a day was coming when God would write his law in people’s hearts, not on tables of stone. It is the same law, but written in the heart instead of on some external demand. God would live with them. They would be his people and he would be their God. They could draw upon his wisdom, his energy, his power and strength for every demand they had in their lives. He would instruct them by his Spirit that their eyes would be opened to see the real meaning of the things they learned. He would settle once and for all the question of their guilt. He would forgive their sins right at the very beginning; and they could rest upon that constant washing and cleansing and forgiveness all through their lives. That is the new covenant as Jeremiah described it. That would change their whole motivation and their outlook on life.

Maybe you are saying, “I don’t want to be dependent on anyone!” That is the real problem. That is the issue that keeps people from receiving Christ. It is not an intellectual issue. Who is going to run and rule our lives? That is the core issue. To be a Christian means to be dependent on the life of Another. We don’t like that, but nevertheless, when we do it, we live life the way it was intended to be lived. We start flying. We discover that the Christian life is not a drag. It isn’t hard. It doesn’t drain our energies trying to keep up a false front. Trying to be a good Christian on the outside when you are

dying on the inside is very stressful. It wears you out. We don't have to live that way anymore. We can be honest. We all are weak and in need. That's the Christian life.

My desire for you is that you will not only accept your limitations, but that you will grow to love them. I pray that you might begin to understand that it is your weakness, your pain, your heartache, the very things you long to be rid of, that are making you what God wants you to be. That was what the apostle Paul learned. The true source of his confidence and his competence as a Christian was the living Christ himself. It is only when we discover that *we can't*, that we are able to see that *He can*.

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