

JOHNS CREEK UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

God Helps Those Who Help Themselves?

Sunday, January 20, 2019

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Psalm 10

Today I continue our series called “Does the Bible Say That?” In this series we are taking a look at common platitudes of faith. Sometimes we see them on bumper stickers. Sometimes we hear them from well-meaning family members or friends. And perhaps some of you may say these phrases to others. Some folks think these phrases come straight from the Bible when they are nowhere to be found in scripture.

Quite often these popular phrases of faith are casually said without really thinking through what they mean. This can be damaging and hurtful to others. So we are going to take a closer look at these popular phrases of faith and test them with scripture. My hope is that this series will encourage us to think deeper about our faith. I also hope it will help us think biblically about some of the popular theology in our culture.

Today we focus on this phrase. Let’s say it together: “God Helps Those Who Help Themselves.” How many of you have ever heard this phrase before? Most of us have. It’s been a popular phrase for generations. As I prepared for this sermon, I found Adam Hamilton’s book *Half Truths* to be very helpful. I recommend it to you.

Jay Leno used to do “Jay Walks” where he would walk around the streets of New York and ask people questions. One time he asked folks to name just one of the Ten Commandments. So many people responded with “God helps those who help themselves.”

Barna once did some research on the public’s knowledge of the Bible. The research concluded that around 81 percent of people interviewed thought the phrase “God helps those who help themselves” comes from the Bible. And 53 percent thought it was a major theme and message of scripture.

Well, of course this phrase does not come from the Bible. It actually comes from Greek Mythology and many years later it was popularized by Benjamin Franklin in Poor Richard’s Almanac.

The phrase is mostly untrue. I say mostly because there is an element of truth to it and I am going to tell you why. But there are more ways this phrase is

untrue and therefore the use of this phrase is often misguided. And misusing this phrase is to misunderstand our faith and who we are as followers of Christ. But briefly let me tell you why sometimes this phrase is true. Sometimes it is true that God helps those who help themselves. For example, every week I pray that God would guide, empower and direct me as I prepare my sermons. And I believe he does. But after I pray and open my eyes my sermon does not miraculously appear! Believe me, there are some weeks when I wish it would! God does help and guide me when I prepare sermons but I hold some responsibility as well. God wants me to participate in the process. He wants to use me. I have to work and prepare. The sermon will not write itself! St. Augustine said, “Without God, we cannot. Without us, God will not.”

When you pray before your meal, you thank God for providing the food but when you open your eyes you know the food did not just miraculously appear. You worked and got a paycheck and got the groceries and cooked the meal, or in my case, called Grub Hub or Uber Eats!

If you are unemployed and sit home and pray that God would give you a job but do nothing but watch Netflix and eat Cheetos you will be without a job for the rest of your life. You have to get out of your parent’s basement, get on the computer, prepare your resume, prepare for interviews and do something.

Adam Hamilton recalls talking about a couple he knew who were trying to sell their home. It was on the market for a very long time. They prayed and prayed it would sell but it never did. They even put a St. Joseph statue next to the “For Sale” sign to get it sold but that didn’t work. So they went to their pastor and asked him why it wasn’t selling. They said they prayed and prayed. Come to find out their real estate agent said they were trying to sell their house 10K over its value. The agent told them if they lowered their price it would sell. They refused. The pastor said, “So you are telling me you want a buyer to pay 10K over the value of the house and you are upset it is not selling?” They finally came to

their senses and lowered it and the house sold in three days.

Hamilton writes, “God is not going to drop food on your table, force someone to hire you for a job when someone more qualified is available, or make people spend more for your home than it is worth. We can pray and pray, but we also have to do some work in the process. God blesses us with brains, strength, and wisdom. God provides other people to advise us. All these are God’s gifts to us, but it is up to us to use them. So we pray—and we work.”

Yes, sometimes it is true that God helps those who help themselves. The Apostle Paul addressed this issue plainly to the church in Thessalonica. They thought the Lord would return soon and some felt they didn’t have to do any work. To this Paul says:

For even 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 in idleness, 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. Brothers and sisters, do not be weary in doing what is right. -1st Thessalonians 3:10-13

Trusting Jesus will lead us to action. Augustine said, “Without God we cannot, but without us God will not.”

Martin Luther King, Jr. didn’t just pray that God would do something about racial injustice. He prayed and then, with God’s power, did something about it himself. Mother Theresa didn’t just pray that God would do something about the poor and destitute. She prayed and then, with God’s power, did something about it. The founders of Johns Creek UMC didn’t just pray that God would create a vital church in this area. They prayed and then, with God’s power, did something about it. God expects us to seek his will and power and then do our part.

But let me tell you why today’s platitude is mostly untrue. In fact, I want to tell you two reasons why this phrase is untrue and misused. First of all, **sometimes people can’t help themselves.**

I’ll give you an example. The phrase “God helps those who help themselves” is often used in the context of the homeless. I remember being in a car with some parishioners and we stopped at a light and saw a homeless man holding up a sign for food. There was some discussion and then the driver turned to me and

said, “The Bible says, ‘God helps those who help themselves,’ right pastor?” I replied, “First of all, that phrase is not in the Bible. Second of all, it’s not always that simple.”

Adam Hamilton was once approached by a homeless person who wanted money for food. He was “Mr. Fix it,” so he said, “I’ll take you to lunch and help you find a job.” They went to lunch and the pastor had a newspaper with job openings circled. After lunch he asked the homeless man, “Okay, what is your address and phone number so your future employer can contact you?” He replied, “I don’t have an address or phone. I’m homeless.” “Well, we will worry about that later. Let’s get your resume ready. What is your education?” He replied, “I dropped out of high school because my family needed me to work.” “Okay, what about references?” He replied, “Well, if I had references I wouldn’t be here!”

It’s rather convenient to say God helps those who help themselves but the truth is sometimes people cannot help themselves. I can tell you in my ministry that I come across many people who are in a pit so dark and deep that they don’t know how to get out of it. They can’t help themselves – those in nursing homes who can’t feed or bathe themselves – helpless and vulnerable children who have nothing to eat – homeless people who are mentally ill and cannot afford the medication they need – orphans and widows left out in the cold – oppressed and abused women and children who need justice someone to be speak up for them – people receiving only minimum wage who cannot afford to get a place of their own because they cannot pay their first month’s rent up front.

And guess what? God calls us to help the helpless and to give hope to the hopeless. God calls us to help the poor and needy and those who cannot help themselves. Take a look at what scripture says:

“When you reap the harvest of your land, you shall not wholly reap the corners of your field when you reap, nor shall you gather any gleaning from your harvest. You shall leave them for the poor and for the stranger: I *am* the LORD your God.” –Leviticus 23:22

Religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father, is this: to care for orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world. –James 1:27

In the gospel of Luke we find the parable of the Good Samaritan and the Sheep and the Goats and in those parables we learn that ultimately God will judge our faith based upon how our faith moved us to compassion to help the poor, needy, wounded, and the beaten, broken and bruised.

The book of Proverbs gives us insight as well:

Whoever is kind to the poor lends to the LORD, and will be repaid in full. –Proverbs 19:17

If you close your ear to the cry of the poor, you will cry out and not be heard. –Proverbs 21:13

You see, God does help those who can't help themselves and you want to know how he does it? By sending you and me. God moves our hearts to help others!

A lot of people talk about this being a Christian nation or wanting it to be a Christian nation. Well, here is the honest gospel truth. If we want to be a Christian nation one of our top priorities should be to help the poor and needy because that is what the Bible calls us to do and, more specifically, what Jesus commands that we do. So as a nation unless we are willing to help the helpless and vulnerable we cannot call ourselves a Christian nation. Take a look at this reminder from scripture:

What does the LORD require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God? –Micah 6:8

Adam Hamilton writes, “We can (and should) debate the best ways of helping and not hurting, of creating independence and not dependence. What is not debatable is our calling to help. People who think they are Christian and 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.”

What I love about Johns Creek UMC is that this church gets that God calls us to help those who can't help themselves. Our myriad of ministries are proof of that. I am proud of this church for all it does to help the helpless and give hope to the hopeless.

Another big reason why the phrase “God helps those who help themselves” is wrong is because the gospel message is the exact opposite! **God Saves Us**

When We Cannot Save Ourselves. Isn't this the point of God's redemptive work in Christ? The gospel message is that God saves and delivers us when we make a mess of our lives. God gives us hope when we are hopeless. Our God is a God of the hopeless and helpless. And let me tell you, without God and his grace, all of us are hopeless and helpless. I don't care who you are, all of us have been or will get to a place in life when we need help and hope beyond ourselves. We call this grace!

You know what grace is, right? It is receiving the blessings of God when we don't deserve it? And how many of us have received God's blessings when we haven't deserved them? All of us have! I can't tell you how many times in my life when I have been helpless and God pulled me up out of the pit. Sometimes he put people in my life to provide the things that I could not provide for myself. And sometimes God provided for me directly.

Folks, the Lord helps and provides us with things that we could never obtain on our own – feeling a sense of love and belonging, having a purpose to our lives, receiving peace in the midst of a storm, getting hope when we feel hopeless. God meets those needs and more. We cannot. So yes, God helps us when we can't help ourselves.

Adam Hamilton recalls meeting with a mother who had lost her teenaged son earlier in the year. She told me how, in the dark days following his death, she essentially had stopped functioning. “I felt like a building had fallen on me,” she said. “I couldn't breathe. I couldn't eat. I couldn't take care of myself. I couldn't even dress myself. I was like a little child.”

She told Hamilton that two things had sustained her through the hardest moments. “When she couldn't eat, her friends and church family brought her food and made her take nourishment. When she couldn't get out of her pajamas in the morning, her girlfriends helped her get dressed and meet the day. When she could not help herself, God worked through others to help her. But she also felt God's hand directly. In the depth of her grief, and even now, she heard God whisper to her, ‘He's safe with me. He's in my arms. You don't have to be afraid.’ As she confronted that higher level of needs, she found that her faith in God, and God's work in her life, had saved her.”

The testimony of these folks reminds me of these words from the Psalmist:

In my distress I called to the LORD; I cried to my God for help. From his temple he heard my voice; my cry came before him, into his ears. –Psalm 18:6

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

I am reminded of a young lady who came to another church I served one Sunday morning. She had been a prostitute. She said, “I came here because I heard this church preaches love and actually backs it up.” She found love, grace and acceptance in our church. One day she said to me, “I used to think I was worthless to God. Now I know he loves me beyond my wildest dreams, and there is nothing I have done or will do that will make him love me less. I am a child of God.” It was a sacred moment.

Hamilton writes, “There are times when we can help ourselves, and we should. God is counting on us to do the best we can—to pray and to work. There are times when people cannot make it on their own, and God prompts us to help. We become the hands of God. We become God’s answer to someone else’s prayer, God’s instruments of grace.”

The truth is when others are helpless God helps us help them. And when we are helpless God helps others to help us. And, most of all, when we are helpless God hears our cries and loves and saves and delivers us directly by his grace. Only God can make us clean and whole. We can’t. Only God can.

Today you may feel helpless. Maybe your marriage needs saving or you are in the clutches of addiction and need help beyond yourself. Perhaps you feel lost and without hope or feel ashamed and desire redemption. Just reach out to God. He can and will help you when you can’t help yourself. He can save you. He can make you whole.

Questions for discussion/reflection:

1. Do you recall a time when you felt helpless? How did God help you? How did the church help you?
2. How does the message of the cross go against the phrase, “God helps those who help themselves”?
3. How is God calling you to help those who can’t help themselves? How is God calling our church to do the same?



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