



Half Truths

Week 5: “God Helps Those Who Help Themselves”

Brian Mattson - 10/05/2025

When we started this series on Half Truths at the start of September, we talked about healthy ways to interpret scripture. The ancient words on the pages of our Bibles needed to be looked at again as our understanding of the natural world changed, and technological and societal advancements reshaped our lives. It's not heretical to dig a little deeper into those words. It's healthy.

I mentioned how churches in the late 19th century wrestled with the idea of indoor plumbing because of a few Old Testament commands. This story, which is humorous to us now, sparked a memory in Scott Sturm and he sent me an interesting article about another time when churches had to rethink their understandings and traditions. This time it was back in the 18th century and it all had to do with lightning.

For centuries, Catholics and Protestants understood that wind, rain, and storms were the product of evil spirits in the air. Early church fathers like St. Augustine believed this. Thomas Aquinas did too. Even up through the reformation. Churches did their best to ward off the damaging effects of the storms by saying prayers, consecrating the bells, and sprinkling holy water around. I'm sure the idea that the

effects of thunderstorms, most notably lightning, were caused by evil spirits because the church steeples were the most common victims. It was never the brothels or gambling houses around town. In the span of about 30 years in Germany, 400 church towers were damaged and 120 bellringers were killed in storms.

Things started to change when one of America's founding fathers, Ben Franklin, flew his kite in a storm. His experiment was aimed at understanding lightning and electricity better, and after the famous event, he developed the lightning rod. This simple device carried the current from the lightning to a grounding rod, safely conducting the electricity away from the high points of buildings.

To some, this was tantamount to playing God. *How dare mankind dabble in manipulation of the spiritual realm?* A few years after the proliferation of lightning rods in New England, there were several earthquakes in the area. Rev. Thomas Prince blamed Ben Franklin's lightning rods for the tremors, indicating that the lightning passing to the ground was causing the earth to quake. In one sermon, he warned the congregation that, "There is no getting out of the mighty hand of God."

Of course, we have a different understanding of our natural world today, and thanks to Ben Franklin and others, the common destruction of church steeples around America and Europe ceased to be an issue. But I do have a bone to pick with Ben Franklin. He helped coin our half truth for today: God helps those who help themselves. A similar sentiment was common for millenia, dating all the way back to Aesop's Fables in the 5th century BC. Franklin published his version in the famous Poor Richard's Almanac in 1736. The easy-to-remember and seemingly innocent phrase became part of our common language.

Contrary to popular belief, this phrase isn't in the Bible. Not even in Proverbs. I will concede that the statement makes sense, though, and if you take out the God-language, it sounds more like *good things come to those who work for them*. So in that sense, I believe there is truth to be found in the phrase. As Adam Hamilton relates in his book, when he says a mealtime prayer, food doesn't magically appear on his plate. He worked to receive a paycheck to buy the groceries and prepare the food. We are supposed to work and provide for ourselves. We can pray and pray for food or jobs, but we have to do some work in the process. We pray *and* we work.

Paul had similar words for the early church at Thessalonica. If you read Paul's letters, you get the feeling that he thought Jesus was coming back very soon. Any minute. It's very clear in his first letter to the Thessalonians. And apparently some of these early converts quit their jobs and began spending carelessly. Well, word got to Paul and his second letter to the church read a little differently.

When we were with you, we gave you this command: anyone unwilling to work should not eat. For we hear that some of you are living irresponsibly, mere busybodies, not doing any work. Now such persons we command and exhort in the Lord Jesus Christ to do their work quietly and to earn their own living.

- 2 Thessalonians 3:10-12

We pray *and* we work. *Ora et labora* is the phrase some monks use. This second letter to the Thessalonians encourages them to pray and work. Hamilton writes:

He did not teach that trusting Jesus means you pray and then God takes care of everything. Our faith is meant to move us to action even as we trust in God. We pray, and we work.
- Adam Hamilton

I believe that as we pray and seek the guidance of the Holy Spirit, we become more who God believes we can be. We are more likely to see with wider eyes and care with kinder hearts. Our prayers lead us into work that is holy and good and meaningful. We are the very real instruments doing the work that changes the world. It's not work for the sake of work. It's work for the sake of the world.

On the flipside, there are a couple ways this half truth does real damage. The first is that we assume if we work hard we will get everything we want, and it will make us happy and successful. And the second way is that we assume people in need around us *aren't* working hard.

Let's address that first incorrect assumption. There are certain preachers out there who think today's half truth—*God helps those who help themselves*—means you should send money into their televangelism programs. Many of them have boiled down God's covenantal promises of scripture as a way to attain health and wealth. This is known as prosperity theology or the prosperity gospel. It's a hollow reading of scripture that reduces the words on the pages to a recipe for success.

They make promises that God will provide good health and financial success if you send in "seed-faith donations" that God will grow and give back. This is a materialistic view of the Christian life. But I don't believe that's how God works. We pray and we work. And sometimes

we are the answer to someone's prayer. Other times, it's the people around us who are the answers to our own prayers. But regardless, I believe that God is the provider and instigator of those answers. And it's most definitely not a promise that if you have faith, you will be rich or healthy or both. That's not how Jesus's story ended.

There is a shred of truth to the contorted view of the prosperity gospel. I heard author Kate Bowler say this about the prosperity gospel. She said, **"My only true prosperity gospel is that, somehow, when you have less, you will in the very weirdest way have more only because God is there."** To me, that's the boiled down, reductionist view of God's promise—God will always be there with us and for us.

Now for the second way this phrase causes harm. Like all of us, I too get jaded and frustrated. I, too, have thoughts when I see the homeless or panhandlers at intersections like, *why don't they get a job?* which is silly because I know the struggles people in these situations face. Having worked downtown now for more than a decade, I know how many boxes you have to check and phone calls to make to be processed through our social services sector. Even still, the phrase *God helps those who help themselves* passes through my mind. We hear that phrase as permission to disregard the plight of our neighbors. But in the cycles of addiction, generational poverty, or homelessness, some truly cannot help themselves. They need other people.

Just this week, I helped someone who recently got out of jail. This person was in a transitional housing facility, but had no identification or money. To qualify for food assistance, he needed an ID. I told him the church would help him out with that at the DMV. We headed over and after waiting in line, he realized he needed a different form signed by the manager of his housing facility. This meant he had to figure out how

to get all the way to the north side of town with no vehicle and then get back downtown. He hoped to accomplish that in three hours before the DMV closed. He didn't make it.

He showed back up at the church a few days later with the correct form and we headed back to get the ID. On behalf of you all, I was able to pay the \$24 for the ID and got him a Walmart gift card for some groceries before his SNAP benefits took effect. This was not the first time I'd seen the hurdles people have to jump to access governmental assistance. It's a tangled web of forms and offices that causes a lot of people to just give up. God calls us to help those who can't help themselves.

That doesn't mean we do everything for everyone. We can't. But we can do some of the things. And there is still debate about the most effective ways to help people because our goal is to create independence, not dependence.

Showing compassion and mercy, especially to the poor and destitute, is a repeated theme in scripture. The Old Testament command for farmers to leave parts of their fields unharvested so those who don't have enough can collect food for their own tables. In the book of James, we read, **"Religion that is pure and undefiled before God the Father is this: to care for orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself unstained by the world."**

Jesus reminds us that our compassion to those experiencing need is a testament to our faith. He remarked in the parable of the sheep and the goats that "whatever you did to the least of these, you did to me."

Now, I don't expect you all to stop at every intersection or intervene in the lives of each homeless person you encounter. I do hope that your compassion for the poor, the widows, and orphans invites you to help

where you can; to give when you can. I'm so thankful for the ways you all have supported McGregor Elementary, Rare Breed, the church's Benevolence Fund, and our operating budget. The generosity of this church is felt far beyond these walls, to the strangers who drop by regularly and the organizations who are doing more work than we could possibly do on our own. And this generosity, your generosity, is a reflection of God's grace.

These are our resources given willingly, unearned, with no expectation of anything in return. It is our response to God's gracious work in our lives. We, too, did not earn the love of God, or gain the opportunity to breathe the air of this sacred life. God's mercy and compassion are unending and never-failing. We can simply ask for it and accept it. I love what Adam Hamilton says.

There are times when we can help ourselves, and we should. God is counting on us to do the best we can—to pray and to work. There are times when people cannot make it on their own, and God prompts us to help. We become the hands of God. We become God's answer to someone else's prayer, God's instruments of grace.

- Adam Hamilton

And there are times when it's not us who are the instruments of grace for other people, but other people for us. There will be moments, if you haven't had them already, when the only thing you could call out for was God's help. In those times of emptiness, God is still there. I believe in the good that God is working in us, and through us, and through other people. God doesn't leave when things get tough. God provides for us when we can't provide for ourselves. It is clear to me when I see the ways this community rallies around others. Because sometimes we

are the answer to someone's prayers, someone's cries to God. Other times, it's the people around us who are the answers to our own prayers. But regardless, I believe that God is the provider and instigator of those answers. God's grace is a wonderful, inexplainable, beautiful thing.

This morning we celebrate how God provides at the Lord's Supper. There is bread and juice. These are the things that not only nourish and sustain us, but give us the power to go into the world and be witnesses of God's grace to the people around us.