Yesterday, I woke up. I have a Shaker bed, crafted out of wood by someone else. It has a mattress and mostly fleece blankets, none of which were made by me or any of my relatives. I brushed my teeth with an electric toothbrush also made by someone else with toothpaste that I bought through Amazon, which means not only did I not make it, but I was dependent upon someone or something to find it in a warehouse, put it in a truck and then deliver it in a truck made by another person along highways paved by other people. I walked my dog, who I adopted from a rescue group many states away, with a leash and collar that were made in a factory by someone other than me and clean up after her with bags, also made by someone other than me. I ate cereal made with grains grown by a farmer other than me, with milk from almonds grown on a tree raised by someone else and a banana grown by someone far from here and shipped here. I put on clothes made in a factory by others and shipped here through the efforts of many people. I got in a car made by other people in a factory, probably in another country, and powered by gas from oil drilled by someone else.

I could continue to describe my day, but we all get the idea here. I am dependent upon someone else to accomplish everything I need to do. I couldn’t do anything without someone else, often someone I don’t even know, having helped me. No matter how independent we think we are, we rely on others. The most important person we rely on is God. Without God, we don’t get up in the morning. Without God, there are no grains for anyone to harvest or trees for someone to chop down and fashion into a bed. Without God’s having become Incarnate as Jesus and Dwelling within us as Spirit, we would fail to bear the fruit that God the Creator expects of us. These fruits are qualities like kindness, patience, gentleness, love and self-control. Without Jesus, we’d face judgment when we fail. But Jesus continues to plead for us, asking that we be given another chance with more careful tending and help. Jesus continues to provide all that we need to be disciples. God, in giving us Jesus, provides for us unending mercy – mercy that we need and depend on.

The challenge for us is to realize that we need this help and accept it. We are so much a part of a culture that values independence and we are proud of being independent. Just Do It!, for example. While it’s a great slogan to get us up and moving, it seems to imply that we can just do everything we need ourselves. But we can’t.

We make mistakes. When we sit down with God to review our day, God helps us see those times when we failed at giving grace to others when they needed it – in fact, we even see times when we may have even been mean. We see those times when we’ve chosen to put other things before God. In fact, we have times when we are just like the fig tree in the parable today – we’re standing and living, but we’re just not quite bearing the fruits that we would bear if we just let the Word of God and the love of Jesus fertilize us and tend us. When we fail to bear these fruits, we repent. Repentance, writes Kathleen Norris, is coming to our senses, seeing, suddenly, what we’ve done that we might not have done, or recognizing … that the problem is not in what we do but in what we become. [[1]](#endnote-1) When we realize that we have become like that fig tree, we ask for God’s mercy to hang in there with us and plead for us. We ask for God’s mercy in helping us to change our lives so that we bear fruit. Change is hard and we can’t do it on our own.

Psychiatrist Stephen Grosz has done extensive research on people’s capacity to change how they behave. Even in situations when the need to change is perceived as urgent, people have difficulty changing. He writes:

Committing ourselves to a small change, even one that is unmistakably in our best interest, is often more frightening than ignoring a dangerous situation. We don't want an exit if we don't know exactly where it is going to take us, even—or perhaps especially—in an emergency … We want to know what new story we're stepping into before we exit the old one.[[2]](#endnote-2)

We need God. We need God to help us be disciples. We need God to forgive us when we fail and to help us change our lives around so that we bear fruit. The good news is that God provides all we need. God’s mercy NEVER ends.

1. Kathleen Norris, The Cloister Walk, found on PreachingToday.com [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Dr. Stephen Grocz,The Examined Life *(W.W Norton & Company, 2013), pp. 122-123*, found on PreachingToday.com [↑](#endnote-ref-2)