

**The Bible Doesn't Say That:
"God Helps Those Who Help Themselves"**

Psalm 121

Matthew 5:1-10

Matthew 9:35-38

New sermon series: The Bible Doesn't Say That. Over the next few weeks, we'll look at some sayings that have been commonly thought of as coming from the Bible but aren't actually in there. Or sayings that are attributed to Jesus (so the title of this series could be, "*Jesus* never said that"). Things like "God helps those who help themselves" (this morning). And, "God won't give you more than you can handle."

And we won't just be looking at what the Bible *doesn't* say, or what Jesus never said, but what the Bible *does* say—the sayings or teachings that clarify what is truly communicated in the gospel. Because some of the sayings are simply misquotes of the Bible, or misunderstandings that have evolved and repeated over the years, so they sound Biblical.

It doesn't take long to come up with a list of phrases that are commonly mistaken or misunderstood as coming from the Bible; or they are an adapted, or perhaps corrupted, version of something that *is* in the Bible and therefore misquoted or misused. And that could be another sermon series, titled "Ya, that's in the Bible but it doesn't mean what you think it means."

I'm just going to address a few of these sayings, and if you have one that you'd like to have discussed, please let me know! I'm guessing that we have a lot of the same ones in mind, or some version of it. But there are probably ones I haven't heard of, and I'd like to know what they are.

And as we go through this series, many of you will find yourself saying, "I know that's not in the Bible!" And if that's true, then this series will help us understand where these sayings came from and why, and perhaps will help us in conversation with folks who *do* think it's in the Bible.

But you'd be surprised... after 30 years in pastoral ministry I have come to learn that there are a lot of church-going folks who do believe the Bible says some of these things, either directly, or indirectly by its meaning or intent. I've been asked about several them over the years, and they get used and bandied about commonly in conversation, both in churches and in the public square. That doesn't mean that anyone is a bad person for thinking they're in the book. It just means we need to talk about them and get at the heart of the Biblical witness and discover what God is truly saying—to us, and to the world.

Another reading from Matthew's gospel...

Matthew 9:35-38

35 Then Jesus went about all the cities and villages, teaching in their synagogues, and proclaiming the good news of the kingdom, and curing every disease and every sickness. ³⁶When he saw the crowds, he had compassion for them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd. ³⁷Then he said to his disciples, 'The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few; ³⁸therefore ask the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest.'

This is the word of the Lord!

This morning we begin this series by looking at the phrase, "God helps those who help themselves." Of all the phrases I've been asked to look up chapter and verse of where it says this in Scripture, or talk about it with folks who wonder when or where Jesus said this, this is the most oft asked-about phrase from my experience. And my experience, I've discovered, is borne out in the research.

A Gallup survey conducted about 5 years ago revealed that 1 in 8 Americans believe that the Bible not only teaches this concept, but that it actually says those words, "God helps those who help themselves."

When I'm asked to locate it in the bible, my reflexive response is to say, somewhat jokingly, that it isn't in the Bible we know and read; that saying is in the *Protestant Work Ethic Bible*. Which sounds kind of smart-alecky, but it's more or less true. There isn't really such a thing as a protestant work ethic bible that you

can hold in your hands, but there sort of is one, more like an oral tradition, based on collections of moralistic, proverbial sayings that have made the rounds for a couple centuries in America.

So if this phrase is not in the Bible, where'd it come from? And what does the Bible say instead? We'll get to the second question in a moment.

First, where did this saying come from? Although he didn't invent it, Benjamin Franklin is the one who popularized it in his *Poor Richard's Almanac*. (Remember, Benjamin Franklin *is* Poor Richard; he often wrote using a pseudonym, like Poor Richard, or Silence Dogood, and Harry Meanwell)

Here's how it appears in the 1757 edition. He's talking about taxes, and he basically says, the taxes imposed on us by the government might seem heavy, but they are as nothing compared to other types of taxes we impose on ourselves. Then he begins to moralize, almost preach. He says: "*We are taxed twice as much by our idleness, three times as much by pride, and four times as much by our folly. And from these taxes the commissioners cannot ease or deliver us by allowing an abatement. However, let us hearken to good advice, and something may be done for us. 'God helps them that help themselves,' as Poor Richard says, in his almanac of 1733.*" There you have it.

It might help to remember that Benjamin Franklin was a deist. He, like deists, didn't believe in a personal God who is actively involved in the lives and affairs of people, but rather in a God who set the world in motion and then stood back and let things unfold, while we fend for ourselves. This is God as the unmoved mover. Sets things in motion, and then sits back with popcorn and soda and watches it all unfold.

While Benjamin Franklin popularized the phrase, the real origin of the motto probably lies in ancient Greece, when the storyteller Aesop wove the proverb into one of his tales. Are you familiar with Aesop's fables? Here is what it says in one of Aesop's tales, titled *The Waggoner*:

"A waggoner was once driving a heavy load along a very muddy way. At last he came to a part of the road where the wheels sank half-way into the mire, and the more the horses pulled, the deeper sank the wheels. So the waggoner threw down his whip, and knelt down and prayed to Hercules the Strong: "O Hercules, help me in this my hour of distress." But Hercules appeared to him, and said: "Tut, man, don't sprawl there. Get up and put your shoulder to the wheel. The gods help them that help themselves." So its origin is likely right here in Aesop's fables (or in ancient proverbs that inspired his fables).

Regardless of where the saying comes from, we might be inclined to think that this isn't such a bad thing. You know, don't be lazy, don't expect others—or God—to do for you what you can do for yourself. And there are kernels of truth there. Sometimes putting our shoulder to the wheel *will* get us out of the mire. We do need to take responsibility for our lives and our actions. But, Biblically speaking, those kernels of truth aren't the *primary* truths. They aren't the *first* truth. And, they are often *graceless* truths, especially if they are put first/primary. I'll talk about this more in a moment.

While there are kernels of truth in the saying, "God helps those who help themselves," there are significant problems with this phrase.

For example, the saying suggests that God won't do something until we get our act together first. That's a works righteousness belief, which goes against the gospel of grace. And think about what this phrase says about who God is and how God relates to people, if at all.

The saying also suggests that people who are truly struggling and helpless are out of luck. What about those in the depths and darkness of despair or depression? Or those experiencing intense grief and loss? What about those with mental illness, or a physical disability? Or those who have been unjustly treated and marginalized, with no access to the resources they need?

Ask any recovering addict if helping themselves worked. The whole premise of the 12 steps, and even the gospel (on which the 12 steps are based), is that we *can't* help ourselves.

In fact, for any of us, the harder we try to help ourselves when we're in the pit of darkness, difficulty or trouble, the worse things often get. Self-help and self-will often lead to more misery and a deeper pit. The Bible addresses this. For example the Old Testament book of Proverbs teaches, "*Those who trust in themselves are fools*" (Proverbs 28:26). Strong language, but that's how the book of Proverbs rolls. And we are taught to pray, "...*your* will be done." Implying, not my will, *primarily*; ideally our will and God's will are to become integrated.

The biggest problem with the saying, though, ("God helps those who help themselves") is that it goes against the entire primary Biblical witness and salvation story, from Creation to Revelation. For example, when the Hebrew people are slaves in Egypt and under forced labor and Pharaoh's cruel dictatorship, and they cry out to God for help and deliverance, Moses didn't say to them, "God helps those who help themselves." No! Moses said, "God has heard your cry, and he will deliver you." And on it goes from there in the Bible. Jesus never said to anyone who came to him asking for help, "Tut, man/woman, don't sprawl there..."

A few years ago I met a former inmate and gang member through Underground Ministries and the One Parish-One Prisoner program. He shared his story and as he told his story, the thing he kept saying over and over again was: “I couldn’t help himself.” He said, “I was so deeply caught up and entangled in the gang life and drugs and self-misery that my only solution was to cry out to God.” He said his first prayer was that he’d end up in jail. How’s that for a prayer! He knew that he was helpless on his own. God answered that prayer! Then while in jail his prayer was that he would be set on a path of restoration and healing. Then God put Chris Hoke in his path (Chris is a jail chaplain and the leader of Underground Ministries), and the restoration and healing process began.

So, if the Bible doesn’t say “God helps those who help themselves” what does the Bible say about this? The answer is, quite simply that **God helps those who are utterly helpless.**

There are several places in Scripture where this is said, straightforwardly, like in our reading from Matthew today. Jesus had compassion on the people because they were “harassed and *helpless*, like sheep without a shepherd.” And I love it that Matthew tells us that Jesus saw them, and had compassion. He was moved in his gut (“compassion” is the same word for “intestines”). Because he saw that they were helpless. Jesus is not the unmoved mover; the deity that puts

creation into motion and then steps away from it. God, through Jesus Christ, is affected by the helplessness and the pain of others.

The Biblical witness is that God provides tangibly for those who are *helpless* and *in deep need*. So we might rephrase this to say that “God helps those who *can’t* help themselves.” In a way that’s what Jesus is saying in the first few beatitudes as well: those who are poor in spirit, mourning, hungering and thirsting and so forth. They’re blessed. God sees them and helps them because they can’t help themselves. In the second half of the beatitudes, where Jesus blesses the peacemakers, and the merciful, the justice-seekers, we might say “God helps those who help others.” So, “God helps those who can’t help themselves,” and “God helps those who help others.”

Our prayer from Psalm 121 affirms this: “I lift up my eyes to the hills, from where will my *help* come? My help comes from the Lord, the creator of the universe.” It’s the Bible’s way of saying, my help can’t ultimately come from me, or from something out there, in terms of my deepest truest need for help.

And the apostle Paul gives us a couple brilliant summary statements about the work of God in Jesus Christ, through his death and resurrection. For example, in Romans 5 (from our assurance) he says, “For you see, at just the right time, when we were still powerless (helpless), Christ died for us... God demonstrates his

own love for us in this: *while we were still sinners*, Christ died for us.” Not, “After we got our act together, Christ came to help us.”

And he hits a home run when he summarizes the gospel in Eph.2: “For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast.”

So what it really comes down to is grace. Pure grace. The gift of God that came to us, and continues to come to us, in our need—apart from our attempts to try to save ourselves or control outcomes. It’s all grace. Grace in the form of forgiveness, from God and between people. Grace in the form of reconciliation—with God and between people. Grace in the form of answered prayer for tangible needs. Grace in the form of healing—emotionally, and even physically. Grace in the form of a deep sense of connection with the world and with God’s creation and a deepening spirituality and sense of wonder. Grace in the form of the peace that passes understanding in our hearts and minds.

What Paul is saying, and what Jesus modeled, is that God always makes the first move toward us, in love. Because we can’t help ourselves, God always makes the first move toward us. *God, in Christ, is the great initiator.* God, in Jesus Christ, is the ultimate first responder. God is not the unmoved mover who stands at a distance while we fend for ourselves.

This is the God who became flesh and dwelt among us as a human being. The incarnation shows us that God desires relationship with us, and with his creation, and is near to us, to enable us to be grateful *second* responders to his help—not only for our own sakes, but for the sake of others too.

In response to God's grace, we become the help that others need: the merciful, the peacemakers, the laborers in the harvest, and so forth, who become the answer to others' prayers, as each of us listens and gratefully responds to the God who is our refuge and strength, a very present *help* in trouble.

One of the needs that Jesus addresses is our hunger—for meaning, for purpose, for a sense of dignity and worth, a hunger for home—"prone to wander, Lord, we feel it," right? So, we are invited to come home, and the invitation is issued: All who hunger, come.

All Who Hunger, Gather Gladly