

God Helps Those Who Help Themselves
(Half Truths: Things You Only Thought Were in the Bible, Part 1)

Luke 6:20-21, 24-25

[A sermon preached by the Rev. Stan Gockel at the First
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I

It's a saying I recall hearing from the time I was a little boy.

I heard it from my grandmother, my mother, and other relatives,
and I've it heard repeated many times down through the years.

Usually I hear it when unemployment figures are announced,
or when the evening news carries a report about the number of people living
in poverty.

It goes something like this:

“Too bad about all those poor, unemployed people.
Like the Bible says,
‘God helps those who help themselves.’”

II

It's also a great line to throw into an argument.

Nothing like backing up your point of view with a verse from the Bible.

Only a fool or a pagan would not respect such a line of reasoning.

There's only one problem with some of our favorite sayings—

They are not in the Bible!

I thought I'd give this sermon some class by quoting Shakespeare:

*“There is no error so gross but that some
somber brow will bless it with a proper text.”*

Today's quotation is one of those: **God helps those who help themselves.**

Just for the record—Jesus didn't say it,
 St. Paul didn't say it,
 it's not from the Book of Proverbs,
 Moses didn't write it.

The origin of the phrase is one of Aesop's fables, from the 6th century B.C., entitled "Hercules and 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," quoth he. 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.

In the 17th century A.D., the English political theorist Algernon Sidney took this idea into the English language with the now familiar wording,
 "God helps those who help themselves."

The saying was then taken up by Benjamin Franklin in the 1736 edition of *Poor Richard's Almanac*.

Franklin was a deist who believed in God but did not believe that God intervened in human affairs, so people were pretty much on their own.

Like so many of the sayings that have been handed down to us, "God helps those who help themselves" has become part of our American folk religion.

Folk religion is what most people live by, according to sociologist Robert Bellah.

By "folk religion," Bellah was referring to that collection of disjointed beliefs, aphorisms, and superstitions that are so much a part of our cultural milieu that we assume they are part of the biblical revelation.

This little phrase—“God helps those who help themselves”—is a kind of creedal statement of the Protestant work ethic which is so much a part of American culture that we have made it part of our folk religion.

It is a sign of how biblically illiterate we have become that so many people think this phrase is found in the Bible.

A survey by Christian polling firm the Barna Group found that better than 8 out of 10 Americans think “God helps those who help themselves” is in the Bible, and more than half think it is one of the major teachings of Scripture.

Even among professed “born again” Christians, the percentage who agreed was 68%.

Despite being of non-Biblical origin, the phrase topped a poll of the most widely known Bible verses.

Do you remember when Jay Leno hosted *The Tonight Show* and he would do his “Jaywalking” sketch?

He would ask random people on the street questions about the Bible.

When he asked people to name one of the Ten Commandments, the most popular response (at least, as edited by the producers) was—you guessed it!—

“God helps those who help themselves.”

III

Now I won’t deny that the saying, “God helps those who help themselves,” does have religious connotations.

Many of the sayings in the Book of Proverbs express a similar idea.

For example, in Proverbs 26:15 the lazy are condemned:

*“The lazy person buries a hand in the dish,
and is too tired to bring it back to the mouth.”*

Proverbs 18:9: *“One who is slack in work is close kin to a vandal.”*

Proverbs 6 tells the parable of the ant:

“You lazy fool, look at the ant. Let it teach you a thing or two. Nobody has to tell it what to do. All summer it stores up food. So how long are you going to laze around doing nothing? How long before you get out of bed?” (The Message)

In contrast, just as the lazy person suffers for not working,
so the diligent worker is rewarded for his or her labors:

(10:4) *“A slack hand causes poverty,
but the hand of the diligent makes rich.”*

(12:24) *“The hand of the diligent will rule,
while the lazy will be put to forced labor.”*

(13:4) *“The appetite of the lazy craves, and gets nothing,
while the appetite of the diligent is richly supplied.”*

And there are, of course, hymns to go with such verses that depict God rewarding labor and hard work:

*“Work, for the night is coming,
Work thru the morning hours;
Work while the dew is sparkling,
Work ‘mid springing flowers.*

*Work when the day grows brighter,
Work in the glowing sun;
Work, for the night is coming,
When man’s work is done.”*

[Annie L. Coghill, 1836-1907]

IV

Of course, the saying, “God helps those who help themselves,”
not only has religious connotations,
it is considered by many to be just plain common sense.

The hard-working person who pulls herself up by the bootstraps to become a success is a folk hero of our culture and the theme of countless Hollywood movies.

For example, last year's big hit movie musical that almost won the Academy Award for Best Picture, *La La Land*, portrays two struggling characters,
 Mia, an aspiring actress,
 and Sebastian, a jazz pianist who aspires to open his own jazz club.

Mia and Sebastian have several chance encounters.

At first they don't like each other, but, since it's Hollywood, they soon fall in love and support each other in pursuit of their dreams.

They both struggle to overcome many obstacles,
 including a falling out in their relationship.

But finally through grit, determination, and a few lucky breaks along the way, they both manage to achieve their dreams (although not as a couple)—

 Mia becomes a famous actress with a handsome husband and a beautiful daughter.

 And Sebastian opens his jazz club under the name Mia had suggested,
 Seb's Place.

We love movies like that because we tend to idolize those Horatio Alger-type stories of persons who overcome huge obstacles in the achievement of their dreams.

But at the same time we also feel a subtle (or perhaps not-so-subtle) hostility toward poor people.

Listen carefully to the political rhetoric in election years about people who rely on public assistance and the rhetoric we hear around the issue of health care and the attempt to repeal and replace the Affordable Care Act, aka Obamacare.

How does the phrase "God helps those who help themselves" apply to persons with pre-existing conditions who, apart from the protections provided by Obamacare, would be unable to get health insurance?

How does "God helps those who help themselves" apply to those who are unable to help themselves?—
 the mentally or physically challenged,

those who are disabled as a result of accidents or illness,
 those with mental illnesses,
 adults with chronic diseases like Parkinson's or
 Alzheimer's,
 and children, who constitute the majority of
 welfare beneficiaries.

We have a tendency to think of poor people as lazy,
 as not wanting to work,
 and therefore not deserving of any assistance.

But I can tell you from my years in urban ministry, the poorer members of our
 congregation were some of the hardest working people I've known.

I don't begrudge people using the phrase.

It is kind of useful.

It is important to take initiative,
 to work hard,
 to put forth an effort.

And if the saying, "God helps those who help themselves," helps some people find
 the motivation they need,
 then more power to them.

So there is an element of truth to be found in the saying, "God helps those who
 help themselves."

But like the other sayings we will be considering in this series,
 it is only a half true.

V

The other half sends a message that is the direct opposite of the Bible's message.

Consider the questions that are implied when we say,
 "God helps those who help themselves."

Does God always help those who help themselves?

Are the ones who help themselves the only ones God will help?

What kind of help does God give?

And what about those who are unable to help themselves—
either because of illness or disability or age?

Are they beyond the help of God?

Sometimes “God helps those who help themselves” is used as a way of avoiding
our obligation as Christians to help others,
of doing our part to love our neighbors.

The fact is that some people truly cannot help themselves.

And for many others who find themselves trapped in poverty
or struggling financially
or facing catastrophic illness,
self-help often isn’t nearly as simple as summoning the will
to pull oneself up by one’s bootstraps.

Sometimes people are in a hole so deep that they can’t climb out without help.

Too often there is a subtle self-righteousness in the saying, “God helps those who
help themselves.”

If you get a paycheck,
then God is on your side.

But if you are unemployed,
then you are lazy and lack God’s favor.

If you get a promotion with a big raise,
you are a wonderful, deserving person.

But if you are passed over,
there is good reason:
you are a failure.

If you are sick and get well,

it happened because you are faithful to God.

But if you stay sick and eventually die,
well, if only you had more faith.

If you are hungry, that is because you don't want to work.

But if your belly is full
that can only mean God has blessed your efforts.

VI

How challenging to take our saying which Jesus didn't say and place it alongside some of the things Jesus did say:

Luke 6: *Blessed are you who are poor,
 for yours is the kingdom of God.
Blessed are you who are hungry now,
 for you will be filled.
Blessed are you who weep now,
 for you will laugh.*

*“But woe to you who are rich,
 for you have received your consolation.
Woe to you who are full now,
 for you will be hungry.
Woe to you who are laughing now,
 for you will mourn and weep.”*

Evidently, Jesus and Ben Franklin do not share the same perspective!

New Testament scholar William Barclay interprets this passage according to verse 24, where Jesus says, “Woe to you who are rich because you have all the comfort you are going to get.”

In the original Greek, the word **have** is a business term for receiving payment in full on an account. A tradesman would write this word on an account when he had received payment in full.

Jesus is saying, “If you set your heart and bend your whole energies to obtain the things which the world values, you will get them—

but that is all you will get.”

As we might say today, been there, done that!

On the other hand, if you set your heart and bend your energies to be utterly loyal to God and faithful to Christ,

you may well run into all kinds of trouble—

you may be poor,

you may be hungry,

you may be grief-stricken—

but your payment is still to come,

and when it does come,

it will be eternal joy.

VII

Could it be that part of our fondness for this saying—

“God helps those who help themselves”—

is our attempt to excuse ourselves from social responsibility?

If “they” (whoever “they” are) won’t help themselves and God can’t help them, then what in the world do you expect me to do?

It’s but another version of sociologists call “blaming the victim.”

Earlier in Luke’s gospel, Jesus called Matthew the tax collector to be his disciple, and then went to a party that night at Matthew’s house.

Some self-righteous people complained that Jesus went there knowing there would be undesirables and outcasts present.

Jesus answers (Luke 5:31), *Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick; I have come to call not the righteous but sinners to repentance.*

Now I am not suggesting that God does not want us to work hard.

Neither am I saying that we are not to be productive—quite the contrary.

But that is not the Gospel.

This is the Gospel:

God always stands ready to help those who cannot help themselves.

As a matter of fact, until we realize that we are lost without God, we are lost.

The ones whom God can help are those who know their own helplessness.

In Romans 5 Paul writes:

For while we were still helpless, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly...but God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners (i.e., helpless in our sins) Christ died for us.

As long as you feel self-sufficient,
as long as you feel no need of help,
you place yourself beyond God's help.

**God's grace is experienced not in what you do for yourself,
but in realizing what you cannot do for yourself.**

And that's the gospel truth.

Amen.

Sources:

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