

NEW TESTAMENT READING: Matthew 25:32-45 pg 29 NT

All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats, ³³ and he will put the sheep at his right hand and the goats at the left. ³⁴ Then the king will say to those at his right hand, 'Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; ³⁵ for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, ³⁶ I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.' ³⁷ Then the righteous will answer him, 'Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? ³⁸ And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? ³⁹ And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?' ⁴⁰ And the king will answer them, 'Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, ^[a] you did it to me.' ⁴¹ Then he will say to those at his left hand, 'You that are accursed, depart from me into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels; ⁴² for I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, ⁴³ I was a stranger and you did not welcome me, naked and you did not give me clothing, sick and in prison and you did not visit me.' ⁴⁴ Then they also will answer, 'Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not take care of you?' ⁴⁵ Then he will answer them, 'Truly I tell you, just as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me.' ⁴⁶ And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life."

OLD TESTAMENT READINGS:

Psalm 94: 17-19 Unless the Lord had given me help, I would soon have dwelt in the silence of death. When I said, "My foot is slipping," your unfailing love, Lord, supported me. When anxiety was great within me, your consolation brought me joy.

Psalm 18:6,16 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...He reached down from on high, he took me; he drew me out of mighty waters.

Amos 2:6-7; 5:14-15 This is what the LORD says: "For three sins of Israel, even for four, I will not relent. They sell the innocent for silver, and the needy for a pair of sandals. ⁷They trample on the heads of the poor as on the dust of the ground and deny justice to the oppressed.

Seek good, not evil, that you may live. Then the LORD God Almighty will be with you, just as you say he is. ¹⁵Hate evil, love good; maintain justice in the courts.

This is the word of the Lord. **Thanks be to God.**

Common But Not Biblical Wisdom Pt 1

I recently read a terrific book by Adam Hamilton which regards “Half Truths”. It’s about things people think are in the Bible but aren’t. It made me consider that it might be a good thing to use this as a theme for a summer’s sermon series. Sound good? If you’re game, over the next 5-6 weeks then, we will examine some commonly heard “wisdoms” which are often misconstrued as Biblical. Today, let’s begin by considering the phrase, “God helps those who help themselves.”

Evidently, in a survey done by a Christian polling firm, 88% of people believe that this phrase is Biblical, and is, in fact, a major tenet even in the Bible. Many people list it as one of the 10 commandments!¹ I have to admit, it does sort of sound like it could be. And indeed, there is a bit of truth to it. Most Biblical misquotes contain a degree of truth.

Deist, Benjamin Franklin, is often thought to have originated it. In his *“Poor Richard’s Almanac”*, he most likely was quoting, however, from an old Aesop fable. Both Franklin and Aesop used the phrase, “God helps those who help themselves,” to urge people to work and not to be presumptive of the Supreme Being’s power or care of them. And likewise, after teaching believers in Thessalonika that Jesus would come again very soon, Paul found himself having to admonish them for quitting their jobs and spending the time idly waiting, *“For we hear that some of you are living in idleness, not doing any work,” he said. “Now such persons we command and exhort in the Lord to do their work quietly and to earn their own living. (Thes 3:10-12).*

Yes, we play a role in bringing to bear the blessings we’ve been given. For instance, none of us expect to get or keep a job if we do not prepare ourselves through education and training, if we do not seek the job out, and if we do not turn up for work each day with the sincere intention of accomplishing the tasks required. Neither do we expect to grow physically and mentally if we do not drive to the grocery store to shop for the food, if we do not put the effort into preparing it, and if we do not sit up to the table to eat it. We’ve been gifted with brains and

¹ Adam Hamilton. *“Half Truths. God Helps Those Who Help Themselves and Other Things the Bible Doesn’t Say”* (Nashville: Abingdon Press; 2016), 53-76.

muscles, with initiative and curiosity. God does not want us to pray and pray but not work. God wants us to pray AND work! As Adam Hamilton says, “*Our faith is meant it to move us to action even as we trust in God.*”²

I would imagine most of you have heard the story about the very religious man was once caught in rising floodwaters. He climbed onto the roof of his house and trusted God to rescue him. A neighbor came by in a canoe and said, “The waters will soon be above your house. Hop in and we’ll paddle to safety.” “No thanks” replied the man. “I’ve prayed to God and I’m sure God will save me” A short time later the police came by in a boat. “The waters will soon be above your house. Hop in and we’ll take you to safety.” “No thanks” “I’ve prayed to God and I’m sure God will save me” A little time later a rescue services helicopter hovered overhead, let down a rope ladder and said. “The waters will soon be above your house. Climb the ladder and we’ll fly you to safety.” “No thanks” replied the man. “I’ve prayed to God and I’m sure God will save me”. All this time the floodwaters continued to rise, until soon they reached above the roof and the man drowned. When he arrived at heaven he said, “Lord, why? Why? I prayed for you to save me, I trusted you to save me from that flood.” “Yes you did my child” replied the Lord. “And I sent you a canoe, a boat and a helicopter.”³

Yes, we are meant to be moved to action by our faith. And we are equipped with many gifts with which we can act. So, there is indeed some truth to the “God helps those who help themselves” phrase.

However, however, the bigger, much bigger Biblical truth is that “God helps those who CANNOT help themselves”! (repeat). And this we so often see God doing through us, who are equipped. Over and over again we are called to love our neighbors, those who are paralyzed in the grip of poverty, those who are weak from illness or age, those who are victims of injustice, who cannot speak for themselves, those who cannot simply summon the will to pull themselves

² Adam Hamilton.

³ Anon. <https://storiesforpreaching.com/i-sent-you-a-rowboat/> (accessed 6-10-18).

up by their bootstraps. We are instruments in the bringing of God's Kingdom; you and I, participants in the divine plan for earth. WOW!!!

I have always admired the OLD TESTAMENT psalmists and prophets who, with such courage, called their people, all their people, their society, to account for their lack of compassion for those most vulnerable. Ah, those psalmists and prophets! But you can't beat the story in the book of Ruth. There we learn of Boaz, the wealthy landowner who farmed the fields outside of Bethlehem. He was one who lived out God's Levitical command to love neighbor. He left the edges of his fields un-harvested as commanded. This was to give the poor, the foreigner, the widow the chance to take what they needed to eat. It was also to remind God's people that the fields were not theirs to begin with. And indeed, Naomi, a widow, and Ruth, her daughter-in-law from Moab, gleaned from Boaz' fields and did not starve. If you know the story, one thing led to another and soon Boaz and Ruth met. They become a couple and gave birth to Obed, who was the father of Jesse, the father of David, the great, great, great, great, grandfather of Jesus.

The NEW TESTAMENT is full of this same "God helps the helpless" message, maybe no more clearly than in the vivid parable (hyperbole) of Matt 25 where we learn that we are judged (while we are yet living) not only by our faith, but by whether our faith leads us to a greater compassion for the poor, the outcast, sick and oppressed. The real truth revealed here is that the king who is Judge is the CRUCIFIED King, and he identifies with...he is met...he is made known in every one who also suffers. It's a core and essential tenant in Scripture. As Wilfred Harrington says, "*Jesus is the loving and living expression of God's concern for humankind. A God BENT on humankind, and nothing short of that, becomes the standard of our concern for those in need.*" She goes on, "*It is a denial of the label 'Christian' to any church not characterized by loving concern for the helpless.*"⁴ (repeat)

Yes, God helps those who CANNOT help themselves. And this IS accomplished through us, those who wear the label, Christian. God puts it on our heart and on the hearts of others to

⁴ Wilfred Harrington. <http://www.goodnews.ie/lastjudgment.shtml> (accessed 6-7-18)

give a helping hand.⁵ *Numerous, countless times, in my ministry I have had people tell me that they did not know what a church really was until they were on the receiving end of the compassion and generosity of the family of faith. I've been the messenger for anonymous donations of money or food or clothing, and I've watched the eyes of recipients well up when they've been surprised by the heart of the giver. Even this week, it's happened. I've witnessed gifts other than physical needs be given and received too... Christ-like gifts of acceptance, hope, comfort, welcome, forgiveness and of VOICE! (pause)*

Now, one more thing to ponder, just as we are the ones through whom God helps others, so too are we ones who are given help. For we are helpless too, are we not? We are all helpless in spirit. "All," the Bible says "have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God." (Rom 3:10-12) "All of us are weak and heavy laden." (Matt 11:28). And the Bible testifies, our spirits testify, we know that we know that we know God is with us...and for us. *I've imagined our human situation as being in a deep muddy, muddy pit with no way out on our own. We try and try to climb but keep slipping back down into the muck. And Jesus comes to NOT simply stand at the top, looking sympathetically down, to not throw us a bunch of rope down and cheer for us to find our way up. No, he gets in the pit with us and hoists us on his shoulders such that WE can escape.* God is with us and for us, friends, as we walk through the dark places of guilt, grief, despair, loneliness, confusion, hurt, worry. God sacrifices himself to lift to safety. Nothing we do earns or deserves this. It is the unmerited work of Jesus. Paul says, "it is by grace we have been saved, through faith; this is not from ourselves, it is the gift of God." (Eph 2:8-9).

Fellow sons and daughters of God, the next time we feel too weak to face the difficulties of life, the next time we find ourselves in a mess (maybe one we've made), let's be still and feel God's presence and look for God's helping hand **to us**, however it comes. The next time we witness one who is suffering, let's bring our gifts to bear to be as Christ **to them!** The next time we hear someone say, "God helps those who help themselves," let's say instead that we all

⁵ Adam Hamilton.

have a God, we have a God, who helps those all who CANNOT help themselves. **This is the Biblical wisdom!** *“In my distress I called upon the Lord; to my God I cried for help...He reached down from on high, he took me; and he drew me out of mighty waters. (Ps 94:17-19)*
Amen.

Others to come!

A Tangled Web we weave when we practice to deceive.

Root of All evil is money

Everything happens for a reason

Love the sinner, hate the sin

God Won't Give you more than you can handle