

McCabe United Methodist Church

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Half-Truths: "God Helps Those Who Help Themselves"

Sermon on Mark 2:1-12

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Good Morning Church!

I am excited for this chance to worship together again! As we continue this Lenten Journey, in worship we're thinking about some of these statements we sometimes accept at face value. We're wrestling with these statements because, sometimes, in different situations they can feel or be perceived as hurtful. As followers of Jesus we're mindful that making disciples is about helping people meet the Living Christ, instead of pushing them away from Him.

Let's pray:

Mighty and Merciful God, may the words of my mouth and the meditations on each of our hearts be acceptable in your sight. You alone are our Rock. You alone are our Redeemer. Amen.

We begin with the statement: God helps those who help themselves. It's probably the most cited verse in Scripture, that's not actually in the Bible. It gets listed as one of, if not THEE best known Bible verses. 75% of American Christians agree that it's in the Bible - (George Barna) .

Three Quarters of American teenagers say it's the central theme in the Bible...

God helps those who help themselves... It sounds like it could be in the Bible, but it's not. God helps those who help themselves.

It can be traced way back to BEFORE Jesus, but Ben Franklin made it mainstream. Ben Franklin, in the Poor Richard's Almanac in 1736, Ben Franklin vaulted the phrase into mainstream American culture. God helps those who help themselves.

Even though it's not in the Bible with a chapter and verse, it's not completely without merit, is it?

You may have heard of the religious guy who got caught in a flood. He got on his roof and he trusted God to rescue him. His neighbor came by in a canoe saying: "The waters are rising fast. They're going to cover your roof pretty soon. Hop in! We'll paddle to safety."

The religious guy replied: "No thanks. I prayed to God. God will save me."

A police boat came by. "The waters are rising. It'll cover your roof pretty soon. Get in. We'll get you to safety."

“No thanks” the religious guy said. “I’ve prayed to God. God will save me.”

A rescue helicopter came by. A rope ladder came down. The crew yelled: “The water’s rising. Climb the ladder. We’ll get you to safety.”

“No thanks. I prayed to God. God’ll save me.”

And the floodwaters kept rising. The flood waters covered the house, and the religious man drowned. When he got to heaven he was hopping mad. He demanded to see God. When he saw God, his jaw was clenched. His fists were packed, and he confronted God saying: Why am I here? “Lord, I prayed for you to save me. I trusted for you to save me from that flood.”

God responded: “You sure did my child. I heard every word you said.” “So I sent you a canoe, and a boat, and a helicopter. Why didn’t you get in? God helps those who help themselves.

We might hear Colossians 3:23 saying: Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord, not for people. Or, 2 Thessalonians 3:10 saying: “The one who is unwilling to work shouldn’t eat.” Or there are Proverbs that speak to working and not being lazy. We can definitely find Scripture that supports, and encourages, being good stewards of our time, our talents, and treasures.

God helps those who help themselves.

It’s not completely untrue. We’re supposed to use what God has given us, in faithful, authentic ways. The challenge comes in the area we’re invited to wrestle with God about. It comes when we use this statement as a justification, or as a rationale for judging or for not helping. Sometimes we can use this statement for building ourselves up at someone else’s expense.

God helps those who help themselves, so pull yourself up by your bootstraps. God helps those who help themselves, so, if you want something different, do something different. Or, you got yourself into that, get yourself out.

These can be words of encouragement or helpful reminders but at other times, they can be words of judgment and condemnation.

We rally together, we will go to the ends of the earth to help out in dramatic, emergency situations. Think about a football coach taking bullets to protect his students, or the people pulling boats down to Houston to help out after the hurricane. The brave men and women who respond during, or after fires, or terrorist attacks, or car accidents. We intervene without hesitation. The helpers are role models. We call them heroes, and we should because they are heroes.

Yet, in everyday situations, with regular people, when we have time to think about it, we can get numb, or even harsh as we find reasons to cast blame. We can find reasons to justify why we shouldn't help. Sometimes taking the easy road can be finding excuses for why we think God *DOESN'T* want us to respond. After all, we argue, God helps those who help themselves.

Then we hear Psalm 121: I lift my eyes to the hills, from where will my help come? My help comes from the Lord. The Lord who made heaven and earth. It doesn't say God helps those who help themselves. It says: I Look to the hills. I ask: Where will I find help? Because we *EACH* need help. And the reply: Our help comes from the Lord, the Lord who made heaven and earth.

Friends, we are journeying toward the cross. On the cross, God, through Jesus Christ sacrificed everything so you and I can forgive and be forgiven. God, through Jesus Christ, sacrificed everything so we can be healed, and we can be instruments of healing. We don't have to judge. We can receive grace and offer grace.

At the cross, Jesus sacrificed everything so we can receive help and we can be helpers. The way we respond can draw people closer to Christ or it can push them away.

We hear God helps those who help themselves, and we turn to the Gospels and see God incarnate. We see God in the flesh. We see Jesus helping those who *CAN'T* help themselves.

In Mark 1:29 and forward: Jesus *WENT* to the sick, and many sick and demon-possessed people were brought to Jesus. In v 34: Jesus healed many people who *COULDN'T* help themselves. Jesus healed many people who were sick with various diseases, and he cast out their demons.

In Mark 1:40, a guy with leprosy came to Jesus. He knelt in front of Jesus begging to be healed. He couldn't do it himself. He begged Jesus, if you're willing you can heal me. You can make me clean. And Scripture says: Jesus was *MOVED WITH COMPASSION*. Jesus reached out and touched him, helping him, healing him, and the man was healed.

We might say there are overtones of God helping those who helped themselves in these Scriptures. In the Gospels, people helped themselves by drawing closer to Jesus. People helped themselves by admitting their need for a Savior. They knew they couldn't do it alone. Friends brought friends to Jesus. Friends brought friends who couldn't help themselves because they couldn't do it themselves. Jesus went to hurting people because the people couldn't help themselves.

Did you see teacher Marissa Schimmoeller last week. She was dreading the return to school after the Florida school shootings. Her heart was heavy. Her heart was aching for her students.

Ms. Schimmoeller went to school prepared to revisit the school safety plan for active shooters in the building. Ms. Schoemoeller is in a wheelchair because she has cerebral palsy. She told her students, if they have to evacuate because of an active shooter in the building, they need to get out as quickly as they can and leave her behind. Teacher Schiemoeller's students told her they had a different plan. Instead of leaving her behind, they were going to carry her out to safety.

It sounds a little like the friends in Mark 2, doesn't it? In this morning's Scripture, a paralyzed man, a guy who physically COULDN'T help himself, he was lowered by his friends through the roof. And Jesus, not seeing the man's faith, but seeing his FRIEND's faith, Jesus said to the paralyzed man, your sins are forgiven, now get up and walk.

There are at least four sets of actors in this Scripture... There's Jesus, swarmed by the people and filled with compassion. There's the crowds, knowing they can't do it alone, watching, seeking Jesus. There are the friends helping their friend. And there's those guys, the judgmental ones, with hardened hearts. These guys could've maybe benefited from a Lenten journey. These guys could've benefited from some faithful self-reflections. These guys could've benefited from reflecting on how they lived their faith.

Jesus said to them: What are YOUR motives? Because it doesn't feel right. You're just casting judgment and condemnation. Why don't you celebrate the healings? Why don't you celebrate, and offer grace?

We say: God helps those who help themselves but if we look at it head on, we are forced to examine our own motives. We are invited to look in the mirror. We are invited to wrestle with God, and go forward from there.

We say: God helps those who help themselves, and there's some truth to it, especially if we're helping ourselves by drawing closer to Jesus. But God also helps those who can't help themselves, for whatever reason. He helps even people like you and me...

Jesus healed the lame. Jesus healed the blind. Jesus healed the broken hearted and the sinful. Jesus went places and tolerated conditions others judged too messy or unclean.

We say: God helps those who help themselves. This can sound comfortable. We can see ourselves as fully independent. We're do-it-ourselves people. We can feel like we get God's blessing by earning it, and then we hear a Lenten message... Jesus teaching in Matthew 4:17: "...Repent of your sins and turn to God..."

We say: God helps those who help themselves. We can help ourselves by repenting of our sins and turning to God. Not only does God help those who repent and turn to God. He helps those who CAN'T help themselves.

Matthew 5:3-12 actually describes how God BLESSES people who, in many situations, might be unable to help themselves...

In Matthew 5, Jesus went up on the mountainside and he started to teach. His teaching was in part, about people who couldn't always help themselves. His teaching was about God's favor for even those struggling to help themselves.

Jesus taught: ³“God helps, and God even blesses those who are poor and realize their need for him,

⁴ God helps, and God even blesses those who mourn.

God helps, and even blesses those who are humble, and who hunger and thirst for justice,

⁷ God helps, and even blesses those who are merciful, and pure in heart.

⁹ God blesses those who work for peace, and who are persecuted for doing right.

¹¹“God blesses you when people mock you and persecute you and lie about you and say all sorts of evil things against you because you follow Jesus.

We say: God helps those who help themselves. God helps us, and we help ourselves, according to the Scriptures, when God offers, and when we accept God's grace.

Grace. That unconditional love and pursuit of us from God. Grace is something we don't deserve. Grace is something we can't earn, yet God offers it to us anyway.

God offers us grace. We receive God's grace, and we're expected to give grace to others too.

As we continue our Lenten journey, we continue to wrestle with Scripture. God speaks to us through Scripture. First, just for clarification. The often quoted passage: God helps those who help themselves is NOT a cannot be found as chapter and a verse in the Bible. And second, what are the implications of the way we hear this statement, and the way we use this statement? When we say: God helps those who help themselves, What are we really saying? What is our goal, what are our motives in saying it?

Let's pray...

Glorious and gracious God, we speak and we act through our words, our actions, and our ways. Warm our hearts and align our motives with your desires for us. We come this morning seeking you. We come this morning seeking to be faithful to you. You are God. We're not. We plead for you to help us be faithful, and to help us respond faithfully. It's in the name of your Son Jesus we pray. Amen.