



Rooted in Scripture - Pointing to Jesus

BIBLE FOUNDATIONS

Rowboat, Sailboat, or Steamboat?

Three Approaches to the Christian Life

The Short Answer

The Christian life is neither self-powered striving nor spiritual passivity. Like a sailor who cannot create the wind but actively raises the sail and steers, believers cannot create spiritual life but are called to obey, persevere, and respond while depending completely on God's grace and the Holy Spirit.

John 15:1-5 · Galatians 5:16-25 · 1 Corinthians 15:10 · Philippians 2:12-13
Colossians 1:28-29 · Romans 8:13 · Zechariah 4:6

Opening Memory Anchor

Grace does not eliminate effort. Grace changes where the power comes from.



WELCOME

WHO IS POWERING THE BOAT?

Imagine three boats trying to cross a large lake.
In the first is a person rowing as hard as possible.

Pull.

Pull.

Pull.

Progress depends upon strength and endurance.

When the rower becomes exhausted, progress slows.

This is the **rowboat**.

Now imagine another boat.

Its passenger sits comfortably while an engine moves the boat.

The passenger may enjoy the scenery without doing much at all.

This study will call that the **steamboat**.

Finally, imagine a sailboat.

The sailor cannot manufacture wind.

No amount of effort can create it.

But when the wind blows, the sailor does not simply sit motionless.

The sails are raised.

The lines are adjusted.

The boat is steered.

The sailor watches, responds, learns, and participates.

The wind supplies power the sailor cannot produce.

Yet the sailor is genuinely active.

That is the **sailboat**.

These boats are not biblical categories.

Scripture never says:

“Be a sailboat Christian.”

They are simply teaching pictures.

But they can help clarify an important question:

HOW DOES CHRISTIAN GROWTH ACTUALLY HAPPEN?

Does spiritual maturity depend primarily upon trying harder?

Should believers stop striving and simply wait for God to change them?

Or does Scripture describe something different?

The Bible presents a remarkable combination:

**God works.
Believers act.**

God gives grace.

Believers respond.

The Holy Spirit produces fruit.

Believers walk by the Spirit.

Jesus gives life.

Disciples abide in Him.

God transforms His people.

His people pursue holiness.

The Christian life is deeply dependent and genuinely active at the same time.

That is what this study explores.

AN IMPORTANT FOUNDATION

THIS STUDY IS NOT ABOUT EARNING SALVATION

Before discussing effort, obedience, discipline, or spiritual growth, one distinction must remain clear.

Salvation is not earned through spiritual effort.

Ephesians 2:8-10 places the order carefully.

Salvation is God's gift.

It is received by grace through faith.

It is not the result of works.

And then those who have been saved are created in Christ Jesus for good works.

Grace comes first.

A changed life follows.



For fuller treatment, see:

Study #86 - What Is Salvation?
Study #87 - Repentance, Faith, and New Life
Study #88 - What Does It Mean to Be Born Again?

And for the broader life of following Jesus:

Study #120 - Living as a Disciple of Jesus

This study focuses on one particular discipleship question:

IF GOD IS THE ONE WHO TRANSFORMS CHRISTIANS, WHAT ARE CHRISTIANS SUPPOSED TO DO?

PART ONE

BEGINNER GUIDE

GRACE, EFFORT, AND DEPENDENCE

1. CAN CHRISTIANS CHANGE THEMSELVES?

Not in the deepest spiritual sense.

Jesus gives a striking picture in John 15:1-5.

He is the vine.

His followers are the branches.

A branch cannot produce fruit by disconnecting from the vine and trying harder.

Jesus says:

“Apart from Me you can do nothing.”

Spiritual life originates in Christ.

Christian transformation therefore begins with dependence.

2. DOES THAT MEAN CHRISTIANS SHOULD DO NOTHING?

No.

The same Bible that emphasizes dependence repeatedly commands believers to act.

Christians are told to:

- repent,
- pray,
- forgive,
- resist temptation,
- flee sexual immorality,
- pursue righteousness,
- put away sinful behavior,
- serve,
- give,
- encourage,
- learn Scripture,
- love one another,
- make disciples,
- and persevere.

Dependence upon God does not eliminate obedience.

It makes obedience possible.

3. WHAT IS THE ROWBOAT APPROACH?

The rowboat represents **self-powered Christianity**.

It says, in effect:

“Christian growth depends mainly on how hard I try.”

The rowboat Christian may become preoccupied with:

- rules,
- performance,
- spiritual achievement,
- comparison,
- productivity,
- discipline,
- visible results,
- and proving faithfulness.

Prayer may gradually become less important because effort seems more reliable.

Dependence becomes difficult.

Rest may feel irresponsible.

Failure becomes devastating because everything seems to depend upon personal performance.



4. IS EFFORT THE PROBLEM WITH THE ROWBOAT?

No.

That distinction is essential.

The Bible repeatedly calls Christians to effort.

Paul speaks about:

running,

training,

laboring,

striving,

fighting the good fight,

pressing forward,

and disciplining himself.

The problem is not effort.

The problem is **self-reliant effort**.

MEMORY ANCHOR

The opposite of grace is not effort. The opposite of grace is earning.

5. WHAT IS THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN EFFORT AND EARNING?

Effort responds to grace.

Earning tries to deserve grace.

Effort says:

“Because God has loved and saved me, I want to follow Him faithfully.”

Earning says:

“If I perform well enough, God will owe me acceptance.”

Those are very different.

Christian obedience is response, not payment.

6. WHY CAN THE ROWBOAT APPROACH FEEL SO NATURAL?

Because human beings like control.

If spiritual growth can be reduced to:

work harder + perform better = become godlier

then everything appears manageable.

But Christianity does not begin with human ability.

It begins with grace.

The Gospel confronts the illusion of self-sufficiency.

A person cannot save himself or herself.

And a Christian cannot produce the life of Christ through willpower alone.

7. WHAT HAPPENS WHEN ROWBOAT CHRISTIANITY “WORKS”?

It can produce pride.

If spiritual growth is interpreted mainly as personal achievement, success can become evidence of superiority.

A person may begin thinking:

“I am disciplined.”

“I know more Scripture.”

“I serve more.”

“I avoid sins those people still struggle with.”

Jesus repeatedly confronted religious pride.

Spiritual practices can be good while the heart quietly turns them into trophies.

8. WHAT HAPPENS WHEN ROWBOAT CHRISTIANITY FAILS?

It can produce exhaustion, shame, hiding, or despair.

If everything depends upon personal performance, failure becomes frightening.

The person may think:

“I should be better by now.”

“God must be disappointed with me.”

“Maybe I am not trying hard enough.”

The response is often:

Row harder.

More rules.

More promises.

More effort.



More guilt.
Eventually, the rower becomes exhausted.

9. WHAT IS THE STEAMBOAT APPROACH?

The steamboat represents **spiritual passivity**.

Its basic idea sounds like:

“God is sovereign. God changes people. Therefore, I should simply trust Him to do it.”

There is truth inside that statement.

God does transform His people.

But passivity becomes a problem when trust is used as a reason to ignore what God has already commanded.

10. WHAT MIGHT STEAMBOAT CHRISTIANITY SOUND LIKE?

It may sound like:

“If God wants me to change, He'll change me.”

“I'm waiting for God to take this temptation away.”

“If God wants the relationship repaired, He'll make it happen.”

“I'll start reading Scripture when I feel led.”

“God knows my heart, so obedience isn't that important.”

“I'm waiting for peace before I act.”

But sometimes God has already spoken clearly.

The next step is not waiting for another sign.

It is obedience.

11. IS TRUSTING GOD EVER PASSIVE?

Sometimes waiting is exactly what faithfulness requires.

Scripture contains many commands to wait upon God.

There are situations in which human beings cannot force an outcome.

But biblical waiting is not necessarily inactivity.

A person can wait prayerfully while remaining faithful to everything God has already made clear.

Waiting on God and neglecting responsibility are not the same thing.

12. WHY CAN PASSIVITY FEEL SPIRITUAL?

Because it can use very spiritual language.

“I'm trusting God.”

“I'm waiting on the Lord.”

“I'm letting God handle it.”

Those can be beautiful expressions of faith.

But they can also hide:

fear,
avoidance,
indecision,
lack of discipline,
or unwillingness to obey.

The question is not whether the language sounds spiritual.

The question is whether the response agrees with Scripture.

13. WHAT IS THE SAILBOAT APPROACH?

The sailboat represents **active dependence upon God**.

The sailor cannot create the wind.

But the sailor can raise the sail.

The Christian cannot create spiritual life.

But the Christian can respond faithfully to God's grace.

The sailor watches the wind.

The Christian attends to God's Word and Spirit.

The sailor adjusts course.

The Christian repents and obeys.

The sailor participates.

The wind provides the power.

MEMORY ANCHOR

Dependence does not mean inactivity. It means acting with confidence that the power ultimately comes from God.



14. WHERE DOES SCRIPTURE TEACH THIS MOST CLEARLY?

One of the clearest places is Philippians 2:12-13.
Paul tells believers to **work out** their salvation.
Then he immediately explains why:
God is **working in them**.
Notice both truths.

Believers work.
God works within believers.

Paul does not choose between divine action and human response.
He holds them together.

15. DOES “WORK OUT YOUR SALVATION” MEAN WORK FOR SALVATION?

No.
Paul is writing to people he already regards as believers.
He does not say:

Work for salvation.

He tells them to live out what God is already working within them.
The distinction matters.
Christians do not obey so that God will save them.
They obey because God's saving grace is already at work.

16. DID PAUL HIMSELF LIVE THIS WAY?

Yes.
Read 1 Corinthians 15:10.
Paul says God's grace toward him was not without effect.
Then he says he **worked harder** than the others.
That sounds like intense effort.
But Paul immediately adds:
it was not ultimately Paul alone-it was **the grace of God with him**.
Paul worked.
Grace worked.
Paul does not see those statements as contradictory.

17. WHAT ABOUT COLOSSIANS 1:29?

Paul describes his ministry by saying that he labors and struggles.
Again, strong effort language.
But how does he struggle?
According to God's power working mightily within him.
That is sailboat Christianity.

GOD'S POWER + HUMAN PARTICIPATION

Not:

God instead of effort.

Not:

effort instead of God.

But:

effort empowered by God.

18. WHAT DOES GALATIANS MEAN BY “WALK BY THE SPIRIT”?

Read Galatians 5:16-25.
Paul does not say:

Sit by the Spirit.

He says:

Walk by the Spirit.

Walking is active imagery.
But the power and fruit come from the Spirit.
Believers are called to keep in step with Him.
The Spirit produces fruit.
The Christian walks.
Again:

dependence and participation.

19. WHO PRODUCES THE FRUIT?

The Holy Spirit.



Galatians 5 calls it:

Not:

the fruit of impressive Christian willpower.

Love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control ultimately reflect God's transforming work. But believers are still commanded to walk by the Spirit and resist the desires of the flesh.

20. WHAT DOES “ABIDE IN CHRIST” ADD TO THE PICTURE?

John 15 prevents the sailboat metaphor from becoming another self-improvement strategy.

The deepest issue is not technique.

It is relationship with Jesus.

A branch does not study fruit-production techniques.

It remains connected to the vine.

Christian formation begins with:

Remain in Christ.

Scripture.

Prayer.

Trust.

Communion with God.

Obedience.

Dependence.

The Christian life grows from relationship.

21. DOES PRAYER MATTER IF GOD ALREADY KNOWS WHAT HE WILL DO?

Yes.

Prayer is one of the means God has given His people for relationship, dependence, intercession, wisdom, confession, thanksgiving, and participation in His purposes.

Jesus prayed.

The apostles prayed.

The early Church prayed.

Dependence upon God's sovereignty does not make prayer unnecessary.

It makes prayer reasonable.

22. WHAT ROLE DOES SCRIPTURE PLAY?

Scripture helps the sailor know where to steer.

Feelings change.

Circumstances can be confusing.

Personal impressions can be mistaken.

God's Word provides an objective foundation.

Psalm 119 repeatedly connects God's Word with guidance, wisdom, obedience, and life.

The Holy Spirit does not lead Christians contrary to the Scriptures He inspired.

23. WHAT ROLE DOES OBEDIENCE PLAY?

A central one.

Jesus repeatedly connects love and obedience.

Read John 14:15-24.

Obedience does not purchase relationship with Jesus.

It expresses relationship with Jesus.

Sometimes the next faithful step is not mysterious.

Forgive.

Tell the truth.

Stop gossiping.

Flee temptation.

Serve.

Give.

Pray.

Love.

Apologize.

Keep the promise.

God's will is often clearer than people pretend.

24. WHAT ABOUT TEMPTATION?

Passivity is especially dangerous here.

Scripture does not merely say:



Ask God to remove temptation.

It also says:

flee.
resist.
watch.
pray.
put to death.

make no provision for the flesh.

Read Romans 13:14; 1 Corinthians 6:18; 10:13-14; James 4:7; 1 Peter 5:8-9.

Depending upon God may include taking very practical action.

25. CAN SOMEONE PRAY FOR CHANGE WHILE REFUSING TO CHANGE ANYTHING?

Yes.

And that can become a form of spiritual avoidance.

A person may pray:

“God, help me stop doing this.”

while deliberately maintaining every environment, relationship, habit, or opportunity that feeds the behavior.

Prayer matters.

So does wisdom.

Sometimes raising the sail means deleting something.

Leaving somewhere.

Calling someone.

Creating accountability.

Changing a routine.

Or finally obeying what has already become clear.

26. WHAT ABOUT SPIRITUAL DISCIPLINES?

Prayer, Scripture reading, worship, fasting, fellowship, generosity, service, confession, solitude, and other spiritual disciplines do not manufacture grace.

They are ways believers intentionally place themselves where they can attend to God and respond to His grace.

A sail does not create wind.

But refusing to raise the sail matters.

MEMORY ANCHOR

Spiritual disciplines do not manufacture God's grace. They help believers intentionally respond to it.

27. CAN DISCIPLINE BECOME LEGALISM?

Yes.

A good practice can become a bad master.

Bible reading can become a scoreboard.

Prayer can become performance.

Fasting can become pride.

Church involvement can become identity.

Service can become proof of worth.

The answer is not abandoning discipline.

It is returning discipline to its proper place.

28. WHAT ABOUT REST?

Rest is also an expression of dependence.

The rowboat mentality can make rest feel dangerous.

If I stop, everything will fall apart.

But human beings are creatures.

God is not.

Jesus slept.

Jesus withdrew.

Jesus invited exhausted disciples to rest.

Rest can become a confession:

God remains faithful when human strength reaches its limit.

29. CAN A CHRISTIAN SWITCH BETWEEN ALL THREE BOATS?

Absolutely.

These are not permanent personality categories.

A person may row in one area and become passive in another.

Someone might:



row at work,
depend on God in ministry,
but become passive about finances.
Another person might:
pray faithfully,
work responsibly,
but row desperately when relationships become uncertain.
The purpose of the metaphor is not to label people.
It is to help identify patterns.

30. HOW CAN SOMEONE TELL WHICH APPROACH THEY ARE USING?

Ask:

ROWBOAT

Am I acting as though everything depends upon me?

STEAMBOAT

Am I calling something “trust” that Scripture would call avoidance or disobedience?

SAILBOAT

Am I actively doing what God has made clear while depending upon Him for the strength and outcome?

PART ONE SUMMARY

The Christian life is not:

TRY HARD ENOUGH AND CHANGE YOURSELF.

Nor is it:

DO NOTHING AND WAIT FOR GOD TO DO EVERYTHING.

Scripture describes something richer.

Jesus says:

Abide.

Paul says:

Work.

Paul also says:

God is working in you.

Christians are told to:
walk by the Spirit,
resist sin,
pursue holiness,
pray,
obey,
serve,
persevere,
and trust.
The power comes from God.
The response belongs to the believer.

MEMORY ANCHOR

God's grace is not an excuse for passivity and human effort is not a substitute for grace.

A SIMPLE WAY TO REMEMBER THE SAILBOAT PATTERN

Five words can help summarize active dependence:

ABIDE

Begin with Christ rather than self-sufficiency.

LISTEN

Attend to what God has made clear in Scripture.

RESPOND

Take the next faithful step.

DEPEND

Ask the Holy Spirit for strength.



RELEASE

Entrust the outcome to God.

MEMORY ANCHOR

Abide. Listen. Respond. Depend. Release.

The Personal Study and Application section later in this study will return to these five words.

WANT TO GO DEEPER?

PART TWO

INTERMEDIATE

GRACE, HUMAN RESPONSIBILITY, AND THE WORK OF THE SPIRIT

READER NOTE

This section explores some theological and historical questions behind the three approaches.

Christians have used different language to describe the relationship between God's work and human participation in spiritual growth.

You do not need to master those debates to understand the central biblical point:

God transforms His people, and His people are called to respond actively to His grace.

31. IS THE SAILBOAT METAPHOR ACTUALLY IN THE BIBLE?

No.

That should remain explicit.

Scripture uses many images for Christian life:

a branch abiding in a vine,

a race,

a fight,

a walk,

a body,

a building,

a field,

a soldier,

an athlete,

a farmer.

The rowboat/sailboat/steamboat framework is a modern teaching analogy.

It should never be used to override the biblical images.

Its value is limited to one question:

Where does the power for Christian growth come from, and what role does the believer have?

32. WHY DOES SCRIPTURE USE SO MANY ACTIVE METAPHORS?

Because Christian life involves genuine participation.

Paul tells Timothy to train himself for godliness.

Hebrews describes running with endurance.

Paul describes fighting the good fight.

Christians are told to put off old behaviors and put on new ones.

These commands make little sense if Christian maturity is purely passive.

God's grace creates active people.

33. WHY DOES SCRIPTURE ALSO EMPHASIZE HUMAN WEAKNESS?

Because Christian effort is never independent.

Read 2 Corinthians 12:7-10.

Paul learns that God's power is displayed through weakness.

This does not glorify incompetence or discourage preparation.

It destroys boasting.

The Christian may work intensely while still saying:

The sufficiency belongs to God.

34. WHAT DOES ZECHARIAH 4:6 MEAN?

The famous statement is:

"Not by might nor by power, but by My Spirit."

Its original context concerns Zerubbabel and the rebuilding of the temple after exile.

The verse should not be detached from that setting and turned into a slogan meaning human action never matters.

Zerubbabel still had work to do.



The point is that God's purposes would not ultimately succeed because of ordinary human strength. God's Spirit would accomplish what human power alone could not. That principle fits the larger biblical pattern of dependence.

35. WHAT IS SYNERGISM?

The word comes from a concept of **working together**.

In Christian theology, *synergism* can describe frameworks in which divine grace and human response are both meaningfully involved.

But the term is used differently across traditions.

It should therefore be handled carefully.

Some Christians embrace synergistic language.

Others reject it because they believe it risks implying that human beings contribute independently to salvation.

This study is not using the sailboat to settle those debates.

The narrower point concerns **Christian growth after conversion**:

Scripture clearly speaks both of God's transforming action and the believer's active response.

36. WHAT IS MONERGISM?

Monergism emphasizes God's action as the decisive cause of salvation.

It is especially associated with Reformed discussions of regeneration and conversion.

Again, care is needed.

A Christian who holds monergistic views of salvation does not necessarily believe sanctification is passive.

Many strongly Reformed theologians emphasize rigorous Christian effort precisely because God is working within believers.

The rowboat/sailboat/steamboat analogy should therefore **not** be mapped simplistically onto denominational labels.

37. DOES THIS STUDY TEACH THAT GOD DOES HALF AND THE CHRISTIAN DOES HALF?

No.

That would misunderstand the picture.

The sailor does not contribute half the wind.

God is not one partner supplying 50 percent while the Christian supplies the other 50 percent.

God gives life.

God gives grace.

God gives the Spirit.

God supplies strength.

God produces fruit.

Yet God's action does not erase meaningful human obedience.

The relationship cannot be reduced to percentages.

38. WHAT DID AUGUSTINE SAY ABOUT GRACE?

Augustine of Hippo strongly emphasized the necessity of divine grace, especially in his later writings and debates concerning human sin and God's saving action.

His writings became deeply influential in Western Christianity.

Augustine's theology developed across his lifetime, and later Christian traditions interpret aspects of his thought differently.

The important historical point for this study is that Christians have wrestled for centuries with the relationship between:

God's initiative

and

human response.

39. WHAT WAS THE PELAGIAN CONTROVERSY?

Pelagius was a late-fourth- and early-fifth-century Christian teacher whose views became associated with a strong emphasis on human moral ability.

Augustine opposed teachings he believed minimized the necessity of divine grace.

The controversy became a major moment in Western Christian reflection on sin, grace, freedom, and salvation.

It would be inaccurate simply to say:

Rowboat = Pelagianism.

The historical theology is more complex than the metaphor.

But the controversy reminds Christians that Christianity cannot be reduced to:

"God gave the rules. Now become righteous through your own natural ability."

Grace is indispensable.

40. WHAT IS QUIETISM?

Historically, **Quietism** refers particularly to spiritual movements associated with seventeenth-century figures such as Miguel de Molinos.

Certain forms emphasized inward passivity and surrender in ways critics believed weakened active obedience and ordinary Christian practices.

The term has sometimes been used more broadly and imprecisely.

Therefore:

Steamboat Christianity should not simply be equated with historical Quietism.

The analogy addresses a broader practical problem:



using dependence upon God as justification for spiritual inactivity.

41. WHERE DID “LET GO AND LET GOD” COME FROM?

The exact slogan has been used in different settings, but it became especially associated in popular Christian thought with approaches emphasizing surrender, rest, and the victorious Christian life.

Related ideas appeared within the **Higher Life** and **Keswick** movements beginning in the nineteenth century.

These movements were not identical, and their teachers should not all be treated as though they taught the same thing.

They often emphasized important truths:

dependence upon Christ,
the insufficiency of self-effort,
surrender,
faith,
and the Spirit's power.

Critics have sometimes argued that simplified versions can sound too passive.

The slogan itself therefore needs interpretation.

42. IS “LET GO AND LET GOD” WRONG?

Not necessarily.

If it means:

Stop trying to control what belongs to God and trust Him,

it can express genuine faith.

If it means:

Stop trying to earn God's favor through frantic self-effort,

it can be helpful.

But if it means:

Stop obeying, stop resisting sin, stop practicing wisdom, and wait for God to act instead,

it conflicts with many biblical commands.

A slogan should never carry more authority than Scripture.

MEMORY ANCHOR

Surrender means giving God control-not abandoning the responsibilities God has given.

43. WHAT DOES THE DISTINCTION BETWEEN EFFORT AND EARNING HELP CLARIFY?

Christian writer Dallas Willard became well known for distinguishing **effort** from **earning** in discussions of spiritual formation.

The distinction fits an important biblical pattern.

Christians cannot earn grace.

But grace trains believers to live differently.

Titus 2:11-14 describes grace as teaching God's people to reject ungodliness and live self-controlled, upright, godly lives.

Grace is active.

And grace creates active disciples.

44. WHAT DOES TITUS 2 TEACH ABOUT GRACE?

Read Titus 2:11-14.

Grace does more than forgive.

Grace **trains**.

It teaches believers to say no to ungodliness and worldly passions and to live differently.

This corrects two distortions.

The rowboat says:

“Change yourself so God will accept you.”

The steamboat says:

“Because God accepts you, change doesn't really matter.”

Biblical grace says:

“God has acted graciously-and His grace is now training you.”

45. HOW DOES ROMANS 6 ADDRESS PASSIVITY?

Paul anticipates a question:

If grace increases where sin increases, why not continue sinning?

His response is emphatic:

Absolutely not.

Believers have been united with Christ in His death and resurrection.

Grace does not make sin irrelevant.

Grace creates a new relationship to sin.

Romans 6 repeatedly tells believers to **consider, present, and not let sin reign**.



Those are active responses grounded in what God has already done.

46. WHAT DOES “PUT TO DEATH” MEAN IN COLOSSIANS 3?

Colossians 3 tells believers to put to death what belongs to the earthly nature.

Paul then names specific sins.

He also tells believers to put on compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, patience, forgiveness, and love.

Notice the pattern.

God has given believers a new identity in Christ.

Therefore:

live like the people God has made you.

Identity comes before instruction.

Grace before obedience.

But obedience still follows.

47. WHAT ABOUT ROMANS 8:13?

Romans 8:13 brings much of this study together in one phrase.

Believers are told:

by the Spirit

to

put to death

the deeds of the body.

Who acts?

The believer.

By whose power?

The Spirit.

That is active dependence.

48. WHAT ROLE DOES HABIT PLAY IN SPIRITUAL GROWTH?

A significant one.

Human beings are shaped by repeated actions.

Scripture does not use modern habit-science terminology, but it repeatedly describes patterns of practice.

Believers train.

Practice.

Continue.

Put off.

Put on.

Remember.

Gather.

Pray.

Give.

Serve.

Habits cannot create spiritual life.

But repeated practices can shape how believers respond to God's grace.

49. CAN HABITS BECOME MECHANICAL?

Yes.

A person can read Scripture without listening.

Pray without attention.

Attend worship without engaging.

Serve while resentful.

The possibility of misuse does not make the practice useless.

It means the heart continually needs reorientation toward God.

50. WHAT ROLE DOES COMMUNITY PLAY?

Other Christians can help believers “raise the sails.”

Not by controlling another believer's relationship with God, but by:

encouraging,

teaching,

correcting,

praying,

modeling,

reminding,

serving,

and carrying burdens.



Hebrews 10:24-25 tells believers to consider how to stir one another toward love and good works. Christian growth was never designed as an isolated project.

51. WHAT ABOUT ACCOUNTABILITY?

Healthy accountability can help expose patterns that are difficult to see alone.

A trusted believer may ask:

**How are you actually doing?
Did you follow through?
Where are you struggling?
How can prayer help?**

The goal is not dependence upon the accountability partner.

The goal is greater faithfulness to Christ.

52. CAN “ACCOUNTABILITY” BECOME SPIRITUALLY ABUSIVE?

Yes.

Accountability becomes unhealthy when someone claims inappropriate authority over another adult's ordinary decisions, demands access to private information, uses shame or spiritual threats, or treats disagreement as rebellion against God.

Christian community should encourage obedience to Jesus.

It should not replace Jesus with a human controller.

PASTORAL SAFEGUARD

Dependence upon God does not require unhealthy dependence upon a spiritual leader.

Christ remains Lord.

53. CAN THESE THREE BOATS BE USED TO ASSESS SOMEONE ELSE?

Only with humility and great caution.

The framework was primarily designed for **self-examination**, not labeling other people.

A parent, pastor, mentor, or trusted friend may sometimes notice patterns and help another person ask better questions.

But the metaphor should not become:

“You’re a rowboat Christian.”

or:

“You’re obviously a steamboat.”

No one sees another person's heart perfectly.

Healthy discipleship asks questions rather than assigning identities.

For example:

“Do you think you may be carrying something God has not asked you to control?”

“Is there a clear step of obedience you may be avoiding?”

“Where might you need God's strength rather than additional pressure?”

The goal is not to become someone else's spiritual diagnostician.

It is to help one another follow Jesus.

MEMORY ANCHOR

Use the boats as mirrors more than labels.

54. WHAT ABOUT PEOPLE WHO ARE EXHAUSTED?

The sailboat metaphor should never become another command to perform.

Some people are not lazy.

They are depleted.

Jesus shows compassion toward human weakness.

Elijah in 1 Kings 19 needed sleep and food before receiving further instruction.

Jesus invited weary disciples to rest.

A person experiencing exhaustion may need:

rest,

help,

simplification,

community support,

or wise professional care.

Sometimes the faithful act is not:

Do more.

It is:

Receive help and rest.



55. DOES DEPENDENCE ON GOD MEAN REFUSING PRACTICAL HELP?

No.

Prayer and practical action are not competitors.

Depending upon God does not normally mean refusing:

- medical care,
- counseling,
- wise financial planning,
- safety measures,
- education,
- legal help,
- medication when appropriately prescribed,
- professional expertise,
- or assistance from other people.

God frequently provides through ordinary means.

Nehemiah prayed **and** posted guards.

Paul trusted God **and** used available legal rights.

Faith does not require pretending practical means are unspiritual.

PASTORAL SAFEGUARD

“Trust God” should never be used to shame someone for seeking legitimate help, protection, treatment, or wise counsel.

56. WHAT ABOUT ABUSE OR DANGER?

Passivity can become particularly harmful here.

A person experiencing abuse should not be told:

“Just pray harder.”

“Wait for God to change the person.”

“Submitting means doing nothing.”

Scripture condemns oppression and misuse of power.

Seeking safety, reporting criminal behavior, involving appropriate authorities, establishing boundaries, or obtaining professional assistance can be faithful and wise actions.

Waiting on God does not require remaining unnecessarily exposed to danger.

57. DOES FAITH MEAN ACTING WITHOUT WISDOM?

No.

Faith and wisdom belong together.

Proverbs repeatedly praises prudence, planning, counsel, and foresight.

Trust in God does not require recklessness.

The sailor trusts the wind.

The sailor also watches the rocks.

58. WHAT IF GOD'S WILL IS UNCLEAR?

Then wisdom becomes especially important.

Not every decision has one hidden correct answer that must be discovered through a sign.

Where Scripture has spoken clearly, obey.

Where Scripture allows several faithful options:

pray,
seek wisdom,
consider consequences,
ask mature counsel,
examine motives,
make a responsible decision,
and trust God.

Christian maturity includes learning to make wise choices without demanding supernatural certainty about every detail.

59. WHAT ABOUT “WAITING FOR PEACE”?

Inner peace can be meaningful.

But Scripture does not teach that every correct decision will be accompanied by a particular emotional sensation.

Jesus experienced deep anguish before the cross while remaining perfectly obedient.

Paul sometimes acted amid conflict and uncertainty.

Feelings matter.

They are not infallible guidance.

The sailboat needs Scripture and wisdom, not merely emotional weather.



60. HOW DOES PRAYER CHANGE ACTION?

Prayer can:

clarify motives,
confess dependence,
seek wisdom,
bring fear before God,
strengthen resolve,
intercede for others,
and align desires with God's purposes.

Prayer is not the opposite of action.

Often prayer prepares faithful action.

61. WHAT ABOUT RESULTS?

This is where rowboat Christianity often becomes anxious.

Faithfulness does not guarantee visible success.

A Christian may obey and still experience:

rejection,
failure,
delay,
loss,
misunderstanding,
or outcomes that cannot be controlled.

The sailor can raise the sail and steer faithfully.

The sailor cannot command the wind.

Obedience belongs to the believer.

Outcomes belong to God.

MEMORY ANCHOR

Faithfulness is the responsibility. Results are God's territory.

62. WHAT IF I AM OBEYING, DEPENDING ON GOD, AND THE SITUATION STILL DOESN'T CHANGE?

This is where the principle becomes difficult.

A person may be:

praying,
obeying,
seeking wise counsel,
working faithfully,
changing unhealthy patterns,
asking for help,
and trusting God-
while the painful circumstance continues.

A chronic illness may remain.

A job may not appear.

A marriage may remain deeply strained.

Grief may continue.

A loved one may not return to faith.

An unanswered prayer may remain unanswered.

A hoped-for door may stay closed.

Active dependence is **not a technique for producing the desired result**.

Scripture repeatedly shows faithful people living through prolonged difficulty.

Joseph waited through years of injustice.

David spent years fleeing Saul.

Jeremiah faithfully spoke God's Word and experienced rejection.

Paul prayed repeatedly about his "thorn," yet it remained.

Jesus prayed in Gethsemane for the cup to pass if possible, while surrendering Himself to the Father's will.

Faithfulness does not create a debt God must repay with the outcome requested.

63. DOES "RELEASE THE OUTCOME" MEAN PRETENDING THE OUTCOME DOESN'T HURT?

No.

Releasing an outcome to God does not require emotional detachment.

Biblical faith includes lament.

Psalm 13 asks:



Many Psalms openly express grief, fear, confusion, and longing.
Romans 8 describes creation groaning and believers groaning while waiting for final redemption.
Trust can cry.
Trust can ask again.
Trust can seek help.
Trust can grieve.
Trust can say:

“This is not what was hoped for.”

and still say:

“God remains faithful.”

PASTORAL SAFEGUARD

Do not use “just release it to God” to silence grief or rush someone through legitimate sorrow.

Sometimes faithful dependence looks like obedience with tears.

MEMORY ANCHOR

Faithfulness does not guarantee the outcome hoped for. It entrusts the outcome to the God who remains faithful.

A BIBLICAL CASE STUDY

NEHEMIAH - PRAYING, PLANNING, WORKING, AND TRUSTING

Nehemiah offers a vivid biblical example of active dependence.
He is not presented in Scripture as a “sailboat Christian.”
That is this study's modern analogy.
But his story demonstrates the biblical pattern the analogy is trying to describe.

NEHEMIAH HEARS BAD NEWS

Read Nehemiah 1.
Nehemiah learns that Jerusalem's walls remain broken and its gates burned.
What does he do first?
He sits down.
He weeps.
He mourns.
He fasts.
He prays.
Nehemiah does not immediately rush into action.
Dependence comes first.

NEHEMIAH PRAYS SPECIFICALLY

His prayer remembers God's covenant faithfulness.
He confesses sin.
He asks God for success before the king.
He recognizes that the situation cannot simply be controlled by human determination.
But prayer does not become the end of the story.

NEHEMIAH MAKES A REQUEST

Read Nehemiah 2.
When the king asks what he wants, Nehemiah prays-and then answers.
He requests permission to travel.
He asks for letters of safe passage.
He requests timber for construction.
This is practical preparation.
Prayer did not prevent planning.
Prayer shaped planning.

NEHEMIAH INSPECTS THE PROBLEM

When he arrives in Jerusalem, Nehemiah examines the walls.
He gathers information before announcing a plan.
He does not assume that trust in God eliminates the need to understand the situation.
Faith and careful observation work together.



NEHEMIAH ORGANIZES PEOPLE

The wall is rebuilt through coordinated human work.
Families and groups receive responsibilities.
People build.
Carry materials.
Repair sections.
Guard vulnerable places.
God's favor does not make organization unnecessary.

NEHEMIAH FACES OPPOSITION

Read Nehemiah 4.
Enemies threaten the builders.
Nehemiah does not choose between:

prayer

and

practical protection.

Nehemiah 4:9 summarizes the pattern beautifully:
They prayed to God.
And they posted a guard.
That is active dependence.

NEHEMIAH CANNOT CONTROL THE OUTCOME

Nehemiah plans and works diligently.
But the story repeatedly recognizes God's hand.
Human effort is real.
Divine provision is foundational.
Nehemiah neither behaves as though everything depends upon him nor as though faith means doing nothing.

CASE-STUDY MEMORY ANCHOR

Pray. Plan. Work. Watch. Trust.

Nehemiah's example does not establish a formula for every situation.
It shows that biblical trust and responsible action can belong naturally together.

64. HOW DOES THIS HELP WITH EVANGELISM?

Christians are called to share the Gospel faithfully.
They cannot make another person believe.
Paul explains in 1 Corinthians 3 that one person plants, another waters, but God gives the growth.
That frees evangelism from two errors.

Rowboat:

"If I say everything perfectly, I can produce conversion."

Steamboat:

"If God saves people, there is no need to speak."

Sailboat:

"Faithfully plant and water-and trust God for growth."

65. HOW DOES THIS APPLY TO PRAYER FOR SOMEONE ELSE?

Pray faithfully.
Love faithfully.
Speak truth when appropriate.
Serve.
Remain available.
But do not assume responsibility for another person's choices.
One person cannot control another person's heart.
This is especially important when praying for adult children, spouses, friends, or loved ones who are struggling spiritually.
Faithfulness does not require control.

66. HOW DOES THIS APPLY TO MONEY?

A rowboat approach may say:

"Everything depends upon my planning and accumulation."

A steamboat approach may say:

"God will provide, so planning is unnecessary."



Biblical stewardship holds trust and responsibility together.

Work.

Plan.

Give.

Avoid foolishness.

Seek wisdom.

Hold possessions loosely.

Trust God.

67. HOW DOES THIS APPLY TO WORK?

Work diligently.

Develop skill.

Keep commitments.

Act honestly.

Prepare.

But do not make work the source of identity or ultimate security.

Colossians 3:23-24 encourages wholehearted work directed toward the Lord.

Faithfulness works hard without worshipping work.

68. HOW DOES THIS APPLY TO RELATIONSHIPS?

Relationships reveal the limits of control.

A person can:

 speak truth,

 apologize,

 forgive,

 establish boundaries,

 listen,

 love,

 pray,

 and seek reconciliation.

But one person cannot force another person to change.

The sailboat approach asks:

What is mine to do faithfully?

Then it releases what belongs to God and the other person.

69. HOW DOES THIS APPLY TO HABITUAL SIN?

Do not merely say:

"I'll try harder."

And do not merely say:

"God will take it away when He's ready."

Instead:

 confess,

 pray,

 identify triggers,

 remove access where possible,

 seek accountability,

 replace destructive patterns,

 fill the mind with truth,

 flee temptation,

 and depend upon the Spirit.

Grace does not make strategy unnecessary.

Strategy does not make grace unnecessary.

70. WHAT IF CHANGE IS VERY SLOW?

Slow does not mean absent.

Fruit usually grows gradually.

A person may notice over time:

 quicker repentance,

 greater patience,

 less defensiveness,

 more compassion,

 greater self-control,

 deeper hunger for Scripture,



greater willingness to forgive,
or increasing awareness of sin.

Ironically, growing Christians may sometimes become more aware of weakness because they are seeing themselves more clearly.
Do not measure spiritual growth only by speed.

71. CAN SOMEONE BECOME TOO FOCUSED ON THEIR OWN SPIRITUAL GROWTH?

Yes.

Constantly checking spiritual progress can become another form of self-absorption.

Fruit grows while branches remain connected to the vine.

The Christian life looks outward as well:

toward God in worship,

toward neighbors in love,

toward the Church in service,

toward the world in mission.

Spiritual formation is not endless inspection of the self.

72. HOW DOES HUMILITY FIT THE SAILBOAT?

Perfectly.

The sailor knows:

I cannot create the wind.

That destroys pride.

But the sailor also knows:

I have responsibilities aboard this boat.

That destroys passivity.

Humility neither exaggerates human power nor denies human responsibility.

73. WHAT ABOUT SUCCESSFUL NON-CHRISTIANS WHO SHOW GREAT DISCIPLINE?

Human beings can develop remarkable habits, skills, wisdom, courage, virtues, and self-control through natural ability, training, culture, relationships, and what many Christian theologians call **common grace**.

Christians should not dismiss genuine courage, wisdom, creativity, discipline, compassion, or social good merely because it appears in someone who is not a Christian.

All truth and goodness ultimately belong to God.

At the same time, Scripture distinguishes ordinary human virtue from spiritual regeneration and from the **fruit of the Spirit** as a particular work of God in believers.

The claim of this study is therefore narrower:

Christlikeness in the full biblical sense cannot be reduced to human self-improvement.

Christian transformation includes reconciliation with God, union with Christ, the work of the Spirit, and formation toward God's purposes.

74. IS THIS JUST CHRISTIAN SELF-HELP WITH GOD ADDED?

No.

Self-help usually begins with the individual's goals.

Christian discipleship begins with Jesus as Lord.

The question is not merely:

"How can life become better?"

It is:

"How can life increasingly conform to Christ?"

Sometimes Jesus' way will improve circumstances.

Sometimes obedience will make circumstances harder.

The goal is not optimized selfhood.

The goal is Christlikeness.

75. WHY DOES THE CROSS MATTER TO THIS STUDY?

Because the Christian life is shaped by the Gospel.

Jesus does not merely provide techniques for becoming stronger.

He dies for sinners.

He rises.

He gives new life.

The Christian's relationship with God rests upon Christ's finished work, not spiritual performance.

That means the rower can stop trying to earn acceptance.

And the passive believer cannot use grace as an excuse to ignore the Lord who gave Himself for them.

76. WHY DOES THE RESURRECTION MATTER?

Because Christian transformation is resurrection-shaped.

Romans 6 connects believers' new life with Christ's death and resurrection.

Christianity is not merely moral rehabilitation.



God brings life where there was spiritual death.
The power for Christian living ultimately belongs to the God who raises the dead.

77. WHY DOES PENTECOST MATTER?

Because Jesus promised power from the Holy Spirit for His people and mission.
Acts 1-2 shows disciples who had received Jesus' teaching but still needed the Spirit's empowering presence.
The Christian mission was never designed to operate through human competence alone.
The Church needs the Spirit.

78. DOES DEPENDENCE ON THE SPIRIT MEAN FOLLOWING IMPRESSIONS?

Not primarily.
The Holy Spirit certainly guides God's people.
But Scripture's clearest descriptions of Spirit-filled life emphasize things such as:
Christlike fruit,
truth,
holiness,
witness,
worship,
unity,
service,
and obedience.
An impression should never be treated as having the authority of Scripture.
Claims of spiritual leading should be tested.

79. WHAT IF SOMEONE SAYS, "GOD TOLD ME"?

Humility is wise.
God can guide His people.
But personal impressions can be mistaken.
It is usually safer to distinguish between:

"Scripture clearly says..."

and

"It seems God may be leading in this direction."

No personal impression can legitimately contradict God's revealed Word.
And "God told me" should never be used to control another person's decisions.

80. CAN THE SAILBOAT METAPHOR ITSELF BECOME A PROBLEM?

Yes.
Every analogy eventually breaks down.
Real sailboats depend upon weather patterns.
The Holy Spirit is not an impersonal force like wind.
He is divine.
He acts personally and sovereignly.
Christians also do not manipulate the Spirit by learning the right spiritual technique.
The metaphor is useful only to illustrate:

dependent participation.

Do not press it beyond that.

81. WHAT IS THE DEEPEST DIFFERENCE BETWEEN THE THREE APPROACHES?

The rowboat overestimates human power.
The steamboat underestimates human responsibility.
The sailboat recognizes both:

human dependence

and

human participation.

But even that is not the deepest foundation.
The deepest foundation is God Himself.
Christian life begins with the Father,
comes through the Son,
and is empowered by the Holy Spirit.
Discipleship is response to God's grace.

THREE BOATS - ONE DIAGNOSTIC



ROWBOAT

SELF-POWERED STRIVING

"Everything depends upon me."

Core thought:

Common signs:

- anxiety,
- comparison,
- perfectionism,
- spiritual pride,
- exhaustion,
- difficulty resting,
- shame after failure,
- prayerlessness disguised as productivity.

Biblical correction:

Apart from Christ, spiritual fruit cannot be produced.

John 15:1-5

STEAMBOAT

PASSIVE SPIRITUALITY

"God will do it, so there is little for me to do."

Core thought:

Common signs:

- procrastination,
- waiting for feelings,
- avoiding clear obedience,
- spiritualizing indecision,
- ignoring practical wisdom,
- asking God to change what one refuses to confront.

Biblical correction:

God's work within believers produces active obedience.

Philippians 2:12-13

SAILBOAT

ACTIVE DEPENDENCE

Core thought:

"I will faithfully do what God has given me to do while depending upon Him for power, guidance, growth, and results."

Common signs:

- prayerful action,
- humility,
- obedience,
- teachability,
- repentance,
- perseverance,
- wise effort,
- willingness to rest,
- increasing fruit.

Biblical pattern:

"I labor... according to His power which works mightily within me."

Colossians 1:29

A GENESIS-TO-REVELATION PATTERN

GOD ACTS - HIS PEOPLE RESPOND

CREATION

God creates.

Human beings receive life and are given meaningful responsibility.

ABRAHAM

God calls and promises.

Abraham trusts and goes.

EXODUS

God rescues Israel.

Israel is called to walk in covenant faithfulness.



WILDERNESS

God provides manna.
Israel still gathers it.

PROMISED LAND

God promises to give the land.
Israel still enters and fights.

DAVID

God chooses and empowers David.
David still acts courageously and faithfully.

RETURN FROM EXILE

God promises restoration.
His people rebuild.

JESUS

Jesus accomplishes salvation.
Disciples are called:

Follow Me.

THE CHURCH

The Holy Spirit gives power.
The Church witnesses.

NEW CREATION

God ultimately completes His work.
His servants worship and serve Him.

THE PATTERN

God's initiative does not normally erase human response.
It creates it.

HARD QUESTIONS - QUICK REVIEW

Can people save themselves?

No.

Can Christians make themselves spiritually alive through willpower?

No.

Does grace eliminate effort?

No.

Does Christian effort earn grace?

No.

Is all striving wrong?

No.

Is frantic self-reliance healthy?

No.

Is waiting on God biblical?

Yes.

Can "waiting on God" become an excuse for avoiding obedience?

Yes.

Does the Holy Spirit produce fruit?

Yes.

Are believers still commanded to act?

Yes.

Does prayer replace practical action?

Usually not.

Does practical action replace prayer?

No.

Does trusting God mean refusing medical, professional, or practical help?

No.

Should victims of abuse simply wait for God to change the abuser?

No.

Can spiritual accountability become controlling?

Yes.



Should the three boats be used to label other Christians?

No.

Can the framework help mentors ask better questions?

Yes, when used humbly.

Does faithful obedience guarantee the desired outcome?

No.

Can prolonged suffering continue even when someone is faithfully obeying God?

Yes.

Does releasing an outcome mean suppressing grief?

No.

Who controls the outcome?

God.

Can someone move between rowboat, steamboat, and sailboat patterns?

Yes.

Is the sailboat metaphor itself biblical?

No. It is a teaching analogy.

What is the biblical principle behind it?

Active dependence upon God's grace and power.

KEY TERMS

A QUICK GLOSSARY

Abiding

Remaining in ongoing dependence upon and relationship with Christ, especially drawn from Jesus' vine-and-branches teaching in John 15.

Active Dependence

A descriptive phrase used in this study for faithfully obeying and participating while recognizing that spiritual life, power, and transformation ultimately come from God.

Common Grace

A theological term commonly used for God's goodness and provision experienced broadly in the world, including gifts, abilities, wisdom, social goods, and forms of virtue not limited to Christians. It should not be confused with regeneration or saving grace.

Effort

Intentional action. In Christian discipleship, effort can be a faithful response to grace.

Earning

Attempting to merit or deserve something. Salvation cannot be earned through human works.

Higher Life Movement

A nineteenth-century stream of Christian spirituality emphasizing deeper surrender, faith, and victory in Christian living. Particular teachers and expressions differed.

Keswick Movement

A movement associated with conventions beginning in Keswick, England, in the nineteenth century, emphasizing surrender, dependence upon Christ, and spiritual growth. Its teaching has taken different forms and should not be reduced to one slogan.

Legalism

A term used in several ways. In this study, it refers especially to treating religious performance or rule-keeping as a means of earning acceptance or spiritual standing before God.

Monergism

A theological term emphasizing God's decisive action in salvation. It is particularly associated with Reformed theology.

Quietism

Historically, a movement emphasizing inward surrender and passivity, especially associated with some seventeenth-century spirituality. The term is sometimes used more broadly, so historical precision matters.

Sanctification

God's work of making believers holy and transforming them increasingly toward Christlikeness.

Synergism

A theological term used for frameworks emphasizing meaningful divine and human participation. Different Christian traditions use and evaluate the term differently.

PERSONAL STUDY AND APPLICATION

WHERE AM I ROWING?

Ask:

Where am I acting as though everything depends upon me?

Where has prayer disappeared because control feels safer?

Where am I exhausted because I am trying to manage an outcome that belongs to God?



Where does failure produce shame rather than repentance and renewed dependence?

Write down one area.

Then pray:

God, show where self-reliance has replaced dependence upon You.

WHERE AM I PASSIVE?

Ask:

Where am I waiting for God to do something He has already told me to do?

Is there:

an apology to make?

a boundary to establish?

a habit to change?

a temptation to flee?

a conversation to have?

help to seek?

Scripture to learn?

wisdom to apply?

a responsibility being avoided?

Pray:

God, give courage to obey what You have already made clear.

WHERE AM I RAISING THE SAIL?

Ask:

Where is God's grace already producing movement?

Where is obedience becoming easier?

Where is fruit growing?

Where has prayer changed how a situation is approached?

Where is God teaching greater trust?

Give thanks.

Spiritual growth should not become endless attention to failure.

Notice grace too.

WHAT AM I TRYING TO CONTROL?

Ask:

Is there an outcome that has become the measure of whether God is being faithful?

Have faithful steps been taken?

Has prayer been offered?

Has wise counsel been sought?

Is there more that Scripture clearly requires?

If not, it may be time to release what cannot be controlled.

Releasing the outcome does not mean becoming indifferent.

It means refusing to carry authority God has not given.

A SIMPLE DAILY PRACTICE

1. ABIDE

Begin with God rather than self-sufficiency.

Read Scripture.

Pray.

Remember the Gospel.

2. LISTEN

What has God actually made clear in His Word?

3. RESPOND

Take the next faithful step.

4. DEPEND

Ask the Holy Spirit for strength.

5. RELEASE

Leave the outcome with God.

DAILY MEMORY ANCHOR



Abide. Listen. Respond. Depend. Release.

REVIEW QUESTIONS

1. What does the rowboat represent? 2. What does the steamboat represent? 3. What does the sailboat represent? 4. Are these biblical categories? 5. Why can human effort not produce spiritual life? 6. Why does dependence upon God not mean inactivity? 7. What is the difference between effort and earning? 8. Why can self-powered spirituality produce pride? 9. Why can it produce exhaustion? 10. How can passivity disguise itself as trust? 11. What does Philippians 2:12-13 teach about God's work and human response? 12. How does 1 Corinthians 15:10 hold grace and effort together? 13. What does Colossians 1:29 teach? 14. What does walking by the Spirit mean? 15. Who produces spiritual fruit? 16. Why is abiding in Christ foundational? 17. What role does obedience play? 18. Why doesn't prayer eliminate practical action? 19. How can spiritual disciplines support active dependence? 20. Can discipline become legalistic? 21. Why is rest part of dependence? 22. Can one person use different "boats" in different areas of life? 23. What is monergism? 24. What is synergism? 25. Why shouldn't either term be mapped simplistically onto the boat metaphor? 26. What was the Pelagian controversy broadly about? 27. What was historical Quietism? 28. How should "let go and let God" be evaluated? 29. How does Titus 2 describe grace? 30. What does Romans 8:13 teach about Spirit-empowered action? 31. Can accountability become controlling? 32. How should a mentor use the three-boats framework with someone else? 33. Does trusting God mean refusing legitimate practical help? 34. Why is passivity particularly dangerous in abusive situations? 35. Does faithful obedience guarantee a desired outcome? 36. What should a believer do when faithful obedience does not change the situation? 37. Why can lament coexist with trust? 38. How does Nehemiah model prayer and practical action together? 39. How does the framework apply to evangelism? 40. How does it apply to relationships? 41. How does it apply to habitual sin? 42. Why can spiritual growth be slow? 43. What is common grace? 44. How is ordinary human virtue different from regeneration or the fruit of the Spirit? 45. What are the limitations of the sailboat metaphor? 46. What is the central biblical principle of the study?

WHERE CAN I LEARN MORE?

START WITH SCRIPTURE

Read these passages slowly:

Abiding, dependence, obedience, love, and fruit.	John 15:1-17
Prayer, planning, practical preparation, work, opposition, and trust.	Nehemiah 1-4
Lament and continued trust when circumstances remain unresolved.	Psalms 13
Grace, new identity, and active response to sin.	Romans 6
Life in the Spirit, putting sin to death, suffering, groaning, hope, and God's faithful love.	Romans 8:1-39
Grace and Paul's labor.	1 Corinthians 15:1-10
Weakness, unanswered prayer, and sufficient grace.	2 Corinthians 12:7-10
Walking by the Spirit and the fruit of the Spirit.	Galatians 5:13-26
Working because God is working within His people.	Philippians 2:12-18
Grace-centered striving toward Christ.	Philippians 3:7-16
Laboring according to God's power.	Colossians 1:24-29
New identity followed by active putting off and putting on.	Colossians 3:1-17
Grace that trains believers toward godliness.	Titus 2:11-14
Running with endurance while fixing attention on Jesus.	Hebrews 12:1-3
God's provision alongside diligent Christian growth.	2 Peter 1:3-11

RELATED 3NAILS STUDIES

For the foundation of salvation:

- #86 - What Is Salvation?**
- #87 - Repentance, Faith, and New Life**
- #88 - What Does It Mean to Be Born Again?**

For the broader framework of following Jesus:

- #120 - Living as a Disciple of Jesus**



Study #120 asks:

What does the life of a disciple look like?

Study #121 asks:

How does that disciple actually grow without falling into either self-reliance or passivity?

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

AUGUSTINE

Augustine's writings on grace and human dependence became enormously influential in Western Christianity.

Readers interested in the historical debate may explore his anti-Pelagian writings while remembering that Augustine's thought developed across his lifetime and is interpreted differently among later Christian traditions.

DALLAS WILLARD

The Spirit of the Disciplines

Willard explores the role of intentional spiritual practices while strongly distinguishing grace from earning.

JERRY BRIDGES

The Discipline of Grace

Bridges emphasizes both daily dependence upon the Gospel and active pursuit of holiness.

J. I. PACKER

Keep in Step with the Spirit

A Protestant evangelical exploration of the Holy Spirit and Christian living.

RESOURCE SAFEGUARD

Listing a resource does not mean 3Nails endorses every theological position, interpretation, methodology, publication, or conclusion it contains.

Compare sources carefully and continually return to Scripture.

FINAL MEMORY ANCHORS

Grace does not eliminate effort. Grace changes where the power comes from.

The opposite of grace is not effort. The opposite of grace is earning.

Dependence does not mean inactivity. It means acting with confidence that the power ultimately comes from God.

Spiritual disciplines do not manufacture God's grace. They help believers intentionally respond to it.

Surrender means giving God control-not abandoning the responsibilities God has given.

Use the boats as mirrors more than labels.

Faithfulness is the responsibility. Results are God's territory.

Faithfulness does not guarantee the outcome hoped for. It entrusts the outcome to the God who remains faithful.

The rowboat overestimates human power.

The steamboat underestimates human responsibility.

The sailboat pictures active dependence upon God.

Abide. Listen. Respond. Depend. Release.

FINAL REFLECTION

A rower looks down at the oars.

Everything depends upon pulling harder.

A passive passenger may look around and assume there is nothing meaningful to do.

But the sailor looks toward something beyond personal strength.

The wind cannot be created.

It can only be received.

And yet the sailor is not inactive.

The sail is raised.

The course is watched.

Adjustments are made.

The boat moves by power the sailor did not create.

The Christian life is far greater than this picture.

The Holy Spirit is not wind.

He is not an impersonal force to harness.

He is God.

And Christian discipleship is not a technique for getting divine power to accomplish personal goals.

It is life under the lordship of Jesus.

But the picture can still remind believers of something Scripture teaches again and again.

God acts.

His people respond.



God calls.
His people follow.
God gives grace.
His people obey.
God gives the Spirit.
His people walk by the Spirit.
God supplies strength.
His people labor.
God produces fruit.
His people abide.
There will be seasons when the temptation is to row harder.
To control.
To perform.
To prove.
To carry what belongs to God.
There will be other seasons when the temptation is passivity.
To postpone.
To avoid.
To spiritualize fear.
To wait for God to do what He has already commanded.
And there will be seasons when neither is the deepest struggle.
A believer may be praying.
Obeying.
Working faithfully.
Seeking wisdom.
Doing everything that appears responsible.
And still the answer does not come.
The illness remains.
The relationship stays broken.
The grief lingers.
The door stays closed.
The prayer remains unanswered.
In those seasons, active dependence becomes something deeper than a method for accomplishing a goal.
It becomes trust.
Not cheerful denial.
Not pretending the loss does not hurt.
Not abandoning prayer.
But entrusting what cannot be controlled to the God whose character does not change.
Nehemiah prayed and planned.
He trusted and acted.
He posted guards and still looked to God.
Paul labored intensely and credited grace.
Jesus prayed in anguish and surrendered Himself to the Father's will.
The biblical invitation is therefore neither frantic control nor passive avoidance.
Jesus says:

“Abide in Me.”

Paul says:

“Walk by the Spirit.”

And Scripture says:

“It is God who works in you.”

So pray.
And act.
Trust.
And obey.
Rest.
And persevere.
Lament when necessary.
Receive help when needed.
Receive grace.
And respond to grace.
Raise the sail.



Then release what was never yours to control.

Because the Christian life was never meant to be powered by human strength alone.

And grace was never meant to leave God's people unchanged.

God supplies what His people cannot produce.

His people faithfully respond to what He supplies.

That is not earning.

That is discipleship.

Rooted in Scripture - Pointing to Jesus.