

Help Yourself! (Half Truths #2)

September 3, 2017

Luke 1:46-55, Psalm 40:1-5, 13-17

The First U.P. Church of Crafton Heights

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To hear this sermon as preached in worship, please visit

<https://castyournet.files.wordpress.com/2017/09/sermon09-03.mp3>

(please note that this recording begins, for reasons unclear to me, with about 20 seconds of silence)

I have a friend – a preaching colleague of mine, actually – who stood up in front of a huge crowd and told an amazingly powerful story. He shared a narrative that was filled with emotion and drama, and was a perfect illustration for the scriptural point he was trying to make. It had its intended effect, and at the end of his message, people were crying, signing up for profound commitments, and more. It was a *great* story.

We were chatting afterward, and his son – who had been mentioned in the story – cleared his throat and said, “Um, dad? That story you ended with? Can I say something?”

“Of course!” was his father’s quick reply.

“Well, it was a good story, only... well, it didn’t happen that way.” And the son went on to recount the incident as he remembered it. When he was finished, his father looked at him and said, “Hmph. So, it didn’t happen the way I said it did, huh?” His son shook his head. The father paused for a moment and said. “Hmph. Well, it should have.”

I’m sure that all of you have forgotten things that have happened. How many of us remember things that *didn’t* happen? Who *knows* something that isn’t true?



I have a question for you, but I *do not* want you to raise your hands. It is a trick question. How many of you remember reading the Bible verse that says, “God

helps those who help themselves?”

Now, how many of you *know* someone who believes that phrase is found in the Bible? *Everyone* needs to raise your hands now, because a recent survey indicated that an astounding 82% of Americans believe that “God helps those who help themselves” is in the Bible.

And you might smile to yourself and say, “Well, of course, if we’re talking about *all* Americans here. *Real believers* know better. And you’re right. Only 81% of people who identify themselves as “born again Christians” think that’s a verse from the Bible.¹

Four out of five people think that this phrase is scriptural! I’m here to tell you that you won’t find it in the Bible. If you look, you can find it in Ben Franklin’s *Poor Richard’s Almanac*. Ben probably borrowed it from *Aesop’s Fables*, wherein we find something very similar.

But... but... it just *sounds* so true, doesn’t it? It sounds really Bible-*ish*. You might be looking at me and saying, “Seriously, Dave, I swear I read something like that in the Bible...”

And you’re close. In his first letter to the Thessalonians, Paul writes, “If a man will not work, neither shall he eat.” That verse was used a couple of years ago by a member of Congress who was looking to cut food stamp benefits to hungry families. The context in Thessalonians, however, is more complex. There were people in that community who were so convinced of the imminent return of Jesus and the end of the world that they had stopped participating in the responsibilities of daily life. They quit their jobs, they stopped caring for their gardens, and more. After all, if Jesus is coming back on Tuesday, why bother going to work today? Let’s just enjoy this moment!

¹ Statistics from the Barna Research Group, quoted at <http://www.albertmohler.com/2016/01/20/the-scandal-of-biblical-illiteracy-its-our-problem-4/>

In fact, the larger context of Paul's letter is actually a rebuke to the people in Thessalonica to start acting *more* like Jesus would in terms of caring for each other and the world around them.

When someone says, "God helps those who help themselves," it's almost always from the perspective of one who is in a position of being *able* to help, but who chooses not to. You drive across the bridge and you see a panhandler. You turn on the news and are irritated by the fact that someone is using *your* tax dollars to pay for groceries or utilities. I find myself getting angry at those who are lazy, freeloading, good-for-nothings, and then I say, "After all, God helps those who help themselves..." It is a justification for me *not* to act, because in my refusal to help, I am being like God.

As such, then, "God helps those who help themselves" is a statement that is rooted in privilege. Think about all the aspects of your existence right now that are rooted in some sort of a privilege or advantage that you enjoy. Many of us are beneficiaries of what is called "white privilege". Among other things, I can walk through a Family Dollar without being shadowed, or pull over with absolute confidence when I'm stopped by the police in any municipality in the USA. I enjoy "male" privilege, and I see this when I'm visiting in a hospital room and the Dr. speaks directly to me about the patient's condition, rather than to the mother, wife, or daughter of the patient. I know that I am economically privileged, because if you told me this morning that the price of gasoline was going up a dollar a gallon because of hurricane Harvey, I'd still hop in the car and drive to visit my granddaughter this afternoon.

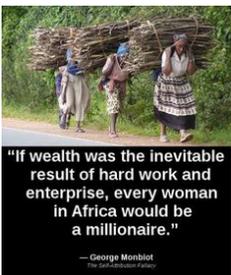
Can you read? Were you greeted by a friend today? Did you grow up in a community of faith? Did you wake up this morning in a residence that had both working electricity and running water? If any of those things are true, then you join me in having access

to privileges that much, if not most, of the world can only dream about. If we start to think about those things as something we have “earned” or “deserved”, we run the risk of becoming blind to the many gifts that we have received.

Can we please realize how rooted in privilege the phrase, “God helps those who help themselves” is? It’s ludicrous.

Who looks at those people in Texas, hanging onto rooftops, seeking shelter anywhere they can find it, and shrugs, “Well, that stinks. They better get crack-a-lackin, because, you know, God helps those who help themselves...”?

Who walks past a woman using a walker at the Giant Eagle who is struggling to reach that can on the top shelf and thinks, “Well, if you just tried a little harder, lady...”?



Journalist George Monbiot points out the fallacy of this line of thinking by saying simply, “If wealth was the inevitable result of hard work and enterprise, every woman in Africa would be a millionaire.”²

When we use that phrase, it sounds too much like a disavowal of the other. “You – you’re in a jam? Hey, help yourself. Get a job. Be more like me.” That kind of language is insulating, divisive, and cancerous.

I’m suggesting that we redeem some of that same language, but we do so that it might be an invitation rather than a dismissal.



Every person in this room has been, I hope, in a situation where there is some bounty – a feast, a garden, a craft table, a clothes closet – where the opportunity is extended: “Do you see this? Help yourself! This is for you. Take what you need, or want, or can use...”

Do you see what I mean? They are the same words – but

² “The Self-Attribution Fallacy”, <http://www.monbiot.com/2011/11/07/the-self-attribution-fallacy/>

instead of *help yourself* coming across as a selfish statement of isolation or derision, it conveys an invitation to participate in a deeper, more generous relationship.

When we say “help yourself” in this way, we are in fact behaving more like God. The scriptures all point to the glorious truth that God, in fact, helps those who *cannot* help themselves.



The Psalmist testifies that he was in a pit, lower than low, when God reached out to help. It was slippery, and every single place he tried to find a foothold, he wound up sinking deeper and deeper... And then, by the grace of God, he found a place to stand! He gives witness to the truth that we are poor and needy, and God is the deliverer.

When Mary discovers the identity of the Christ child within her, her spirit soars as she belts out the song we have come to call “The Magnificat”. “God lifts up the humble! God fills the hungry with good things!”

Every page of the Bible is filled with the affirmation that God does what God *can* do, but does not *have* to do. We learn over and over that it is in God’s nature to be giving, forgiving, filling, satisfying, and empowering to those who find themselves to be in need, or distress, or marginalized. The theological term for this attribute and behavior of God is “grace”.

Grace is God’s decision to meet us where we are and help us to get to where we need to be, or could be, or should be. In grace, God sets God’s self before us and says, “Help yourself. Dive in. This is who I am...”



And if that is true, then by implication we are called to be people who consider the generosity and graciousness of God in our lives and seek to share that with

others. And that means that there are strategies that we can employ in our own lives.

When you are in charge of the buffet, what do you do? Don't you set out what you hope will be more than enough of everything? You might reserve some of the things that you absolutely need for yourself, but by and large, you want to make sure that you're offering what is needed and appreciated, right? You don't offer the things that are likely to embarrass you – the burnt edges, the moldy fruit, or the sour milk. You offer as much as you can as well as you can.

What if we sought to do that, not just when it's our turn to host the thanksgiving meal, but every day? In some ways, that might turn our discipleship – and our lives – upside down.

For instance, in the area of personal finance, we often come to church thinking, "Well, what can I afford to donate today? What is the amount I should give? I don't want to cramp my style or be racked with guilt. What is the least I can do and still feel good about myself?"

What if we approached our lives from the other end: what do I need in order to be me, and how can I make the rest of it available for God's purposes? When I was a 17 year old high school student, I committed myself to doing my best to tithe any income I received. When we got married, I said, "Honey, the first 10% belongs to God..." And we did that. But then we figured out that, actually, all 100% belongs to God. And we didn't need 90% to live on. So for many years now, Sharon and I have been privileged to make more than 10% of our income available for the Lord's work.

It's the same when we come to think about the time that we have. You have been given an amazing gift of a life... how are you spending it? Are you looking for ways to share yourself freely and deeply as you seek to grow in your ability to serve and be in

relationship with others? Or are you bored and restless? You know, I've done a lot of funerals, and I've sat with a lot of folks who were dying. No one has ever said to me, "You know what, Dave? I wish I'd have had the chance to watch more pre-season football..." Nobody's ever said, "You know, my house was *spotless* while those kids were growing up, and they were proud of that, you betcha..." But so often, those are the things that seem so important in the moment. How do you anticipate investing the hours you've been given today, this week, and this year? Can you do so in ways that bring life and hope and joy?

Last week, when I introduced this series of messages, I said that phrases like "everything happens for a reason" or "God helps those who help themselves" are half-true, or true-ish.

The reality is that this phrase is anchored in something that is eternally true. It's just that the phrase "God helps those who help themselves" is, perhaps like this sermon, simply too long.

God helps.

That is true. It always has been, and always will be.

So this week, can we look at the world around us, and act like God? God helps, and so will we, to the extent that we are empowered and privileged to do so. Thanks be to God! Amen.