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Yes and No: God Helps Those Who Help Themselves
Psalm 10: 12-17; 2 Thess. 3:6-13; James 1:22-27
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We've all heard sayings like these before. Maybe we've even said them ourselves. "God helps those who help themselves." "Everything happens for a reason." "God will never give you more than you can handle." They sound like they come straight from the Bible, but they don't. Are they true? Well . . . yes, there's some truth in those sayings. And no, there are ways in which those statements are not true at all. In fact, they can even be harmful.

For the next several weeks, we'll look at each of those sayings and talk about why they are so appealing, what's helpful and true about them, and what is flat-out false. We'll also talk about helpful things we CAN say, because they ARE in the Bible.

We begin this week with the beloved phrase, "God helps those who help themselves." In his book *Half Truths: God Helps Those Who Help Themselves and Other Things the Bible Doesn't Say*, Adam Hamilton recalls watching The Tonight Show when Jay Leno was hosting it, and on this particular episode, Jay went out and asked a bunch of random people to name one of the Ten Commandments. And Hamilton was startled to note how many people responded by saying, "God helps those who help themselves." He then went on to point out a recent poll by the Barna Group, which found that more than 8 in ten Americans do think that this phrase is in the Bible, and more than half of those surveyed believe that "God helps those who help themselves" is one of the major themes of scripture.

In fact, the statement originated in Greek mythology and was made popular in our country by Ben Franklin.

So what's true about "God helps those who help themselves"? Well, yesterday, you may have watched a race called the Belmont Stakes, where a horse named Justify became the 13th horse to win the Triple Crown. If you watched it, you would have seen the jockey, trotting around the course after the race, gazing upwards and kissing his fingers towards the heavens in gratitude, over and over, and thanking his Lord and Savior Jesus Christ for his success that day. And well he should! But leading up to that moment, there was a lot more than prayer involved. There was breeding, and training, and grooming—years of hard, disciplined work on the part of the trainer, the jockey, and many others—that led to that Triple Crown.

There's that old joke about the woman who prayed, and prayed, and prayed to win the lottery. She prayed for YEARS. Finally, one day, she was sitting alone in her church, pouring her heart out in prayer, and she said, "God, I just don't understand. I've prayed so hard all these years, and I still haven't won the lottery." And suddenly, a voice says, "BUY A TICKET."

There is plenty of scripture that affirms the importance of doing our part. We heard one of them today, from 2 Thessalonians. Idleness is not from God. Resting on the sabbath, yes—idleness, no. The author speaks very firmly about the importance of earning your own living and not mooching off your neighbors. If you don't like to work, he says, I sure hope you don't like to eat.

In the ancient stories of the Israelites wandering in the wilderness, hundreds of years before Christ, God sends manna to feed them. But the manna doesn't show up pre-packaged in ziplock bags for them to take home and eat. They have to gather it themselves, picking it up off the ground every single morning, six days a week.

In the story of Ruth, God did not magically provide food for Ruth and her mother-in-law Naomi when they had nothing—God provided it through Ruth's back-breaking work of bending

down and picking up the grain that fell out of the sheaves as the harvesters did their work in the fields. THEN the owner of the fields noticed her, and was kind and generous to her.

As Adam Hamilton summed it up, “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” (*Half Truths*, pp 56-57).

This is also true when we see injustice in our community. We can pray and pray that God will provide for hungry children in Topeka, but if we really want God to provide for them, we will work to do something about it.

That brings us to the point where “God helps those who help themselves” starts to fall apart. Sometimes we say this as a way of dismissing people in need. If they would just make an effort, if they would just try harder, they wouldn’t be in debt, and they wouldn’t be unemployed, and they wouldn’t have to struggle so much. If we say, “God helps those who help themselves,” it implies that people in need DESERVE to be in need, because if they were exerting themselves sufficiently to help themselves, then God would have helped them out by now.

But in reality, there are too many people who simply cannot help themselves, or need help in order to help themselves. There’s not a child in the world who got to choose their parents, choose where they were born, or choose their physical abilities. We don’t get to turn our backs on them because their parents’ choices offend us. And many people in need DO work hard, but simply do not earn enough to pay for a working car, and health care, and healthy food, and a home in a safe neighborhood. As we heard in the letter of James, true religion is this: to care for the widows and the orphans, a.k.a. those who are vulnerable, in their distress. We can spend all day listing passages where God commands—not suggests, but commands--that we help

our brothers and sisters in need. God's favorite way to help people is through other people. We ourselves may well be the help that God wants to send someone. It doesn't mean we need to enable anybody, it doesn't mean we can't set boundaries, but at the same time, isn't it interesting how so many of us seem more afraid of enabling someone or being taking advantage of than we are of failing to show compassion.

The other problem with saying "God helps those who help themselves" is that it makes God really, really SMALL. Let's face it. Many of us would LIKE it if "God helps those who help themselves" WAS in the Bible. Because then we would have a God that plays by OUR rules. It would mean not only could we ignore the people that weren't helping themselves as we saw fit, but that we ourselves would DESERVE our own success and blessings, because, hey—we helped ourselves! God simply rewarded us for our efforts.

Thankfully, God is much bigger than that. God—oh, how outrageous—God has been known to help people who could not help themselves because they fell in too deep of a pit, and that pit was of their own making. God has helped alcoholics whose drinking has torn apart their families . . . God has helped sex addicts whose marriages have gone down the toilet . . . God has reached down into prisons and helped rightfully convicted thieves and murderers. . . God helps people who acquired terrible diseases from sleeping around . . . God can help anybody God wants to help—and yes, maybe sometimes help means the strength to face and overcome the consequences of our actions, not the removal of those consequences—but the point is, God is not bound by our expectations. God is merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness (Psalm 86:15). THAT'S in the Bible.

Sooner or later, if it hasn't happened already, someday, we're going to need some help. We'll find ourselves over our heads, out of steam, out of resources, stuck with no clear way out.

Sometimes we might even feel we've messed up so bad that we don't deserve any help. But it's at these times when God is holding us more closely than ever, and preparing sources of help we may never have imagined.

So what can we say, instead of "God helps those who help themselves"? Try one of these:

You could quote Proverbs 10:4, which says, "Laziness brings poverty; hard work makes one rich." But then you'd have to quote Proverbs 19:17, which says, "Those who are gracious to the poor lend to the Lord, and the Lord will fully repay them." And Proverbs 21:13, which says, "Those who close their ears to the cries of the poor will themselves call out but receive no answer."

Cast all your anxiety on God, because God cares for you—1 Peter 5:7

Bear one another's burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ—Galatians 6:2.

Then the king will answer them, "Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these, who are members of my family, you did it to me."—Matthew 25:40

Or maybe this: Our help is in the name of the Lord, who made heaven and earth—Psalm 124:8.

Let us stand as we are able and sing "Our God, Our Help in Ages Past."