



Irrational Gospel: God Helps Those Who Help Themselves

Philippians 2:12-18

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A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and fell into the hands of robbers, who stripped him, beat him, and went away, leaving him half dead. Now by chance a priest was going down that road; and when the priest saw him, he said a prayer for the man, and continued walking into town. So likewise a doctor, when he came to the place and saw him, wrote him a prescription for pain killer, and continued into town. Then an elder woman came near him; and when he saw her, he asked her for help. She said to him, "Son, God helps those who help themselves." She left him and continued into town. But a Samaritan while travelling came near him; and when he saw him, he was moved with pity. He went to him and bandaged his wounds, having poured oil and wine on them. Then he put him on his own animal, brought him to an inn, and took care of him.

There are times in our lives and in our relationships that we struggle to find the words or to know how to respond to help alleviate the pain and difficulty of life. Seeking to stay out of the drama and ensure we don't fall into the same type of struggles, we offer our prayers, our prescriptions, and our platitudes, and walk by on the other side of the road.

In this season, we are considering some of the most often used Christian clichés, which truthfully have little to do with the authentic word of God. Today we focus on this offering, ***God helps those who help themselves.***

This saying is widely believed to be Scripturally sound. A survey by the Barna Group, a Christian polling firm, found that 8 in 10 Americans think this phrase, *God helps those who help themselves*, is in the Bible text. Over half of the respondents felt strongly convinced that this is one of the major messages of Scripture on the whole.

To be clear, there is no such passage in the Bible. In fact, this phrase is thought to have originated in Greek mythology over 500 years before Christ's birth. But perhaps we know it best today from the popularity it garnered beginning in 1736 with its printing in Benjamin Franklin's *Poor Richard's Almanac*.

Like most sayings that are attributed to the Bible, but that don't really exist in the Biblical text, there are some diminutive truths that can be identified in this saying. For example, when I am hungry for dinner, I don't sit at the table with an empty plate in front of me and pray, "Dear Lord, please make food show up on this plate that I may enjoy a nice dinner." In order for there to be food in front of me, there are some things that need to be done ahead of time. I need to have earned or found money to buy food. I need to have gone to the grocery store or restaurant. I need to have prepped the food, or at minimum opened the take-out box it came

in. There is a glimmer of truth, that unless I do some work for myself, food won't magically appear on the plate.

The same could be said for finding a job. I can't just pray for a job in my private devotions and expect to get a call saying I'm hired. There are connections to be made, applications to be filled out, interviews to undergo, and a vetting process to endure. It can certainly be said that there are times when a person must do work to receive the benefits of work.

Back in the late 1700s, the industrial work force was still working according to a sun-to-sun workday. This meant 12 to 13-hour work days in the summer months. The work was grueling for any labor-based jobs, often resulting in 75-hour work weeks. In Philadelphia, there was a group of journeyman carpenters who felt like such a work schedule was unjust. They sought a change in the schedule from their managers, but no change was being presented. So, in 1791, a group of carpenters organized a walk out. To maintain a salary, they formed a cooperative and continued working for themselves, charging 25% less than their former bosses had charged. They were striking for a ten-hour work day, and they maintained the strike and the cooperative until they were given a ten-hour work day in the work force. A year later, the first full-fledged trade union was established in America, because at times you have to work for yourself to get what you need.

There is something to be said for people working hard to make things better for themselves. We see the same type of willingness to fight for a better life in the Civil Rights movement, in the women's suffrage movement, and in the fight for equality that still exists in our world today. There is something to be said about people helping themselves.

However, the reality of our world is that not everyone *can* help themselves. There are times and places in which people literally can't help themselves. We have systemic injustices set up in our nation that prevent some people from bettering their own situation. Just to name a few: like when a young black teen leaves a party to get away from what is turning into an out of control party, but is shot by the police for looking like a trouble maker and being black; or when a Hispanic immigrant, who has followed all immigration protocol and has broken no US laws, is arrested after leaving a hypothermia shelter simply for looking Hispanic; or when a young Muslim woman, seeking to escape the genocide taking place in her country, is prevented from entering a country where she may be able to actually help herself because she is wearing a hijab; or when we allow for school segregation and school selection, furthering the lack of funding available for schools serving low-income communities, which in many places serve minority majority populations.

There are people in our own city who, because of race, religion, country of origin, mental capacity, physical ailment, or family circumstance, cannot help themselves. They can't get jobs and they can't get housing. It is specifically for such individuals that the Biblical text mandates help be offered. This is not a half-truth of the Bible, but is fully expected of God's followers. For example, Leviticus 23:22 says, "When you reap the harvest of your land, you shall not reap to the very edges of your field, or gather the gleanings of your harvest; you shall leave them for

the poor and for the alien.” Helping others is a mandate according to the Prophet Isaiah, who says, “I want you to share your food with the hungry and bring right into your own homes those who are helpless, poor, and destitute. Clothe those who are cold, and don't hide from relatives who need your help.”ⁱ Such a mandate isn't just an Old Testament thing, it's a principle maintained in the days of Christ. The Apostle Luke accounts such a practice of helping others was carried out in the early church. We read in Acts 4, “There was not a needy person among them, for as many as owned lands or houses sold them and brought the proceeds of what was sold. They laid it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to each as any had need.”

Offering help to those who are poor and needy (and the Biblical text doesn't offer any stipulation as to whether they can help themselves or not) is part of the Biblical mandate offered by God, *because* “Showing compassion and mercy for those who struggle is part of the very character of God.”ⁱⁱ Such a mandate is asked and expected of the faithful in the Biblical text because such work is part of the nature of God. In 1 John 3:17, we are questioned, “How does God's love abide in anyone who has the world's goods and sees a brother or sister in need and yet refuses help?”

Just for some further evidence, hear the words of the Psalmist: Psalm 10 offers, “O Lord, you have been the helper of the orphan ... 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 18 says, “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 and took me, he drew me out of mighty waters.” Psalm 121 offers, “From where will my help come? My help comes from the Lord, who made heaven and earth.” The Biblical text, from start to finish, is chalk full of the promise of God's covenant to help us when we cannot help ourselves.

“God is the God of the hopeless cause, the God who loves sinners, the God who walks with us through the darkest valleys. He is the God who brings light into our darkness and helps us find peace amid times of anxiety and despair. God rescues, redeems, and forgives. We receive blessings from God even though we don't deserve them. Even when we have made a mess of things and can't fix them, God extends mercy to us. There's a word for God's mercy toward those who cannot help themselves. We call it grace.”ⁱⁱⁱ

Such grace is the premise of the entire New Testament text, which is in and of itself a promise to help us all when we cannot help ourselves. The grace of God exemplified in the cross of Christ is the purest witness of the work of God doing for us what we cannot do for ourselves!

And because we are called to be examples of God in the world, “We help others who cannot help themselves because God helps us when we cannot help ourselves.”^{iv}

If helping others, who may or may not be able to help themselves, is part of the Biblical mandate, where is our direction for how to respond when we come across those who have needs? Instead of saying, as the elder woman said to the man on the side of the road, *God helps those who help themselves*, what should be our response?

Let's look to our scripture for the day in Philippians 2. Paul says to those in the church of Philippi, "My beloved, just as you have always obeyed me, not only in my presence, but much more so in my absence, work out your salvation with fear and trembling; for it is God who is at work in you, enabling you both to will and to work for his good pleasure."

Paul had been to Philippi, and had started this church while he was present with them. He acknowledges that it was easy for the members of the church to be obedient to his teaching of Christ when he, Paul, was present, but that they have even done well being obedient to Christ as Paul had left to go start and teach churches in other communities. Paul instructs them to continue to work out their salvation, even in his absence, with fear and trembling.

Fear and trembling? Salvation is a joyous gift of God, for what part of salvation should we be fearful? For what part of salvation should we tremble in fear? For what? Paul answers – for it is God who is at work within you, enabling you ***both to will and to work for the good pleasure of God***. The fear and trembling are the result of God's call on your life to will and to work for the better purpose of God.

See, in the rationale teaching of the world, *God helps those who help themselves* makes sense. There is no fear and no trembling in this kind of response, because it calls for extreme individualism. Such extreme individualism tells the poor and needy they are left to their own will to better their own lives. It gives permission for hoarding and for denying help to others. Extreme individualism allows for the toxicity of a capitalist society that allows for the gain of some at the expense of others. It's rationale from a worldly perspective because it allows that those who have the privilege of society will always be the ones to benefit. When we are allowed to only worry about ourselves, and we are the ones who have historically held the wealth, the resources, and the upper hand in the work force, we have little to fear and tremble about.

But Paul says that as believers in Christ, as followers of the cross of Christ, our salvation has to be worked out in fear and trembling, because our salvation calls us to seek the will and the way of *God's* purposes. And *God's* way is terrifying because it calls for a denial of self. It calls us to help those who need help. *God's* way is not one that tells others to pull themselves up from their bootstraps and get themselves out of bad situations – it says we will, as those who are filled with the love of God, be the ones to surrender our own privilege so that those who have need and need help may find help and have their needs met. "Loving in accordance with the crucified and exalted Lord is not simply a matter of verbal confession, [wherein we give praise to God who helps *us*] but, equally important, a matter of the particular ways we relate to others."

Paul goes on, because living out *God's* call in and of itself is not enough. "Do all these things without murmuring and arguing, so that you may be blameless and innocent children of God without a blemish in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation, in which you would shine

like stars in the world.”^{vi} It’s not enough to help others who are in need, Paul says, you should do it joyfully and without the criticism that so often accompanies a cry for help.

When someone is in need, don’t curse them for needing help; when someone asks for assistance, don’t shame them under your breath for not having their life as perfect as yours; when an entire race or religious community cries for help, don’t seek for a way to blame it on them; when injustice rears its ugly head, don’t seek to write yourself off as innocent; when laws are passed that strip lifelines from those who need the help, don’t say, *God helps those who help themselves* – because at surface level it’s not sufficient, and at the core it’s a lie. If that were the case, even you would receive no help from God. But instead, hear and respond to the irrational good news of God, God helps us even when we cannot help ourselves. It’s scary, and worthy of our fear and trembling, but it will likely mean giving up of our abundance, giving up of stockpiles, giving up of our privilege – just as for God it meant giving up his Son. May we be willing to work for the praise of the salvation of God, given to us, that others may find life in the gifts of God offered through our lives. May we live, not according to the rationale concepts of our world, but according to the irrational love of God. Thanks be to God. Amen.

ⁱ Isaiah 58:7. NRSV.

ⁱⁱ Adam Hamilton. *Half Truths: God Helps Those Who Help Themselves and Other Things the Bible Doesn’t Say*. Nashville: Abindgon Press, 2016.

ⁱⁱⁱ Hamilton.

^{iv} Taylor Mertins. thinkandlethink.com. Retrieved May 3, 2017.

^v Daniel L. Migliore. *Philippians and Philemon. Belief: A Theological Commentary on the Bible*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2014.

^{vi} Philippians 2:14-15