

## **New Year's Day Sermon: Walking by Faith**

**2 Cor 5:6-10**

**Preached by Rev. Craig T. Smith on Sunday morning,**

**January 1, 2023**

*(Read text)*

### **The Consequences of Confidence**

In the first five verses of 2 Corinthians chapter five, Paul is sharing his knowledge concerning the future. These next verses draw a conclusion that flows from what Paul knows.

It is interesting that Paul can have confidence about a future he has yet to experience. It isn't because Paul is confident in himself. He is not even confident in his depth of faith. He is confident in the Object upon which his faith is fixed. Because Paul knows that his future is secure no matter what happens in the present, including his complete destruction, Paul remains confident, courageous.

It isn't even this good earth that Paul's confidence is in. Paul cautions against absolutizing the significance of our present "location," our lives here on earth. Paul wants to remind his readers, which includes us, that we are not to cling too tightly to this earthly tent. As you spring out into 2023, what sorts of things are you grasping with too firm a grip? Christians tend to place their true faith and the love of their hearts on things that are NOT God. Paul reminds us that this life is not the believer's end-all, be-all.

If you believe in Jesus, this life here is not your final reality. So stop living as if it is. Our faith must be stronger than a "today is all we have" sort of arrangement. To be honest, that is an anemic, almost non-existent faith. Paul reminds us of the often-unspoken spiritual truth about life on earth: it is "away from the Lord." God is in his heavenly dwelling place, and we are here.

And yet, Paul recognizes the temporary significance of the present life. And that gives Paul courage. Regardless of the circumstances he faces here and now, Paul has courage and confidence.

Paul lives or walks by faith and not by sight. That is the consequence of Paul's confidence.

## **Blinded By the Present**

Paul writes about being “spiritually blind” here. He is walking by faith. This means that as he lives in this world, he lacks the “sight” to see and comprehend the fullness of the glory still to come. Despite this limited ability to see, Paul trusts God’s promises as the ultimate reality and lives accordingly.

Paul does not live as if the present suffering were the sum of his life. He lives with the understanding that they are not that at all. Your life as a Christian isn’t a collection of what you experience here. It is an understanding of something that is coming that you and I cannot fully comprehend, yet we trust that it will occur.

Each week I have conversations with myself and with others that, upon further reflection, reveal how lacking Christian faith truly is.

It is as if we expect faith to just appear overnight. It isn’t that way. Preachers preach and Bible teachers teach that faith is this second-nature default that we have once we are saved. And God’s grace is certainly at work in our hearts through the indwelling ministry of the Holy Spirit. It is impossible to walk in faith but not in grace.

God doesn’t magically implant some disposition or different orientation like some huge spiritual transfusion. Faith is learned, practiced behavior. We are to work on this and practice these disciplines and Christian virtues to the point that they do become so natural that we tend toward them without thinking about it. Except that is extremely hard and takes a lifetime of development to get to.

Those disciplines and virtues that strengthen our faith are learned and acquired through imitation and practice. What was that Paul told Christians he led? “Imitate me as I imitate Christ.” (1 Corinthians 11:1) And again. “Therefore I urge you to imitate me.” (1 Corinthians 4:16) Or even “Join in imitating me, brothers and sisters, and pay careful attention to those who live according to the example you have in us.” (Philippians 3:17)

We don’t just take some “faith pill” or sing a few good, solid theologically strong songs and we’ve got it. We have to train moral muscles just like we do physical muscles. We are what we love. And love is a habit. Our most fundamental orientation as to who we are is shaped by what we love. And if we love God, then that faith is shaped by those habits and virtues.

But if deep down we really love this world, this place, money, fame, power, influence, our own fat egos – all in an effort to orient us to love what James Smith calls “the good life,”<sup>1</sup> then we are not developing faith. Rather, we are developing addiction to the opposite of God.

If we are not walking by faith, we are being shaped by this world, this culture. We are daily, moment by moment, often unconsciously, training our hearts. And we have been training our hearts all of our lives. We grow up being trained by what we want and how we should live. People give faith and God lip service, but those are more code words. People are certainly not training themselves to live out some virtue that places hope in a life that is coming rather than the one that is already here.

Think about the ways our lack of faith was revealed even in the last year. How often did our theology of death reveal that our faith is in the here and now rather than in the life to come? How often did we place importance on stuff and rules and tradition and comfort rather than in stepping out into the unknown, releasing our grip on our ego and pride, and trusting the Lord to take control?

No, the older I get, the more I realize just how *UNfaithful* I have been programming and training myself to become. I have been imitating the wrong things and acquiring knowledge from the wrong sources. And I bet you have too. Just like we will not become faithful overnight, we did not become unfaithful overnight either. We trained ourselves to be that way.

We chase down things in this world that we shouldn't. We respond and act exactly like everyone else does. Meaning we are being programmed to look and act just like things that are NOT God.

Each January 1<sup>st</sup>, we determine that we will change our lives. But to radically and truly change our lives concerning faith, it will require us to imitate exemplars – good, godly examples – and to calibrate our souls by being immersed in practices that, over time, will orient our hearts to a certain end. Paul tells us this is an end that is to come that we cannot clearly see. Not the life that we can see pretty clearly now.

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<sup>1</sup> James K. A. Smith, *You Are What You Love: The Spiritual Power of Habit* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2016) 12-13.

Paul looks around at this world, this “earthly tent” that he lives in, and he realizes that God’s promises are the ultimate reality. He lives a life that is in tune with that. He is calibrated to that frequency. His mind, his heart, has been forced over time through action and habit to become that. Paul recognizes that his default setting is still the opposite of what he desires in righteousness. He admits as much in Romans 7. He admits that he doesn’t always understand what he is doing “because I do not practice what I want to do, but I do what I hate.” (Romans 7:16)

Walking in faith is the consequence of confidence in God not this world. And if we intend to become something that we have never been before in our lives, we are going to have to do things differently than we have ever done them. Paul realized this and determined to practice and learn to orient his heart towards the Lord. This strengthened his faith.

His confidence in the Lord did not waiver. Paul would fix his gaze on what cannot be seen (2 Corinthians 4:18), his inner glory not his outward affliction (4:17). He focused on inner renewal not his external decay (4:16), the new age to come and not the old age (4:18), resurrection life and not present dying (4:10,11) things that are of eternal weight and not temporary trivialities (4:17), the eternal, not the temporal (4:18), the heavenly and not the earthly (5:1-2). In short, Paul adopted a perspective of faith based on the confidence that he held in the promises of God coming true.

“So we are always confident and know that while we are at home in the body we are away from the Lord. For we walk by faith, not by sight.” These two verses provide the healthy course correction to the misunderstanding and miscalibration we allow. These verses point us back to what it means to be “in Christ.” That concept of remaining “in Christ” was a concept that was a significant part of the Corinthian church. However, they misunderstood their experiences to assume that they were experiencing the fullness of the life “in Christ” in the present moment and that simply isn’t true.

This past year, I have had people angry at me, angry at others, upset over things that, honestly, don’t really matter that much. It was as if the Corinthian church’s self-importance was ingrained within churches in Martinsburg today. If we truly walked in faith, a lot of what we get sideways over, simply wouldn’t exist. But our hearts are not calibrated toward faith. They are too often oriented toward “the good life.”

The life in which we get what we want and feel and look important getting it. Paul is telling us that life is NOT walking by faith. It is walking by sight. It is living in the here and now and depending on what you can see and feel and hold on to that is temporal, not eternal.

If you had issues with coping and adjusting to life within the church in 2022, hang on to your hats. Because you are going to be pushed, challenged, and exhorted to your very core. You are going to be called to do things that you've never done before. It will not be dipping your toes out of your established comfort zones. It will be a cannonball into the unknown.

And all of this will be possible for us ONLY if we walk by faith. If we continue to imitate this world, we will continue to have the same fights and some of you may be left behind as this church moves ahead in faith. Your heads and your hearts will be constantly challenged to be in tune with the Holy Spirit.

So, let's take Paul's advice and train ourselves toward faith. Let's imitate those who laid out such a powerful example of godliness. Let's spend time looking at the lives of men and women like A. W. Tozer, C.S. Lewis, Augustine, Corrie ten Boom, Ruth Graham, Rosaria Butterfield, Anselm, and Aquinas.

Let's develop holy habits found in books like Richard Foster's *The Celebration of Discipline* or Dallas Willard's *The Spirit of The Disciplines*. Let's begin today with a reading plan and a prayer plan for spending time in the presence of God. How often do we, on our own, truly stand in the presence of God?

It is time to walk by faith and begin to become the people and the church that God wants us to be. Walking by faith is not some cliché. Cliches are not taken seriously. Paul's teaching here in these verses, when taken seriously, challenges Christians in no uncertain terms to leave behind this contemporary cultural obsession with the present. This obsession with the present (or even worse with the past) is so prevalent within churches and it is a crippling obsession. Calibrating our hearts toward living for today means we only want what this world has to offer. This world has nothing for a believer. Instead, we are to fix our eyes on the Author and Perfecter of our faith, confident in the life that He has for us up ahead.

Walking by faith will truly, honestly, wholeheartedly, change us completely.  
And that is not a cliché. It is the truth.

**FURTHER THOUGHTS:**

What resolutions have you made before in your life? Have you made any for 2023?

Have you ever kept a resolution? What did that feel like? How did it change you?

What events or experiences in 2022 revealed that you had too much of an obsession with the present rather than confident faith?

What spiritual disciplines do you think that you need to add to your life in 2023? (examples include prayer, study, simplicity, solitude, confession, celebration, service, submission)

Who is someone that you believe you could imitate – an “exemplar” who was or is a fully devoted follower of Christ? Did any of the authors Pastor Craig listed ring a bell?

Is your heart being programmed or calibrated to be unfaithful by culture and practice? How can that happen to a person?