

9-24-17 BUCYRUS UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

“GOD HELPS THOSE WHO HELP THEMSELVES.....REALLY?”

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Scripture: Ephesians 2:1-10

So 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 7-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 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” is one of those Ten Commandments!

So why would so many of us hold the belief that this phrase is Biblical when it's actually not? It might be because there is some truth to this idea that “God helps those who help themselves.” This morning, we are going to talk about the one thing about this statement that is true, but we are also going to talk about two untruths.

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 the 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. 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 were given the right 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 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 heard an interview on NPR over a year ago with a woman who was recovered from severe drug addiction. Her father was not around when she was growing up, and her mother was an addict, and when she was in her teens, she just left home. Her mom wasn't really caring for her anyway, so she took to the streets. She was making money any way she could just so she could buy drugs. Somehow she moved from Philadelphia to San Francisco, where her habit continued. She talked about pulling needles out of gutters, or stealing them from Sharps Containers, just so she'd be able to get the next hit. As the conversation continued, the NPR interviewer asked, “So what was the turning point for you?” The woman talked about how she started going to these needle exchanges that some non-profits had set up. The deal is, druggies can go to these exchanges and trade in their used, dirty, rusty needles for clean sanitary ones. They set these exchanges up so at least the addicts are injecting themselves with clean needles than subjecting themselves to illness and disease through dirty or contaminated needles. It sounds terrible, because it seems as if these exchanges just enable the habit. But here's what the woman said. Going to these needle exchanges was a turning point for her because every week, someone was checking in on her. Someone was asking her how she was doing. Someone was caring about her and for her. She didn't just go in, drop a dirty needle and pick up a clean one, people built relationships with her, and that was her turning point.

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.

I've been in conversation with Verna and Kim, two of our Prayer Warriors who come on Fridays and pray with our guests who come to our Food and Clothing Closet. On one particular Friday, a lady came for only one reason. She wanted prayer! To hear her tell them that she had been to the Closet before and felt the need to once again come for the purpose of prayer, just reaffirmed that we are where God wants us to be. The people who come to our Food and Clothing Closet...

- Appreciate prayer.
- Ask us to pray for their spouse, children, friends, and not for themselves.
- Are broken, lost, and feel comfort from prayer.
- Feel hopeful after prayer.
- One as requested to be baptized.
- Feel peace after prayer.
- Don't feel alone after prayer.
- Reconnect with God after prayer.
- Give their own testimony about God.
- Reaffirm their faith through prayer.
- Show enthusiasm about coming to church.
- They appreciate a genuine hug.
- They explain how they live when homeless. Living in abandoned houses, putting cardboard in a thicket, or living in a car.

Verna and Kim continued on, saying that they have witnessed tears of relief, joy, and hope time after time after prayer. We come to the Food and Clothing Closet to give, but we always receive more from those we serve. We would rather err on the side of compassion.

But God also works in other ways. Primarily, God saves and delivers those who've made a mess of their lives. I mean, this is exactly why Christ went to the cross, right? To wash away our sins and set us on the right path, the path to abundant life. And here's the thing: that's ALL God! This is God helping us. Period. Not when we help ourselves, not when we are deserving or worthy; it's just God helping us. That's exactly what this passage from Ephesians is driving home. "God is rich in his mercy," the writer says. He brought us life, even when we were dead. God did this because of God's GRACE. "You are saved by God's grace because of your faith. This salvation is God's gift. This is not something you did that you can be proud of. Instead, we are God's accomplishment." One theologian put it this way: "This is the sheer, unbelievable, magnificent kindness of God." God, in God's infinite GRACE helps us; there is nothing we can do to earn or deserve that help, that salvation; it is simply God's gift. When we are at our lowest, when there is nothing we can do to help ourselves, God still helps us.

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!

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 when comes my help? My help comes from the Lord..."