

That's Not in the Bible Sermon Series
God Helps Those Who Help Themselves
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In this sermon series we've been looking at some popular spiritual statements to see if they are really in the Bible, or just quasi-Bible-ish. So far, we've learned that the phrases "Everything happens for a reason" and "Hate the sin, love the sinner" are not in the Bible. But what about today's line, "God helps those that help themselves"? I'm going to read to you the actual parable where this phrase was first used, and I want you to decide if this comes from the Bible or not. Now, there are a few clues in this story that will tip you off, so listen carefully. Bible or not Bible?

"A wagoneer was once driving a heavy load along a very muddy way. 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 wagoneer threw down his whip, knelt down, and prayed to Hercules – did you hear the clue? - 'Oh, Hercules, help me in my hour of distress.' But Hercules appeared to him and said, 'Man, don't sprawl there. Get up and put your shoulder to the wheel. The gods help them that help themselves.'"

Bible or not Bible? I just can't fool you all, can I? So we can conclude that this passage is not in the Bible. That was actually one of Aesop's fables. The last line was taken up and popularized by Ben Franklin, so much so that it is still a part of our common vernacular today. "God helps those who help themselves." If anything sounds like it comes from the Bible, this would be it. The fact that it isn't in the Bible hasn't stopped people from believing otherwise.

Here are two examples: In January 2002, talk show host Bill O'Reilly was interviewing a New York City pastor about a homeless ministry. O'Reilly told the pastor, "Jesus would have demanded that the homeless people shape themselves up or else, because, we all know the passage 'The Lord helps those who help themselves.'" And, no less of an authority than President Barack Obama made the same mistake. In a speech about a jobs bill, President Obama said, "That's not putting people back to work. I trust in God, but God wants to see us help ourselves by putting people back to work." The lesson we can learn here is don't get your Bible knowledge from talk show hosts or politicians.

We can forgive these two misuses of this phrase because it does appear to be a sound biblical tenet. It certainly is in line with our own denomination. The Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) is the oldest American-born denomination, founded in the early 1800s by frontierspeople who believed in religious freedom and rugged individualism. We don't need someone else telling us what the Bible says, we're called to figure that out for ourselves. We don't expect someone else to do for us what we can do for ourselves. It's not a far step from that line of thinking to "God helps those who help themselves."

As with our other clichés, there is a grain of truth in this one. In fact, you can find places in the Bible where people are scolded for their lack of initiative. Paul chides the Thessalonians because they quit working in anticipation of Jesus' second coming. He basically tells them to get off their keister and get back to work, because that is more Christ-like than sitting idly and mooching off your neighbors. So, passages like these support the concept behind God helping those who help themselves. Paul's thinking here applies to today's world, as well. Too often, people place the responsibility or blame on God that they themselves should assume. It's not up

to God to give me an A on a test or better health; those are things I am responsible for. If I want God to help me do those things, I need to do my part, as well.

But there's a darker flipside to this understanding of "God helps those who help themselves" of which we must be aware. If you take this statement too far, it promotes the idea of independence apart from dependence upon God. That concept manifested itself in this country when the self-help movement took off in the 1970s as people sought to better themselves in every facet of life. Not coincidentally, that's the about the same time we started to see a decline in church attendance and participation. If I can do everything for myself, why do I need God?

We can find self-help motivation in almost every facet of our lives. I'm still waiting for self-help titles like "7000 Habits of Highly Compulsive People," "Stupidity for Dummies," and "How to Lose Five Pounds in Six Years." All of the self-help books have as their subject our favorite thing in the entire world: us. As soon as we believe there's no limit to what we can achieve as people, we've stopped believing we need God. And yet, as each of us know, we do have our limits. We do need God in our lives. Our difficulty, sometimes, is admitting that. Thankfully, God helps those who think only they can help themselves.

This phrase "God helps those who help themselves" has another hidden agenda to it that the speaker may or may not intend. I often hear this phrase spoken in relation to those in our society who struggle to make ends meet or who rely on governmental assistance to survive. These are folks on disability, on welfare, who eat subsidized school lunches and get checkups at taxpayer-funded medical clinics. But they aren't the ones who say this phrase. No, the ones who say it are the ones who've made it, the people who are under the false impression that they didn't need any help to get where they are. If I can make it so can everyone else. That's the American dream, right? But not everyone has the same opportunities, the same environments, the same parents, the same education, the same good health as us. And each of us, no matter how much we think we've made it, are not as far from those brothers and sisters as we pretend to think.

What do you do if you can't help yourself? We may think that most people who are down-and-out can help themselves but won't, but that's a really easy viewpoint for us to have from up here looking down. So, what does the Bible say about people who can't help themselves? In our story today, a paralyzed man is brought to Jesus for healing by four of his friends. Jesus doesn't say to the man, "Do something for yourself first and then I'll help you." Instead, he commends the four for their mighty faith and using it in service of their helpless friend.

The big problem with the statement "God helps those who help themselves" is that it doesn't acknowledge the web of interdependence in which we exist. We need each other, and the reality of life is that some of us need each other more than others. We come out of the womb completely dependent on others for survival, and while the degree of dependence varies over our lives, it never goes away. We always need each other.

The implied self-sufficient in this cliché is actually in direct contradiction to what we learn about God from scripture. From the very beginning, when God says, "Let us create humans in our image," we have learned that our God is a relational God. God created humanity in order to be in relationship with us, and God stuck with us even when we did things like forsake God and kill each other and ignore Jesus' witness and teachings. God calls us to be in relationship with God and with each other, to be interdependent beings.

But God takes it a step further. God says not only are we to be in relationship with each other, but we are to pay special attention to those among us who aren't able to help themselves. One of the primary accusations against the Israelites that led to their divine punishment was that

they didn't take care of the widows and orphans among them. Isaiah says to Israel, "Ah, you who make iniquitous decrees, who write oppressive statutes, to turn aside the needy from justice and to rob the poor of my people of their right, that widows may be your spoil, and that you may make the orphans your prey!" "Iniquitous decrees, oppressive statutes." Those are laws. Isaiah is criticizing Israel's leaders who write and enact laws that turn aside the needy from justice and rob poor people of their rights. The message here is not to encourage others to help themselves, but to help them, especially if they can't help themselves!

Jesus brings us those same words in the famous passage from Matthew 25. Jesus tells his listeners that he was hungry and they gave him food and he was thirsty and they gave him something to drink, that he was a stranger and they welcomed him, that he was naked and they gave him clothing, that he was sick and they took care of him, that he was a prisoner and they visited him. The listeners say, "When did we do that?" And Jesus says, "When you did this for the least of these, you did this for me." No dose of self-help or rugged individualism there. What we do for others, especially those in need, we do for Jesus.

There is no denying that we are responsible for our own actions and our own decisions. We cannot abdicate our responsibilities as human beings. But we also must acknowledge the essential role that others play in helping us. At Crestwood, we have packed hundreds of boxes of food for the Nest, bought gifts for kids on the Angel Trees, made sandwiches to be handed out to the homeless by the Hopemobile. What if we had said, "You know, those people should be able to help themselves"? How many opportunities would we have missed to extend God's love to another person? Instead, we recognized that part of our calling as followers of Christ is to help others, end of sentence. It's not our job to judge whether someone is capable of helping themselves; it's our job to embody God's relational, loving spirit and to simply help them. Because when we serve them, we serve God.