

January 24, 2021  
 Farmville Baptist Church  
 "Who Does God Help"  
 Matthew 7:7-8 Hebrews 4:14-16  
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In case you weren't with us last week, we are currently in a series called, Half-truths - let's trade them for the Whole Truth! We're drawing on Adam Hamilton's book called Half-truths as we make our way through the series. Last week we dealt with the phrase, "Everything Happens for a Reason," and we examined why that statement was only half-true. Someone asked this week, if it's not helpful to say that everything happens for a reason or that it must have been God's will, what **should** we say when people we love are suffering? Let me answer that question quickly before we get into today's saying. Sometimes the answer is say nothing. Sometimes people just need us to be present with them and not say anything. In my very first interim pastorate, I was called to the hospital one night to be with a family whose husband/father was in a coma after a routine colonoscopy nicked his colon. I remembered from my seminary pastoral care class to just sit quietly and be with them. All evening I told myself, "just be quiet and be here, just be quiet and be here." For someone like me who wants to fix things when people are hurting it was harder than you might think. Later, after his funeral, the family told me more than once how very helpful I had been that night at the hospital - when the main thing I did was to tell myself to sit there and be quiet. I've never forgotten that lesson. If you do need to say something, try, "I'm so very sorry that this is happening; please know that I love you and that I'm here." If the person is a believer you can also say, "God grieves with you and is walking alongside you." (PAUSE)

Today we are talking about the familiar statement, "God helps those who help themselves." This saying is deeply imbedded in our culture. Some of you may remember when

Jay Leno used to go out on the street and ask people random questions ó he called it Jaywalking. One night he asked people to name one of the Ten Commandments. It was amazing to see how many people answered by saying, “God helps those who help themselves.” In a 2017 Barna study, 8 in 10 Americans and 52% of practicing Christians surveyed agreed that the Bible teaches this, yet these words are found nowhere in Scripture.

So where did this saying come from then? The saying is rooted in Ancient Greece and it was picked up in England in the 1600s by Algernon Sydney. We have Ben Franklin to thank for popularizing it in the US in his work Poor Richard’s Almanac. Of course, this saying contains some truth, and we’ll get to that in a bit, but first, let’s start with the theological problems this saying raises.

The first problem with this statement is how it orients us. If we believe that God helps those who help themselves, who is our first source of help? Ourselves, right? And if we are our first go-to, then God becomes secondary. This, my friends, is out of order. God should always be where we turn first. We find people crying out to God in many places in Scripture. A few moments ago, we heard David’s words, “In my distress I called upon the Lord; to my God I cried for help. From his temple he heard my voice, and my cry to him reached his ears.” In Psalm 72:12-14, Solomon writes, “For he delivers the needy when they call, the poor and those who have no helper. He has pity on the weak and the needy, and saves the lives of the needy. From oppression and violence he redeems their life; and precious is their blood in his sight.” We heard it in our NT lessons about seeking and knocking, about Jesus who is our high priest. All of these verses remind us that God should be our first source of help, not ourselves.

And the reality is, even those of us who enjoy a great deal of privilege (and that’s every one of us gathered here today), we can’t always help ourselves, can we? At the deepest spiritual

level, we cannot save ourselves, only God can do that. When we lose a loved one, we need the support of our family and friends to help us through. When I broke my foot 5 years ago, I couldn't drive, clean our home, cook a meal, or even go out on the porch to get the mail. I would never have made it through those days without Jay, my mother, and the village that supported us in so many ways. Sometimes we get drawn into addictive behaviors and need help to get clean and sober. What is the first step in 12 step programs, We admit we are powerless over whatever it is we are addicted to, and that our lives have become unmanageable. We have to admit that we cannot help ourselves; that we need God and others.

This leads us to the second danger with this half-truth. If we believe that God helps those that help themselves, it can lead us to the false conclusion that we, as Christians, are not responsible to help others. Throughout Scripture, God commands God's people to take special care of the poor, the orphan, the widow and the needy. Here are some Scripture verses that address this:

James 1:27 ó True devotion is this: to care for orphans and widows in their distress

In Luke 10 we find the Parable of the Good Samaritan where the Samaritan is praised for stopping to assist the man lying beaten on the side of the road.

Galatians 5:6 ó the only thing that counts is faith working through love.

In Hosea 6:6, speaking on God's behalf, Hosea says, "I desire faithful love, not sacrifice." Jesus quotes this verse to the Pharisees.

Finally, Proverbs 21:13 tells us that those who close their ears to the cries of the poor will themselves call out but receive no answer, and 22:9 says, "Happy are generous people, because they give some of their food to the poor."

God typically meets the needs of those who are poor or struggling or hurting by acting through other people. We can and should debate the best ways to do this and it's not always easy, we don't want to enable or create dependence, but we should act in ways that help and create independence.<sup>i</sup>

As I mentioned earlier, there is, of course, some truth to this statement. God is not an unlimited ATM machine, dispensing everything we want or need whenever we want or need it. When we sit down to eat, we thank God for our food, but that doesn't make it magically appear on our tables, does it? We work for our food by earning a paycheck or tending a garden. If we purchase our food at the store, farmers, and truckers and stockers and cashiers all worked to make it possible for us to eat. In the same way, if we are unemployed and simply sit around praying, "God please give me a job," we might sit there a good long time. What does God expect us to do? Prepare a resume, look for job openings, submit applications, and put our best selves forward at interviews. Of course, we should pray and turn to God first, but we also have work to do in the process. God blesses us with brains, and strength and wisdom and gives us the counsel of others and these are God's gifts to us, but we have to use them. Benedictine monks use the Latin phrase *ora et labora* which means Pray and work. Our faith is meant to move us to action even as we trust in God. We pray and we work.<sup>ii</sup>

The apostle Paul had to address this issue with members of the church in Thessalonica. When he started the church there on his second missionary journey, he taught them to trust in Christ, and that Jesus might be back at any moment. Unfortunately, some took this to mean that they could quit their jobs and wait for Jesus's imminent return, and they expected God to provide for them in the meantime. When this word reached Paul, he wrote,

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. They aren't working, but they are meddling in other people's business. By the Lord Jesus Christ, we command and encourage such people to work quietly and put their own food on the table. (II Thess. 3:10-12) Applying these words to everyone who is struggling is a gross misapplication of this verse and its very specific context.

As we seek to pray and work, we have to be careful that we don't swing to the opposite extreme – which is what happened to me in my own faith journey. My parents both grew up in very large families – 10 children in my dad's family and 11 in my mother's. In both families, everyone had to work very hard to help sustain the family. On the farm where my mother was raised, cows had to be milked twice a day, gardens had to be tended then the produce had to be canned and stored. Butter needed churned, wood needed chopped, water had to be drawn – the work was relentless – and both of my parents developed a very strong work ethic. They took this ethic with them when they moved from the mountains of WV to Washington DC soon after they were married. Their hard work and commitment to a better life for our family helped them rise into the upper middle class – they are a classic example of achieving the American dream.

Because they knew the value of hard work, they had high expectations of me and my brothers. I'm the first born and naturally eager to please, so I worked very hard and excelled in school. At some point in my childhood, my young mind warped this ethic. I came to believe that my parents' praise of my efforts was equal to their love for me – which was so very untrue. Ultimately I came to believe that I could or even had to earn the love of others by my actions and my achievements. And of course, I transferred this belief to my relationship with God. During my late elementary and early teenaged years, I could not believe that God loved me

unconditionally and initiated a relationship with me out of that love. I could not believe that I didn't have to earn salvation by being a good person who did good deeds. Now of course, I know that we call this works theology or works righteousness, and it is the half truth that God helps those who help themselves taken to the extreme.

As with all of life, we must strive for balance. We must turn to God first for help. But as we do that, we can't sit idly by waiting for God to meet our needs or to correct the ills in our society. As we said last week, God works through people so we are the hands and feet of God and we are to about God's work in the world. We are called to be the change we want to see so here in our church as we revision, in Farmville as we continue to help our brothers and sisters who are struggling, and across the nation and our world.

So instead of casually dismissing a need with the statement, "God helps those who help themselves," let's ask, "God is this a legitimate need that you are calling me or us to meet? How can we use the gifts and talents you have given us to be your hands and feet in the world?" It may be something as simple as caring for one of our members who is sick or grieving so we're really good at that here. But it may be something much more. It might mean opening our building up to new ventures or it might mean all of us getting out into the community to meet a need that God lays on our hearts as we revision. However God calls, I pray that we will listen, and not allow this half truth to keep us from experiencing the whole truth of the gospel. Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> Adam Hamilton, *Half Truths*, p. 66

<sup>ii</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 55-58.