

Half Truths II: “God Helps Those Who Help Themselves”

A sermon by Pastor Steve Easterday-McPadden
for First UMC, Grand Junction, Sunday, Jan. 21, 2024

This sermon can be listened to on the FUMCGJ website or by clicking this link and finding the date of the worship service in which it appears:
<https://www.christianworldmedia.com/wordstream/fumcgj/search>

Scripture Text: Psalm 18:3-6, 16 [NLT],
with numerous references to Adam Hamilton, *Half Truths: God Helps Those Who Help Themselves and Other Things the Bible Doesn't Say* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2016).

OPENING

I don't know which of the five half-truths Adam Hamilton identifies in his book are the most widespread and, therefore, the most egregious. But the one for today is certainly near the top of the list: “God helps those who help themselves”.

It's striking how many people, even self-identified “Christians”, think this is even one of the Ten Commandments [Hamilton, 53-54]. And it's not even a commandment! It's a maxim, like a proverb.

And it's decidedly NOT in the Bible. Perhaps of Greek origin in the 5th century BC, it was popularized by Ben Franklin some 2,500 years later in his *Poor*

Richard's Almanac published in 1736 [Ibid., 54]. Of course, like other things “Americana”, this entitles it to Scriptural status in our lives – NOT!

Consider this story Hamilton writes about in his book:

I think of a young couple... [Hamilton, 56]

Or the story we've all heard about the flood that struck a small community with suddenness and life-threatening consequences. A man prayed and prayed and asked God to deliver him from being swept away in the deluge.

Just then, a man came in a 4-wheel drive and offered to take the man to safety, but the man replied, “Thanks, but I'll be fine. God is going to deliver me from this.”

Then, with the waters rising, a woman in a boat...(same response from the stranded man).

Then, with the waters rising still higher, the man had to climb to the roof of his house. A crew in a helicopter called down to him...(same response from the stranded man).

Finally, the man was swept away and perished in the flood. Upon reaching the Pearly Gates, he asked God, “What the heck?!” And God said, “I sent you a man in a 4-wheel drive, a woman in a boat, and a helicopter! What the heck do you want?!”

We can – and we should – pray, but we also have to do our part.

- When we are wise,
- When we recognize that God is working in the background all the time to bring goodness to us (like we said last week [Romans 8:28], e.g., how many 4-wheel drives, boats, and helicopters – metaphorically speaking – does God send our way?), and
- When we give God something to *work with*, i.e., take some personal responsibility for our lives, it's amazing how often it appears that God *does* help those who help themselves!

So, while the saying is decidedly NOT Biblical, and is even *antithetical* to what the Bible teaches about God, that doesn't mean it contains no truth at all. An example from the New Testament will help to make this point.

TO THE SCRIPTURES

(*Paul's church in Thessaloniki, his assurances that Jesus was coming back soon, and the Thessalonians' response: To quit their jobs, sit back, and wait for Jesus to come. God would provide for them in the meantime!*) Hear Paul's response to this from these verses in his second letter to this community:

When we were with you, we were giving you this command: "If anyone doesn't want to work, they shouldn't eat." We hear that some of you are living an undisciplined life. You aren't working, but you're meddling in other people's business. By the Lord Jesus Christ, we command and encourage such

people to work quietly and to put their own food on the table. – 2 Thess. 3:10-12 CEB

ILLUSTRATION

The Benedictine monks' motto: *ora et labora*. Latin for "pray and work". (*This is legit! My experience with it at the Abbey of St. Walburga.*)

They take this *very* seriously with 7 periods of prayer each day, beginning at 4:50 AM(!) and finishing about 8:00 PM, interspersed with periods of work, study, and *some* recreation.

Adam Hamilton writes that this is what Paul was driving at with the Thessalonians. One doesn't pray and then expect God to take it from there. "Our faith is meant to move us to action even as we trust in God. We pray...and we work." [Hamilton, 58]

BUT...that's about where "the truth" of this saying stops. As Hamilton points out, "there are two other senses in which this saying is fundamentally unbiblical." [*Ibid.*, 61]

SERMON THOUGHTS

1. God's Preference for the Poor and Needy

Leviticus 23:22 – "Gleaning" (and many other passages that point us in the same direction)

Also, "We can (and should) debate the best ways of helping and not hurting, of creating independence and not dependence. What is not

debatable is our calling to help.” [Hamilton, 66]

One of the most effective ministries in the Grand Valley, and one which we gladly support with one of our Make-a-Change Sundays, is **Hope of the Grand Valley**, whose motto is “A Hand Up, Not a Handout”. Vicki McGee and her team do an amazing job of walking the fine line between doing too little and doing too much, resulting in lives transformed in very practical ways and in deeply spiritual ways.

2. God’s Help for the Helpless = Grace

But sometimes people can’t help themselves:

- Because they suffer debilitating mental illness – with any of a number of addictions being manifestations of such – that make the debate over the best ways to help and not hurt very complicated and deeply personal.
- Or because they have descended too deeply into sin or despair.

ILLUSTRATIONS:

Sin – Marital infidelity

Despair – The pain of loss

In both cases, the Biblical saying becomes, “God helps those who *cannot* help themselves.” The word used to describe this is “grace”.

CONCLUSION: “I Am Here” – *God*

So, there are times when we can help ourselves, and

we should: *Ora et labora*...Pray AND work.

There are times when God prompts us to be His hands and feet in the lives of others, particularly the poor and needy, helping them to get on their feet and to move into places of greater independence, dignity, and self-worth.

And there are other times when folks simply do not have the psycho-spiritual health it takes or the resources to even know where to start, so that the grace of God is the first and, sometimes only, place to turn for help. But while God is the source of it, oftentimes that grace is *channeled through* persons of deep compassion, sensitivity, and resources who are able to help relieve suffering and, hopefully, set those folks on a path to healing, wholeness, and restoration to God and their community.

If we are able to be such a channel for the grace of God in the life of someone in our midst, let us not be found wanting in our response to the nudge of the Holy Spirit in their direction.

TRANSITION

To UMH #522 “Leave It There”, vv. 1-3