

Message Road Map

Series: *Half Truths*

Message: “God Helps Those Who Help Themselves”

Texts: Psalm 10:14b, 17-18a

Today we continue with our series, *Half Truths*, by looking at the phrase, “God helps those who help themselves.” When preparing this message, I was surprised to discover that according to the Barna Group, 8 out of 10 Americans think that this phrase is in the Bible. But it’s not. Rather, it goes back to Greek mythology in the 5th century before Christ and is repeated in various forms by philosophers over the next two-and-a-half millennia. It became popular in American thought in 1736 when Benjamin Franklin recorded the phrase in *Poor Richard’s Almanac*. So, while it has a long history, the phrase is not in the Bible, leading us to ask how it lines up with biblical truth.

There is at least one sense in which the phrase seems to be true: prayer is not a magic trick. For example, when we sit down to eat a meal and say grace, the food does not magically appear on the table. Rather, many people had to work hard to raise, grow, harvest, and transport it to a location nearby. In addition, someone in your household worked to earn a paycheck that was used to purchase the food, went to the store to get it, and cooked it before plating it up. So, when we say grace it’s not in hopes of food magically appearing but a way saying thank you to God for a planet that sustains our life, for the capacity to earn a living, and for all the people who helped get it on our table. The same is true when it comes to employment. You don’t get a job by sitting at home and praying, “God, please give me a job.” Rather, you work on a resume, search for openings, submit applications, and go to interviews. If all you do is sit around praying, you will probably remain unemployed. The examples lead to an important principle in Christianity: first we pray, then we work. *Both* are necessary to get things done in life, to move in the direction of God’s call on our lives.

This issue was addressed in the New Testament letter of 2 Thessalonians, which tradition attributes to the apostle Paul. After Paul established a church in the city of Thessalonica, the people soon began to think that Jesus was coming back soon, so soon that they could quit their jobs and start preparing for his arrival. But when this news reached the apostle, he sent a letter that said:

. . . when we were with you, we gave you this command: anyone unwilling to work should not eat. For we hear that some of you are living irresponsibly, mere busybodies, not doing any work. Now such persons we command and exhort in the Lord Jesus Christ to do their work quietly and to earn their own living. (2 Thess 3:10-12)

In this way, Paul is reminding us of the importance of both prayer and work. A great example of this principle of “pray AND work” can be found in the civil rights movement in America. In 1965 African Americans in Alabama were being prevented from exercising their right to vote. To register, they were required to take tests that no one could pass, like guess the exact number of jelly beans in a jar. In response, to these attempts to keep African Americans disenfranchised, people began to organize, and during a peaceful demonstration a church deacon named Jimmie Lee Jackson was shot and killed by a state trooper. At a meeting in a Methodist Church, a call

went out for a larger, non-violent march from Selma to Montgomery, which was about 54 miles. On Sunday, March 7, 1965, approximately 600 people met at Brown Chapel African Methodist Episcopal Church, began with prayer, and then they started to march. Leading the group was John Lewis. At the time, Lewis was a young seminary student, but he would go on to serve in the US congress for 33 years until his death in 2020. Right when they started to march, police blocked them as they crossed the Edmund Pettus Bridge and, even though the people marching remained non-violent, the police physically attacked them. More than 50 marchers were hospitalized, and John Lewis suffered a fractured skull. These men and women didn't just pray and wait for God to fix things, they prayed AND worked, they made sacrifices and were even willing to die, for a just and moral cause. This day would go down in history as Bloody Sunday, and it was a turning point in the civil rights movement. Two days later Martin Luther King Jr came to Selma and led another March. Later that year, congress passed the Voting Rights Act.

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So, when it comes to the saying, “God helps those who help themselves,” it’s true that we should not passively sit around waiting for God to miraculously do everything for us. Since we are the instruments that God uses to change the world, we must offer more than “thoughts and prayers” in the face of need. So, we are called to pray AND work.

However, there are at least two ways that the saying, “God helps those who help themselves,” runs contrary to scripture and can distort our understanding of the Christian faith.

First, the saying is sometimes used by Christians to avoid their God-given obligation to help people in need. In truth, there are some people who truly cannot help themselves. I think of children and adults with disabilities. People trapped in serious mental illness or addiction. People who are born in extreme poverty inside and outside of our country. And while it may be true to varying degrees that at some point these people have a role to play in shaping their own lives, this initially proves impossible without outside help. Some people find themselves in situations so dire that they cannot simply pull themselves up by their bootstraps.

I remember when I went through a divorce while living in Nashville, TN. I was a full-time graduate student working part-time at the university. My now ex-wife worked as a nurse, so she was bringing in most of the money that paid the bills. When we separated and started working with lawyers to prepare for divorce, I lost her income. The story is complicated, but I ended up being the sole support for my oldest son, who had ADHD and needed medication that I could no longer afford. So, I went to apply for government assistance, and when they looked at all my supporting documents, they said that I not only qualified for Medicaid, which would pay for my son’s medication, but also food stamps. This was a lifesaver for me for about 6 months as I tied-up loose ends at school, moved back to Florida, and looked for a full-time job in the church. I don’t know what I would have done without this extra help, as well as help from my parents. When you consider people who are in even more extreme situations, people who are homeless with no family or friends to help, or the meth addict who can’t kick the habit, or the person who lost everything after a cancer diagnosis, it becomes clear that some people cannot help themselves unless other people step-up and help them first.

This is not to say that people shouldn't do what they can to support themselves and make their lives better. Of course, they should. But sometimes people face challenges they cannot overcome on their own, and our calling as Christians is to meet them where they are and do what we can to alleviate their suffering. In fact, this is what God commands us to do in scripture. Consider the following examples.

In relation to the poor, God says to the Israelites in **Leviticus 23:22**:

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“When you harvest the produce of your land, you must not harvest all the way to the edge of your field; and don't gather the remaining bit of your harvest. Leave these items for the poor and the immigrant: I am the LORD your God.”

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Instead of consuming everything themselves or selling for a profit, God commands farmers to leave something for those who cannot make ends meet. Indeed, throughout the Old Testament, God commands His people repeatedly to care for the orphan, widow, and immigrant, as well as the sick and disabled, because these were the most vulnerable people in society and the most in need of help. Drawing from this Jewish tradition, Jesus teaches his disciples the same thing in his parable of the sheep and the goats, where he commands us to feed the hungry, clothe the poor, tend the sick, welcome the stranger, and visit those in prison. He goes on to say that when we do these things for others, we do it to him. We see similar ideas in the stories of the Good Samaritan and the Prodigal Son. And this same theme is echoed in the New Testament letter of **James**,

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which says in chapter 1, verse 27, *“True devotion, the kind that is pure and faultless before God the Father, is this: to care for orphans and widows in their difficulties.”*

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These are just a few examples among many in the Bible that instruct us to take the first step in helping others who are in a hole too deep to climb out on their own, and when we read these kinds of passages, God teaches us two important things. The first is about God's character. Rather than being punitive and relentless, God is compassionate and generous to the poor, the outcast, and the vulnerable. In other words, God is in the business of helping people *who cannot help themselves*. Second, we learn that God typically meets the needs of struggling people through us. If we are receptive to God's Spirit, God opens our eyes so we can see the needs around us, evokes compassion in our hearts, and nudges us to do something about it. When we are alert and obedient, God helps those who cannot help themselves through us. While we can (and should) debate the best ways to help people, we are never free to turn a blind eye or shrug off our responsibility.

Most of you know my wife Emma, and I want you to hear one of her stories about God helping her through a Christian friend when she was having a hard time helping herself.

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As Christians, we are called to help each other in this way. And our help cannot be limited to people in our church or even people who share our faith. God calls us to help anyone in need for one simple reason, *because they are in need*. This is why our church supports local and foreign missions. As I've mentioned before, The United Methodist Church is a global denomination, and fifteen cents of every dollar that you give to a United Methodist Church goes to what we call apportionments. Just like we ask you to tithe a certain percentage of your income to support the ministers of your local church, congregations as a whole give back to the denomination, which empowers us to exponentially increase the amount of good we do together, compared to what we could do as a single church. While some of these funds are used to do things like train pastors and start new churches, they also help people in need all over the world directly and indirectly. The same is true when we give money to the United Methodist Committee on Relief, one of the most respected international aid agencies. In fact, UMCOR is mobilized right now, helping in the wake of hurricane Idalia. In addition, our church hosts a community food pantry, and partner with ministries like Family Promise, Children's Hunger Project, and One Body Global Ministries. All these things, and many more, are efforts to be obedient to God's command to help those who cannot help themselves, to allow God to work through us to help others.

In addition, there are some things that only God can do directly in the hearts and minds of people through the gift of his grace, and one of these things is to save sinners like you and me. This brings us to a second way that the saying, "God helps those who help themselves," is wrong. For if this were true, what would it mean for our salvation?

The Bible teaches that everyone sins and wanders away from God, and that we get so lost in our wandering that we cannot find our way home. In fact, the Bible says that when we are stuck in this predicament, we don't even realize it. Rather, we deceive ourselves into thinking that we are happy and don't need help from God or anyone else. While we are lost, broken, and in need of help, we convince ourselves that we've got everything under control, and everything is fine. We are incapable of even seeing the mess we're in until God pulls back the curtain and shows us our true condition, which usually happens in times of great crisis or suffering. And even after we see the truth, we are powerless on our own to do anything about it. God must take the first step in helping us when we cannot help ourselves by extending his grace to begin the process of healing and restoration. If God said, "Get your act together and pull yourself up by your bootstraps, and THEN I'll help you," we would never change; we would die a slave to sin and miss experiencing the fullness of life. But thanks be to God that He is in the business of doing for us, what we cannot do for ourselves. Check out this testimony from my friend Chris Cee, who helps lead the AA meetings at our church every Friday night.

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This story shows us that sometimes we can't help ourselves, not because we are poor and destitute or without resources but because we have descended too deeply into self-destruction

and despair. And before we think of Chris as an extreme example, remember that the Bible says that at some point in life *we all* find ourselves in this kind of situation. It may not be drugs or alcohol, but we all find ourselves powerless before God asking for help. This is what grace is all about, and it's central in the Christian tradition. Grace is the undeserved work of God in our lives, the unmerited love and favor of God that we cannot earn, buy, or achieve for ourselves. We can only ask God for help and receive it as a gift. And the essence of this grace is that God helps those who cannot help themselves.

Friends, there are times when we can help ourselves, and we should. God is counting on us to do the best we can by praying AND working. But there are also times when people cannot make it on their own, and God prompts us to help. We become God's answer to someone else's prayer. And lest we become too confident in our own resourcefulness and too judgmental toward people in need, we must always remember "there but for the grace of God I go."

If it hasn't already happened, there will come a time in your life when you cannot help yourself. There are things that happen to us (and things we do to ourselves) that we cannot fix—when we will need God's help and the help of others too. In that moment, we cry out to God, the only one who can truly help, and even though we are "poor and pitiable, weak and afraid," God has mercy on us, reaches down, picks us up, comforts us in our suffering, and help us move forward. God is there for you in your time of need, and God calls you to do that for others. Just as God helped you when you could not help yourself, God calls you to help others when they cannot help themselves. The question is, will you listen and respond?

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One of the things we do in the Christian tradition to acknowledge our utter dependence upon God is to confess our sins. As we prepare to receive the Holy Sacrament of Communion, I invite you to join me in confessing our sins before God and one another, trusting in God's grace and forgiveness