

God Helps Those Who Help Themselves?

1/10/2016

Psalm 10:14, 27-28; Psalm 18:6, 16; Psalm 121:1-2

In this sermon series we are using resources from Church of the Resurrection UMC to consider things that Christians often say, things they believe, that may not be entirely true. They sound right and often can be supported by some scripture. But under careful examination they are found to be, at best, half-truths. It is the part that is not true that trips us up so I would like us to think together carefully about one of those phrases.

This phrase is often recited by Christians and non-Christians alike, it's up on the screen, so say it with me: God helps those who help themselves. A couple of polls conducted by the Barna Group some years ago found that 81% of Americans believe this phrase appears in scripture, and 53% felt that it was a major message of the Bible. But "God helps those who help themselves" is not in the Bible. Though it has been around since the ancient Greeks, it was probably Ben Franklin who popularized it in the 1730's in his book Poor Richard's Almanac.

So today we'll look at one way in which this phrase is true and it captures a biblical teaching, and two ways in which it's not true and the opposite of what the Bible's message is.

This phrase "God helps those who help themselves" captures one important truth. We don't sit at the supper table and pray that God will drop food onto our plates. That would be a good way to go hungry. I've known people who prayed for a job but did little to look for work. That would be a good way to stay unemployed.

There was a couple who were trying to sell their home. They prayed for their home to sell. They turned in prayer request cards for it to sell. All along their realtor told them they were asking too much for their home. Months went by and they expressed their disappointment with God for not selling the house. When confronted with the idea that what they were really praying for was someone to pay more than their home was worth they realized what they needed to do and finally took their realtor's advice and lowered the price by \$11,000, and the house sold within three days.

God is not going to drop food on your table, force someone to hire you for a job when there is someone more qualified, or make someone spend more for your home than it is worth....

In Thessalonica Paul taught the people to trust in Christ and he also taught them that Christ would return soon. So some people quit their jobs to just be ready for when Jesus came back. Paul hears about it and writes these words, "Even when we were with you we were giving you this command: "If anyone doesn't want to work, they shouldn't eat." We hear that some of you are living an undisciplined life. They aren't working, but they are meddling in other people's business. By the Lord Jesus Christ, we command and encourage such people to work quietly and put their own food on the table." (2 Thess 3:10-12) So Paul is not teaching – just pray and God will take care of everything. You pray and then you work. The Benedictine Monks use this phrase Pray and Work. Ora et Labora is the Latin. We pray and work and this is how the world is changed.

As I've said many times, God works through people. Our prayers are meant to empower us for, and guide us into action. Those who fought for civil rights did not simply pray at church and hope that things would change. They prayed and then marched, knowing they were likely to be beaten and arrested. But they did it because they believed the cause of civil rights was just, a cause God was calling them to and that God would somehow see them through... So in a sense there is truth to the idea that God helps those who help themselves..

But I'd like to suggest two contexts or ways in which this statement is fundamentally unbiblical and gets it wrong.... Here are some humorous examples:

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First, this phrase God helps those who help themselves is sometimes used by people as a way of avoiding helping others. The situations in which people find themselves in poverty or financially struggling are not always prone to simple answers. God recognizes this. Again and again in scripture we find God calling his people to take special concern for the poor, the orphan, the widow and the needy.

It's important to note that in scripture God consistently calls his people to help those who cannot help themselves, or who require help before they can help themselves. In Leviticus God commands, "When you harvest your land's produce, you must not harvest all the way to the edge of your field; and don't gather every remaining bit of your harvest. Leave these items for the poor and the immigrant; I am the Lord your God." (Lev 23:22) In other words don't harvest your whole crop leave some for the poor who can have dignity in harvesting the remainder for themselves – they get to help themselves by doing the work. This is God's strategy for ensuring that others are helped.

James writes these familiar words in the New Testament: "Religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father, is this: to care for orphans and widows in their distress." (James 1:27) In Biblical times, widows and orphans had no standing in the community, no power unto themselves so this mandate basically commands us to be actively engaged in helping those who cannot help themselves.

In the Parables of the Sheep and the Goats and the Good Samaritan Jesus tells us that God judges us not only by our faith, but by whether our faith was one that led us to a greater compassion for the poor and needy and then to take action on their behalf.

God does help those who can't help themselves. This is a part of the very character of God—his compassion and mercy for those who are struggling, his ability to discern how someone ends up in poverty or living on the streets or struggling to make ends meet. We can debate the best ways of helping and not hurting, of creating independence and not dependence and we should. But any people who think they are Christians and pleasing God, yet have no compassion for those in need and do little to care for them, believing “God only helps those who help themselves” have missed an essential component of the gospel.

And when I think of how God helps those in need, it's clear that God doesn't send angels, nor drop food or clothing or shelter down from heaven, but instead he puts it on the hearts of others to help....

There's one final sense in which, thankfully, God helps those who CANNOT help themselves: Consistently in the Bible God saves, rescues and helps human beings who have made a mess of their lives and cannot save themselves. God is the God of the Hopeless Cause. He is the God who loves sinners. He is the God who walks with us through the darkest valleys. He is the God who brings light into our darkness and peace to our times of anxiety and despair. God rescues, redeems and forgives sinners. This help is extended to us even though we can't earn it and don't deserve it. There's a word for this truth of God's help for those who cannot help themselves. We call it GRACE. And it refers to God's unconditional love for us – we can't earn it, we don't deserve it but God gives it to us without condition. When we've made a mess of things and God still shows us mercy, we can't fix it but God comes and intervenes in our life.

We need two kinds of help in life. The first is the physical kind—food, shelter, clothing, security, healthcare. If you remember your high school psychology, these were the most basic needs in Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs. God meets these physical needs through community, through others; we are our brother and sister's keepers. But on the higher or deeper needs, the existential, interior and spiritual needs for love, hope, peace, comfort, interior strength, forgiveness, meaning and purpose, our faith in God and God's work by his Spirit provide a different kind of help. Again we find this help is given to those who cannot help themselves.

I think of the words of the Psalmist: “In my distress I called upon the Lord; to my God I cried for help. From his temple he heard my voice, and my cry to him reached his ears...He reached down from on high, he took me; he drew me out of mighty waters.” (Psalm 8:6, 16)The Psalmist could have been describing an actual rescue from floodwaters or could have been describing the hopelessness and despair they were experiencing and God lifting them out of that.

I have been at the bedside of people who have been told by doctors, “there is nothing more we can do” which as you can imagine is devastating to hear and I prayed for them to have peace of heart and mind which is based on this passage in Philippians from Paul, “And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.” (Philippians 4:7)

The Psalmist also wrote, “I lift up my eyes to the hills—from where will my help come? My help comes from the Lord, who made heaven and earth.” (Psalm 121:1-2) There are times you can help yourself, and you should—God is counting on you to do so. But you will find in life, if you haven’t already, that there are times you cannot help yourself.

There are things from which you cannot save yourself. Thanks be to God that God DOES INDEED HELP THOSE WHO CANNOT HELP THEMSELVES. That includes YOU and ME. This is the picture we have of God in scripture—a God who sees us at our worst, our most despicable, our weakest, most pitiable and afraid, and who reaches down and picks us up and washes us clean and says, “I am here. You matter to me. I will forgive you. There is hope. Your life has meaning. You are loved. I will not abandon you and together we can make this right” And what we call that, when God helps those who can’t help themselves, is GRACE.

Thanks be to God that God helps those who help themselves and thankfully, God helps those who cannot help themselves.

Psalm 10:14, 27-28

The helpless commit themselves to you; you have been the helper of the orphan...

O Lord, you will hear the desire of the meek; you will strengthen their heart, you will incline your ear to do justice for the orphan and the oppressed.

Psalm 18:6, 16

In my distress I called upon the Lord; to my God I cried for help. From his temple he heard my voice, and my cry to him reached his ears... He reached down from on high, he took me; he drew me out of mighty waters.

Psalm 121:1-2

I lift up my eyes to the hills—from where will my help come? My help comes from the Lord, who made heaven and earth.