

Into the All Sufficiency of Christ #1 - Emptied

by Ed Miller

The sermon emphasizes the importance of understanding the all-sufficiency of Christ and how it is the secret to the Apostle Paul's life.

Duration: 39:47

Scripture: Hosea 7:8, 2 Corinthians 9:8, 2 Corinthians 10:3-5, Philippians 4:19, 1 Timothy 1:16-17

Topics: "Christ Sufficiency", "Spiritual Dependence"

Description

In this sermon, the speaker outlines the structure of the book of Romans and its message. The first seven chapters focus on the sufficiency of Christ in the believer's life. Chapters 8 and 9 highlight how Christ is sufficient through the believer, and the remaining chapters emphasize how Christ is all-sufficient for the believer, eliminating the need for self-defense. The speaker emphasizes that God delivers believers from the allure of the world by pouring out His mercies and allowing them to experience affliction and dependence on Him.

Transcript

And there's no way we can ever be bondservants of one another, of our fellow man, unless we understand what it means, Christ Jesus as Lord. It would be nice if we could just take the foundation for granted, but I remember a long time ago a brother in Christ shared this with me. He says, never take for granted anything when you share the Word of God, because they will never go out with what you think they know.

They'll only go out with what you give them. And so I haven't taken anything for granted, and so if you hear simple truths, that's what you'll hear anyway. Simple truths, you've heard them before.

Ask God to revive you again and to quicken you. There's nothing new that I'm going to share with you all weekend. But I pray God will quicken us to some of the old truths again.

The Apostle Paul had come to this place where Christ Jesus was Lord and where he was a bondservant of others. And there's a process by which the Apostle Paul came to see this. And what I'd like to do in the introduction tonight, I'd just sort of like to feel along to get the heart of what's on my heart, the burden I'd like to share, and then begin to develop it.

And then through the weekend, I think you'll see very clearly where we're heading. If I have a burning desire in my heart for some theme, usually I study book studies. I like book studies.

I like to study Chronicles and Joshua and Acts. I like whole books. But every now and then, I'm inclined to do topics.

And one of the things that I always do when I do topics, and since this is sort of topical, I did it this time, I ask these two questions. Number one, has God, the Holy Spirit, somewhere in the Bible, illustrated that topic? Has God given some illustration? It doesn't matter if it's Old or New Testament. It always helps me to have a picture, some historical story that I can follow.

God just seems to love to fossilize eternal principles in some of these stories. And so, has God given an illustration? And then the second question, if so, where? And so, in terms of this servant message, let me just ask those two questions. Has the Holy Spirit given us, somewhere in the Bible, an example of someone who understood thoroughly what it was to have Christ Jesus as Lord and themselves bond servants to their fellow men? Has God given us an illustration of that? And I believe He's given us one, and let me be bold for a moment.

Trust me for it, and I think I'll show it to you. I think God has given one such illustration, and only one. I don't think there's more than one illustration of this in the Bible.

And I'd like to share that one illustration. Now, at first, if you have a spiritual mind, you might say, I know right away what that illustration is. It's our Lord Jesus Himself.

He's the model. He's the example. He's the illustration.

Certainly, Jesus knew what it was to live in a relationship with His Father. Of course, no one else has ever poured out themselves for others like our Lord Jesus. And I think Jesus, in a sense, is a good illustration of the principle.

But in a sense, the way He lived disqualified Him for that. In the first place, the Lord Jesus didn't live by grace, as we're called to live by grace, especially if you take grace to be unmerited favor, undeserved favor. Jesus didn't live that way.

He didn't need God's undeserved favor. And secondly, I know He lived in dependence upon His Father. I'm not saying He didn't exercise faith.

But He didn't live by faith in the way God has called us to live by faith. In fact, I think Galatians 4, 4 and 5, when the fullness of time came, God sent forth His Son, born of a woman, born under the law. I think the Lord Jesus lived by law.

He obeyed God. He got what you get by unmerited favor. He got that through a perfect obedience.

So there is an illustration, but I don't think the Lord Jesus is God's illustration of that life. In fact, if Christ were that model, I'm sure Satan would tempt us to say it's unattainable. Jesus was the model.

He's the God-man. And He lived that way because of who He was. And so we couldn't live that way anyway.

And so you go through the Word of God and you say, many men of God in the Bible, many women of God, certainly somebody must have been that illustration of knowing Christ as Lord and themselves bond servants. You can study Moses. He's a great picture of meekness.

You can study Job, a picture of patience. Study Elijah. Learn something about courage, perhaps.

Abraham, a picture of faith. Solomon, of wisdom. I could study the Apostle John, learn something about devotion.

Or David, to teach the same thing, worship. Peter, progressive sanctification. I think whether you take Bible saints or whether you take saints post-Bible, Augustine and Luther and Calvin and Whitefield and Wesley and Mueller and whatever list you read, I think you'll find that every one of those Bible saints I've mentioned, every one I haven't mentioned, and all of those post-Bible saints, are incomplete models of the Christian life.

Not one of them is a complete model of the Christian life. I don't think God would have us pattern our lives after any saint that we read about or any biography we read. I believe God has put in the Bible one and only one complete model of the Christian life.

He's given us a picture of the new covenant life, and I think that God would have us check all of our Christian experience by that one model. This one life is a safeguard against all incomplete models of the Christian life. And I think you already know who I'm referring to.

I'm talking about the Apostle Paul. I think the Apostle Paul was selected by God as the only complete model of the victorious Christian life. He alone had it all together.

Now listen to these verses. I've jotted them down to save time. The Apostle knew it, too.

The Holy Spirit told him he was going to do that with him. And in a sense, he lived under the weight of that. Acts 9, 15 and 16.

To Ananias, he's a chosen instrument of mine, to bear my name before the Gentiles and kings and the sons of Israel. I will show him how much he must suffer for my sake. 1 Corinthians 4, 16.

I exhort you, therefore, brethren, be imitators of me. 1 Corinthians 11, 1. Same thing. Be imitators of me, just as I am of Christ.

Philippians 4, 9. The things you've learned and received and heard of me, practice these things. 1 Thessalonians 1, 6. Become imitators of us. 2 Thessalonians 3, 7-9.

You yourselves know how you ought to follow our example. We did not act in an undisciplined manner among you, nor did we eat anyone's bread without paying for it. With labor and hardship, we kept working, night and day, so that we might not be a burden to any of you.

Not that we do not have the right to do this, but in order that we might offer ourselves a model to you, that you might follow our example. And then, finally, 1 Timothy 1, 16-17. For this reason I found mercy, in order that in me, as the foremost, Jesus Christ might demonstrate His perfect patience as an example for all who should believe in Him for eternal life.

The Apostle Paul recognized that God had selected him, of all people that ever lived, to be the model, the complete model, of the life that we're going to describe. All through his ministry, he referred to it. In Hosea 7, verse 8, we read this, Ephraim is a cake not turned.

That's just another way of saying half-baked. Brown on one side and uncooked on the other side. I believe that many Christians, probably all of them, in some way is half-baked.

Burned on one side, raw on one side. We all seem to have our own distinctive emphasis. And we all have our own caricature.

We go after one thing or after another thing. And I believe only the Apostle Paul was properly cooked on both sides. We're all half-baked.

And everybody that we follow, except the Apostle Paul, is going to lead us astray if they're the only ones we follow. That's what's good about brethren. That's what's good about the body, because we're not left to one individual and we can see Christ everywhere in all of His people.

But if you want one illustration, I think God has given us one in the Apostle Paul. Jesus was Lord of his life and Paul was a bond slave, a bondservant of men. Outside of the Lord Jesus, the Apostle Paul was the world's greatest sufferer.

2 Corinthians 7.5 describes, I think in a summary of his life, he said, Our flesh had no rest. We were afflicted on every side, conflicts without and fears within. Even Job didn't suffer like the Apostle Paul.

See, Job had 140 years after his suffering of blessing. The Apostle Paul suffered right up to the end, right up to the last month. And so much for the illustration.

Yes, God has given us an illustration. All the eggs in one basket, the whole ball of wax. The Apostle Paul is the model and the safeguard against every incomplete model that we'd ever see.

That's why the Lord allowed the Apostle Paul to experience everything any Christian would ever go through. You see, when God needed one church to be the model church that will go through everything, He chose Corinth. And when He chose one man as His model, He chose the Apostle Paul.

The second question is, if God has given us that picture, where? Where is it recorded? Where can I find that theme unfolding? Once again, just like our heart was tempted to go to the Lord Jesus for the model, we're tempted to go to the book of Acts since that's the Apostle Paul, that's the story of his life, that's his conversion, that's his missionary journey, that's his ministry. There we read about his sufferings. And yet you'll find if you study the book of Acts that Acts is the outside view of the Apostle Paul.

It's Paul, alright, but it's the outside view. Is there an inside view? Is there a passage of Scripture that gives us the inside of the Apostle Paul so that he can expound as God begins this process of creating that kind of a person? And again, I would say, yes there is, obviously. I wouldn't be doing this series.

I'm talking about the book of 2 Corinthians. The book of 2 Corinthians. If you've read 2 Corinthians in a sitting, you'll notice what all other commentators have noticed when they've read it.

It's very unsystematic. It's not like some of the other books. Romans is very systematic, very logical.

1 Corinthians is very systematic. 1, 2, 3, A, B, C, little A, little B, little C. But in 2 Corinthians, if you read it on the surface, it almost looks like the Apostle Paul is jumping all over the place. In fact, some commentators suggest this is so unsystematic that it wasn't even a letter.

That the Apostle didn't even write it as a letter. Instead, we've discovered his diary, they say. This was his diary, and he just jotted these things down as he went on his travels.

Every day he jotted a little down, and the Holy Spirit preserved it. This book has been called Paul's autobiography. One commentary calls it a series of sobs.

And certainly it is a tearful letter. Another said it's the heartbeat of Paul. Paul's testimony in Paul's words.

You know, when someone has been a blessing in your life, somehow you find yourself gravitating toward that person. You want to get close to that person. May I suggest, brothers, that you can get close to the Apostle Paul in the study of 2 Corinthians.

In 2 Corinthians, Paul just unveils his heart. He just puts himself on paper. Deeply personal.

2 Corinthians is not cut and dried. Not at all. The Apostle Paul just pours himself out.

One man described this as a quill dipped in tears, written from the anguish of his heart. Another man calls this Paul's garden of Gethsemane. It's his testimony.

And here Paul unveils the process by which God taught him what it meant to have Jesus as Lord and what it meant to be a bondservant. Perfect model. At one time, the number one enemy of the Lord Jesus, the greatest legalist that ever lived, now somehow transformed into the number one friend of our Lord Jesus, the greatest minister of the grace of God that ever lived.

Alright, you see what we've done so far. So far we've had two great points. What are we going to look at? Service.

What's the illustration? Paul. Where's it found? 2 Corinthians. See how we're moving along? I'd like to show you from 2 Corinthians a couple of principles that Paul writes down in testimony form to show how God brought him to that place.

Now, what I'd like to do, I'm going to give you three principles. We're going to look at the first one tonight. Underneath all of the principles, the background of everything, you can call it the secret of Paul.

And this isn't the first principle, but you're going to see how it's tied into all the principles. It's the theme of 2 Corinthians. It's the all-sufficiency of our Lord Jesus Christ.

That was the secret of everything. The apostle discovered, rather God discovered to the apostle that Jesus was enough. That Jesus was adequate.

That Jesus was all-sufficient. And that becomes the secret of his life. And when the apostle discovers that, God begins then to write these principles that we're going to look at.

And we'll try to state them very clearly and we'll look at them very simply. And then may God give us light and may God create us after this model. Now, we're not studying 2 Corinthians as a book this weekend, but let me just suggest a little outline.

This is very unsystematic and it's hard to outline, but I think you'll see if you trace the big sections that this theme goes through. Let me just suggest this outline for your own personal study. In the first 7 chapters, the apostle writes down in testimony form what it means to have Christ all-sufficient in him.

And then in chapters 8 and 9, he shows what it means to have Christ all-sufficient through him. And then in chapters 10, through the rest of the book, Christ is all-sufficient for him so that he doesn't have to defend himself in any way. Of course, all-sufficient through him is illustrated by that great stewardship chapters.

Money just becomes the illustration of the flow of ministry. Anyway, let me give you those... I'm not going to give you all three right now, but here's the outline that we'd like to follow for those that like logical connection, and now we'll get right down to it. Three principles that show the process by which God created in Paul 2 Corinthians 4-5.

I'm going to ask you to turn, please, to chapter 1. We'll look at verses 8-11, which gives us our first principle. We do not want you to be unaware, brethren, of our affliction which came to us in Asia. We were burdened excessively beyond our strength, so that we despaired even of life.

Indeed, we had the sentence of death within ourselves in order that we should not trust in ourselves, but in God who raises the dead, who delivered us from so great a peril of death, who will deliver us, he on whom we have set our hope. He will yet deliver us. You also joining in helping us through your prayers, that thanks may be given by many persons on our behalf for the favor bestowed upon us through the prayers of many.

All right, let me give you the first principle. I'll just state it for you, and then try to unfold it a little bit. God help me.

Before Paul could become our model, before Paul could become that blueprint, before he could know Christ as Lord and himself a bondservant, God had to work this in his life. Here's the principle. It can be summarized in these words.

God had to take Paul beyond Paul and into the all-sufficiency of Jesus. Before this could happen, God had to take Paul beyond Paul and into the all-sufficiency of the Lord Jesus. And brothers, what was true of the model, what was true of the example, must be true in the lives of anyone who would follow that example.

If you're going to know what it means to have Jesus as Lord and yourself a bondservant, God must take you beyond you and into the all-sufficiency of Jesus. And if I'm to know that truth, as the apostle knew it, then God must take me beyond me and into the all-sufficiency of Jesus. You know, sometimes we have a very shallow view of ministry.

We think about our gifts and our talents, and if they're dedicated to the Lord, if they're used for the Lord. You know, I can just dedicate my energy for God and my service for God, my talents and so on. And then I minister when I let God use my voice and when I let God use my heart and when I let God use my notes and so on.

Ministry lies beyond that. Notice in verse 8, please, and 9, Paul begins to describe what God allowed in his life. I'm using the New American Standard.

If it reads a little differently, and I don't know what version you're using, but it says, we were burdened excessively. And then he adds this, burdened beyond our strength. Mr. Weiss translates that, we were weighed down far beyond our power.

If you have NIV, it says, we were under great pressure, far beyond our ability to endure. So much so that verse 8 and 9 says, so we despaired even of life. We had the sentence of death within ourselves.

Now, he's describing something there in verse 8 that happened to them in Asia. For the moment, it's not important to know what. In fact, commentators can't settle on it anyway.

Was it Acts 19, 23 to 41, the outcry by Demetrius against Paul? Was it his shipwreck and the treading of his water? Was he talking about some emotional distress that was caused to him by the state of affairs at Corinth? He had some frustrating confrontation with the Judaizers, the legalists. Maybe that was it. Or others would say, no, it was his bad eyes, or the wild beasts at Ephesus, or his imprisonment, or his thorn in the flesh.

For now, it doesn't matter what it was. Something, God allowed, was more than he could bear, beyond his strength. Now, whatever it was that God used, according to Paul, it was beyond his strength.

You've probably heard these expressions. Maybe you've used them. Pushed to the limit.

My wits end. The end of my rope. The end of the line.

Down to the wire. Right to the edge. Brothers, we need to see this, because it becomes very important to the principles that follow.

The Holy Spirit did not push Paul to the limit. You read it in Corinthians. Paul was pressed beyond the limit.

Not to the limit. Beyond the limit. That's what it said.

Anatomists tell us that we all have different limits as to how much we can bear. Doctors call these thresholds. We all have different thresholds.

Now, we all experience pain the same way. We all have millions of little nerve endings called receptors. And when someone kicks you in the ankle, then a little nerve goes up and tells your brain, ouch, and then you respond.

But according to those who claim to know, we all have different thresholds of pain. Some of us can take more than others. You know, when you read some of the tortures inflicted by men on men, it's amazing, really, what the human body can take.

We have thresholds of pain. I don't know how you approach this. I personally think women have a greater threshold for pain than men.

At least my woman does. Now, what's true of pain is really true, and if you could only think of your life in terms of this, that your life is really made up of limits and we're all different. We all have different limits, different thresholds, different boundaries.

There's mental thresholds and energy thresholds and personality thresholds, emotional thresholds, volitional thresholds. God not only took Paul to the wire, but God took Paul over the line, over the wire, and I'm suggesting this, and I think we'll see it as we go along. God pressed and pressed and pressed on that man to be the example, to be the model, until he went over all his lines and all his thresholds.

Until he went beyond his threshold of pain and suffering. Until he went beyond his threshold of patience. Until he went beyond his threshold of willpower.

Until he went beyond his threshold of hope. Until Paul was driven beyond Paul naturally. He had to go beyond himself.

And the Holy Spirit pressed him and pressed him. He drove him beyond his strength, beyond his righteousness, beyond his wisdom, beyond his own resources, beyond his friends. Some people have trouble with this.

They say there's a contradiction there between that passage and 1 Corinthians 10.13 where God says He won't push us beyond that which we are able. There's no temptation taken you. Then in the Navigators, remember I said, no temptation taken you, but such as is common to man, God's faithful.

He will not allow you to be tempted above that you are able, but will with the temptation make a way of escape that ye may be able to bear it. Now, is that a contradiction, brothers? Is God saying I'll never drive you beyond your thresholds, beyond your limits? You know, that's how it's often interpreted. God won't give me more than I can bear.

God knows my limits. God knows my capacities. He knows what I can take.

When God sees I've taken all I can take, then He'll give me relief or He'll take me home. See, we've all heard that or said that or maybe felt that. But if we're serious about being God's bond slaves and having a bond slave's heart, we need to understand that God must, not only sometimes does, but God must.

It's the first principle. God must take us beyond all of our threshold. When He said He's not going to give you more than you're able, He wasn't saying more than you're able in your own strength.

He wasn't saying more than you're able in your flesh, drawing on your resources. It's not more than you can bear. It's more than faith can bear.

It's more than you laying hold of God can bear. That's the context of that. Verse 9, He tells you why God pushed Him beyond His limits.

God pushed Him over every line and God pushed Him beyond His threshold. Very simple. He says in order that we should not trust ourselves.

See why God has to push you over the line? In order that you should not trust yourself. Proverbs 28, 26 says, He who trusts his own heart is a fool. You see, God knows that already, but we need to know that.

We need to know the folly of trusting ourselves. You see, unless God pressed the Apostle Paul beyond the line, the Apostle Paul would trust the Apostle Paul. And unless God pushes you over the line, you're going to trust yourself every time.

I'm going to trust myself. You see, God had to press Paul beyond Paul or Paul would trust Paul's righteousness. God had to press Paul beyond Paul or Paul would trust Paul's strength, and his own willpower, and his own courage, and his own patience.

He trusts his own love. He trusts his own gifts. He trusts his own ingenuity.

He trusts his own creativity. And so God pushed, and God pushed, and God pressed, and Paul said, I'm almost to the limit. And God said, yeah, push again.

Can't take much more. Good, push again. And again, until finally Paul cried out in verse 9, we had the sentence of death in ourselves.

Finally Paul cried out, I'm a dead man. You know, the principle there that Paul is saying, he said, God pushed me beyond Paul. God pushed me beyond my threshold.

God pushed me beyond my limits. I cried out, I'm a dead man, and I finally saw that I couldn't trust Paul anymore, and I could trust the corpse. Imagine carrying a corpse with you every place you went.

Let me ask you this, brothers. How many times would you look to that corpse for help, for advice? You're carrying a body with you, a dead body. How many times would you look for counsel from that corpse, or help, or aid, or assistance, or guidance? Only once.

I think only once. And then you'd learn. You can't trust a corpse.

I suppose to keep a secret, you could trust a corpse. And Paul said, listen, God pushed me so far that I learned that there was no more value in trusting myself than there was in trusting a corpse. God pushed me over the line, and I saw that I was a dead man.

Now, not much would be gained at this point to go into the infinite variety of the ways God has of pushing us over the line, because I think He does it differently in all of our lives. He's going to press you one way. He's going to press me another way.

But, brother, as sure as God is God, and this word is true, if you're serious about knowing Christ Jesus is Lord, and about being a bondservant, a bondservant for others, I guarantee you God is going to push you beyond all your thresholds in order that you would not trust yourself. That's only part of it. But on the other side of that line, when you cross the line, and you're on the other side of you, not trust ourselves, but God who raises the dead.

You see, on the other side for Paul was God who raises the dead. And according to the testimony, you can read it here, it wasn't an easy thing for Paul to be pressed beyond his limits, beyond his thresholds, and he struggled just like we would. But I tell you, when he crossed that line, and he stood there, and he stood and saw the all-sufficiency of the Lord Jesus, Paul must be pressed beyond Paul's nature, his resources, in order that he might know the all-sufficiency of Christ.

In order that I might know the all-sufficiency of Christ. Now, before we leave this as a principle, I want to illustrate one more thing, and then we're done. As you know, and I sense, again, from our fellowship and the direction of the hearts, as you've already expressed them, I'd be a dead man if I brought legalism this weekend.

I just know it. I can sense that. You were created to know God.

And you were redeemed to know God. You're not left here because you've got a job to do. You're left here because you've got a God to know.

And there are ways that earth reveals Him that heaven can't. And you need to know God here, and I need to know God here. Now, I speak as a fool when I say this, but God sort of had a problem on His hands.

You know what I mean when I say, speak as a fool. God has no problem. God's goal has always been Himself and you, we, one, one with Him.

But when God found us, and again, I'm just putting this in human terms to get the point across, that we were terribly alive to this present evil world. Think back when God found you, so dazzled by the glitter and all the stuff this world offers, the promises and the pleasures and the sensualities and so on, all of its captivating scenes. It all looked so good, and we were just so held by the principles of this world.

And somehow, if we're going to know God and the ways of God, God's going to have to press us beyond this world. How does He do that? How's He going to get our attention? How's He going to deliver us from the shallowness of this world to teach us that this world means nothing, and money means nothing, and land means nothing, and success means nothing, and pleasure means nothing, and sin means nothing? How's God going to do that? Well, the book of Romans opens up how God does that. The answer is, He pours out His mercies.

He pours out His mercies. Almost by contrast, He shows us the vanity of this life by unveiling the surpassing beauty of the other life. And He shows us the foolishness of sin.

And He sets us free. And He brings into our lives to replace the children of darkness, children of light. And He takes away the awful gloom, and He gives us joy and peace and some of His other gifts.

He pours out His mercies. And I mean He dumps them on us. So we begin to experience forgiveness and acceptance with God and joy and liberty and peace and mercy.

We have mercy on mercy and benefit on benefit and gift on gift. And God just dumps this on us. Sort of like a family that has little children, and He goes into the room and the kid's playing with a knife and with drugs and with a gun and explosives.

And they bring in a truckload of toys. And they just dump it in the room. All of a sudden the kid gets away from the dangerous things and begins playing with the toys.

But the father wants the child to be occupied with himself. So at first he was occupied with dangerous things. And then all of a sudden he's occupied with toys.

Still not occupied with the father. Still not occupied with the parents. And so God, in order to draw us from the world, He pours on His mercies.

Mercy, mercy, mercy, mercy. And then finally He says, Now I beseech you by the mercies of God. Because of all that I've given you and all that you've tasted and all you've experienced, forgiveness and joy and relationship and fellowship, victory, all that, I beseech you.

And so God presses and presses and presses and presses. And pretty soon we say, I don't even want the world. Praise God.

He's pressed me beyond the world. God, I said, has a problem on His hands. Now God must move again and press us again.

I really believe with all of my heart that many Christians are bored right here. They can't let go of the toys. There's no joy in the joy of God.

There's only joy in God. There's no peace in the peace of God. There's only peace in the God of peace.

And God must now press us until we are willing to be pressed beyond all His mercies. See, that was the accusation that Satan made to God against Job. That you're not wonderful enough in yourself to serve apart from your gifts.

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