

8-24-25 Sermon: “That’s Not in the Bible!: God Helps Those Who Help Themselves”

Today, we are starting a sermon series that I’ve always wanted to preach but never have; it’s called, “*That’s not in the Bible!*”

Over the next four weeks, we’ll explore some ideas that people tend to attribute to Scripture but that are not biblical – and can actually be theologically harmful, if we take them seriously. And we’ll investigate what the Bible *does* say on these topics.

Now, a couple of caveats as we begin.

First, just because something is not in the Bible doesn’t mean it’s not true. The Bible is a closed document, born out of one particular culture. And there is plenty of wisdom, including Christian wisdom, that is not contained in this one book.

Second, just because something *is* in the Bible does not necessarily mean that it is good! We call this document, “The Word of the Lord – thanks be to God,” but these holy words are filtered through human hands, and y’all, it shows! There’s some nasty stuff in the Bible...from Proverbs, “Spare the rod, spoil the child,” or from Colossians, “Slaves, obey your masters.” Or from Second Thessalonians, “The one who does not work should not eat.” Yikes.

So. The Bible is not perfect, nor is it the exclusive source of wisdom and goodness. But as Christians, this is our holy Scripture; it’s *our* road to approach the divine. And we take these words seriously, if not always literally. So let’s dig in.

Our first non-biblical teaching, as you can see in your bulletin is, “God helps those who help themselves.”

This is a popular one! In a 2017 poll by the Barna group, “God helps those who help themselves,” was #1 on the list of most widely known Bible verses...despite it not actually being in the Bible! We can see why it resonates in our culture, though, can’t we? It’s practical, it fits right in with our American boot-strappin’ mentality. But this is not what Jesus teaches us.

So if it’s not Bible, where does it come from? It first shows up in ancient Greece, as the moral to one of Aesop’s fables, “Hercules and the Waggoner.” In the story, a man’s wagon falls in a ravine, so he cries out to Hercules to help him get it out of the ditch and back on the path. A voice from heaven responds that he should try pushing it himself first. Moral of the story: the gods help those who...help themselves.

A similar sentiment appears in the teachings of Islam. An ayah from the Qur’an reads, “Indeed Allah will not change the conditions of a population until they change what is in themselves.” (13:11). Another popular phrase, attributed to the prophet Muhammad, has made it into our American idioms: “Trust in God, and tie your camel.”

The English phrase, “God helps those who help themselves,” is attributed to seventeenth century British political theorist Algernon Sidney. From him, Benjamin Franklin picked it up and included it in his Poor Richard’s Almanack, and well, as they say, the rest is history.

When we hear this say, “God helps those who help themselves,” we who are familiar with the teachings of Jesus *know* that something about it is not quite right. As one of you said this week, when I mentioned what I was preaching on, “Hmm...that’s kind of the opposite of the Bible, isn’t it?”

And you’re right; it is...kind of.

The Bible is not *against* hard work and initiative – those are good values, and Scripture praises them. Proverbs 12:11 reads “Those who till their land will have plenty of food, but those who follow worthless pursuits have no sense,” followed by Proverbs 13:4: “The sluggard craves

and gets nothing, but the desires of the diligent are fully satisfied.” And let us not forget James 2:26, “Faith without works is dead.”

But in terms of who God *helps*, according to the Biblical witness, industriousness and effort have nothing to do with it.

There are two Biblical counterstatements to “God helps those who help themselves.” And the first one is this: God helps those...who need God’s help. And most of the time, that means people who are poor, sick, and needy.

Latin American liberation theology calls it God’s “preferential option for the poor.” As Jesus himself said it, “It is the sick who need a doctor, not the healthy.” Rob just read us Psalm 146: “God executes justice for the oppressed and gives food to the hungry; God lifts up those who are bowed down, watches over the alien, upholds the orphan and the widow.”

Or how about Hannah, in First Samuel, who sings, “God raises up the poor from the dust, lifts up the needy from the ash heap.”

Or there’s Mary’s song, the Magnificat: “God has filled the hungry with good things and sent the rich away empty.”

Or Jesus’ inaugural sermon: “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor; he has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to bind up the brokenhearted and let the oppressed go free.”

Or how about today’s Gospel reading, the Beatitudes, where Jesus climbs up a mountain and declares for all to hear, “Blessed are the poor in spirit, those who mourn, the meek, those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.”

God helps those who need God’s help. And in the kingdom of God, top priority is always given to the poor.

And notice...no there is no distinction made between the “deserving” and the “undeserving” poor. God helps because people need help. Jesus heals because people are sick; he saves because we humans are broken. God loves because God is rich in mercy and everlasting love. It’s never about anything we did or didn’t do. It’s all about God and who God is.

Which brings us to the second Biblical counterstatement to “God helps those who help themselves.” We *can’t* help ourselves!

At the ultimate level – the level of salvation, and love, and life, and death – everything that we have and everything that we do is utterly dependent upon the grace of God.

“For by grace you have been saved, through faith,” writes the author of Ephesians, “and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God – not the results of works, so that no one may boast.”

Y’all, this is, like, the *crux* of Reformed theology. Isn’t it? That we are saved by grace alone. That everything in our lives is absolutely dependent on the grace of God. That we are not in control, we cannot save or help ourselves. Go back to those early days of the Reformation, and listen to the Heidelberg Catechism, question #1 (getting old school here!):

Question: What is your only comfort in life and in death?

Answer: That I am not my own, but belong – body and soul, in life and in death – to my faithful Savior, Jesus Christ.”

We cannot help ourselves. But we don’t need to. Because our lives are entirely dependent on God’s grace. And God’s grace is sufficient for us.

So no, friends. God does *not* help those who help themselves. (Tell everyone you know!)

God helps those who need help. God helps the poor and the needy. God helps all of us. The broken, beloved people of God. God saves us, not because we are deserving, but because God loves us, and that's what love does.

So blessed are you, dear friends. For yours is the kingdom of heaven. Amen.