

Shandon Presbyterian Church Sermon

Things Jesus Never Said: God Helps Those Who Help Themselves

Mark 2:1-12

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“God helps those who help themselves.” This is the second in our series of Things Jesus Never Said. He never said it, but it is frequently attributed to him. The last time the Barna group, a religious polling firm, asked the question, 82 percent of the general population believed the saying was found in the Bible. Of course, that’s the general population. Christians surveyed did better. Only 81 percent of Christians who were surveyed thought the same.

The next most common citation, outside of scripture, is that the saying originated with Benjamin Franklin. It does appear in Franklin’s Almanac. The earliest known use of the exact quote, though, is in an article titled Discourses Concerning Government, written by Algernon Sidney, an English politician, in 1698. However, strikingly similar sentiments are found in Aesop’s Fables, dated back to approximately 600 BCE. Whichever source you are inclined to credit, the idea has been with us long enough to have woven itself securely into our culture and, unfortunately, sometimes our Christianity, too.

Before we go further, though, I wonder if you’ve heard this story. To be clear, it is not in the Bible, either, even though it is often referred to as the Parable of the Drowning Man: A terrible storm swept into town and local officials sent out an evacuation notice, warning that the river would soon overflow and flood the nearby homes. A faithful Christian man heard the warning and thought to himself, I will stay. I will trust God and if I am in danger, then God will save me. The neighbors came by his house and said to him, “We’re leaving, and there is room for you in our car. Please come with us.” But the man said no. “I have faith that God

will save me.” As the man stood on his porch watching the water rise, a man in a canoe paddled by and called to him, “Hurry and come into my canoe, the waters are rising quickly.” But the man said no. “I have faith that God will save me.” The water rose higher still and the man retreated to the second floor. A police boat came by and saw him in the window. “We will come up and rescue you,” they shouted. But the man refused, saying, “Go save someone else. I have faith that God will save me.” The water continued to rise, and the man climbed to his roof. A helicopter spotted him and dropped a rope ladder. A rescue worker came down the ladder and reached for the man. “Grab my hand and I will pull you up!” But the man still refused. “No. I have faith that God will save me.” Shortly after, the floodwaters overwhelmed the house and swept the man away and he drowned. In heaven, the man stood before God and said, “I had such faith in you. Why didn’t you save me?” And God said, “I sent you a warning. I sent you a car. I sent you a canoe. I sent you a boat. I sent you a helicopter. How much more help could I have sent?” There are actually a few different versions of this parable floating around. Growing up in Michigan, I first heard it as the Parable of the Man Lost in a Snowstorm. Rainstorm or snowstorm, though, it reminds us that a healthy dose of humility is appropriate when discerning, assessing, or, heaven forbid, preaching about the presence or absence of divine assistance.

“God helps those who help themselves.” There is a grain of truth to be found here, scriptural and otherwise. Second Thessalonians contains a strong warning against idleness: “Anyone unwilling to work should not eat. For we hear that some of you are living in idleness, mere busybodies, not doing any

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work. Such persons we command and exhort in the Lord Jesus Christ to do their work and earn their living.” But that was likely a response to Christ-followers who had decided that since Jesus was coming back sometime soon, they didn’t have to do anything they didn’t feel like doing in the meantime. To be human is to carry responsibility in this world. It is not solely up to God to give me an A on a test, or pay my bills on time, or remind me to refill a prescription, or make me go to bed at a reasonable hour. If I want God to help me with those things, I need to do my part, as well. Which is fine.

But “God helps those who help themselves” is not a caution against overly-casual behavior. It has become a siren song of rugged self-reliance, raw individualism, and abject independence, things that are decidedly not scriptural, attributes that Jesus never emphasized. From start to finish, the entire biblical witness insists that we are tied inextricably to God and that God does not leave us in our time of need. The prophet Isaiah proclaims that God is “a refuge to the poor, a refuge to the needy in their distress, a shelter from the storm and a shade from the heat.” The apostle Paul teaches, “God proves God’s love for us in that while we were sinners, Christ died for us.” Jesus himself, when criticized for sharing lunch with a tax collector, says “Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick.”

And a more sustained look in one area of scripture is even more instructive, I believe. Mark’s gospel begins in a hurry, and within 10 verses of the first chapter Jesus is baptized, a dove descends and a voice from heaven says, “You are my son, the beloved, with you I am well pleased.” His hair is still wet from his baptism when he is tempted by Satan in the wilderness; he resists. He calls some followers, and just about as soon as they’ve all learned each other’s names, he takes them to the synagogue where he exorcises an unclean spirit from a man.

Then as soon as they leave the synagogue, Jesus heals Simon’s mother-in-law of a fever. By that same evening, people were bringing to him everyone who was sick or unwell, and he cured them and healed them. He tries to get a little time alone, but a leper finds him and begs him, please, make me clean. So Jesus heals him, too. That is what happened prior to our reading this morning. Jesus has healed and helped so many people, they are starting to follow him wherever he goes. Do you remember that part? “So many gathered around that there was no longer room for them, not even in front of the door.” That is why four men climb onto a roof and then tear straight through it, all to get to Jesus with their paralyzed friend. And Jesus does not push them away. He does what he always does. He helps the man in the ways he needs it most. That is not the picture of someone who would claim “God helps those who help themselves.” It is the picture of someone who is going to help as many people as he possibly can, and who will not let anything stand in the way — not Satan or sickness or sin, not demons or disease or disability, not even physical structures or well-meaning people. God, through the person of Jesus Christ, is going to move heaven and earth to help and heal everyone and anyone who needs it. That is literally the gospel truth.

And y’all know I love it when grammar makes the gospel even more obvious. The paralytic who is healed — up until the moment of his healing, every verb used to describe him is passive. He is carried by other men. He is lowered into the house. He is commanded by Jesus to get up. The man does literally nothing. Speaks not a single word. God’s help is a result of who God is, not a result of what we do. Gospel truth. Yet it is also Gospel truth that we are called to be God’s hands and feet in this world for and with one another. I love the cover art on today’s worship bulletin because not only does it show how many people were crowded in and around the house, it shows how many people were involved in getting the paralyzed man up onto the

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roof and then down into the room. God helps those who help themselves? None of us are capable of helping ourselves, not all the way. Anyone who thinks otherwise is deceiving themselves. We come into this world completely dependent on others for survival, and while the degree of dependence varies over our lives, it never goes away. Most of the time I hear the divine self-help mantra is when people are complaining about or frustrated by what is perceived to be a lack of effort on someone else's part. I hear it in public response to governmental assistance programs, like food stamps or unemployment or disability pay, subsidized school lunches and taxpayer funded medical clinics. But I also hear it in private conversations, with individuals in my office who are being so hard on themselves they can no longer lift their head to see the light of day, who are convinced that everything wrong could be remedied if they just tried a little harder, managed a little better. Whether we are holding others to it or whether we are holding ourselves to it, "God helps those who help themselves" makes an idol of independence and perpetuates the lie that we can make it through this life on our own. And that is not the good news of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Frederick Buechner, in his memoir *The Sacred Journey*, writes, "To do for yourself the best that you have in you to do — to grit your teeth and clench your fists in order to survive the world at its harshest and worst — is, by that very act, to be unable to let something be done for you and in you that is more wonderful still. The trouble with steeling yourself against the harshness of reality is that the same steel that secures your life against being destroyed secures your life also against being opened up and transformed by the holy power that life itself comes from. You can survive on your own. You may even prevail on your own. But you cannot become human on your own." Becoming human is holy. Being human is holy. It is so holy that even God chose to do it. Let us never endeavor to do anything less.