

SERMON DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

August 10, 2025

Does the Bible Really Say That?

“God Helps Those Who Help Themselves”

John 15:1-8

Rev. Mike Fordham

There was once a slave and storyteller who lived in ancient Greece from 620 B.C. to 564 B.C. His name was Aesop. He put together a collection of fictional stories that all had a moral or lesson to teach. Today we call that collection **Aesop's Fables**. Some of the fables are still being told today like, *“The Tortoise and the Hare”* and *“The Boy Who Cried Wolf”*. One of the lesser-known fables is, *“Hercules and the Wagoner”*, a story about a man whose wagon was stuck in a muddy road, and he prayed for Hercules to help. Hercules appeared and said, “Get up and put your shoulder to the wheel.” The moral given at the end of the story was “The gods help them that help themselves.”

Almost 300 years ago in the mid 1700's, Benjamin Franklin popularized the phrase, “God helps those who help themselves” by adding it to his *Poor Richard's Almanac*. It is a phrase that is still used by many today. According to pollster George Barna, the phrase “God helps those who help themselves” topped a poll as one of the most widely known Bible verses. The only problem is, it's not a Bible verse. While there may be an element of truth in the quote pointing out that we cannot always just passively sit back and expect God to do everything for us. Overall, though, the quote points us in the wrong direction. The emphasis in the Bible is not what we do for God, but that God loves us so much that He, in His infinite grace, helps us because we ultimately cannot help ourselves. In *John 15:1-8*, Jesus addresses what God does for us in His grace and the main role that we play in God's work in our lives.

John 15:1-8

“I am the true grapevine, and my Father is the gardener. 2 He cuts off every branch of mine that doesn't produce fruit, and he prunes the branches that do bear fruit so they will produce even more. 3 You have already been pruned and purified by the message I have given you. 4 Remain in me, and I will remain in you. For a branch cannot produce fruit if it is severed from the vine, and you cannot be fruitful unless you remain in me.

5 “Yes, I am the vine; you are the branches. Those who remain in me, and I in them, will produce much fruit. For apart from me you can do nothing. 6 Anyone who does not remain in me is thrown away like a useless branch and withers. Such branches are gathered into a pile to be

burned. 7 But if you remain in me and my words remain in you, you may ask for anything you want, and it will be granted! 8 When you produce much fruit, you are my true disciples. This brings great glory to my Father.

WE CAN DO NOTHING

Jesus first makes the point ***We Can Do Nothing*** without Jesus. Here in John 15, Jesus uses the analogy of a vineyard, something very prominent in the agrarian first century world of Judea. Jesus describes Himself as being the grapevine, His Heavenly Father is the gardener, and we are the branches. As the vine, Jesus is the source of life for us the branch. As the gardener, the Heavenly Father does everything possible to ensure the branches produce the best fruit possible. Both the vine and the gardener are doing all the work in order that the branches will produce the best fruit possible. Without the vine and the gardener, the branches can do nothing. Jesus then says at the heart of this teaching in verse 5, *“Yes, I am the vine; you are the branches. Those who remain in me, and I in them, will produce much fruit. For apart from me you can do nothing.”* We can do all we want on our own, but without Jesus, the vine, our source of life, we will not be able to produce the fruit God wants in our lives. We also cannot be a healthy vine without the shaping and pruning work of the gardener, our Heavenly Father. The branches are 100% dependent upon the vine and the gardener. Branches will only survive, stay healthy, thrive, and produce abundant fruit if they remain connected to the vine and are cared for by the gardener. It is that time of the year when we once again find ourselves here in Florida in the midst of hurricane season. What is one essential tool we need to be prepared for during hurricane season that will make recovery more bearable? Yes, that’s right, a generator, a reliable source of power. When the storms hit, we can guarantee that the power will go out, maybe for a few minutes, hours, days, or, if it is really bad, weeks. When the power goes out, my number one concern is food. Nonperishable foods will only go so far. In order to keep our perishable foods from spoiling, we need refrigeration and that requires electricity. When we become disconnected from electricity, our source of power, we realize just how much we are dependent upon electricity. Without some source of power, we are in major trouble. We now have a small, portable generator which takes care of our refrigerator, and we can use it to plug in whatever is needed to help us get by until we get our power back. I know some of you have gone all in with whole house generators. That’s some serious power to get you by. Even more so, without Jesus we can do nothing!

JESUS OFFERS US GOD’S GRACE

Jesus Offers Us God’s Grace. While it may not sound like good news that we can do nothing without Jesus, the good news is we do have Jesus, who offers us God’s grace every step of the way of our journey of life. When it comes to our relationship with God, everything boils down to the absolute necessity of God’s grace. The word grace simply means a gift. Grace is defined as God’s unmerited favor, or the best way that I remember what grace is, is with the acrostic, **G**od’s **R**iches **A**t **C**hrist’s **E**xpense. When the Bible talks about God’s grace, it is referring to God’s gift of Himself to us through

Jesus who rescues us from condemnation and the power of sin to enslave us. Through grace we are brought into union with God in Christ which is all made possible through the work of the Holy Spirit. The emphasis in the Bible is not on what we can do for God, but almost exclusively on all that God does for us in His amazing grace. Our entire relationship with God is contingent upon God's grace.

There are three different aspects of God's grace that we experience in our relationship with God. The first aspect of God's grace is what we call **Prevenient Grace**, which refers to God reaching out to us in His grace while we are broken, hurting sinners, in desperate need of God's grace. *Romans 5:6-8*, "⁶ When we were utterly helpless, Christ came at just the right time and died for us sinners. ⁷ Now, most people would not be willing to die for an upright person, though someone might perhaps be willing to die for a person who is especially good. ⁸ But God showed his great love for us by sending Christ to die for us while we were still sinners." God sent Jesus into this world to offer us God's love and grace when we were at our worst, while we were helpless, lost, hurting, broken sinners. Now the Holy Spirit is working behind the scenes to convince us that we are sinners who desperately need God's grace as offered to us through Jesus.

The second aspect of grace is what we call **Justifying Grace**. We experience this aspect of grace when we say yes to and receive Jesus' offer of the free gift of forgiveness of sins. We then are made right with God and enter into a relationship with God through the Holy Spirit uniting us to Christ. *Titus 3:4-7* describes this wonderful gift of God's justifying grace in this way, "*But—When God our Savior revealed his kindness and love, ⁵ he saved us, not because of the righteous things we had done, but because of his mercy. He washed away our sins, giving us a new birth and new life through the Holy Spirit. ⁶ He generously poured out the Spirit upon us through Jesus Christ our Savior. ⁷ Because of his grace he made us right in his sight and gave us confidence that we will inherit eternal life.*"

This then leads to the third and final aspect of God's grace, **Sanctifying Grace**. In sanctifying grace, the Holy Spirit is continually renewing us in our relationship with Christ and transforming us and empowering us to be more like Jesus. As *2 Corinthians 3:18* says, "*So all of us who have had that veil removed can see and reflect the glory of the Lord. And the Lord—who is the Spirit—makes us more and more like him as we are changed into his glorious image.*" It is God's grace working within us through the Holy Spirit to make us more like Jesus.

Have you ever heard the song which Zach Williams and Dolly Parton popularized called, "*There Was Jesus?*" The song describes so well all that Jesus and His grace has done for us throughout the highs and lows of our life. The song says:

"Every time I tried to make it on my own / Every time I tried to stand and start to fall / And all those lonely roads that I have travelled on / There was Jesus / When the life I built came crashing to the ground / When the friends I had were nowhere to be found / I couldn't see it then but I can see it now / There was Jesus / In the waiting, in the searching / In the healing and the hurting / Like a blessing buried in the broken pieces /

Every minute, every moment / Where I've been and where I'm going / Even when I didn't know it or couldn't see it / There was Jesus / For this man who needs amazing kind of grace (mm) / For forgiveness at a price I couldn't pay (mm) / I'm not perfect so I thank God every day / There was Jesus (there was Jesus) / In the waiting, in the searching / In the healing and the hurting / Like a blessing buried in the broken pieces / Every minute, every moment / Where I've been and where I'm going / Even when I didn't know it or couldn't see it / There was Jesus / On the mountain, in the valleys (there was Jesus) / In the shadows of the alleys (there was Jesus) / In the fire, in the flood (there was Jesus) / Always is and always was / No, I never walk alone (never walk alone) / You are always there / In the waiting, in the searching / In the healing and the hurting / Like a blessing buried in the broken pieces / Every minute (Every minute), every moment (every moment) / Where I've been and where I'm going / Even when I didn't know it or couldn't see it / There was Jesus / There was Jesus / There was Jesus / There was Jesus"

Every step of the journey of our lives, God's amazing, undeserved, free gift of grace is making all the difference in our lives.

WE ARE TO REMAIN IN JESUS

While it is true God's grace is making all the difference in our lives, we do have a part to play in it. Jesus says that as the branches on the vine, ***We are to Remain in Jesus.*** Again, as the branches cannot hope to survive and produce fruit without the work of the gardener and being attached to the vine, so also our main role in the work of God's grace in our lives is to grow as close as we can to God. How do we grow ever closer to God? We can do so through regular, daily times alone with God in prayer, listening to God speak to us through the Bible, through regularly worshipping God together, spending time in fellowship with other Christians, serving God every chance we get, and learning to obey God in every area of our lives. The irony is that the way we cooperate with the work of God's grace in our lives is by getting out of the way and handing the controls of our lives over to Jesus to run. Or as Jesus said in *Matthew 16:24-25*, *"24 'If any of you wants to be my follower, you must give up your own way, take up your cross, and follow me. 25 If you try to hang on to your life, you will lose it. But if you give up your life for my sake, you will save it.'"* Being a disciple is about giving up my life to Jesus and following Him, staying connected and cooperating with Him every step of the way. It is not about me. It is about Jesus!

As we turn our lives over to Jesus and learn to abide in Him and grow closer to Him, we will discover all that is good in our lives is really not about what we do for God, but all about what God's grace is doing in our lives. Jesus' grace in us is what is truly making all the difference in our lives and all our efforts are nothing compared to what God is doing in and through us.

I know we have all worked hard to get to where we are today in our jobs, our families, our own personal lives and God expects our best effort in all those areas. But as we

draw closer in our relationship with God, we quickly learn the truth Paul expressed in *1 Corinthians 15:10*, “*But whatever I am now, it is all because God poured out his special favor on me—and not without results. For I have worked harder than any of the other apostles; yet it was not I but God who was working through me by his grace.*” Nobody was more gifted, qualified and worked harder for God than the Apostle Paul, but when he looked over his life, he humbly realized that it wasn’t all about his efforts, but it was all about God’s gracious work in and through His life. The once great missionary to China, Hudson Taylor, summarized it well as he said, “I used to ask God to help me. Then I asked if I might help him. I ended up asking him to do his work through me.”

It is in our ever-growing relationship with God as we abide in Jesus that we learn it is by the grace of God we are where we are today. Imagine what our life would be like if we did not have Jesus in our lives. Therefore, it is a great honor and privilege to daily turn over our entire lives to God’s grace to have His way in us.

SUGGESTED RESOURCES: (Books marked with * are available to be checked-out in the Asbury Discipleship Resource Center)

- *The Holy Bible* (Several FREE copies are available in the DRC)
- *Against the Flow*, John Lennox
- *Abide in Christ*, Andrew Murray
- *Transforming Grace*, Jerry Bridges

Icebreaker I – Have you ever heard someone quote “God helps those who help themselves” as if it were in the Bible? How did you respond?

Icebreaker II – Can you share a time when you realized you could not “do it yourself” spiritually, and had to fully depend on God’s help?

1. In John 15:5, Jesus says, “*Apart from me you can do nothing.*” What does this mean in practical terms for our daily life?
2. The sermon outlined three aspects of God’s grace: prevenient, justifying, and sanctifying. How have you experienced each of these in your own walk with God?
3. How does the phrase “God helps those who help themselves” subtly shift the focus away from grace and toward self-reliance?
4. Jesus calls us to “remain” or “abide” in Him. What daily habits or disciplines help you stay connected to the “vine”?
5. Paul said in 1 Corinthians 15:10, “*I worked harder... yet it was not I but God who was working through me by His grace.*” How can we balance diligent effort with dependence on God’s power?
6. Hudson Taylor moved from asking God to help him, to letting God work through him. How might your approach to serving God change if you adopted that mindset?
7. What impacted you most from the sermon? How might you apply this week’s sermon to your life?
8. How might this group pray for you this week?