

“God Helps”

September 11, 2022

Half Truths series

If I asked you where to find the phrase *God helps those who help themselves*, you might think it's in Scripture. It sounds like a verse in Proverbs or something from what we call Wisdom literature; it sounds like good advice. Some people might think it comes straight out of Jesus' mouth, but they'd be wrong. Jesus never said it, and it's nowhere to be found in Scripture. We can file it under stuff Jesus didn't say.

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But it sounds true, right? It's something I want to say when someone needs a boost of encouragement - or maybe a kick in the behind. Most of the time, though, we hear it in conversations and discussions about those living in poverty. Perhaps you heard it as a reaction after the recent announcement about student loan debt forgiveness. That's another discussion for another, but in case you're wondering, there are numerous opinions about Scripture's directive on debt forgiveness as it relates specifically to student loan debt. We debated it at Annual Conference this year.

It's another cliché that can do real damage if we're not careful. What does it say about who God is and what God is like? God helps those who are working hard and doesn't care about the rest? How do we measure hard work if that's our goal? My dad was a farmer for many years. He worked hard - probably too much. Does my dad the farmer's hard work mean more than someone else's? Besides being an untrue theological statement, *God helps those who help themselves* encourages us to start judging one another. Maybe there's a bit of truth, but we'd do well to sit with it for a while.

Remember what Carole said about these expressions being like verbal emojis - “things that we say quickly to make ourselves feel better.” *God helps those who help themselves* might point us to the importance of personal responsibility, which is a legitimate one on some level, but it's usually not the whole story. Our lives are more complex than that.

Surely, we understand that we don't sit around and pray for food on the table or employment. We have to do something, which means using what's available to us - our abilities and connections - to get what we need. But there are people who struggle to do that.

We live in the tension. Even Paul had to confront early Christians who quit working and sat waiting for Jesus' imminent return, which they thought would happen anytime. So, if you hear people quote from Thessalonians about "If you don't work, you don't eat," it's in response to people who quit working to wait for Jesus to come back.

From a spiritual standpoint, prayer and worship empower us to act on the faith we claim. We trust that God is at work for good as we rely on God AND we live with active faith. We need help, and we offer help. We pray for God's Kingdom to come AND we work and act for the sake of God's Kingdom. When we offer thoughts and prayers for society's struggles, we have to back it up with action, advocacy, awareness, and involvement that seeks to make the world more like the Kingdom of God.

If we want some history on where this phrase comes from, we have to look way back to ancient Greece in the 5th century BC and Aesop, a man famous for fables and stories. **SLIDE.** You see it here in a conversation between Hercules and the Waggoner that ends with "The gods help those who help themselves."

God helps those who help themselves stayed around and was actually made even more popular by Benjamin Franklin in the 1730s in *Poor Richard's Almanac* **SLIDE.** So it's not from Jesus. There's some wisdom in it, but we need to be careful because it's not Gospel truth.

This "half-truth" contains a deep truth - that God helps. But it's more accurate to say God helps those who are helpless and God helps when we can't help ourselves. If we consider our spiritual lives, we are helpless before God.

Paul starts a letter to the Ephesians with a reminder of God's work to save us: "By grace you have been saved through faith. It is a gift of God so that no one can boast." God forgives us. God gives second (and third and fourth and twentieth) chances. We are helpless when it comes to salvation. Grace really is a free gift that we receive. We don't earn it. We don't deserve it, but God, who is rich in mercy and who loves us, offers us a gift that we receive by faith.

And God's help is a basis for our need and relationship with God. Psalm 121 is a song that people sang together as they were traveling to Jerusalem, specifically to the Temple there. It wasn't so much climbing a mountain, but getting up the long incline to the city on a hill - an elevation of about 2,700 feet with a diverse topography to navigate. This psalm focuses on God's constant care at all times - even in the heat of the day when they needed shade and in the cool (and potential danger) of the dark night when they needed protection.

This psalm offers the promise of God's presence. For those travelers, this isn't just anyone who provides help. God helps - Maker of heaven and earth. God is our Keeper - protecting us, not allowing for our mistakes to overtake us, offering us grace and mercy on the journey. Just like making our way across difficult terrain with potential for stumbling, falling, or getting injured, we depend on God to help us on our journey.

The parable that Jesus tells about sheep and goats is sometimes difficult to hear because no one gets off without some level of discomfort. It's about the last judgment - and how God will judge us for what we've done and what we haven't done. I'm always struck by the fact that those who have cared for "the least of these" don't realize that they were caring for Christ himself.

The King is pretty straightforward about what help is given: feeding the hungry, offering water to the thirsty, welcoming the stranger, clothing the naked, caring for the sick, and visiting the prisoner. It confronts our humanity in how we view others. When I read these six calls to help, I still myself asking questions and passing judgment. *How do I know she's hungry? How do I know he really needs clothes? How can I be sure that she really doesn't have the funds to pay for medicine?* Judgment can creep in so quickly.

How do I know? The answer is: I don't. We help because someone is in need. Throughout his ministry, Jesus is clear that a neighbor is a person in need. But if I can blame someone for their struggle, then I don't have to do anything about it. I don't need to help in the present moment, and I can avoid the challenge of looking at the bigger picture to see why someone is struggling and needing help, considering justice issues and other circumstances.

Jesus addresses poverty in many ways through his ministry, especially reaching out to those who are marginalized. He's clear that the poor will be always be with us - not as a reason to ignore the plight of those who live in poverty, but as a reminder that this is reality that we live in. It's our community.

There are people whose lives have been rough for many reasons - some in their control and some not in their control. We know people who are trying to make ends meet - weighing the cost of childcare, transportation, food, and rent up against going to work. That's not excuse, but a reality. It's not so simple for a person on one income to make it work. Not one of us is "self-made." We've had help and support along the way.

If I think about me and my family, the help that we've received is incredible. Whether it was the gift of a place to stay or the blessing of childcare from family,

we've had help. I was thinking about when I broke my arm and all of the things I couldn't do without help. If someone would've said, "God helps those who help themselves," I'm not sure how I would've responded.

That's why Jesus' words in Matthew 25 cut to the heart. We have to face the truth about ourselves - that we stand in need of help and we've received - from practical aid to community. When have we not served Christ and shown the love of God?

There are challenges here. For the first listeners who heard Jesus tell this parable, there might have been an expectation that Jesus was talking about the Jew and Gentile divide. Surely this was about being of the right ethnic group and religious group, right?

Jesus blows that expectation apart, and the divide is along an entirely different line. It's not about ethnic identity at all. This is about how our faith is lived out and the reality that we can't separate our relationship with God from our relationship with others – not just the others we want to serve, but all of God's people - all of God's family.

Maybe Jesus is focused on the fact that those who know of their relationship with him – who understand some sense of forgiveness and grace – should have no question about what it looks like to respond. Throughout Scripture, God is always concerned about the most vulnerable - and always calls us to be active in alleviating their struggles in whatever way we can – offering support, encouragement, and practical aid. God helps, and so should we.

Maybe our role can be to "flip the script" and change the cliché into something helpful and meaningful - and true. *Grace and mercy show us that God helps those who cannot help themselves. **God helps the helpless.** God helps because we can't help ourselves.* We need God's help.

That doesn't diminish the need for personal responsibility, but it reminds us of our call to help each other as a response to God's help in our lives. It may be practical or spiritual, but the two are connected. And the most important part is our witness to who God is and what God is like. *God helps those who cannot help themselves* doesn't tell the truth about who God is and what God is like. God shows compassion and mercy for us when we struggle.

The hope, prayer, and goal that we have is to reflect God who is Love and who helps us in our need - and calls us to help each other. That's my pray, and I hope it becomes more than a prayer - that we might be moved to action.

Thanks be to God. Amen. Let us pray...