

Half-Truths: 2. God Helps Those Who Help Themselves?

John 5:1-6

January 13, 2019

Pastor Steve Richards

We all say things and do things based on assumptions. When we don't know what to say, we sometimes say what sounds true. Like "everything happens for a reason." And because it sounds true, we keep saying it. It seems reasonable until it isn't. Someone gets cancer or a 13 girl old girl gets kidnapped. For a reason? Really? The Bible is clear that God wants good for us. God does not cause bad things to happen to us. But life happens – and sometimes for no reason, and the one thing we can always count on is God. That's what we looked at last week.

Another phrase that sounds true is "God helps those who help themselves." It sounds like something we would find in the Bible, but it's not there. Instead these words have been traced back to Greek mythology in the 5th century BC, and the phrase was popularized by Benjamin Franklin who included it in his *Poor Richard's Almanac* in 1736. God helps those who help themselves. My grandma told it was in the Bible, and I'm sure that's because someone told her it was in the Bible – and because she said it was in the Bible, I assumed it was true. And what I assumed she meant was the God made me and gave me abilities wanted good things for me, so it was up to me to do what I needed to do to get what I wanted. Don't wait around. God will help me get what I want. It's like this [video]. God made me. God wants what's best for me. So don't wait, the good things in life are there for my taking. God helps those who help themselves.

There is a religious belief among some Christians called the prosperity gospel that financial blessing and physical well-being are always God's will for us and when we have faith and give to religious causes God will give us financial rewards. Several years ago the Prayer of Jabez was popularized when Bruce Wilkinson published a book by that title. It was based on the Old Testament story of Jabez who prayed: "**If only you would greatly bless me and increase my territory...**" **And God granted his request.** The story of Jabez is meant to show us the power of prayer, but the problem is many people have taken the prayer of Jabez as a way of increasing their wealth and getting what they want. As long as I am faithful to God and pray the prayer, God will give me what I want. After all, God helps those who help themselves.

There was a time when I tried that. I was in school, and I knew a test was coming. I studied. In fact, I stayed up most of the night reading as much as I could so I would be ready. And the next morning, before I took the test, I said, "God. I need you. You know that I love you. Do what you can do to get me through this. Jesus, you said, 'Ask and you will receive, knock and it will be opened.' And I'm asking, and I'm knocking. The Bible even says you can do even more than I can ask or imagine." I needed an at least an 85 on the test but when I got the test back it was a 68, and I said, "God how could you?" I expected God to do what I needed to be doing. God would help, but the test was my responsibility. I still remember what Marilyn Carlson Nelson said at a community prayer breakfast a year ago. She said, "Prayer is not enough. It is a place to begin, but it is not enough. We can and must do something." And that's what I think that's the sense in which this phrase is true.

In the 5th chapter of John's Gospel, there is a story of God's loving and kindness and what God can do. **There was a Jewish festival, and Jesus went up to Jerusalem. In Jerusalem near the Sheep Gate in the north city wall is a pool with the Aramaic name Bethesda. It had five covered porches, and a crowd of people who were sick, blind, lame, and paralyzed sat there.** This was a well-known place of healing, at the outskirts of town, at one of the Gates to the city and if you were sick or physically disabled or diseased or paralyzed you were taken to

Bethsaida and left there. And the legend was the waters in the pool would bubble up periodically and when that happened, the first person to get in the pool would be healed. Some thought it was an angel that caused the bubbling water. But whatever it was, people thought it was the healing place and the place was filled with sick people who were waiting. And if you could not get into the pool, you had no hope. **A certain man was there who had been sick for 38 years. When Jesus saw him lying there, knowing that he had already been there a long time, he asked him, “Do you want to get well?” The sick man answered him, “Sir, I don’t have anyone who can put me in the water when it is stirred up. When I’m trying to get to it, someone else has gotten in ahead of me.”** Jesus was walking to Jerusalem and he didn’t enter the city the way most people did. He went out of his way to enter the Gate at the pool of Bethsaida, and while he could have walked up and healed the man, Jesus was there to teach us an important lesson, and in the process he asks “Do you want to be healed?” Of course, he does. He’s been waiting 38 years, “but I can’t get to the pool. I can’t get there on my own.” **And Jesus said to him, “Get up! Pick up your mat and walk.” Immediately the man was well, and he picked up his mat and walked.**

The story shows us the awesome power of Jesus, but it also teaches if you want to be healed, you do something. Parents know about this. It’s why they put bibs on us when we were babies. Somehow getting a spoon into our mouths was not as easy as it seemed, until one day we did it. And most of us are so good at it that we don’t need a bib anymore. Or when I first rode a bike, I had training wheels, but then one day, my dad took off the training wheels. I didn’t need them anymore. I still remember the day my mother pulled the car to edge of a county road outside of town, and she said, “It’s your turn to drive.” Parents empower us and teach us and equip us, and yet at some point, we have to get up and walk.

There are times when I am meeting with people who are having a hard time getting off their mat. They have excuses, fear, and guilt. The circumstances of life have paralyzed them. They are faithful, praying people but they are stuck and don’t know if they can be healed. And then there are other people are so inspiring. They have every reason to sit on their mat and feel sorry for themselves, but they get up. They make the tough decision. They want to be healed. They let Jesus work in them.

It’s hard, when you’re down and you have every excuse to stay there: Do you want to be healed? Maybe you’ve been on the mat a long time. It’s your health and you’ve been trying to weight but every time you try you fail. Or you’re in a relationship that isn’t going well at all, and you’ve gotten to the point where it seems easier to stay on the mat – status quo – than take a step to get better. Or that job – you’ve been praying. I’m a good person and I bow my head and say my prayer and nothing happens. Just because we’re good, we don’t get everything we want. And just because we are faithful, it doesn’t mean all the bad or difficult things go away. If you’ve been waiting, maybe it’s time – time for me to take up my mat and start walking, whether it’s something small, like waiting to get in better shape, but you’ll wait until tomorrow and then tomorrow comes and you’ll wait until the next day. But praying may not be enough. We have to take responsibility. There are some things we can control – and I don’t think Jesus is going to do those things for us. We have to take responsibility for what we can control.

How do we do this? This sounds easy, but where do I begin. I’ve been waiting, and I know waiting, but I don’t know how to take that next step. Do you know the Serenity Prayer? **God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change.** And there are a lot of thing I cannot change. God help me to accept that. **courage to change the things I can;** there are things we can control **and wisdom to know the difference.** So you might take a sheet of paper and make two columns – Me at the top of one column and God at the top of the other

column. And if you are in a relationship that is not going well, write down all the things you can control: Your thoughts, attitudes, actions, goals. And everything else goes in God's column. If you are a parents and you are struggling with a relationship with a child, write down what you can control: you can show up; you can tell him they you love him; you can make time. And everything else goes in God's column. God helps those who help themselves.

But God also helps those who cannot help themselves, and God's delivery system is you. God works through people. Go touches our hearts, and calls us to see the needs and then we use our resources and hands to help. I was in line at the grocery store, and I have to admit that I don't like lines at the grocery store. On this day, there were three people in front of me, and then the person in front of me had a cart full of items, and when it was time to pay. She first used her EBT card and then she took out an envelope with cash but she didn't have enough cash – so she started asking the cashier to remove items to get to the amount that she could afford. And at first, I wasn't really paying attention. I had my phone and I was looking at my email, but when I saw her removing items, I felt this nudge – Steve, you do something. And I said to the cashier, I'll pay for it. And the cashier said, pay for what? And I said, all of it. And the woman who was standing there unable to afford what she needed said to me, why would you do this? And I said, because I can. There's ad for an insurance company in Thailand of all places – you may not be able to read the subtitles, but I think you'll get the message. [video]

That's what you were doing when you gave to our Christmas offering. You gave to projects that will help those who cannot help themselves. God is the hope of the helpless. We call this God's grace. There are times when God intervenes in our lives. God helps those who cannot help themselves. Think of the person who you love the most who could call you in the middle of the night and you would get out of bed – and even if they lived on the other side of the country, you would head to the airport and take the next plane because you love and you want to help. That is but a tiny measure of the love that God has for you. God will do for us what we cannot o for ourselves. Do you want to be healed? Do you want to change? Do you want your life to be different? Because if you do, God is saying I'm right there with you to help you, but you've got to pick up your mat and walk.

And there are times when God helps those who cannot help themselves. Despite the mess we've made of our lives, God comes alongside us with grace. And God deploys his people – you and me – to the instruments of love and care in this world. God is with us and loves us and will never leave us alone.

Grow, Pray, Study for the Week of January 13, 2019

Weekly Prayer: O God, you are the source of the life into which we awakened this morning. Keep us grateful for your gifts and humble in heart as we seek to use them in your service. Keep shaping and guiding us in all we do. Once again, we offer our lives to you. Amen.

Monday, January 14

Scripture: Philippians 2:12-14

Therefore, my loved ones, just as you always obey me, not just when I am present but now even more while I am away, carry out your own salvation with fear and trembling. God is the one who enables you both to want and to actually live out his good purposes. Do everything without grumbling and arguing.

Observation: The half-truth of “God helps those who help themselves” is that our willingness to put forth effort is a key part of almost any growth or progress in our lives. It is, however, quite wrong to suggest that God only acts in response to our effort. In fact, even as he urged the Philippian Christians to “carry out your own salvation,” Paul reminded them that “God is the one who enables you both to want and to actually live out his good purposes” (verse 13).

Application: In his commentary, William Barclay noted that verse 13 twice used the Greek verb *energein* to talk about what God does for us, before we ever do anything for God. (You recognize the root of our word “energy.”) Do you find it a challenge to believe that God has given you the spiritual energy to accept salvation and live out God’s purposes? In what ways have you sensed God drawing you to a new way of life, and energizing you for that life?

Prayer: Lord God, thank you for seeking to save me before I ever knew I needed saving. Keep energizing me as I give my best effort to live into the worthwhile way of life you offer me. Amen.

Tuesday, January 15

Scripture: Psalm 68:4-6; Psalm 82:1-4

Sing to God! Sing praises to his name! Exalt the one who rides the clouds! The LORD is his name. Celebrate before him! Father of orphans and defender of widows is God in his holy habitation. God settles the lonely in their homes; he sets prisoners free with happiness, but the rebellious dwell in a parched land.

God takes his stand in the divine council; he gives judgment among the gods: "How long will you judge unjustly by granting favor to the wicked? Selah. Give justice to the lowly and the orphan; maintain the right of the poor and the destitute! Rescue the lowly and the needy. Deliver them from the power of the wicked!

Observation: To an orphan or a widow in Israel’s patriarchal world, it would have been nonsense to say, “God helps those who help themselves.” With no legal or social status, and no influential male relative to take their side, widows or orphans in that society simply had no way to “help themselves.” Yet again and again, in the psalms and in many of Israel’s laws, it was clear that God cared passionately about helping those who could not help themselves.

Application: God most often acts through people. In what parts of life do the words of Psalm 82 speak most clearly to your heart: “Give justice to the lowly and the orphan; maintain the right of the poor and the destitute! Rescue the lowly and the needy. Deliver them from the power of the wicked”? For whom can you be God’s instrument to help those who cannot help themselves?

Prayer: Lord God, I trust you to be my help and my strength, even when all else fails me. Grow me into a person who can extend your help and strength to others who may desperately need them. Amen.

Wednesday, January 16

Scripture: Daniel 9:15-19

"But now, my Lord, our God—you who brought your people out of Egypt with a strong hand, making a name for yourself even to this day: We have sinned and done the wrong thing." My Lord, please! In line with your many righteous acts, please turn your raging anger from Jerusalem, which is your city, your own holy mountain. Because of our sins and the wrongdoing of our parents, both Jerusalem and your people have become a disgrace to all our neighbors.

"But now, our God, listen to your servant's prayer and pleas for help. Shine your face on your ruined sanctuary, for your own sake, my Lord. Open your ears, my God, and listen! Open your eyes and look at our devastation. Look at the city called by your name! We pray our prayers for help to you, not because of any righteous acts of ours but because of your great compassion. My Lord, listen! My Lord, forgive! My Lord, pay attention and act! Don't delay! My God, do all this for your own sake, because your city and your people are called by your name.

Observation: When the Babylonian army destroyed Jerusalem, they hauled Daniel, along with thousands of his fellow Israelites, off to exile in Babylon. The Israelites knew they had no military or political power, and Daniel added the confession that they had blown it spiritually. There was simply no way for Israel to help themselves. But Daniel boldly asked God for help, "not because of any righteous acts of ours but because of your great compassion."

Application: Daniel echoed the tone of passages like Psalm 18:6, 16. He asked God to help, not based on Daniel's effort or success, but instead based on his need. In what ways is this different from the tone our culture teaches us to take in job interviews or loan applications? How easy or hard do you find it to trust that Isaiah was right when he quoted God as saying, "My plans aren't your plans, nor are your ways my ways" (Isaiah 55:8)?

Prayer: Lord God, down deep I know that often the times I need your help the most are the times I deserve it least. Grow in me the confidence to seek you and your help at all times, not just when I think I deserve it. Amen.

Thursday, January 17

Scripture: Romans 8:5-11

People whose lives are based on selfishness think about selfish things, but people whose lives are based on the Spirit think about things that are related to the Spirit. The attitude that comes from selfishness leads to death, but the attitude that comes from the Spirit leads to life and peace. So the attitude that comes from selfishness is hostile to God. It doesn't submit to God's Law, because it can't. People who are self-centered aren't able to please God. But you aren't self-centered. Instead you are in the Spirit, if in fact God's Spirit lives in you. If anyone doesn't have the Spirit of Christ, they don't belong to him. If Christ is in you, the Spirit is your life because of God's righteousness, but the body is dead because of sin. If the Spirit of the one who raised Jesus from the dead lives in you, the one who raised Christ from the dead will give life to your human bodies also, through his Spirit that lives in you.

Observation: The apostle Paul used a Greek word for "flesh" in these verses. The Common English Bible chose the word "selfishness" to convey what he meant by that. The CEB Study Bible noted that Paul was talking about "the core of the human who opposes God's Spirit (as in Rom. 7:5, 14)." Left to our natural impulses, he said, our hearts are hostile to God. We need God's Spirit to do in us what we can't do for ourselves.

Application: This reading once again speaks to the mysterious spiritual "chemistry" between God's part and our part in spiritual growth. The Spirit needs to control our mind—and that happens, in part, because of what we choose to focus our mind on. What is your mind set on? What helps you keep your mind set on what the Spirit desires?

Prayer: Come, Holy Spirit, I need you. Come, sweet Spirit, I pray; come in your strength and your power, come in your own gentle way. Amen.

Friday, January 18

Scripture: Ephesians 2:4-10

However, God is rich in mercy. He brought us to life with Christ while we were dead as a result of those things that we did wrong. He did this because of the great love that he has for us. You are saved by God's grace! And God raised us up and seated us in the heavens with Christ Jesus. God did this to show future generations the greatness of his grace by the goodness that God has shown us in Christ Jesus. You are saved by God's grace because of your faith. This salvation is God's gift. It's not something you possessed. It's not something you did that you can be proud of. Instead, we are God's accomplishment, created in Christ Jesus to do good things. God planned for these good things to be the way that we live our lives.

Observation: When Paul preached the good news in Ephesus, many people's priorities and ways of life changed profoundly (Acts 19:18-22). Paul believed it was important that they understand that this was not something they had accomplished on their own initiative or strength. They were God's accomplishment (Greek *poema*), living out the kind of life God desired them to live.

Application: Today's reading said salvation "is God's gift. It's not something you possessed. It's not something you did that you can be proud of." Of course, none of those first-generation Christians went to Sunday School or learned from Christian parents! In what ways does Ephesians' language capture your life experience? Do you ever think that, in your case, God just took what was already a pretty good life and "bumped it up a notch"? How open are you to letting God continue to shape the way you live the "secular" parts of your life—driving, shopping, business activities, playing and watching sports, and the like?

Prayer: Lord Jesus, I want to be your accomplishment, to be an example of what your spiritual craftsmanship can do in a human being. Please keep shaping and guiding me in all I do today. Amen.

Saturday, January 19

Scripture: 1 Corinthians 4:4-7

I'm not aware of anything against me, but that doesn't make me innocent, because the Lord is the one who judges me. So don't judge anything before the right time—wait until the Lord comes. He will bring things that are hidden in the dark to light, and he will make people's motivations public. Then there will be recognition for each person from God. Brothers and sisters, I have applied these things to myself and Apollos for your benefit. I've done this so that you can learn what it means not to go beyond what has been written and so none of you will become arrogant by supporting one of us against the other. Who says that you are better than anyone else? What do you have that you didn't receive? And if you received it, then why are you bragging as if you didn't receive it?

Observation: After founding the church in Corinth, Paul received reports (1 Corinthians 1:11-12) that the Christians there were dividing into factions, claiming superiority to one another based on which preacher/teacher they preferred. They seemed to think their walk with God was about their superior discernment or taste, rather than about receiving God's gift of grace. That was why Paul asked them, pointedly, "What do you have that you didn't receive?" He wanted to underscore the point that, especially (but not exclusively) in the realm of salvation, God helps us more than we ever help ourselves.

Application: In his commentary, N. T. Wright summed up Paul's message to the Corinthians: "The most obvious argument against boasting of the kind that's been going on is that every gift, talent and skill we possess is a gift from God. You might as well boast about having brown eyes or being left-handed." Are there any good things in your life that you are tempted to see as your own doing, something God is fortunate to receive from you? What helps you to remember that, ultimately, you have nothing that you didn't receive from God?

Prayer: O God, you are the source of the very life into which I awakened this morning. Keep me grateful for your gifts, and humble in heart as I seek to use them in your service. Amen.