



Half Truths: God Helps Those Who Help Themselves

September 27, 2015 | Rev. Taylor Fuerst

*Philippians 2: 4 Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others. 5 Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, 6 who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, 7 but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, 8 he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death— even death on a cross. 9 Therefore God also highly exalted him and gave him the name that is above every name, 10 so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, 11 and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father. 12 Therefore, my beloved, just as you have always obeyed me, not only in my presence, but much more now in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling; 13 for it is God who is at work in you, enabling you both to will and to work for his good pleasure. The Word of God for the People of God. **Thanks be to God.***

Well, we are continuing in our fall series this week as we explore these six phrases, these "half-truths" that get passed around, often by Christians. They're the cliché phrases that we say, often when we don't know what else to say. Next week we'll wrap it up with "God said it, I believe it, and that settles it." But this week, we are talking about this saying--I bet you can finish it for me: "God helps those who help themselves." And at the outset of this sermon, I feel like I need to be real clear with you that there was nothing intentional going on when this particular half-truth lined up on today, on Sarah Winkel's last Sunday as organist here at Westbury. Sarah, I don't know how you feel about God helping those who help themselves, but I want you to know that there's no hidden message in here! No subliminal messages.

But it is a popular one, isn't it? God helps those who help themselves. In fact, I learned last week that this phrase is so much a part of the common Christian ethos, the kind of folk theology in America, that when the Barna Group took a poll and asked people what are the most widely known Bible verses, this phrase was near the top. To take it even further, 75% of American teenagers believe that this is the central message of the Bible. God helps those who help themselves.

Friends, nowhere in the Bible does it actually say, "God helps those who help themselves." It's just not there. The saying became popular when Benjamin Franklin threw it in to the 1736 edition Poor Richard's Almanack, and a few people were saying similar things before then, but there's just not a saying like that anywhere in the Bible.

Now, that doesn't mean that there's no truth in it. So here's what we do find in scripture. First, what we find in Genesis, when God made Adam and Eve and placed them in the garden, God gave them work to do. God gave them responsibility. God shared power with them and, from the get-go, God set up a partnership with humanity--not an equal partnership, but definitely one in which God expects us to work alongside God's work, in concert with God's work. And that's in our lives and in the world. So yes, God has arranged the world in such a way that God does not do everything--God shares God's own work with us. I believe that God does expect us to help.

At a couple of points in the Apostle Paul's letters, Paul gets more than a little irritated with folks because they are being lazy. You see, when Paul began these churches, he really pushed this whole "Christ will come again" idea--he really believed and taught that Jesus would be returning soon--and some of the folks heard that and thought, "Hey, man, if Jesus is coming back so soon, I'm just going to quit my job, and, you know, let things go around here. I'm gonna just enjoy these last few days and not do anything. And they did--they got lazy, thinking that Jesus was just around the corner waiting to come and make this whole "heaven on earth" thing happen. And in the meantime they were mooching off their neighbors and the other people in the church. So Paul writes to them and he says, "Listen! Anyone who doesn't want to work also doesn't get to eat!" He warns them, keep away from those who are living in idleness. In other parts of scripture, especially in the book of proverbs, we find this focus on avoiding laziness, and an expectation that loving God goes hand in hand with working, doing, providing, helping. Think of it this way: God made us in such a way that we can usually get what we need. God did not position us as receivers with no control over what comes our way.

My mom told me about the time she went on a trip with the youth group, and those of you who have gone on youth trips know that really the only requirement of a youth trip is that the van breaks down. So of course, the van broke down. And there was this discussion among the adults on the trip about what to do, how to handle this broken down church van--and there was one woman who just kept saying, "I really think we just need to stop and pray--I think that prayer is really the thing we need here. God will take care of us." And my mom said back to this lady, "Ok, well you pray, and I'm gonna go over here and call the mechanic and we'll just see if God can work with that."

Does God help those who help themselves? Well, yes--God works in partnership with us, and when we have something to offer in that partnership, we better well offer it. We work, and offer our part, and we pray for God to offer God's part, too. work and pray, pray and work. Those things go hand in hand. We can trust God, and also lock our doors at night. You can pray for God to help you find a job, and still send out 100 resumes. Sending out the resumes does not mean that you don't trust God to provide the job--it just means that you are opening up 100 ways for God to do that, knowing all the while that God may do something you haven't even thought of yet.

So the half-truth really is half-true. God really did give us the means--the talents and abilities, the tools--to provide for ourselves. Thousands of years ago, man had the ability to hunt animals and grow grain and gather berries and other kinds of food--but they had to actually do something in order to eat. They really did have to help themselves.

But then there was this time when God's people were stuck out in the wilderness. And although they had the ability to hunt and to grow things and to go find their food, there just...wasn't food to be found. And they wondered if they would have been better off back in Egypt, where they had just escaped from generations of slavery. At least there they had food--out here in the desert they were bound to starve to death. They literally could not help themselves.

But then God made food happen. God rained down this white, flaky stuff--just enough each day. And they couldn't gather up a few days worth and keep it in the pantry, you know, to be industrious and self-sufficient, because if they did, it would just rot. Instead they had to come back, day after day after day and remember who the food came from. They had to live in the fragile balance of life and see that God really did give them what they could not find or make for themselves.

The truth is, sometimes, as much as we hate it, and as much as we hate to admit it--sometimes we are absolutely powerless to help ourselves. If you have ever spent time in a hospital bed, then you know this to be true: sometimes you simply can't help yourself. Sometimes you need God's help.

Sometimes the way God helps those who can't help themselves is through the help of other people. Today, you have the opportunity to be the very help that God longs to give to someone else. You have the opportunity to look to the interests of others, as Paul says. If you've ever been part of a mission trip or a UM ARMY trip and gone to spend a few days helping to repair someone's home or a church or a school, you've probably heard someone say, "We've been praying that God would help us, and now you're here. God sent you as an answer to our prayers." Sometimes, you may be the very help that God longs to give someone. We call it being the hands and feet of Christ. It's about waking up in the morning and asking "God, who do you want me to bless today?" And then keeping your eyes open to those whom God is using to bless you, too, those who are God's help to you.

And then, sometimes God helps those who cannot help themselves in ways that are much harder to explain. Sometimes God works in our lives, through the Holy Spirit, in such a way that we say, "Nobody but God could have done that." When a marriage is healed after a break in trust, and two people are able to rebuild their covenant with one another. When addiction is overcome. When a way is made where there was no way before. Sometimes, with God's help--you can't see how God did it, but the evidence is there, that God changes our lives.

Is it true? Does God help those who help themselves? Well, yeah, kinda. But even with a kernel of truth in it, I ask, is it the most important thing for us to know? No. 75% of teenagers believe that this is the central message of the Bible--I would much, much rather 75% of teenagers knew with assurance that there is a God who created them and loves them so deeply that God was willing to die their death, in order for them to live God's life. Friends, there is no getting around

it--if you believe that this is the central message of the Bible, then you simply haven't read the Bible. If you believe that God is in the business of helping people in the same measure that they can help themselves, then you and I know a different God.

I know the God we read of in the psalm, who is the father of orphans and defender of widows, who gives sight to the blind and sets prisoners free, who, as Mary sang, lifts up the lowly, and fills the hungry with good things. The God that the psalmist sang about when he said, "I lift up my eyes to the hills--from where will my help come? My help comes from the Lord, who made heaven and earth." This is the God that Paul talks about when he says "You see, at just the right time, when we were still powerless, Christ died for the ungodly." This is the God who made his very life a gift--looking not to his own interests, but to the interests of others--not to help himself, but to help others, to humble himself and be obedient to death, even death on a cross--to do for us what we could never do for ourselves.

I believe it is God's character, God's very joy, to help those who cannot or do not help themselves--it's called grace. And it's available for you, and for me, free of charge--you can't earn it, you can't buy it, because you don't need to. God gives it away, in measures that are more than enough to share it with all the world.

Amen? Amen.