

**“All Things New”
Revelation 21:1-6**

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Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. And I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying,

*‘See, the home of God is among mortals.
He will dwell with them;
they will be his peoples,
and God himself will be with them;
he will wipe every tear from their eyes.
Death will be no more;
mourning and crying and pain will be no more,
for the first things have passed away.’*

And the one who was seated on the throne said, ‘See, I am making all things new.’ Also he said, ‘Write this, for these words are trustworthy and true.’ Then he said to me, ‘It is done! I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end. To the thirsty I will give water as a gift from the spring of the water of life.’

I’d like to begin this morning by sharing something with you, and I hope that, as I share it, *it makes your skin crawl*. Ok? Get ready. It’s a piece I found online a couple of weeks ago, and at first glance it looks like a thousand other helpful articles about faith and life. But beyond the first glance...? Think “fingernails on a chalkboard”—that’s what I *want* you to hear when I read this to you. I want you to have *an allergic reaction* to the words I am about to share.

Are you ready? Here it is. The title of the article is “9 Self-Improvement Lessons Anyone Can Learn from the Bible.” Now for a moment, I simply want the title of that article to sit with you. “9 Self-Improvement Lessons Anyone Can Learn from the Bible.” In your mind’s eye, give it a first glance, and now a second. Is your skin crawling yet? Nails starting to screech down the chalkboard? Maybe not—maybe you have yet to feel a case of the theological heebie jeebies coming on, or maybe your biblical Spidey sense is telling you that there is something inherently wrong with the idea of “9 Self-Improvement Lessons Anyone Can Learn from the Bible.”

Or maybe you’re just curious to hear what they could possibly be, these biblical self-improvement lessons. Well, I won’t make you wait any longer. Here they are in all their self-improving glory:

- 1. Find your mentors*
- 2. Develop positive thinking*
- 3. Harness the power of affirmations (Good job if you thought of that one already!)*
- 4. Take care of your body*
- 5. Journal for your mental and emotional health*
- 6. Simplify your life*
- 7. Live your life with passion*

8. *Persevere and work towards your goals*

And the 9th self-improvement lesson anyone can learn from the Bible is...

9. *Develop your spirituality*

Did it work? Is your skin crawling? Do you feel a case of bad theology cooties coming on? If the answer is “no,” let me just say that it’s ok. After all, there’s nothing wrong with *any* of the nine things on that list. Finding mentors, developing positive thinking, harnessing the power of affirmations, taking care of your body... who could argue that these are not good things? In fact, they’re *great things!*

Journal for your mental and emotional health—yes, I should do that more. Simplify your life—yes, I should *definitely do that more*. Live your life with passion—shouldn’t we *all live our lives with passion?* Persevere and work toward your goals—seems kind of obvious, but yes, we should all be persevering and working toward our goals! And then the last one—develop your spirituality—well, why not?

So by now you may be thinking, “Ok, Ben, what’s all this fuss about? Why should our skin crawl with this list of nine perfectly sensible pieces of advice?” Let me take a moment to remind you that we are living in an *age of self-improvement*. We do know this, right? Improving one’s self is a multi-billion dollar-a-year industry. Think of the books, seminars, infomercials, classes, diets, pills, weight management programs, work-out sessions, fitness coaches, life-coaches... the list goes on and on, and when you stop to think about it, everywhere we turn in this world, *an appeal is being made to our desire for self-improvement—a desire which, not surprisingly, is largely fed and driven by the self-improvement industry.* [1]

Ok, so now let me clarify that there’s nothing inherently wrong with self-improvement. If I feel sluggish or overweight, I should improve myself—I should work out more, maybe eat less... If your house is stuffed with things you don’t use or need, *you should improve yourself*—give it away/sell it/burn it (the stuff, I mean, not the house)... whatever you need to do. When we feel depressed, we should get help, when we lack direction, we should seek advice, when we’re over our heads in debt, we should sit down with someone... we should improve ourselves in these cases, BUT...

THE BIBLE IS *NOT* A SELF-HELP BOOK. There’s the *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People*, *The Power of Positive Thinking*, and *Unleash the Power Within*, BUT the Bible is *not* one more in an endless list of self-help books. *That’s* what’s wrong with the whole notion of “9 Self-Improvement Lessons Anyone Can Learn from the Bible.” *The Bible is not a self-help book.*

Though you know what? It might be fun, just for a second, to imagine that the Bible *were* a self-help book. What would that look like? How does the Bible truly teach us to improve ourselves?

Let me list just 9 for you:

1. *Go, sell everything you have and give it to the poor*
2. *If your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off*
3. *If someone strikes you, turn the other cheek*
4. *Pray for your enemies*

5. *Love your enemies*
6. *Bless those who persecute you*
7. *Deny yourself*
8. *Take up your cross*
9. *Follow Christ*

Try selling that on a Saturday afternoon infomercial. Or try marketing it as the next fad in self-improvement. What you may find is that the Bible is certainly *not* a self-improvement book, at least not in the way that we have come to know self-improvement in this day and age. If anything, the Bible is a “Help Us Please Because We Can’t Help Ourselves!” book.

I’ve shared with you before about the work of Father Greg Boyle. His book, *Tattoos on the Heart*, is the story of his work with gang members and former gang members in East Los Angeles. His ministry, this gang-intervention agency, is called “Homeboy Industries” and its motto is “Nothing stops a bullet like a job.” They’ve been on the front lines for decades now, and today they run the Homeboy Bakery, Homegirl Café, Homeboy Silk Screen, Homeboy Maintenance, Homeboy Merchandise and, the latest, Homeboy Solar Panel Installers. Their mission is to welcome gang members from off the street, keep them safe, and offer them a chance at a new life.

One person who found himself at Homeboy Industries was a young man named Ramiro. He grew up in the neighborhood and was involved with gangs at an early age. By the time he appeared in Father Boyle’s office, his body was littered with gang tattoos, but perhaps none were more alarming than the one he had scrawling across his forehead: a giant angry, F-bomb, cursing letters that showed his utter contempt for the world.

“I’m having a hard time finding a job,” he told Father Boyle, who thought, “No kidding?!” Father Boyle hired Ramiro that day to work in the Homeboy Bakery, and he *also* convinced a local dermatologist to volunteer his time removing tattoos, beginning with Ramiro’s. Little by little, they erased Ramiro’s forehead, and today he has a job as a bodyguard at a movie production studio, he and his wife have two children, a home, and no visible trace of the angriest moment in his life. [2]

Now I ask you, is that a tale of self-improvement? To some extent, sure, but not entirely. The story begins with *grace*—with a defining moment of “Help Me Please Because I Can’t Help Myself” and *that* is the story of the Bible—of the gospel and the Old Testament prophets—the story of a God who *never* waits for people to improve themselves, but *always* reaches out to comfort, heal, and lift up.

It’s the story of the prophet Isaiah shouting out to defend the oppressed. It’s the story of Jesus touching the lepers and outcasts to make them clean. It’s the story of Paul crying out to the early Church, “Remember the poor!” And ultimately it’s the story of this final vision in the book of Revelation—a grand pronouncement that in the end, *we will not be left to even our best self-improvement efforts, for God will be with us. God will wipe every tear away. Death will be no more. Mourning and crying and pain will be no more. And as we are known fully, we will come to fully know a God who says, “See, I am making all things new!”*

We may attempt to make the Bible fit our self-improvement culture—to make Scripture just one more verse in an endless drone of voices telling us that we need to do more, achieve more, try harder, create new habits, and stay positive. But in the final analysis, there is this strain that rises from the song of Scripture that says, once and for all, “God is in the business of making all things new!”

This is the good news of the gospel! The Good news is not that we can lose 10 pounds before summer, or that we can clear away the clutter in our homes, or that we can develop a better attitude through positive thinking, or that we can persevere and work toward our goals.

The good news of the gospel is that the brokenness of our world is not the final reality. Grief, cancer, terror, fear... NOT the final reality. The good news of the Gospel is that God is calling Creation toward a destiny of radical wholeness and love—and that as God’s beloved beings, we are called to live in synch with that gospel, however it may *improve* us, *and at whatever the cost*.

1. According to this article from *Forbes*, in 2008 Americans alone spent 11 billion in self-improvement books, CDs, seminars, coaching and stress-management programs.

http://www.forbes.com/2009/01/15/self-help-industry-ent-sales-cx_ml_0115selfhelp.html

2. Father Gregory Boyle, *Tattoos on the Heart: The Power of Boundless Compassion*, Free Press, 2010, p. 7.