February 4, 2018

Psalm 121

Actually, that's not in the Bible: “God helps those who help themselves.”

Rev. Kerry Smith

Greenland Hills United Methodist Church

Psalm 121 Revised Standard Version (hymnal)

I lift up my eyes to the hills. From whence does my help come? My help comes from the Lord, who made heaven and earth. He will not let your foot be moved, he who keeps you will not slumber. Behold, he who keeps Israel will neither slumber nor sleep. The Lord is your keeper; the Lord is your shade on your right hand. The sun shall not smite you by day, nor the moon by night. The Lord will keep you from all evil; he will keep your life. The Lord will keep your going out and your coming in from this time forth and for evermore.

The other weekend at Confirmation Camp and the Methodist camp in Bridgeport, the speaker asked the 100 kids gathered there from 14 different United Methodist Churches in North Texas to list the Big Ten. One kid asked, “the football teams?” but the speaker was referring to the Ten Commandments. The kids got them all, and no one said, “God helps those who help themselves,” but there are folks who think that statement is one of the Big Ten. A Barna poll found that 8 in 10 Americans think “God helps those who help themselves,” is in the Bible and more than half of those polled felt like it is one of the major messages in Scripture.[[1]](#footnote-2)

It is thought to have originated in Greek mythology in the fifth century before Christ. In Aesop’s fables a waggoner is driving a heavy load along a muddy way. The wheels sink half-way in the mud and the more the horses pull, the deeper the wheels sink. The waggoner kneels downs and prays to Hercules the Strong to help him in the hour of his distress. Hercules appears and says, “Tut, man, don’t sprawl there. Get up and put your shoulder to the wheel. The gods help them that help themselves.”[[2]](#footnote-3) It is so catchy! It was repeated by various philosophers over the last 2500 years and in 1736 Ben Franklin published that phrase in Poor Richard’s Almanac which helped to give the statement a permanent place in American thinking.[[3]](#footnote-4)

We can pray for something to happen, but we also have to do some work in the process. I had a friend who was trying to sell her home and she asked everyone to pray. Her real estate agent said the house was priced too high, but my friend said God would answer her prayers. After months of the house not selling, and the agent continuing to say the price needed to be lowered, she realized that God wasn’t going to send someone who was willing to pay more for the house than it was worth. We have been given a brain and the gift of other people to help us talk through things. It is up to us to use them, so we pray and we work.

It’s like the student that is praying for a good grade on a test as the teacher is passing the graded tests back. It is too late! God gave you time to study and teachers to help you. Trusting in Jesus doesn’t mean you pray and then God takes care of everything. Our faith is meant to move us to action even as we trust in God.[[4]](#footnote-5) We pray and we work.

There is a truth to the idea that God helps those who help themselves. We don’t sit around waiting for God to miraculously right the wrongs in society. As Scripture reveals over and over again, God works through people. We are the instruments God uses to change the world.[[5]](#footnote-6)

But the idea that God helps those who help themselves is also unbiblical. That idea can be used as a way of avoiding our obligation as Christians to help others, of doing our part to love our neighbors.[[6]](#footnote-7) Some people truly cannot help themselves. There are folks trapped in the cycle of poverty, struggling financially and they can’t just summon up their will and pull themselves up by their bootstraps. Sometimes people are in a hole so deep that they can’t climb out without help. Sometimes people face challenges they don’t know how to overcome on their own, or they simply don’t have the resources to do it. We don’t get to say, “God helps those who help themselves,” and decide that it is not our problem.

Generational poverty is complex and there are layers of problems that compound each other. To deal with the problem as a whole, we we would be dealing with addictions, mental illness, basic health issues that cause everyday pain, transportation issues, childcare, safe housing, safety, violence, racism, sexism, and a whole host of educational needs just to name a few.

It’s much easier to find a flaw in somebody’s lifestyle and say, well, God helps those who help themselves. If they would just stop doing drugs they would be fine, or if they would have just finished school they would have been fine.

It’s never that simple. And I can say, I had nothing to do with the family I was born into. I didn’t choose the house I lived in as a kid. I didn’t choose to have healthy food and lots of books to read on my shelf. It just happened to me. I’m thankful, but I didn’t deserve it. I didn’t earn it. I simply received it.[[7]](#footnote-8)

God calls us to help those who CAN’T help themselves because compassion and mercy is part of the character of God.[[8]](#footnote-9) Remember that story in Matthew 25 about the sheep and the goats? God uses our hands and our feet to give food to those who are hungry, to give a drink to those who are thirsty, to welcome those who are strangers, to give clothes to those who are naked, to visit those who are sick, and to visit those who are in prison. God puts it on our hearts to help and we do. In Matthew 25 Jesus doesn’t say anything about the worthiness of those who were in need. Jesus doesn’t say, thank you for helping the list of my favorite people. Jesus doesn’t say anything at all about whether they had turned over a new leaf. Jesus doesn’t indicate their ethnicity or gender or religion or sexual identity. Jesus doesn’t comment on whether they were hard working or lazy. Jesus says, good job helping them.

Writer Toni Morrison tells her students, “When you get these jobs that you have been so brilliantly trained for, just remember that your real job is that if you are free, you need to free somebody else. If you have some power, then your job is to empower somebody else. This is not just a grab-bag candy game.”[[9]](#footnote-10)

We are usually really good at helping. We build homes in Juarez, we make blessing bags for the homeless like we did last Sunday with our Kids in Mission, we help the food pantry distribute food Tuesday mornings at Emanuel Community Center (if you are available from 9-11 am on Tuesdays, they are always looking for volunteers). We are changed when we help others, and we hope that the lives of those we are helping are changed too. Eugene Peterson calls the Christian life a long obedience in the same direction. We pray and we work to change the world in God’s name.

There are also times when we CAN’T help ourselves because we feel too hopeless, we feel too sinful. We are in the darkest valley and we can’t get out on our own. God is the one who brings light into our darkness and helps us find peace amid our times of anxiety and despair. God rescues us, God redeems us, God forgives us. We don’t earn it, we don’t deserve it, but God is always loving us, always extending mercy to us. God’s grace. It is because of God’s grace, God’s love for us that we make it through the storm. God never leaves us. God’s mercy, love, and grace stays with us and brings us to today.

We all need acceptance, love, and a sense of belonging. We need hope, peace, comfort, forgiveness, and strength. We need to know that our lives have worth. We need an understanding of our purpose in life so that we can fulfill it. With God’s mercy and grace we have another chance and a new beginning. Christ redeems us when we are broken, whether or not we deserve forgiveness. We pray and we work. We turn to God for help when we know that we can’t get there on our own efforts.

When we admit that we are powerless, God gives us strength to overcome. God says to us, “You are my beloved child! You matter to me! Trust me and walk in my love.” When we trust God and walk in God’s love, we discover grace.[[10]](#footnote-11) Grace says to us that God helps those who CANNOT help themselves.

God is counting on us to pray and to work. When people cannot make it on their own, we are called to help others. We become the answer to someone’s prayer. When we realize that we can’t help ourselves, when we realize that we can’t save ourselves, no matter how hard we try, we cry out to God, the only one who can help us. “I I lift up my eyes to the hills—from where will my help come? My help comes from the Lord, who made heaven and earth” (Psalm 121:1-2). God picks us up, dusts us off, and reminds us that God never abandons us. God gives us strength and we can get through whatever it is, together. Thanks be to God, Amen.

1. Hamilton, Adam. Half-Truths. P. 54. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
2. https://www.biblegateway.com/blog/2017/06/did-you-know-the-saying-god-helps-those-who-help-themselves-isnt-in-the-bible/ [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
3. Hamilton, Adam. Half-Truths. P. 54. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
4. Hamilton, Adam. Half-Truths. P. 58. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
5. Much of this paragraph from Hamilton, Adam. Half-Truths. P. 61. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
6. Hamilton, Adam. Half-Truths. P. 61. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
7. Thanks to my friend Rev. Dana Coker from FUMC Bonham for this insight. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
8. Hamilton, Adam. Half-Truths. P. 65. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
9. <http://www.oprah.com/omagazine/toni-morrison-talks-love/all#ixzz55iEg9lwV> [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
10. Hamilton, Adam. Half-Truths. P. 74. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)