

God's Sufficiency for Godly Living

Lesson 3

Man's Sufficiency versus God's Sufficiency

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In our third course studying God's sufficiency for godly living, we shall be focusing on Man's sufficiency in contrast to God's sufficiency. From that which we have seen thus far in the Scriptures, a large gap between the two should be expected. And such is exactly what we find.

Not that we are sufficient of ourselves to think of anything as
being from ourselves, but our sufficiency is from God. (2
Corinthians 3:5)

Here we find explicit contrast between man's sufficiency and God's sufficiency. Man's sufficiency, the Bible makes clear, is not sufficient. Man does not have resources that are adequate to meet the task set before him. The task is godliness. The task is growing in Christ-likeness. The task is walking with God and serving God. The task is transformation into the image of Christ. And this is a task man is destined to fail in so long as he relies upon himself. Man does not have adequate resources to fulfill the task of godliness—despite the fact that such is the path in which he is required to walk. So clearly, man must look elsewhere for the sufficient resources for Christian living.

Paul declares with confidence the source of this sufficient power. The believer's sufficiency is from God. The only place the believer can find adequate supply of life in order to grow, live, and serve in the manner to which God calls His children is by the sufficiency that comes from God Himself.

Looking at the contrast between man's sufficiency and God's sufficiency, we can easily see it in terms of tension. This is a matter of man's sufficiency versus God's sufficiency. There is a very real conflict or struggle between the two. In one corner, man's sufficiency—only useful for the

kingdom and purposes of man. In the other corner, God's sufficiency—all-powerful and all-sufficient, it draws men up to the glory of the kingdom of heaven. Man's sufficiency is great for storing up power and treasure on the earthly plane (which will pass away), but is completely inadequate for that which the believer is called to in the family of God.

When looking at the contrast between man's sufficiency versus God's sufficiency—and especially in light of the key passages for this course (2 Corinthians 2-5)—it does well to recognize that this speaks of the difference between living by the old covenant of law and the new covenant of grace. The new covenant of grace is really the crux of these early chapters of 2 Corinthians and in chapter 3, there is a contrast building between discussion the new old covenants.

Who also made us sufficient as servants of the new covenant. (2
Corinthians 3:6)

Believers are new covenant servants. As we have seen, the Christian serves God under the terms of the new covenant. Jesus said, “This cup is the new covenant in My blood which is shed for you.” The shed blood of Jesus Christ, purchasing for His children an astounding new and living arrangement for walking with God: that is the fuel for the new covenant.

But their minds were blinded. For until this day the same veil
remains unlifted in the reading of the covenant, because the veil
is taken away in Christ. (2 Corinthians 3:14)

Here again, Paul is explicit: the contrast in this very chapter is between the old covenant of law and the new covenant of grace. Paul distills this further in verse 5 to a contrast between living by man's sufficiency and living by God's sufficiency. Living under the law as one's code of life, as one's way by which he relates to God, demands living up to that law on one's own best effort and resources. As we know, no one has the purity and strength of character to begin or develop a relationship with God by law. The book of Galatians is exceedingly clear upon this matter. As is the book of Hebrews. As is the message of the prophets of old, the message of Jesus Himself, and the message of the apostles in the New Testament. The law was never intended as a means to begin or develop a relationship with God. The law was given to show man's desperate need to have a relationship with God based upon something beyond man's own merits. The law demonstrates man's need for forgiveness of sin and need for a new life to draw upon. And of course, this is all provided in the new covenant under the abundant grace of God. Under the new covenant, the believer finds forgiveness of sins and finds a new life to draw upon for daily living.

So then, this study of man's sufficiency versus God's sufficiency is a look at the contrast between trying to live under the terms of the old covenant of law as opposed to living under the new covenant of grace. The old covenant of law leaves man to draw upon his own resources for life and godliness, whereas the new covenant of grace opens up God's sufficiency as the believer's daily supply. As we proceed in this session, we shall discuss a number of contrasts between old covenant living and new covenant living—that is, man's sufficiency versus God's sufficiency.

Ink vs. the Spirit

We looked previously at the issue of God marking believers as letters of Christ. Building a characteristic of Christ's life into the lives of His children, God, by His gracious work, makes the believer into a living statement of who Jesus Christ is and what He can do.

Clearly you are an epistle of Christ, ministered by us, written not with ink but by the Spirit of the living God. (2 Corinthians 3:3)

This passage reminds us the manner by which the believer is crafted into a living epistle—not with ink, but by the Spirit of the Living God. Ink versus Spirit. Ink speaks of human resource, of something man can produce and man can use. It matters not whether the man is merely a natural pagan or a born-again child of God. Anyone can write and work in ink. We might say that just as the rain, the ability to use ink falls on the just and the unjust alike. This is something for which, by God's common grace, even man is sufficient.

That, however, is not the life the believer lives in Christ. This grace falls on God's children alone. Life in Christ must be by the Spirit of the Living God. The believer's epistle is not written by the mere human hand in something as fleeting and fading as ink, but he is written upon by the very Spirit of God. Human resource pales when compared to divine resource.

Christian lives are lives are to be built by the Spirit of the Living God. Hearts are to be touched and changed by the Spirit of the Living God. The life of the believer should be characterized always by a dependence upon Spirit rather than upon ink and the work of human hands. The believer should find his life characterized by the presence and activity of the Spirit of God.

Tablets of Stone vs. Human Hearts

Clearly you are an epistle of Christ, ministered by us, written not with ink but by the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of

stone but on tablets of flesh, that is, of the heart. (2 Corinthians 3:3)

Soft and living, the vessel of the heart stands in stark contrast to the hard coldness of tablets of stone. Tablets of stone are external to the lives of believers. Hearts of flesh sit inside our very being. A tablet of stone is inanimate and simply dead rock. A tablet of the human heart, the tablet for the writing of the message of the Spirit, is alive. The contrast here, between death and life, is enormous. The attempt to live up to a perfect standard that exists external to one's being is here contrasted with God's work of bringing that message of holiness and godliness and His perfect glory into the center of the believer's being. No longer does God write upon the cold, dead stone of Sinai, but now He writes upon the believer's heart and mind.

The heart is critical in living by God's sufficiency. Christ Jesus said, "Guard your heart, for out of it flow all the issues of life." All of life begins in the heart and flows outward. That which occurs within the heart soon becomes apparent on the outside, shining out, shown forth, manifested, and evident to all. Therefore, the believer must guard the heart, must live by what God is doing in the heart, rather than by what he can attain by living up to an external and insufficient standard.

The tablets of stone to which Paul refers exemplify man's attempt to attain a standard external to him (in this case, the tablets of the law Moses brought down from Sinai). When the believer's eyes look to the law of stone, he will always fail for what man is sufficient for such things. Yet when the believer looks to the word God writes upon his human heart, his thinking, motivations, evaluations, and priorities will all be transformed. God works at the very fountainhead of life in the core of His child's being. The Spirit of God dwells in the heart of the believer developing and enacting the very life of Christ in and through the believer. How much better for the believer to

relinquish the hope of shaping his own life of his own resources to live up to the message on the stone, the Ten Commandments. How much better for the believer to have God working from the inside, effecting life changes from His all-sufficient grace. The comparison is laughable. Tablets of stone versus human hearts—the enormous difference between life by man's sufficiency and life by God's.

The Letter vs. the Spirit

Who also made us sufficient as servants of the new covenant, not of the letter but of the Spirit; for the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life. (2 Corinthians 3:6)

Living by the letter speaks of man's sufficiency and reliance upon the old covenant. It speaks of law. Living by the Spirit, though, speaks of God's sufficiency and the blessing of grace for life through the new covenant. The letter demands that rules be kept—and that is death. Whether the Ten Commandments from God Himself or from any manmade moral code, the human being is frail and inept and will necessarily fail to meet its standards.

Too often, believers attempt to levy a letter upon their own heads. "Oh, you cannot do that and be a good Christian." "Oh, you have got to do this to be a growing Christian." "Oh, you cannot do that if you are a Christian." "Well, if you want to really show that you are a Christian, you have got to get into this." And true, these can be proper extrapolations of the moral life of the righteous as stated in Scripture. But such statements are not helpful for they ignore the heart of the matter. Such statements and admonitions center upon man rather than focus upon God.

The Ten Commandments are holy, just, and good and the Scriptures declare them so. They describe the perfect holiness of God. They call to believers, beckoning them to righteousness. But as Hebrews 7:18-19 says, the law makes nothing perfect. The law demands perfection, but cannot forge perfection. It cannot offer anything to cause the perfecting or maturing process to take place in a believer. The law is a measuring rod, a set standard of righteousness, but it cannot function as a source of growth and life for men.

The letter is only a measuring rod of life; it does not nurture, cause, or provide life. Only the Spirit of God can accomplish this. Since life comes not by the law but by the Spirit, the believer should never set upon himself or other believers a new law. The believer's life may certainly (and should certainly) reflect the righteous standard of this letter, but none of this occurs in and of the believer. There is nothing within man to cause such righteousness of life to spring forth. A life's adherence to facets of the law operate more like signs of potential life than as an indication of what is causing such a life to grow and develop. This is the contrast between the letter and the Spirit. It is the difference between living by rules one can never hope to keep and living by the Spirit of God at work to change us.

Ministry of Death vs. Ministry of Life

Next we shall compare and contrast a ministry of the Spirit, the ministry of life, and the ministry of the law, the ministry of death. Ministry can be described as serving up something, providing something, dispensing something, or producing something. In the following passage, there are contrasted two distinct ministries with two distinct goals. Death and life.

[God] who also made us sufficient as ministers of the new covenant, not of the letter but of the Spirit; for the letter kills, but

the Spirit gives life. But if the ministry of death, written and engraved on stones, was glorious, so that the children of Israel could not look steadily at the face of Moses because of the glory of his countenance, which glory was passing away, how will the ministry of the Spirit not be more glorious? (2 Corinthians 3:6-8)

We see clearly that the ministry of death is the ministry of the law, “written and engraved on stones.” The ministry of life, on the other hand, is here called the ministry of the Spirit, for even as the letter of the law brings death and condemnation, the Spirit of the Lord brings life and liberty to believers.

Each member of the body of Christ, in every thought, action, and circumstance, is either ministering death or ministering life. Congregations, too, as they minister, are either ministering death or ministering life. If a believer or congregation is ministering by human sufficiency, death is the result—for life comes only by the Spirit. If a believer or a congregation is ministering by God's sufficiency, abundant life is being served up—for Christ has banished death and reigns as the king of life. So long as one ministers in God's sufficiency, he is ministering the life of Christ through the unceasing power of the Spirit.

The ministry of life has a distinct appearance in a believer's life. The moral reflection of God and the fruit that God can produce will all be naturally characterized in the life, ministry, family, and service of the believer. His life will overflow with love, peace, humility, gentleness, warmth, genuineness, confidence in God, and spiritual fulfillment (fulfillment both in the believer's own life and in the lives of those he serves). And this kind of life can only flow from living by the

sufficiency of God. These are attributes and fruit of the character of God and only by Him can any hope to exhibit such things.

The ministry of death as well has a distinct appearance in a believer's life. Instead of the godly characteristics of love, charity, and joy, and the liberating hope of life in the Spirit, the ministry of death exudes an oppressive man-centeredness. Instead of love, there is ministered judgment. Instead of peace, the believer is overcome in a striving anxiety. Instead of humility, pride and self-righteousness become evident. Instead of confidence in God, there remains self-confidence. Instead of a down-to-earth reality, a genuineness, in the believer's life, there exists hypocrisy and pretense. Instead of fulfillment, all is emptiness and frustration. Instead of gentleness, harshness and roughness become the normal expression. Instead of warmth, the believer is rendered cold and austere.

The church is to be loving and peaceful. The body of Christ is to walk in humility and in a confidence in God. God's children are to be genuine with lives fulfilled in contentment. Believers should radiate warmth and gentleness. These are all characteristics that mark the healthy congregation that basks in the wealth of God's grace. This love cannot come from life in the old covenant. This hope cannot come from life under the letter. This true and lasting joy cannot come by the sweat of human hands working under the guise of human sufficiency. No, this kind of life can come only by the purity and sufficient power of life in the new covenant.

The issue is truly critical for the church too. No matter the teaching and outward appearance of one's church, if it draws upon the wrong resource, it is actively killing people spiritually. The all-to-frequent building up of the congregation by means of touting their personal worth has a devastating effect upon the church. Believers in such situations are being killed with pride. They

are so deluged with the conception that Christ died for them due to their great worth. They are become themselves the pearl of great price. And because this approach encourages believers to value themselves highly, it likewise encourages them to trust upon their own sufficiency rather than God's; and as we have seen, that is the ministry of death.

Such an approach twists the message of Scripture causing great damage to the body of Christ. Scripture certainly speaks of the Father's love for His children, but is likewise certain to describe that He loved His children while they were still wicked sinners. It plainly speaks of the fact that Christ died not for the beautiful, nor for the worthy, but for the ungodly. The unfailing message of God's word is always a magnification of God and His love and how great that love must be to pay such a costly price (His own Son) for the likes of sinful, worthless man. The fact that God loves the believer to so great a degree that He would pay that infinite price for someone who is useless for anything but human glory (and rarely even that) can drive the believer unflinchingly to trust upon God rather than man. Recognizing this truth of God's sufficiency, the believer can find love, acceptance, peace, security, blessing, protection, and joy. And this will change him.

God desires His people to minister life, to take humble part in the ministry of life. He wants believers to offer life to the entire world. The church should offer—from what they themselves have been given—the life that gives people life in God, hope in God, humility before God, love from God, peace with God, genuine reality in the Lord, and the character of Christ Himself.

The Ministry of Condemnation vs. the Ministry of Righteousness

So the believer is given to choose between the ministry of life and the ministry of death. This can also be spoken of as the difference between the ministry of condemnation and the ministry of righteousness.

For if the ministry of condemnation had glory, the ministry of righteousness exceeds much more in glory. (2 Corinthians 3:9)

Comparing Paul's two terms here, the ministry of condemnation and the ministry of righteousness, we again find stark contrast.

The ministry of condemnation speaks of living by the letter of the law and living by the sufficiency of man. It condemns the man, declaring him guilty and a failure. The ministry of condemnation is typified in the law. If one tries to live up to the law everyday, he lives a condemning experience. Recall the standard: Be as holy as God. And from Leviticus and 1 Peter: "Be holy, for I the Lord your God am holy." And from Matthew 5:48: "Be perfect as your Father in heaven is perfect." That is the standard to which men must attain if they are to live holy by the law. So no matter how well one lives, when brought before God's standard of righteousness, he is only ministered condemnation if his trust rests upon his own works and discipline.

Living by his own sufficiency, man will be left only under condemnation. This is a restrictive way to live, always walking under the burden of guilt and failure. It can be both repressive and inhibiting to live under the law for as guilt and condemnation mounts, the believer who stands under this ministry of death will begin to see only his own malfunctions without recognizing the power of Christ's gracious work. This kind of life, one based off the merit of one's performance, leaves people consistently uneasy with God because they can never do enough to satisfy His holy standard of perfection. Because of this inability and their belief that they must rely upon their own ability, they harbor the conception that God is always mad at them or discouraged by their

lack of ability. They begin to feel as though God is against them. This is the fruit of the ministry of condemnation.

The ministry of righteousness, however, revolves around living by the resources of God. This is new covenant living. This is living by the grace of God. And its results are astounding. The ministry of righteousness announces and declares that by faith in Christ, man can be righteous in Christ. And that righteousness of Christ is available daily—for daily living by faith. Contrasting with the ministry of condemnation, the message of this ministry is one of liberation. It offers an enabling, strengthening, encouraging power to people who embrace it. The relationship with God for those who seek life under the ministry of righteousness is not built upon personal performance (that is, what can be done for God), but upon what God has already done for them in Christ.

The ministry of righteousness brings the believer to become increasingly at ease with God. It allows for building a relationship with God and drawing nigh to God. Those under this ministry of life need not run nor hide from God for it is upon His righteousness—and not their own—that they are secured. Instead, these people are seeking God and approaching God without fear because they know Christ is their propitiation. Christ is the satisfactory payment for their debt of sin. The believer should realize that God is not mad; He is satisfied. His wrath has already been poured out upon Christ, and therefore, there is none left to pour upon the believer. God is not looking for a chance to get mad at His children; He is looking for a chance to show His child how much He loves him.

And this is the ministry with which we ought to minister upon one another. We ought to be always pointing the believer to the righteousness of Christ for in the ministry of righteousness, Christ is not only our substitute on the cross, forgiving our sin and death and giving us new life,

but He is as well our daily resource of life. Each day we ought to draw from Him what we need for the challenges, opportunities, situations that face us.

If we live by the sufficiency of man, if we try to urge others to live by the sufficiency of man, we are merely dispensing condemnation to them. But if we will live by the sufficiency of God and urge others to do the same, we are ministering righteousness—righteousness from Christ and in Christ that covers our sin and offers us a whole new life into which we can grow.

Fading Glory vs. Remaining Glory

Now we should look at Paul's use of "glory" that has appeared numerous times now. So far we have looked at these contrasts: ink versus the Spirit, tablets of stone versus human hearts, the letter versus the Spirit, the ministry of death versus the ministry of life, and the ministry of condemnation versus the ministry of righteousness. Now we shall contrast fading glory and remaining glory.

For if what is passing away was glorious, what remains is much
more glorious. (2 Corinthians 3:11; cf. also v. 7)

Compare these: a life characterized by fading glory versus one by remaining glory. The first is built upon man's sufficiency. The other is built upon God's sufficiency. The first is comes by performance under the letter of the law. The other comes by receiving God's resources under the grace of God.

The fading glory is similar to the hype of a religious pep rally—when the numbers of Christendom gather together, five thousand, ten thousand, seventy thousand, all together in a

stadium chanting, "Jesus! Jesus!" "We'll take the world for Him! We'll be faithful to Him!"

Caught in the moment, these are adrenalized into believing that they are superhuman, never able to stumble or fall again. And it is certainly a glorious moment—but in truth, a moment of fading glory. When the believer is off alone two weeks later, where is the glory of the 70,000? It becomes a four-way duel: just the believer, the world, the flesh, and the devil. The feeling is one of trepidation as the lone believer is now clearly outnumbered. Two weeks earlier, this believer was in the assembled multitude, chanting in glory, proclaiming "new life" with the greatest intent and willpower. But glorious as that was in the moment, if it was based upon human sufficiency, it will be a fading glory.

Glory will always fade when born of the forge of man's sufficiency because such glory is dependent upon man's ability and man's faithfulness, which are fleeting. The believer might have the greatest of intentions. He might even go so far as to make a serious and profound vow. But if the believer is drawing upon his own resources, then soon his own inability and his own unfaithfulness will be demonstrated.

Fortunately, the believer does not have to function in the Christian life with a fading glory. There is a remaining glory, an eternal glory, that can abide with him day after day after day after day. This is a glory that remains like the everlasting God, who always was, always is and always shall be—for it is a glory born of Him and of His grace. The glory remains because the everlasting God is one who has promised to His children that He will never leave nor forsake them. God reveals this glory in the hope and the strength of the heart that is looking to Him rather than the hype of the moment. That is a wonder! When the entire multitude is departed and the believer stands alone again, he is truly far from alone, for God is still there. He has not changed. He still stands available to the believer's every need. He is still committed to His people. He is still able. And He

infuses His people with a lasting glory—the kind of glory remains after all is departed. Because it depends on His ability and His faithfulness, this glory is never-failing.

Substantial Glory vs. Excelling Glory

How will the ministry of the Spirit not be more glorious? For if the ministry of condemnation had glory, the ministry of righteousness exceeds much more in glory. For even what was made glorious had no glory in this respect, because of the glory that excels. For if what is passing away was glorious, what remains is much more glorious. (2 Corinthians 3:8-11)

Upon the one side there is a substantial glory and on the other, an excelling glory. The first is the glory of the law, the old covenant. The law truly was glorious. It came with glory. It had glory. But Paul here speaks of the new covenant of grace, living by God's sufficiency, as an excelling glory—as something more glorious than that which came before.

The old covenant, the law, definitely had a certain glory. The law points out the basic problem of man, his sin. The law points as well to the righteous character of God. When Moses went up upon Sinai and received the law, he came down with his face shining from glory. Yet the glory was fading (2 Corinthians 3:7). God always intended that the glory of the law would fade before the surpassing, exceeding, and remaining glory of the new covenant.

And Moses put on a veil for the sake of the people because the glory apparent upon his face was terrifying to them. The glory of the old covenant was truly glorious. Yet still it was a fading

glory, which was passing away. Moses put the veil on for the right reason—to protect the people from the glory of God—but he kept it on for the wrong reason. He put it on to protect the people. He kept it on to protect himself and the implied position in God's graces that the veil represented.

Therefore, since we have such hope, we use great boldness of speech—unlike Moses, who put a veil over his face so that the children of Israel could not look steadily at the end of what was passing away. (2 Corinthians 3:12-13)

The believer is often tempted to act in the same manner as Moses, pretending for the sake of others that his spiritual life is glory-filled that people would honor him. But Moses should not be emulated in this for his glory was passing. If there is any glory at all in the believer's life, it is to be there only as a result of God's at work in him. This glory is continuously given to Him anyway. If anyone notes anything glorious and shining about the believer, it is to be God working in him (rather than the glory of his own labors). By the new covenant, the believer takes heart in the fact that he is not sufficient of himself. He revels in the fact that he cannot think of anything as being from himself. He knows and finds comfort in the truth that if anything is seen to be sufficient, godly, or glorious in him, that glory comes from God alone.

As there is a glory that is intended to fade, the glory of the old, even so there is a glory that is excelling glory. As glorious as the law is in its ability to condemn to perfection, so much better is the glorious remedy to that perfect condemnation. Glory be to God that the law reveals the heart of the problem. Man is sinful; God is not. Man is alienated from Him. And once forgiven, man looks at the perfect standard of the law and still cannot stand up to it. He is fully inadequate. And as glorious as it is to be shown these things, so much better the glory of the new covenant truth of

grace. Sin is remedied. Man's insufficient power to do good is relieved. The believer no longer has to attain adequacy for he is made adequate by a source far beyond his own power. This comes from God. This is an excelling, surpassing glory.

Conclusion

Man's sufficiency versus God's sufficiency is the critical issue here. For most struggling Christians, the battle is right here and climaxes about these issues. For those who have a vision to serve and please God, the fulfillment of that vision is found here. Living by man's sufficiency or God's sufficiency is the difference between being servants of the new covenant or servants of the old covenant. The old covenant—law, letter, man's resource—brings death. The new covenant—grace, God at work, God's abundant sufficient resources for life—brings life.

Not that we are sufficient of ourselves to think of anything as being from ourselves, but our sufficiency is from God, who also made us sufficient as servants of the new covenant, not of the letter but of the Spirit; for the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life.

(2 Corinthians 3:5)

May our hearts receive the message of the Lord, embrace the vivid contrast and implications between these two ministries and be drawn to walk in humility, admitting we do not have the resource needed. But also in faith and dependence upon God, may we know and take heart in the fact that He does have the resource that is needed. This message is not just about man's bankruptcy, spiritually. It speaks of God's bountiful grace that is infinite, spiritually. Embracing the reality of both of these truths is where God wants us to walk.

Lord, I am not sufficient to consider anything that would be godly: pleasing You, touching hearts, changing lives, seeing souls saved, or building the kingdom. Such worthy deeds cannot come out of my own natural, even dedicated human resources. But I believe that everything that is needed can come out of Your abundant and comprehensively sufficient resources of life. I willingly acknowledge that I am inadequate for these things, but you are fully adequate. I renounce trust in myself. Help me to put all my hope and trust in You O Lord. Thank You that Your yoke is easy and Your burden is light. Amen.