

Half Truths

“God Helps Those Who Help Themselves”

[Psalm 10:14b, 17-18a / Psalm 18:6, 16 / Psalm 121:1-2](#)

Based on Rev. Adam Hamilton’s book, *Half Truths*, we are examining five statements that many Christians often use and assume to be biblical. Here are the statements:

- Everything happens for a reason;
- God helps those who help themselves;
- God won’t give you more than you can handle;
- God said it, I believe it, that settles it; and
- Love the sinner, hate the sin.

Here’s the thing - they all sound “right” and appear as though they could come from scripture. However, none of the statements I just read are found in the Bible. At best, they are half-truths, which do more harm than good, regardless of the good intentions of those repeat them to others. Last Sunday, we looked at the first of the five statements. Today, we will consider the second statement: “God helps those who help themselves.”

We’ve all heard people saying this, haven’t we? You may have been the one saying this to someone, thinking that it was a biblical truth. If you did, you are not alone. According to a Barna study which was conducted 5 years ago, 52 percent of practicing Christians who were polled strongly believed that the Bible teaches that “God helps those who help themselves.” It’s a view so prevalent and widespread that it would seem people believe it to be one of the Ten Commandments!

So, if it isn’t to be found in the Bible, where did this popular phrase come from? According to Wikipedia, the phrase “originated in ancient Greece and is thought to have been proverbial. It is illustrated by two of Aesop’s Fables and this self-help sentiment is found in ancient Greek dramas. Here in America, it most likely became popular through Benjamin Franklin’s *Poor Richard’s Almanac*, which began to be published yearly in the 18th century.

“God helps those who help themselves” sounds biblical because it bears a certain degree of truth. For instance, If you have an exam, you know that you cannot just pray and expect that you will somehow know all the answers. You will have to study and be prepared for the test like everyone else.

When you are hungry, you know that you cannot just pray and expect food to just appear out of nowhere onto your plate. You have to do something about your hunger -- either by going out to buy food or cooking for yourself. And when you are looking for a job, you cannot just pray and expect a job opportunity to magically present itself. You have to put in some effort: you prepare a resume, make a profile on job boards, submit an application, and go in for an interview. This is to say, we must not only pray, but also work towards our goals whatever they may be.

It would be fantastic if I could just pray for an inspiring sermon, and have God magically place the right words into my mouth when I get up here to preach. But, I know it doesn't work that way. Our choir members do not just show up on Sundays expecting to sing a beautiful anthem. They meet every Thursday night and also on Sunday morning before service for rehearsals. Our organist spends many hours on the organ and piano, so she can provide beautiful music for our worship service. We, Christians are not called to just sit and wait for God's miracles to appear. God has endowed each of us with certain physical and mental abilities, and various other gifts, and it is up to us to put them to good use.

The apostle Paul addressed this same issue in his second letter to Thessalonians. Paul had taught the new Christians in Thessalonica to trust in Jesus, and unfortunately, they took his teaching too literally. They quit their jobs because they thought Jesus was returning soon and that God would provide for them. When Paul heard about this, he wrote to them with 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 Thessalonians 3:10-12, CEB)

Yes, God answers our prayers. God helps us and provides for us. But, God's help and provision does not free us from the responsibility of doing our part. We pray, and we work. Our faith moves us into action while we trust in God.

Perhaps you have heard the story of the man who was caught in a flood. With the water levels rising, a town was told to evacuate. But, he did not heed the warnings, saying he believed God would answer his prayers and rescue him. Later, some people on a boat came by asking if he needed some assistance. To which he said, “No, I am not leaving. God will save me.” As the flood waters rose higher and higher, it forced him up onto the roof of his house. There, a helicopter spotted him and lowered a rope for him to climb up to safety. But, he still refused to leave his house. He firmly believed God would be the one to save him. Eventually, the man was swept off his roof and drowned in the water. When he got to heaven, the man asked, “Hey, God, why didn't you save me?” To which, God replied, “Didn't you see the boat and helicopter I sent to save you? What else could I have done?”

Surely, God answers our prayers and helps us, and God's help comes through the hands and feet of people. We pray for healing and God heals us through medical professionals. God works through their knowledge and training. But, in order to receive the healing, we need to do our part, like going to see the doctor to receive treatment and taking the medications that are prescribed.

We pray for the ministries of our church *and* we show up to help. We pray for the financial health of our church *and* we give generously. We pray for the hungry *and* we give them food. We pray for the incarcerated *and* we visit them. We pray for the marginalized *and* we speak up for them, standing with them in solidarity. We pray for transformative social change *and* we engage ourselves in actions that create such change.

That's what some of our church members did yesterday. There was a group from our church that attended the Women's March in San Jose. Joined by thousands of other women (and men), both young and old of different ethnicities and languages, we marched together in order to "dismantle systems of oppression through nonviolent resistance and [to] build inclusive structures guided by self-determination, dignity and respect." (mission of Women's March from it's website)

So far, we have talked about how the idea that God helps those who help themselves bears some truth. Now, let's examine how it is biblically untrue.

First, there are people in our society who truly cannot help themselves, those who are trapped in intergenerational poverty, those without legal recourse based on their immigration status, those who cannot stand up for themselves. It would be cruel to say that God only helps those who help themselves. In fact, the scriptures reveal the exact opposite. God consistently calls us to have special concern for the most vulnerable members of our society and share what we have with them. Here are some of the scripture passages that reflect God's special concern for the poor, the sick, and the disenfranchised:

"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." (Leviticus 23:22)

"Don't steal from the poor, because they are poor. Don't oppress the needy in the gate (court). The Lord will take up their case and press the life out of those who oppress them." (Proverbs 22:22-23)

"if you open your heart to the hungry, and provide abundantly for those who are afflicted, your light will shine in the darkness, and your gloom will be like the noon." (Isaiah 58:10)

*"The Lord proclaims: Do what is just and right; rescue the oppressed from the power of the oppressor. Don't exploit or mistreat the refugee, the orphan, and the widow. Don't spill the blood of the innocent in this place."
(Jeremiah 22:3)*

"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 10: 17-18a)

Clearly, what these passages reveal is the reality that God comes to the aid of those who are at life's margins. And God's help, which meets their needs, comes through other people -- those who hear the command to "do what is just and right" and "open their hearts" to the plight of those suffering around them.

What is made clear is that we cannot simply say "God helps those who help themselves" and then abdicate our responsibilities as God's people to care for the poor and suffering in our midst. When we respond to the needs of those who can't help themselves with food, clothes, blankets, shelter, and any other forms of protection and care, we become the hands and feet of God's love and compassion. We become God's help for them.

And here is one more reason why the popular saying, “God helps those who help themselves” cannot be true. In the Bible, God consistently saves, rescues, and helps people who have made a mess of their lives and fallen into deep despair. God does not abandon those who cannot help themselves. God does the opposite. God is the God of the hopeless. God walks with us through our darkest valleys. God brings light into our darkness and most shameful past and present. God brings peace even today in this time of great anxiety and despair. It is upon this assurance that the psalmist sang out to God: *“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)*

God’s divine help comes to us even though we do not deserve it. This divine mercy is extended to all of us. It’s called grace. This is the unconditional love of God, the unmerited favor of God, the undeserved work of God in our lives seeking us out even when we were yet strangers. And this is not something that we must earn or work for. This concept of grace is central to the Christian gospel, and the essence of this good news is that God helps and is for those who cannot help themselves.

There may be times when you can help yourself through your own strength and resources. But, there will be times when you simply cannot help yourself. There will be situations in all of our lives that make it manifestly clear that we are not in control, that we cannot simply choose to save ourselves, no matter how hard we try. It is in these inevitable moments that we know the untruth of the phrase God helps those who help themselves. For it is as children we cry out to God, like the psalmist whose words we have today: *“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 18:6, 16).*

When we are at our worst, weakest, and most vulnerable, it is God who reaches out and picks us up, saying to us, “I am here with you. I love you no matter what.” The American theologian Paul Tillich described such immeasurable grace in these terms:

“Grace strikes us when we are in great pain and restlessness. It strikes us when we walk through the dark valley of a meaningless and empty life. It strikes us when our disgust for our own being, our indifference, our weakness, our hostility, and our lack of direction and composure have become intolerable to us. It strikes us when, year after year, the longed-for perfection of life does not appear, when the old compulsions reign within us as they have for decades, when despair destroys all joy and courage. Sometimes at that moment a wave of light breaks into our darkness, and it is as though a voice were saying: “You are accepted.”

Thanks be to God’s great and enduring mercy, love, and grace, which help those who cannot help themselves. May we recognize that this includes us all, even and perhaps especially, people like you and me! Amen.