

### **"Did God Really Say: Do Your Best, He'll Do the Rest?"**

"Just do your best." That is really good advice for many situations and circumstances. School just started for many, and we don't need to deny the fact that some students are more gifted academically than others. Some students who work very hard and study faithfully are still discouraged when their grades don't reflect their work. We encourage them by saying, "Do your best." And on the other hand there may be gifted students who are tempted to be lazy in their studies because they will easily achieve passing grades. To them we say, "Keep working at it. Do your best."

No one expects that everything will go well as we try a new sport or other competition, when we try drawing a picture for the first time or learning a new medium for art, or when we get started in a new job. Instead, we expect that with focused practice over time we will do better and better. Through it all, whatever stage we are in, we will work at it diligently and with focus. In other words, we follow the advice, "Just do your best."

But how does that advice translate to spiritual matters? How helpful is it to tell someone to "Just do your best"? I ask that question because I have found that advice being shared frequently enough. An internet search will bear out that it has become a popular adage in Christian circles. There it is phrased something like this: "Do your best, and God will do the rest." It is the theme of blog posts and sermons, and it shows up on posters and t-shirts. But is it true? Is it helpful? Did God really say it?

First of all, let's be very clear. This phrase is not a quote from the Bible. Some have been confused about this, assuming that as often as they have heard the phrase, there must be a verse that says it. There is not.

Next, we have to try our best to understand exactly what point this phrase is trying to make. On one hand, perhaps it means that as long as we try our best, God is going to make things work out the way that we want them to work out. I won't spend much time considering that, because one of our summer Sundays reminded us clearly that Christians bear a cross in this life. That means that we don't expect things to work out the way that we want them to in a worldly sense. We don't have an expectation of being rich and successful. We trust God to bless us first and foremost with eternal blessings.

The other option as I see it is to take this phrase to mean that if you do your best, God will take you to heaven. It acknowledges that nobody's perfect, but it expects that we at least try and try our best. And if this is what someone takes away when they hear that phrase, then it is a very dangerous piece of advice. The Bible says something entirely different, as we see clearly in the first 10 verses of Ephesians chapter 2.

This portion of God's Word tells us something very different than "Do your best." It says, **"As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins."** The Apostle Paul, by inspiration, goes on to speak about some of the ramifications of and symptoms of being dead in sin. People in that state go on indulging their own sinful desires and cravings. It would be easy to think, "Well, clearly Paul is not talking about me." But the fact is that Paul is speaking about every single one of us. He makes it clear that all of us are in this same boat. This is our natural state, the state in which we are born. We are dead, spiritually dead. And that also means that by nature we are objects of God's wrath, doomed to suffer his just punishment against our sins.

But that is far from the end of the story. The main point of this whole section is God's grace. Even though we were dead in our sins, God loves us and he changed us. Look at all of the phrases in these several verses that speak about how God loves us even though we don't deserve it: **"because of his great love for us," "God, who is rich in mercy," "[He] made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions," "it is by grace," and a second time, "It is by grace...through faith," "not from yourselves," "gift of God," "no one can boast."** This is what God's grace really means. It is not the least bit dependent on anything that we have done or on anything that we will do. God's grace only depends on God. If you put any restrictions on God's grace, then it is no longer grace. If you

require any prerequisites for claiming God's grace, then it is no longer grace. If you demand anything, even, "Do your best," as a condition, then you've turned God's grace into something else altogether. Nowhere in Scripture do we find even a hint that we need to do something first before God responds. Nowhere does God say that we need to do our best in order to convince him to do the rest.

No, what Scripture does say is so much more comforting and amazing. It says that even though we are totally incapable of doing anything that would earn, deserve, or merit God's love for us, even though we are dead, God loves us and made us alive. He made us alive in Christ by sending Christ to die for us. He made us alive by raising Jesus Christ from the dead and along with him raising us to life. God has given to us spiritual life, a life of faith, which ultimately means that we will live eternally with him. It is his absolutely free gift to us.

Believe it or not, that makes some people uncomfortable. They don't want a God that loves them even though they are unlovable. They want to be lovable. They want to be able to look at themselves and say, "God loves me because...I go to church, or I give my offerings, or I am a generally nice person." They think that this life should go better for the believer than for the unbeliever because God ought to respond to us doing our best. But believe me, or better yet, believe what God's Word plainly says: you don't want that. If you want God to treat you as you deserve, you deserve hell. Your best is never as good as the perfect standard that God has established. So God doesn't wait for you to do your best and then step in to do the rest. God does it all.

God created you and everything that you need for life. He sustains you with his goodness. He sent his Son to die on the cross in payment for your sin. He washed your sins away in the waters of baptism. He sent his Holy Spirit to move you to believe in him and his promises. And through his Word and his Sacraments, he draws you closer and closer to himself and builds you up to fight against temptation. He does it all.

So here's the question that remains: if God does it all, why have we been talking so much about the things that we do? If God does everything by his grace, why have we gone through an entire Summer Worship Series devoted in large part to the way that we live our lives? Think back on some of these discussions, if you were here for them. Respect the government. Love your enemies. Marry one spouse of the opposite gender for as long as you live, and be faithful to that spouse both before and after your wedding. Tell the truth. Why do we even bother with learning what God wants us to do?

One reason is to show us how absolutely dependent on God we really are. We were dead in our sins, and even though God has made us alive, we still so often hold on to those sinful ways that come naturally to us. When we compare our lives to the lives that God wants us to lead, we see how miserably we have failed. When we realize that God's perfect demands mean perfect obedience for all of our lives, we see that we have fallen short. When we really look at what God really says about how we are to live our lives, we realize that we must put aside any notion of simply doing our best and expecting God to be satisfied. The only way to appreciate God's grace is to realize that we really don't deserve it.

And there is another reason that we look at all of these actions and seek out God's will. We do it because God has made us alive. We do it because God has created us to do good works. We look at what God says about our actions so that we can see clearly what a thankful life looks like. God has done it all, and that means that he also works in us that we live lives of good and godly works. As he says in our text: **"For we are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do."** He provides the opportunity, and he provides the motivation.

So God doesn't look at our works and say, "You've done your best, I'll take it from here." He says, "You are my forgiven child, and everything that you do has been washed clean in the blood of Jesus Christ. The good you do in my name pleases me. It glorifies my name, and it testifies to others that you are mine." God grant this to us all.

The Text: Ephesians 2:1–10 (NIV84)

As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins, <sup>2</sup> in which you used to live when you followed the ways of this world and of the ruler of the kingdom of the air, the spirit who is now at work in those who are disobedient. <sup>3</sup> All of us also lived among them at one time, gratifying the cravings of our sinful nature and following its desires and thoughts. Like the rest, we were by nature objects of wrath. <sup>4</sup> But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, <sup>5</sup> made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions—it is by grace you have been saved. <sup>6</sup> And God raised us up with Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus, <sup>7</sup> in order that in the coming ages he might show the incomparable riches of his grace, expressed in his kindness to us in Christ Jesus. <sup>8</sup> For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God— <sup>9</sup> not by works, so that no one can boast. <sup>10</sup> For we are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.