GOD HELPS THEM WHO HELP THEMSELVES?
John 15:5

“God helps them who help themselves.” Folks on that video aren’t the only ones who aren’t sure where that well-worn phrase comes from. During the heated jobs bill debate in November of 2011, President Obama gave a speech in which he said that while Congress ignored his jobs bill the day before, they did affirm the national motto, “In God we trust.” Said the president, “That’s not putting people back to work. I trust in God, but God wants to see us help ourselves by putting people back to work.”

As a follow-up to his speech, press secretary Jay Carney was asked by a reporter, “Isn’t it a bit much to bring God into the jobs debate?”

Carney replied, “Well, I believe the phrase from the Bible is, ‘The Lord helps those who help themselves.’ And I think the point the President is making is that we should—we have it within our capacity to do the things to help the American people.”

After some immediate blowback, the White House noted later in the transcript, “‘The Lord helps those who help themselves’ is a ‘common phrase’ and does not appear in the Bible.”

It doesn’t? “God helps them who help themselves” is one of those phantom phrases that sounds enough like a Bible verse that many assume that’s exactly where it comes from.

But it doesn’t come from the Bible. Nor do a number of other phrases that sound like Bible—phrases like …

• Cleanliness is next to godliness.
• Money is the root of all evil.
• God will never give you more than you can handle.

In an effort to increase Bible literacy, we’re going to spend a few Sundays thinking together about some of these well-known phrases, asking the question: “Is that really in the Bible?”

Today we ask that question of the phrase “God helps them who help themselves.” Is that really in Bible?

Some of us live like it is. We strain at the Christian life as if it were a competition for God’s love, as if we have to do an Iron Man—swim 2 miles, bike a 100, and run 26.2 to earn a thumbs-up from God. Some of us live as if God is the Wizard of Oz on steroids, demanding that we bring Him some witch’s broom to gain access. Jump through these hoops. Meet these goals. Don’t sin, but if you stumble, do five acts of penance to get back on God’s good side. It’s not been long ago Verizon ran a series of ads about dropped calls with some dude talking on his cell phone, “Do you hear me now?” I can’t tell you how many Christians I’ve counseled across the decades that spend their lives, straining to do their best, and asking God after every sin committed, every fault repaired, every good deed done, and every victory won, “Do you love me now?”

And most of these are not people on the street; they are people in the church house. Somewhere along the line they got the message that “God helps them who help themselves.” So they are doing everything they can to help themselves, hoping, praying, that God will take note of their herculean efforts to impress Him. “God helps them who help themselves.” They live like that phrase comes from the Bible.

But that’s not where it comes from. While it’s hard to pin down the origin of the phrase, it does show up in one of Aesop’s fables. Aesop was an ancient Greek storyteller who lived in the 6th century B.C. In one of his stories, Hercules and the Waggoner, a man’s wagon gets stuck in a muddy road, and he prays for Hercules, a Greek god known for his strength, to help. Hercules appeared and said, "Get up and put your shoulder to the wheel." The moral of the story? You guessed it: "The gods help them that help themselves." This is not the only place this proverb shows up in ancient literature.

There’s an Arab proverb in which the same idea is expressed. One day Mohammed noticed a Bedouin leaving his camel without tying it. He asked the Bedouin, "Why don’t you tie down your camel?" The Bedouin answered, "I placed my trust in Allah." At that, Mohammed said, "Place your trust in Allah, and tie your camel." See the connection?

2http://www.bartleby.com/17/1/61.html
And in our culture, “God helps them who help themselves” showed up as a proverbial saying in a 1736 edition of Benjamin Franklin’s Poor Richard’s Almanack.

So the saying has history. It shows up in a lot of places across the centuries. But one place it never shows up is in the Bible. It’s not in Proverbs. It’s not in the Psalms. It’s not in Ephesians. It’s not even in the Book of Concordance.

I

So let’s look at what is in the Bible in regard to this saying. I invite you to open your Bible to John 15:1-6. John is fond of quoting Jesus’ great “I am” statements: I am the bread of life; I am the good shepherd. I am the resurrection and the life. I am the way, the truth, and the life. There are others. Part of John’s agenda in his gospel is to prove Jesus is God. What better way for John to communicate that than to share the many ways Jesus took God’s Exodus name, “I am,” (Ex. 3:14) and put that name tag on His own shirt. “I am,” said Jesus. One of those “I am” statements is in our text. Hear the word of the Lord … (read the text).

Simple enough, right? Jesus is the vine; we are branches. Anybody who knows anything about basic botany knows that a branch can’t live apart from the vine. Cut a branch from a vine or a limb from a tree and no sooner are they severed than they begin to die. Leaves get dry and crusty and brown. Crush a fresh leaf in your hand and it will unfold into its normal shape. Crush a leaf in your hand that’s been lying on the ground for a few days, and it will crumble into a hundred pieces. And it’s not just leaves that die apart from the tree; branches do too. Once-flexible branches grow brittle. What once bent soon snaps. That’s why if you want to start a campfire, you don’t strip fresh branches, you look for dry ones already severed from the tree. You look for dead ones. A branch can’t live apart from the vine. It’s fully dependent on the vine for its beauty and for its life.

Jesus is the vine; we are the branches. Get it? We are fully dependent on Him. We are helpless apart from Him. We can’t live without Him. Apart from Him we grow brittle and die, not good for much more than kindling for a fire. How dependent are believers on Jesus? The end of v. 5 tells the story: “apart from me you can do nothing.”
Nothing? Absolutely nothing? That can’t be right, preacher. I know people who don’t know Jesus, and they seem to make out okay. They dress themselves and brush their teeth. One set a sales record for his company. Another made an A on the math test. Still another scored the winning touchdown on Friday night. And I know this lost couple whose marriage seems happier than my own. “Apart from me you can do nothing.” That stuff’s not “nothing,” you know.

No, it’s not nothing. But it’s not unassisted either. It’s not fully “apart” from Jesus. Even people outside of Christ, people who don’t believe in Him at all, still live under His common grace. Their health to do the things they do is a gift from God. The talents they employ—gifts from God. The people in their lives who help them be what they are—also gifts from God. The very beat of their heart and the air they breathe—all gifts of God. Paul declares of Christ in his letter to the Colossians:

For by him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities—all things were created through him and for him. And he is before all things, and in him all things hold together (1:16-17).

Jesus is the glue that holds the universe together, the glue that holds your world and your life together whether you realize it or not. You are completely dependent on Him for your very existence, not to mention the multitude of blessings that fill your life. Ann Voskamp has written a popular book entitled One Thousand Gifts: A Dare to Live Fully Right Where You Are. One Thousand Gifts—I think if we took our time we could count way more than that. Said Jesus, “Apart from me you can do nothing.”

While that goes for us all, Jesus was specifically talking with His disciples here. And even though we listen in to this conversation a couple of thousand years later, He’s talking to us. And He’s reminding us that know and love and follow Jesus that apart from Him we can do nothing—nothing that lasts, nothing that matters for eternity, nothing that could be done anywhere near as well without Jesus as with Him.

So the phrase is, “God helps them who help themselves.” Nice phrase. Has a clever ring to it. But it’s not in the Bible. And Jesus words in John 15
aren’t the only place that contradicts this old saying. It goes way back before Jesus said a thing.

- Listen to the prophet Jeremiah: “Thus says the Lord: ‘Cursed is the man who trusts in man and makes flesh his strength, whose heart turns away from the Lord’” (17:5).

- And listen to the Bible wisdom of Proverbs 28:26 — “Whoever trusts in his own mind is a fool ….”

And the rest of the New Testament echoes Jesus declaration in John 15. Paul writes in Romans 5:6, “For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly.” That word “weak” can also be translated “powerless” (NIV) and even “helpless” (NAS).

II

Certainly, when it comes to our salvation, we are absolutely helpless to make that happen on our own. It took the death of Christ for our sins to make that happen in us. There is no way you and I can save ourselves—no way. We can’t buy it. We can’t earn it. We can’t be moral enough or do enough good deeds. Our sin is too serious. The best good works we could muster can never be good enough. The Bible is clear on that:

- “For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (Rom. 3:23).

- “And all our righteous deeds are like filthy rags” (Isa. 64:6).

- “For by grace are you saved through faith, and that not of yourselves. It is the gift of God, not of works lest anyone should boast. For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works God has prepared in advance for us to do” (Eph. 2:8-10).

This is why you don’t find the Bible on the self-help shelf in the bookstore. The Bible’s into God-help, not self-help. The Bible’s theme is grace—God’s grace, amazing grace, gospel grace. As Tim Keller likes to put it, here’s the essence of the gospel: “you are more sinful than you ever dared believe; you are more loved than you ever dared hope.” That is the gospel; that is grace. And don’t cheapen God’s grace by thinking of it as some sort of “God
helps them who help themselves” divine assistance. Grace is not divine assistance; grace is a one-sided divine rescue. And we need rescue because we are “helpless” to rescue ourselves. Our sin is too great.

John Piper puts it this way:

I have heard it said, “God didn’t die for frogs. So he was responding to our value as humans.” This turns grace on its head. We are worse than frogs. They have not sinned. They have not rebelled and treated God with the contempt of being inconsequential in their lives. God did not have to die for frogs. They aren’t bad enough. We are. Our debt is so great, only a divine sacrifice could pay it.

That sacrifice is God’s grace toward us and for us. Jesus died for our sins. Jesus rose from the dead. And it’s only by that act of grace, only by receiving this gift of grace, that we are saved. If we could help ourselves to salvation, Christ’s death on the cross was unnecessary and the single greatest act of cruelty in history.

III

And yet even after we are saved we still need Christ’s help to live the Christian life. When God saves us, He never says, “Okay, here’s your ticket to heaven. See you when you get here. Until then, just do the best you can.” No. Grace comes into play just as much in the Christian life as it does in our initial salvation. As we heard in the Ephesians text, the good works we do in life, God prepares in advance for us to do. God’s involved in it. Paul notes a kind of partnership between God and us in living the Christian life. In Philippians 2:12-13 he writes: “Work out your own salvation in fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure.” Get it? We can only work out what God is working in—day by day, week by week, year by year for a lifetime.

That’s why Christians who need a job don’t just pray for a job then watch daytime television, waiting for the phone to ring. Nope. They hit the pavement, they get online, they look for work while waiting on God to open doors.

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4John Piper, Fifty Reasons Why Jesus Came to Die (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2006), 29.
That’s why when Christians are sick and don’t get better, they go see a doc. They pray for health and they take their medicine.

This is the way God works with His people. God didn’t drop the ark out of heaven, Noah built it. God planted the stone in Goliath’s forehead, but David slung it. God planted churches all over the Roman Empire, but it’s no coincidence that God planted those churches in cities which Paul and his friends visited.

The Christian life is a kind of partnership with God and us. It’s not an equal partnership; God is the senior partner the one with the power. But God invites us to be co-laborers with Him. We can only work out what God is working in, but we work and we serve and we takes steps of faith as we live this life. I suspect you’ve heard the poem “Footprints in the Sand”—how the writer, walking with Jesus, always noticed two sets of footprints in the sand until he had hard times. Then, he only noticed one set of footprints. “Yes,” said Jesus, “because that’s when I was carrying you.” Good stuff. That poem’s got a lot of mileage across the years. But let me tell you about a playoff of that poem, only there was just one set of prints, and the prints were “large and round and neat” and “too big for feet.” The Lord explains in somber tones, that these prints were from a different part of the anatomy because this particular Christian wouldn’t get off his hind end to take any steps of faith, so God had to drag him along—rump prints in the sand. As Dallas Willard put it, “Grace is not opposed to effort; it’s opposed to earning.”

God saves us without any help from you and me. We can’t earn it. We simply receive His gift. Then in gratitude we takes steps of faith and service, steps directed and empowered by God as we live the Christian life. We co-labor with God. There’s some effort involved. But it’s not our efforts alone; God’s grace is at work here too. So even the good we do in life is not solely of our own making; we couldn’t do that without God either.

IV

So the phrase “God helps them who help themselves” just doesn’t cut it. By the time the Bible gets through stripping it down, that poor phrase is turning 10 shades of red and reaching for a robe to cover itself. There’s a grain of truth in it, about the size of a mustard seed. But as Proverbs points
out, you’re a fool to build a life on it. The good news is that God helps those who can’t help themselves. The good news is the grace of God at work in our lives.

- The grace that spares us from our little self-salvation projects that leave us frustrated and worn-out, wondering all the while if we’ve done enough to satisfy God, enough to earn His love and His pleasure.

- The grace that reminds us that God’s love for us is not based on our performance or how we stack up against the performance of others. God loves us as we are.

- The grace that keeps us humble and grateful and dependent on God. Grace keeps us from posturing like the flea who needed to get a mile down the path. On his own it would take him forever. Happily an elephant lumbered by. “I’ll hitch a ride on the elephant’s back,” said the flea. And a mile later, as the flea looked back down that dry old trail, he said to the elephant, “My, what a dust storm we’ve stirred up!” We? Yeah, right. Knowing we ride on the back of God’s expansive grace keeps us humble, grateful, and dependent.

  This is good news. This is gospel. And it’s rooted not in what we can do for ourselves but in what God does for us, in us, and through us by His grace. Frederick Buechner says it better than I can:

  Grace is something you can never get but can only be given. There’s no way to earn it or deserve it or bring it about any more than you can deserve the taste of raspberries and cream or earn good looks or bring about your own birth.

  A good sleep is grace and so are good dreams. Most tears are grace. The smell of rain is grace. Somebody loving you is grace. Loving somebody is grace. …

  A crucial eccentricity of the Christian faith is the assertion that people are saved by grace. There’s nothing you have to do. There’s nothing you have to do. There’s nothing you have to do.

  The grace of God means something like: “Here is your life. You might never have been, but you are, because the party wouldn’t have been complete without you. Here is the world. Beautiful and terrible
things will happen. Don’t be afraid. I am with you. Nothing can ever separate us. ... I love you.”

There’s only one catch. Like any other gift, the gift of grace can be yours only if you’ll reach out and take it.

Maybe being able to reach out and take it is a gift too.⁵

It is a gift indeed. Jesus says it’s a gift: “I am the vine; you are the branches. Whoever abides in me and I in him bears much fruit, for apart from me, you can do nothing.”

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⁵Frederick Buechner, *Beyond Words* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 2004), 139.