

**02/01/26 Who is Sufficient?
2 Corinthians 2:12-17**

Welcome...

We are studying the book of 2 Corinthians. Paul had written the first letter to the Corinthians and was waiting to hear a report from Titus on the state of affairs in the Corinthian church. While waiting for that report, Paul sensed in an acute way his own helplessness and weakness and came to appreciate how utterly dependent he was on God to accomplish anything of lasting value in his ministry. He explains that the Christian life and ministry are not fueled by self-reliance but by Christ's victory, Christ's message, and Christ's power at work in us.

So, this passage invites us to ask an honest question: Who is really sufficient for the work God has called us to? The answer leads us to rest not in ourselves, but in the all-sufficient Christ, so that all the glory belongs to Him alone.

Let's read 2 Corinthians 2:12-17...

There have been Sundays when I've walked away from this pulpit and thought, Well... that didn't go the way I hoped. The sermon didn't feel as focused as I'd hoped. I stumbled a bit in delivery, and there seemed to be little response.

After church, that familiar question crept into my mind: Was I faithful to deliver the truth of God's Word? Or did I just fail?

Then a few days later, I received a note from someone who had been there that morning. They wrote, "I came in discouraged and ready to give up. But pastor, how did you know what I was going through? Through the preaching of God's Word, my focus shifted from my circumstances to my Savior. I left with new hope in Jesus."

What I assumed was a disappointing Sunday was, in fact, a moment of God's quiet triumph.

That experience exposed something in my own heart. I tend to measure ministry—and honestly, life—by what I can see: responses, results, affirmation, changed hearts and changed lives. And when those things are missing, I'm tempted to assume failure.

The apostle Paul knew that struggle. In our text this morning, he opens the door into his own heart—his anxiety, his weakness, his unsettled spirit. And yet, in the middle of all that, he makes a stunning declaration: "Thanks be to God, who always leads us in triumph in Christ."

Paul reminds us that our sufficiency does not come from ourselves. It does not come from our ability, our confidence, or our visible success. Our sufficiency is found in Christ alone. And because Christ has already triumphed, God is at work even when we can't see it.

Main point: 2 Corinthians 2:12–17 shows us four ways our sufficiency is in Christ so that the glory belongs to Him alone.

First, Our Sufficiency is Not Found in Self-Reliance in verses 12-13.

Second, Our Sufficiency is Secured in Christ's Triumph in verse 14

Third, Our Sufficiency Transforms How We See People in verses 15-16 we bear the aroma of Christ—whether that aroma is received with joy or resisted with hostility. And fourth:

Fourth, Our Sufficiency is Proven Through Faithful Integrity in verse 17 by sincerity before God, speaking Christ-centered truth in reliance on Him.

My prayer is that you will know and believe that your sufficiency is not found in your performance, your success, or your circumstances, but in Christ alone. When you feel restless, anxious, or weak you will look to Christ and rest in His triumph. I pray that as you walk with Christ and the aroma of Christ is with you, that you will be faithful witnesses whether your message is welcomed or rejected. May we walk in integrity God to work through our obedience.

So Paul's answer to the question Who is sufficient? is clear: Not the minister. Not the method. Not the moment. Christ alone is sufficient. And that's where we begin.

I. Our Sufficiency is Not Found in Self-Reliance.

Verses 12-13...

Troas was a seaport on the Aegean Sea in western Asia Minor. It was about ten miles from the famous city of Troy, for which it was named. Troas was founded in 300 B.C., and Emperor Augustus had granted it the coveted status of a Roman colony.

From Acts 19:23-41 we learn there was a serious riot in Ephesus sparked by Paul's fearless preaching of the gospel. It was this riot may have prompted the Paul's departure for Troas.

But more importantly, Paul hoped to meet Titus there. Paul had sent Titus to Corinth to find out how the church there had responded to letter of First Corinthians. Anxiously awaiting Titus's report, Paul feared the worst, and his heart was heavy with concern. Paul knew that Titus would pass through Troas on his way back to Ephesus from Corinth. Unable to wait any longer, Paul went to Troas hoping to meet him and get his report sooner.

In going to meet Titus, Paul also had an evangelistic opportunity in Troas. We can see that in Paul's statement in verse 12 that "a door was opened for him in the Lord" to preach the gospel of Christ.

However, Paul was so overwrought and burdened by the situation at Corinth that he found it difficult to focus on the opportunity in Troas. Notice in verse 13...

The turmoil and discontent of Paul's heart were debilitating and threatened to close the door that was opened for ministry at Troas.

What kind of troubling questions occupied Paul's mind as he awaited a report on the Corinthian church? Questions like: Would they affirm their love for Paul and their love for God's truth in the Scriptures? Or would they follow the false apostles that were attempting to mislead the Corinthian church? Would the Corinthians deal with the specific issues Paul had written First Corinthians to address: divisions, strife, incest, marriage, singleness, divorce, the role of women in the church, idolatry, spiritual pride, the abuse of the Lord's Supper, misuse of spiritual gifts?

Paul's heart ached because he did not know the answer to those questions, and as a result he had no freedom to minister. Until he heard from Titus, Paul feared the worst. He was so burdened by the situation at Corinth that he lost interest in the open door of ministry at Troas.

Paul said good-bye to the church there and pushed on to Macedonia. The door would remain open for him and on his return (Acts 20:5-11) God used him mightily in their midst, but for the moment Paul departed, unable to rise to the occasion, no doubt feeling like a beaten man.

Picture a man standing in front of a wide-open door in Troas. Behind this open door is opportunity—people ready to listen, work ready to be done, fruit waiting to be gathered. By every outward measure, it's the kind of moment any missionary prays for.

But Paul doesn't walk through the door. Not because it's closed. Not because the opportunity isn't real. But because his heart is somewhere else.

Paul's experience at Troas exposes the limits of even godly self-reliance.

Paul had an open door — he had external confirmation of opportunity.

Paul had apostolic authority — he had spiritual credibility.

Paul had experience and gifting — he had proven ministry fruit.

Yet none of that was enough to steady his heart. His unrest shows that open doors do not guarantee inner strength. A calling to ministry does not eliminate emotional strain. Faithful ministry cannot be sustained by self-sufficiency. Paul is not insufficient because he is weak in character. He is insufficient because no servant—no matter how mature—can carry the weight of ministry in his own strength.

Any man who is faithful in ministry can identify with how Paul felt. Pastors and elders are called shepherds because they care for, protect, guide, and nourish the flock. Shepherding is relational, close, and personal. You don't lead sheep from a distance; you walk among them, handle them, and often carry them. That closeness is where ministry happens—but it's also where wounds occur.

The problem is that sheep bite. Not literally, of course, but emotionally and spiritually. The very people shepherds love, pray for, and labor to serve – those people can also criticize, misunderstand, resist correction, spread hurtful words, or turn away in anger. Sometimes the "bite" of the sheep comes from immaturity, fear, pain, or sin rather than malice—but it still hurts. The bite of the sheep hurts precisely because it comes from within the flock, not from outside enemies.

This week I met with four other lead pastors from churches on the central coast this week for lunch. One has been a lead pastor for six months, another for two years, the third pastor has served for ten years, and the fourth for 18 years. A couple of these men were in pain and discouraged because the sheep of their flock had bit them.

It was an opportunity to pray with them and encourage them not to fix their eyes on circumstances; but instead fix their eyes on privilege of serving their faithful heavenly Father. To not worry about outcomes, but to fulfill their calling. To not dwell on the difficulty in ministry; but to rejoice in the honor of serving God.

It was a reminder that ministry is not only about teaching and leading; it involves suffering, patience, and perseverance. A minister must learn to keep shepherding even after being wounded—responding not with retaliation or withdrawal, but with Christlike love and faithfulness. In that sense, it echoes the heart of Jesus, the Good Shepherd, who was rejected and wounded by those He came to save, yet did not stop laying down His life for the sheep.

Jesus said in John 12:24, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit."

The Lord said in John 15:5 "I am the vine, you are the branches; he who abides in Me and I in him, he bears much fruit, for apart from Me you can do nothing."

Paul loved the Corinthians so much that his heart was torn apart by concern for them, to the point that he says in 2 Corinthians 7:5-6, “For even when we came into Macedonia our flesh had no rest, but we were afflicted on every side: conflicts without, fears within. But God, who comforts the depressed, comforted us by the coming of Titus.”

Paul was discouraged but not defeated, and he still held on to hope for a good report when he met Titus. Until then he was dealing with serious fears. But relief came when he shifted his focus from the horizontal to the vertical, and focused on his Lord and the emotional weight gave way to gospel triumph.

II. Our Sufficiency is Secured in Christ’s Triumph

Notice how verse 14 starts, “But thanks be to God, who always leads us in triumph in Christ.”

Verse 14 feels like a sudden turn. One moment Paul is describing unrest, anxiety, and a troubled spirit—and then, without warning, he breaks out in thanksgiving to God. If we’re honest, it can feel almost jarring. We want an explanation. We want to know what changed.

Yes, Paul would later meet Titus in Macedonia and receive an encouraging report about Corinth chapter 7:5–7. That news brought real relief. But that is not what Paul points to here. If his joy rested on good news or improved circumstances, he would have said so.

Paul knew there were still people in Corinth who opposed him. He knew the situation could unravel again. The risks had not disappeared. The pain had not been fully resolved.

And yet, Paul gives thanks to God. Why? Paul had learned not to draw his comfort, joy, or encouragement from circumstances that change, but from the God who does not change—the Father of mercies and the God of all comfort (as 1:3 tells us). When Paul’s heart was anxious and heavy, the cure was not control or clarity, but gratitude.

Paul turns his eyes away from what troubles him and fixes them on the God who sustains him. And in doing so, his spirit finds rest and he declares in verses 14, “But thanks be to God who always leads us in triumph in Christ.”

The picture here is what was called the “Roman Triumph,” the special tribute that Rome gave to their conquering generals. It was their equivalent of the American “ticker-tape parade.”

If a Roman commander in chief won a complete victory over the enemy on foreign soil, and if he conquered at least 5,000 enemy soldiers and gained new territory for the Emperor, then that commander in chief was entitled to a Roman Triumph. The procession would include the commander riding in a golden chariot, surrounded by his officers. The parade would also include a display of the spoils of battle, as well as the captive enemy soldiers. The Roman priests would also be in the parade, carrying burning incense to pay tribute to the victorious army.

The procession would follow a special route through the city and would end at the Circus Maximus coliseum that could hold up to 250,000 spectators and where the helpless captives would entertain the people by fighting wild beasts. It was a very special day in Rome when the citizens were treated to a full-scale “Roman Triumph.”

Paul intentionally uses this image. But believers are not the conquering general—Christ is, it is His victory. We are part of His procession sharing in His victory.

From the world’s perspective: Jesus was abandoned, publicly shamed, and executed like a criminal on a cross. From heaven’s perspective: Sin was defeated, Satan was disarmed, Salvation was accomplished.

What looked like the greatest failure in history became the greatest triumph in eternity. Jesus Christ claimed the spoils of battle—lost souls who had been in bondage to sin and Satan.

Colossians 2:13-15 says, “When you were dead in your transgressions and the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made you alive together with Christ, having forgiven us all our transgressions, having canceled out the certificate of debt consisting of decrees against us, which was hostile to us; and He has taken it out of the way, having nailed it to the cross. When He had disarmed the rulers and authorities, He made a public display of them, having triumphed over them through Christ.”

As followers of Christ, we are not called to win the victory. We are called to follow Christ in His victory—even when that procession feels costly, humiliating, or confusing

In the Roman Triumph Parade, the victorious general’s sons would walk behind their father’s chariot, sharing in his victory; and that is where we as believers are today—following in Christ’s triumph. We do not fight for victory; we fight from victory.

Verse 15...

The triumphal procession was filled with fragrance—the incense rising from priests’ censers and the flowers strewn along the streets. That aroma symbolized influence.

Paul’s point is that, by God’s amazing grace, God chooses to make known through believers the sweet fragrance of the knowledge of Christ everywhere. He uses ordinary human messengers to carry the gospel’s aroma, spreading the saving knowledge of Christ to the world. As Paul reminded the Romans in Romans 10:14-15, people cannot call on Christ unless they believe, cannot believe unless they hear, and cannot hear unless someone is sent to preach. For this reason, Scripture celebrates the beauty of the feet that bring good news.

Our Sufficiency is not found in self-reliance. Our Sufficiency is Secured in Christ’s Triumph.

III. Our Sufficiency Transforms How We See People

Verse 16...

As the Roman priests burned the incense in the parade, that odor affected different people in different ways. To the triumphant soldiers, it meant life and victory; but to the conquered enemy, it meant defeat and death.

Using this image of the incense, Paul pictured the Christian ministry. He saw believers as incense, giving forth the fragrance of Jesus Christ in their lives and labors. To God, believers are the very fragrance of Jesus Christ. To other believers, we are the fragrance of life; but to unbelievers, we are the fragrance of death.

In 1 Corinthians 1:18 Paul makes a similar appraisal: to some who are being destroyed the word of the cross is foolishness, but to others who are being saved it is the power of God. How persons respond to the gospel determines whether their final fate is eternal life or eternal death.

Jesus Christ Himself has a dual effect on people. In 1 Peter 2:6-8 we read: “For this is contained in Scripture: “BEHOLD, I LAY IN ZION A CHOICE STONE, A PRECIOUS CORNER stone, AND HE WHO BELIEVES IN HIM WILL NOT BE DISAPPOINTED.”⁷ This precious value, then, is for you who believe; but for those who disbelieve, “THE STONE WHICH THE BUILDERS REJECTED, THIS BECAME THE VERY CORNER stone,”⁸ and, “A STONE OF STUMBLING AND A ROCK OF OFFENSE”; for they stumble because they are

disobedient to the word, and to this doom they were also appointed.” Now to you who believe, this stone is precious. But to those who do not believe, it is “A stone of stumbling and a rock of offense.”

So let me ask you: Is Jesus a precious stone to you, or is He a stumbling stone? He will be precious to you if you will right now recognize your sin before God, believe the fact that Jesus died in your place to forgive your sins, and embrace Him as your Lord and Savior.

Paul’s point in our text is that the Christian life and ministry are matters of life and death. No wonder Paul cried out in verse 16, “And who is adequate (or sufficient) for these things?”

No one is adequate with our human ability to render appropriate service to almighty God. Human resources are insufficient to influence people for eternity.

Paul repeatedly acknowledged his inadequacy to carry out divine ministry. Notice in 3:5 he declared, “Not that we are adequate in ourselves to consider anything as coming from ourselves, but our adequacy is from God.”

Because Paul had learned the secret of spiritual power, he could write in 12:10, “Therefore I am well content with weaknesses, with insults, with distresses, with persecutions, with difficulties, for Christ’s sake; for when I am weak, then I am strong.”

To the Colossians he wrote in Colossians 1:29, “For this purpose also I labor, striving according to His power, which mightily works within me.” Paul was totally dependent on God’s power and enabling grace. And so are we.

Imagine trying to run a heavy piece of equipment—say a table saw—without plugging it in. You can flip the switch all you want. The blade doesn’t move. You can shout at it. You can study the manual. You can even sincerely believe it should work. But no matter how skilled you are, the power simply isn’t there.

Now imagine finally plugging it into the outlet. Nothing about the saw changes—same size, same blade, same operator—but suddenly it does what it was designed to do. Not because the saw discovered new potential, but because it was connected to a power source outside itself.

That’s what Paul learned in ministry. He stopped pretending he was the power source. “Who is sufficient for these things?” Not Paul. Not any minister. Not any believer. Human strength cannot produce eternal fruit. Human wisdom cannot raise the dead heart. Human effort cannot carry the weight of God’s glory.

But when Paul was weak, he was finally honest—and therefore finally useful. His adequacy did not come from within; it came from God working through him. That’s why he could labor tirelessly and yet boast only in weakness. He knew the secret: ministry does not depend on how impressive the instrument is, but on whether it is plugged into divine power.

And the same is true for us. God never calls us to be sufficient in ourselves. He calls us to be dependent—so that the power on display is unmistakably God’s power.

We have seen that our sufficiency is not found in self-reliance. Instead of our sufficiency is secured in Christ’s triumph. Our sufficiency transforms how we see people. Fourth:

IV. Our Sufficiency is Proven Through Faithful Integrity

Verse 17...

Peddling is from a verb that described a con artist or street hawker who cleverly deceived unwary buyers into purchasing a cheap imitation of the real thing.

Picture a crowded marketplace. Vendors are everywhere, shouting, waving, trying to sell their goods—some are genuine, most are just after your money. You have to watch carefully because not everything offered is honest.

Paul says, that's not how we handle God's Word. We don't twist it to make it popular. We don't package it to build our own reputation. We don't treat the truth of God like a commodity to be bought and sold.

Instead, we carry it faithfully, openly, and with integrity—letting the Word itself speak. The message isn't about us; it's about God. People may try to profit from truth, but we serve it. We deliver it. And in doing so, we honor the One who gave it.

So when someone encounters God's Word through you, they see Him, not the salesman. That's the difference Paul is talking about: we are not peddlers; we are faithful messengers of a priceless message. Paul had in mind especially the false teachers who were trying to infiltrate the church at Corinth, who peddled a corrupt mixture of divine truth and Jewish legalism to the Corinthians.

Unlike those spiritual con men, Paul, in sincerity, spoke in the power of Christ in the sight of God. Since he recognized his own inadequacy and depended entirely on God's power to energize his ministry, the apostle had no need to resort to corrupting the Word to influence people.

So, in our text this morning Paul shows us a ministry that—by human standards—looks disrupted, emotionally heavy, and uncertain. Yet Paul declares confidence, not frustration. Gratitude, not despair. Why?

Because Paul understood something crucial: God's triumph does not depend on our strength, our plans, or our visible success.

The gospel advances: Through broken servants. Through imperfect plans. Through weak messengers. And often, through moments that feel like failure.

Some of you may feel like Paul today:
You're obeying God, but things aren't working out the way you expected
You've been faithful, but the results feel small
You feel unsettled, hurt, discouraged, or misunderstood

Hear this clearly: Failure in your hands may be triumph in God's.

You are called to trust God, be faithful in ministry, and trust God with the results. You are not responsible for results. You are responsible to represent Christ.

And as long as you are following Jesus, you are not losing—you are being led in His triumph.

So, we do not preach ourselves. We do not rely on human approval. We do not measure success by results we can see. We simply walk in obedience, compelled by the love of Christ, trusting that God will use our lives to spread the fragrance of His Son.

To some, that aroma will be life. To others, it will be death. But before all else, it is pleasing to God.

So let us live humbly, speak faithfully, and serve boldly—knowing that while the task is far greater than us, our sufficiency is found in Christ alone.

Let's pray...