



Pilgrimage:

A Newsletter of Christian Spirituality

November/December 1995

SUFFICIENCY

When Christmas rolls around, we often struggle with what to get those "hard to shop for" people on our list. What do you get for someone who has everything? There is a Christian equivalent to this problem: what can you give to someone for whom God is not enough?

God is not enough because we want various things in addition to God. The "God and ..." syndrome comes in many forms. One person may expect success. He works hard; he has the gifts needed to succeed in his chosen field; he takes his work seriously. He also takes his Christian life seriously, and goes to church, says his prayers, and even tithes. Yet with all this, he does not receive the outward signs of success. It eludes him, even after years of effort.

How does he respond? He is increasingly frustrated. He envies those who do succeed, especially when they do not seem to work as hard as he does -- whether at the job or at Christian life. It isn't fair! Life becomes a burden. He has trouble respecting himself, since he does not measure up to his own standards. As a result, he is generally defensive about his accomplishments. Since he cannot respect himself with any enthusiasm, he assumes that others look at him the same way. Soon, he doubts whether his wife really loves him, since he is not successful. Things only go down hill from there.

Or it might be a housewife, who expects to manage a well-run house: to keep everything clean and neat, to have dinner ready on time and pleasingly prepared every night, to make clothes for her family, and keep the garden weeded and productive at all times. Yet this never seems to work: there isn't enough time for it all, and the less urgent projects get put aside. The kids need attention -- sometimes more than one expects -- and emergencies arise.

Like the "unsuccessful" man, she gets frustrated with the way things are going. It is humiliating (to put it mildly) to see the windows which have not been washed in two years, or the curtains which are yet unfinished, though she bought the material five years previous. Not only is it humiliating, but the "failures" are ever present. She cannot avoid seeing them. She feels she **ought** to do better. She is frustrated with herself -- and because she is frustrated with herself, she is frustrated with God as well. She feels He has let her down. It is not for lack of effort or devotion that things do not get done.

Or, for a third example, think of an older Christian who has been ordained for some years. Then it comes out that he was accused of some financial irregularities when he was much younger and working at a government job. No charges had been filed, but things were not altogether proper (he had not filed the proper forms, though he had done nothing morally wrong). It does look bad, and his reputation is damaged. People in his congregation lose confidence in him. The only charitable thing he can do is resign, and resigning under a cloud, he has little chance of finding another position.

It is hard to imagine that he would not be peeved at God for letting this happen to him. His whole life is bound up with the ministry, and it is being taken from him. How can he go on? Without his reputation, how can he hold up his head? Sure, he would have done things differently back then, but it does not seem fair to lose all the good because of a minor misdeed long ago.

It is a fact of life that such trials do happen, and happen to faithful Christians. The question is what we are to do about them. In these examples, people respond to them by resistance, by frustration and resentment. They go to God and demand (one way or another) that He change the way things are. They imply that they cannot go on with life unless He fixes the problem.

This is nothing new. We see Paul, that ardent apostle, putting the same demand to God, that He remove his "thorn in the flesh." (II Corinthians 12:7) Paul argues that it is an impediment to his ministry, as well as to a full life on earth. But God's answer is no. The reason is compelling: "My grace is sufficient for thee: for my strength is made perfect in weakness." (II Corinthians 12:9) Grace is sufficient; it is enough. We need nothing more.

In another place Paul writes, "Our sufficiency is of God." (II Corinthians 3:5) This is one of the foundation stones of Christian life. We get into trouble when we insist that we need something more, something besides God. Since there are many good and useful things to have in this world, it is not hard to fall into this trap. Reputation is a good thing, and essential for many callings in this life. The priest cannot get very far without one. And yet a good reputation will not get us into heaven.

A clean and well-ordered home is a joy to behold and live in -- it is a good thing. So are success and health. But if we stake our self-esteem on such things, we act as though God were not enough. We say that we need these things in addition to Him.

So we come back to the Christmas question: what can you give to someone for whom God is not enough? The Child in the manger is God's answer. He gives Himself, in humility, to appeal to our hearts rather than to our sense of accomplishment or wealth or success. The cost of finding Him insufficient is manifest: anxiety, frustration, anger, defensiveness.

Yet how do we get from here to there? How do we find our sufficiency in God?

First, it requires trust. We must trust in God's power and in His providence. We profess that He is Almighty: we must practice the profession. This is not as easy as it sounds, because He continues to allow fallen man to exercise his freedom in the world. Thus the world does not always appear to be ruled by God. Evil things happen. There is injustice and pain and suffering. While we may profess that God is omnipotent, we act (all too often) as though He needs our help: the world will not be quite right unless we take some initiative and make it so.

To believe in God's power requires in turn that we accept His way of dealing with evil. He does not simply wipe clean the face of the earth -- then we would not be here! Rather He wills to redeem evil, by His own sacrifice. He takes upon Himself that burden which cuts off His beloved people from Himself, yet leaves them the trials by which their love for Him can be made pure. In short, through sacrifice, He brings good out of evil. It is hard for us to grasp this -- thus we must regularly ponder the Cross of our Saviour.

We need to trust His power; we need also to trust His providence. This is hard for the same reason it is hard to trust His power: His providence does not always seem to win out. If He wants what is good for us, why does He not remove the trials and injustices I face? By faith, we must agree that He really does know best. If He chooses to leave a "thorn in the flesh," as He did for Saint Paul, then it is for our own good. For Saint Paul, it was to keep him from pride, from the temptation of trusting in himself instead of in God's power. Though it seemed from Paul's perspective to be an obstacle to the Gospel, God could see more clearly, and bring good from that evil.

Providence is not empirically provable. No amount of evidence will finally convince us that God is working in the circumstances of our lives unless we are open to that reality on the basis of faith. We must trust Him. There is no other way.

If we are willing to trust that He is in charge of our lives, then we draw near the point where we can accept that He is sufficient for us, all by Himself. If He is in charge, then we do not need to be -- indeed, it is better if we renounce being in charge. He accomplishes in our lives all that really matters. He determines what is essential for us, and His list may differ somewhat from ours. Paul felt getting rid of the thorn in the flesh was essential; God did not. Paul was willing (eventually) to trust God.

Trust leads to a willingness to accept our own insufficiency, which is impossible otherwise. Unless we trust ourselves to God, we will be ever asserting our own worthiness, our own accomplishments, our own claims to be lovable and worthy of God's favor. When we give this up and accept (at least in principle) the sufficiency of God, then we no longer need worry about our own accomplishments and virtues. They are irrelevant. God does for us and in us all that is really necessary. If we do not accomplish great things -- within His providence -- so what? He is God and He does what is needed. If something doesn't happen, we can trust Him that it wasn't needed.

Trusting Him, we can face the fact that we are not worthy of heaven -- nor even of our own respect. Our failures, and our failure to live up to our own standards, need not be cause for distress and anxiety: God is greater. Paul glories in his infirmities (II Corinthians 11:30 & 12:9), not his accomplishments, because his infirmities, his failures, show the power of the Cross: grace made perfect in weakness. It is the power of the Cross, not of Paul, that matters, and is capable of affecting the world.

God will do the same with us. We can glory in our failures; we need not be defensive about them, either to others or to ourselves. There is a wondrous freedom in accepting the sufficiency of God: our own insufficiency is no longer a burden and obstacle but a joy, because it reveals the love of God.

So it comes down to this: do I really love God above all else? It is easy to imagine getting anxious about that question. We may be unsure about our desires. Certainly there are some tip-offs to disordered desires -- anxiety, frustration and so on. But if we are willing to let God be in charge, then we need not be preoccupied. Any desire which gets in the way, He will ask us to sacrifice. He will choose the sacrifices for us. If we are attached to success, or neatness or reputation in a way that threatens our devotion to Him, then He will give us the opportunity to renounce the desire. He will purify us. It may be a painful purification -- as gold tried in the flame (I Peter 1:7) -- but it will teach us to find our sufficiency in God. It will be for our good.

To find our sufficiency in God is the liberation of Christian life. If God is enough, we find our contentment, our fullness in Him. Our other desires matter only in relation to our desire for Him. They no longer control our lives. We are free, free to love God and man.