

January 13, 2019

That's Not in the Bible: God Helps Those Who Help Themselves

Rev. Dr. John Ross

Thessalonians 3:6-13

As we turn to our time to hear scripture and receive the message, I invite you to take out your weekly Inspire. Again, on the back side of that we've provided a little spot where you can make some notes, things you might want to remember from this hour. If you're worshipping at home, just take out a piece of paper, maybe, because we hope and pray that maybe you will hear something in this hour that you want to remember in the hours, days and weeks to come. That's our expectation. If that's helpful to you, then that's good news.

Speaking of something you might like to write down, here's a question for you. How would you live if you knew Jesus was coming back tomorrow and would take care of all your needs? How would you live your life? What would you do if you knew Jesus was returning tomorrow and would take care of all your needs – everything that you need to sustain your life? This is what Paul was dealing with in his letter to a church that he started in a place called Thessalonica or Thessaloniki. Thessaloniki is a port town, a harbor town, in what is today known as Greece. I'll bet by a show of hands that some of you have been there? Some of you traveled with this church or other churches to Thessalonica. Well, it was an important place then, and it still is in different ways today. Paul went there at least twice, and it was on his second trip that he started this church, and he was teaching them about what it means to trust God, but some of the people were taking it a little too far. They were trusting God so much that they just gave up on doing work, doing the things necessary to provide for themselves. So, I want you to listen as Lindy reads Paul's response when he found out that the people in Thessalonica had just stopped working because Jesus was coming back soon.

(Lindy reads Thessalonians 3:6-13.)

So, we're starting a new year by giving careful consideration to four phrases that are often spoken with Biblical authority. There's just one problem. None of these four phrases can be found in the Bible. Last week, Danielle kicked us off with a common phrase: God won't give you more than you can handle. Next week, Lindy's going to deal with the phrase: This too shall pass, and Rustin's going to wrap us up at the end of the month with a phrase that is all too familiar to us: Hate the sin, love the sinner. Now, today, we turn to: God helps those who help themselves. Before I get into the details of that, let me remind you that we just celebrated Christmas, and in that, it's the word made flesh. So words really matter. Rustin helped us on the last Sunday of last year when we did One Word Sunday to remember how important it is to enliven the words of our lives and that our words create worlds. It's important to be thoughtful and careful, and it's also important to remember that we may well be the only Bible that some people ever read. So, we're being careful because words matter. Now, the fact that some of these sermons might touch the very core of your faith because of the content that they lead us to speaks to this importance, but it's important, also, because some of these words can actually hurt people. They can actually do damage. They are capable of pushing people away from God rather than inviting them into God's presence. Some of these words have the great risk of over simplifying very

deep and complex issues, and, most dangerous of all, some of these words are used to justify biases and prejudices that don't serve the world.

Now, these are just four of many other phrases. The common denominator of these four is that they're just not actually in the Bible even though people think that they are. They are all partly true in some regard, but they're maybe half-truths, and sometimes we employ them as little white lies to help somebody in a moment of need. We do well to be careful with what we ascribe to scripture because we believe that God is still speaking, and we also see in the ministry of Jesus that he would often say, "You have heard it said." That was what he meant as it relate to scripture. "You have heard from scripture." "You have heard it said, but now I tell you." Jesus was constantly interacting with scripture and even at times correcting it.

Now, also along the way of this month, it's super important for us to remember that piety is never a replacement for pastoral sensitivity. Do you understand what I mean? There are times and places where theological correction is appropriate and even necessary, and there are times when, in the cause of being correct, we inflict pain and damage relationships. So let us be proactive and intentional in this season to reflect faithfully at least on these four so that our words can match our convictions in the moments when we need them most, from the Sunday school classroom to a funeral home, from the locker room to the sanctuary. Words matter.

So, what's next? God helps those who help themselves. Let's get a little help. Let's pray. Will you bow with me? Loving and gracious God, put us in this story. Help us to find ourselves in this word today, that you would use the time beyond this hour to remake us from within. Amen.

So, God helps those who help themselves. What do you think? True or False? Now, I've also told you, one hundred percent sure it's not in the Bible. Okay? So we can set that aside. God helps those who helps themselves. There's some evidence that the phrase originated in Greek Mythology, maybe around the fifth century before Christ. You might even be familiar with one of Aesop's Fables that concludes with the words "the Gods help them that help themselves." True or False? Poor Richard's Almanac in 1757 tells us that it was Ben Franklin who made these words famous, along with a couple of other clever one-liners, like, "Cleanliness is next to Godliness." That's Luke 12 ... No that's not right. That's not in the Bible either. That's not in there either. Our very own Brian Jones, or as I like to refer to him as "Mr." Danielle Jones, Brian reminded me just last week that according to the Barnet Group, a little research group, eight out of ten Americans believe that this phrase is from the Bible, but it's not. God helps those who help themselves. I ask again, True or False?

Now, as with all these sayings that we are dealing with in this series, the fact that they are not in the Bible doesn't necessarily mean that there's not some measure of truth to them, but I'm going to suggest that it's only partial truth at best, and when it comes to "God helps those who help themselves" being true or false, I say yes – both. Partly true, but in ways that really matter in the world, I'm going to submit to you that this is mostly false. Let me tell you what I mean by that. Partly true, mostly false. God helps those who help themselves. The phrase on the surface seems harmless enough, and in a quick glance, It seems to be true, that we all have to do our part in the kingdom of God, helping

ourselves - Not like reaching into the cookie jar. That's not the helping of ourselves I'm talking about. – but helping ourselves be being part of the community.

This is what Paul was referring to in his letter to Thessalonica. For him it was about food. You heard what Lindy read. They couldn't have food if they didn't earn it or didn't pay for it. They had to help. He was talking about sustenance, the very fabric, the very things of our lives that help us live, and he was saying to them, "You can't just be loafing around. You have to work. You gotta help. You gotta do your part." There's a Latin phrase that comes out of the Benedictine tradition that might help us. I think I first encountered this phrase during a retreat up in Colledgeville at St. John's. The Latin phrase is "Ora et Labora." Pray and work. Ora et Labora. Pray and Work is what Paul was trying to impress upon the church in Thessalonica. To trust God isn't to just wait around for God to just provide the needs of life, the basic sustenance of food and other things. That's not what it looks like to trust God. Our faith in God compels us to action. We pray and we work. God helps those who help themselves. Time and again, we see powerful ways in which God works through people. God helps by sending others to offer a hand up.

I immediately think about my wife, Sheila, who works for an organization called Opportunity International. Wayzata Community Church has partnered with them as a mission partner for more than a decade. She formally went to work with them a few months ago. Opportunity International has the singular vision of eradicating global poverty in our life time. The total extermination of extreme poverty in our life time is their goal. Their motto is built on providing tiny little loans to hard-working entrepreneurs in developing countries. It's not just a small outfit. They work with nine million clients. They are truly having an impact on global poverty. The place we partner with them in Nicaragua is taking it to a whole new level by working on community economic development, taking that same model and applying it to a region of that country. It's amazing. With a 95 percent payment rate, millions of people are being lifted up out of poverty, with just a small loan, people ready to work, ready to help themselves. Ora et labora. Pray and work. God helps those who help themselves.

So, what's the big deal? Other than the fact that it's not in the Bible, what's so problematic with this phrase or this saying? What about it can make it hurtful or half true? The falsity of this phrase comes always from the same thing, and that is the truth that not everyone can help themselves. That's it. That's when and where this phrase falls apart. Not everyone CAN help themselves, and it's in that moment that what they need from us more than our judgement is our help. They need our love. You see, many times this phrase is simply used to imply that someone is lazy, that they're slothful or indifferent in their life, that they're unwilling to do their part. Even if they have a certain skill, they lack the will. They don't want to help. There is in that moment an unmistakable message of judgement and an expression of uncaring, and whether it's by intentional malice or by sheer ignorance, what is really being said is that God ONLY helps those who help themselves. In these moments this phrase is used as a way of avoiding our obligation as followers of Christ, our obligation to help other people. Period. Hard stop. To love our neighbor. Period. Hard stop. To serve the poor, the needy, the orphan, the widow. Period. Hard stop. That's our obligation. Sounds like what the Lord requires of us, but too often a phrase like this gives an easy out.

You know, it was with a single phrase that Jesus turned us loose on our mission – to love God with our whole heart, mind, soul and strength and to love our neighbor as ourselves. That’s just a single phrase, but the whole of the Bible overwhelmingly tells us in very real ways that God helps those who cannot help themselves, and it’s always through the love of another person. And let me be clear in this moment that there are many times in which we are incapable of helping ourselves, many ways in which our need for God’s help has nothing to do with food or finances, the sustenance of our lives. Those times when our spirit has sunk into despair, when we’re in the grip of anxiety and depression or addiction. These realities are impervious to, and know nothing of, investment portfolios, public prominence or any other source of power in our lives. Every single one of us is susceptible to becoming helpless in one form or another, and the last thing we need to hear in that moment is that God helps those who help themselves.

I was reminded this past week by an old friend that the duty of privilege is absolute integrity. Get that. That’s refrigerator worthy. Let me say it again. The duty of privilege is absolute integrity. Let me unpack that. Let me be clear. That word privilege is often loaded. The duty of privilege is absolute integrity. Privilege comes in many forms. It’s not just financial and economic. Privilege comes in good health and well-being. Privilege comes in just the ability to have a positive attitude and an optimistic attitude on the world. That’s privilege. Integrity. Integrity, you know, aside from always being the same person no matter who’s looking – right? Aside and beyond that level of integrity, integrity is living with honesty, and uprightness and generosity, the very things that we talk about as we enter into this fellowship – grace, growth and generosity. The duty of privilege is absolute integrity.

For me, this is the kind of phrase, that when lived daily really can change lives and can change the world because, in my estimation, the idea that the duty of privilege is absolute integrity skips over the whole judgmental, uncaring of whether or not someone can help themselves, and it turns the question around onto ourselves and holds a mirror up to ourselves and asks two questions. It asks, “What resources do I have that I can share with the world?” and “What do I lack for which I need to ask for help?” Put those in the personal. What resources do you have that you can share with the world? Because the duty of your privilege is absolute integrity. And, at the same time, what do you lack for which you need to ask for help? Friends, this is how we engage our world because we are, in any given moment, helping or helpless, and we have both in the room right now – those that are helping and those that are helpless, helping the world as Jesus calls us to, out of our privilege living with absolute integrity, or helpless, at a point where we lack what we need and must cry out for help, because God helps those who help themselves is both true and false. When we are able, and we can help ourselves, we should. Ora et Labora. Pray and work. When we become aware of another who cannot help themselves, can’t make it on their own, that’s the moment of our call to become God’s hands and feet in the world, an answer to prayer.

But, here’s what I want you to remember more than anything else today. When you, yourself, arrive in a helpless moment, when you can no longer help yourself, when you are out of strength, when you are out of options, when you are out of gas, when you don’t think you deserve help because maybe you put yourself in this position in the first place, that’s when grace kicks in. That’s when grace takes over. Grace is that unearned, that undeserved handout of God’s love. That’s the moment we remember the words and recite the words of the psalmist. “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.” That’s the moment we remember the words from that same guy, Paul, who wrote those words to Thessalonica, also wrote words to Rome, where he said, “Nothing can separate us from God’s love.” Nothing. Period. Hard Stop. Nothing that’s happened to you in your privilege or your pain can separate you from God’s love, and nothing that you’ve done, because God loves you more than you can ever mess up. Period. Hard Stop. Nothing in all creation can separate us from God’s love in Christ Jesus.

Let us pray. We give thanks to you, O God, for help in all circumstances, for the strength you give us when we reach the end of our rope and the courage you provide when we see another hanging by a thread. Thank you, O Divine Master, that in your loving economy, there is both a time for a hand up and a hand out. Grant us now the wisdom to know the difference. Amen.