

Oregon City United Methodist Church
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Series: Stop Saying These Things!

Sermon: God Helps Those Who Help Themselves

Psalm 10:14b, 17-18a (NIV)

The victims commit themselves to you;
you are the helper of the fatherless.
You, Lord, hear the desire of the afflicted;
you encourage them, and you listen to their cry,
defending the fatherless and the oppressed. . .

Psalm 18:6 (NIV)

In my distress I called to the Lord;
I cried to my God for help.
From his temple he heard my voice;
my cry came before him, into his ears.

Psalm 121:1-2 (NIV)

I lift up my eyes to the mountains—
where does my help come from?
My help comes from the Lord,
the Maker of heaven and earth.

Sermon

We continue this week our look at some phrases commonly spoken by Christians and others that sound Biblical and perhaps hold some truth about our faith, but which aren't entirely true. This week, we are thinking about the phrase, "God helps those who help themselves." Now, as I mentioned to you last week, none of these statements we are looking at through this four-week series are actually in the Bible, even though some of them will sound like they are. But what's really amazing is how many people out there believe that these statements are Biblical. This phrase, "God helps those who help themselves" is one of the best examples. In a recent study by the Barna Group, it was found that a little more than 80% of respondents believe this statement is in the Bible, and 53% said it is an important idea conveyed in Scripture. And yet it's not in the Bible at all! But it gets worse! You all know the former late night host, Jay Leno? You might remember that he had a segment on his show called "Jaywalking," where he would go out on the street and ask people questions—about history, geography, politics, anything. Well, one night the question was, "What are the Ten Commandments?" Turns out, there are a lot of people who think "God helps those who help themselves" was the most incorrect answer given!

To get an idea of the truth in today's statement, I want you to think for a minute about what happens when you sit down at the dinner table. Now, I'm guessing that what doesn't happen is that you come in the house after a long day of work, you throw down your bags, grab a plate, set it on the table, bow to say a word of thanksgiving to God for your food, and then you open your eyes to a plateful of succulent meat and vegetables perfectly cooked and seasoned. I have to admit, it would be awfully nice if it worked that way, wouldn't it? But unfortunately, it doesn't. If we want a plateful of succulent meat and vegetables perfectly cooked and seasoned, then we either have to go out to a restaurant and pay someone else to make it for us, or when we get home from work, we have to get out the pots and pans and start cooking. By the sweat of your brow, right? In the same way, you wouldn't expect to get a job if you weren't out interviewing for a position, or you wouldn't expect to sell your house if you had it priced \$75,000 over market value. There are some things that we have to take

responsibility for if we expect them to happen. And indeed, God makes it possible for us to have an earth with soil, and sun, and rain so vegetables will grow, but we have to harvest and prepare those vegetables so they can be eaten. So, in that sense, it is true that God helps those who help themselves. We have to pray to God, we have to seek God's help, God's guidance, and direction, we have to thank God for our many blessings, but we also have to work.

A great example of this comes out of the Civil Rights Movement. As you are probably aware, the Civil Rights Movement really grew out of the church, particularly after the bombing of the church in Birmingham that resulted in the deaths of three young girls. But the Civil Rights movement wasn't just people sitting in churches and praying, right? Certainly prayer is important as we seek justice in the midst of the injustices of this world. But it took more than praying. Many of the people who were a part of the Civil Rights Movement were in churches on Sundays praying, but when they weren't in the church, they were out marching—marching for the right to vote, or doing “sit-ins” for the right to share the lunch counter, or whatever. And this included Christians from all around the country who made their way to the south to work for justice for all people. In the end, as you know, the Jim Crow laws were repealed, blacks who already had the right to vote finally got the opportunity to vote, and integration began. God worked, but the people worked to. We still have a long way to go, but if we will pray and work, it is possible. So in such cases as these, it is in some sense true to say, “God helps those who help themselves.”

But there are also times when this statement is not true. Sometimes, as I'm sure we are all more than well aware, people get into such a deep hole that they cannot figure out how to get out. I think we can see this with addiction, maybe even with mental illness like depression, and sometimes in the cycle of poverty. In circumstances such as these, I'd imagine that most of us have seen how difficult it can be for a person, on their own, to climb out of the hole they are in. Even when a person is trying to live or act independently, it often takes the intervention of another to essentially “throw in the lifesaver.”

I can't help but think that God put those people there for that very purpose; to throw out the lifeline to people who were drowning and had no way out on their own. That's the way God works. God commands the Israelites over and over and over again to take care of the poor, the orphaned, the widowed. And Jesus does the same thing. This is a huge piece of our call as disciples of Christ; to be salt, to be light, to be people who God can use in the world to help others, and especially to help those who can't help themselves.

To me, this is the great good news. This is why the story of the Christian faith is so magnificent. This is our hope when we are hopeless, our joy in the midst of sorrow, our healing in the midst of illness, our forgiveness in the midst of sin and brokenness, our help when we are helpless. And it's all because of God's grace; grace which goes before us, grace which undergirds us, grace which transforms us from brokenness to wholeness, from death to new life!

I'll be honest. I've thought this phrase a lot when helping people. Pastor Mike, I need help (usually in the form of cash) - and then I try and think of all the reasons why I shouldn't. Why are you deserving of a handout? Where'd the money go that you had last week? These are questions that many of us might have when we see someone in need. And we are to be wise in our resources, but to often, I use the phrase God Helps Those Who Help Themselves as a reason why I shouldn't give someone a break, or to get involved! It's my shield so I don't have to see pain and suffering and want and hunger. God helps those who help themselves means I don't have to help! Widow, orphan, the addicted or mentally disabled? You're on your own - which doesn't sound very Gosselly to me.

I didn't need any help, thank you very much, so I don't need to help others. Forget the fact that I was born into the greatest nation the world has ever seen. Forget the fact that I was born into white privilege - which I'm happy for, but understand that it really is a factor. Forget the fact that I was born male, so I earn 15-20% more

than females. Forget the fact that even though I worked all through high school and college and seminary, I couldn't have done it without parents, scholarships, and the early lessons of hard work. And I can imagine that most of us, even those of us who scrimped and saved and worked and studied - none of us are where we are without a little help along the way. God does help those who help themselves - but he also helps those who are struggling. Those who need grace and mercy. God has always given to those in need. He freed the slaves out of Egypt. He got Johah out of the belly of the whale. He saved us from sin and death.

We are a part of God's good and wonderful creation. There are times when we have the ability to help ourselves, and we should when we can; we should pray and we should work. And just as much as we do what we can for ourselves, we should also make ourselves available to help others who are in need. But the simple truth of the matter is that there are times when we cannot help, or save, or fix ourselves, much less anyone else. Yet, despite the messes we make of our lives, God is there. God sends just the right people to help us in our time of need, to provide for our physical well-being. But at the same time, God is present with us. And by his Spirit, God picks us up, holds our hand, and walks with us. God, in God's infinite grace, washes us clean and says to all of us, "I love you. I will not abandon you. I will help you. I will save you." God helps those who help themselves. But thankfully, God also helps those who cannot help themselves.

"I will lift my eyes up to the hills—from whence comes my help? My help comes from the Lord..."