

Oak Grove Presbyterian Church

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Psalm 121

Let us pray for the awareness and inspiration of the Holy Spirit.

Empty us, Sustaining God, of all that prevents us from hearing what you would say to us. Empty us of our preconceptions, our preoccupations and our prejudices. Empty us that we might be filled with your Spirit and your Word. Empty us that we might be filled for ministry and mission. In Christ's name we pray, Amen.

Psalm 121: A Song of Ascents

- ¹ I lift up my eyes to the hills—
from where will my help come?
- ² My help comes from the LORD,
who made heaven and earth.
- ³ God will not let your foot be moved;
The Lord who keeps you will not slumber.
- ⁴ The Lord who keeps Israel
will neither slumber nor sleep.
- ⁵ The LORD is your keeper;
the LORD is your shade at your right hand.
- ⁶ The sun shall not strike you by day,
nor the moon by night.
- ⁷ The LORD will keep you from all evil;
God will keep your life.
- ⁸ The LORD will keep
your going out and your coming in
from this time on and forevermore.

Several year ago, when Jay Leno was the host of The Tonight Show, they had a segment called “jay-walking.” In this segment, an interviewer would go out on the street and ask people questions, often questions that people should know the answers to, but often did not. They would show the funniest or most incorrect responses the audience. One such time, the interviewer walked up to people on the street and asked them to name one of the Ten Commandments. Many people answered, “God helps those who help themselves.” This statement, however, is not in fact, one of the Ten Commandments. Indeed, it is not in the Bible at all. But many Christians believe it is. A poll by Barna Research, an agency that polls widely on Christian topics, discovered that about 75% of people were sure that “God helps those who help themselves,” was in the Bible. Barna also found that a majority of young people polled thought it was a central message of the Bible.

The phrase actually was made famous by Benjamin Franklin from his Poor Richard’s Almanac in the early to mid-1700’s, although the thought has been around much longer than that. Franklin adapted it from ancient Greek drama that appeared almost five centuries before Christ. The Greek playwright Sophocles wrote, “no good ever comes of leisure purposeless, and heaven never helps the men who will not act.” Similarly, Euripides says in his tragedy *Hippolytus*, “try first thyself, and after, call on God. For to the worker God himself lends aid.” Later in Aesop’s fables, there is a tale of a sailor who is shipwrecked and calls upon the goddess Athena for help, and he is advised to try swimming first.

A few years back, a guest on Bill O’Reilly’s show was talking about helping the unemployed with food assistance and mentioned Jesus and the Good Samaritan as part of his argument, and O’Reilly responded by highlighting the importance of individual responsibility and said, “while

Jesus promoted charity at the highest level, he was not self-destructive. The Lord helps those who help themselves. Does he not?"

The sentiment that we receive help primarily from ourselves is widespread. Perhaps that is because there is some truth to the saying. There is the old familiar joke about the man who is at his home when he hears a warning on the news about a bad storm coming and the authorities call to evacuate. The man decides that he is faithful and believes in God, and thinks "I will trust God, and if I am in danger, God will send a miracle and save me." The neighbors are leaving, and invite the man to come with him, but trusting God, he stays put. The waters rise and begin to come into the first floor of the house, but a boat comes by with rescuers providing a safe exit, but still the man declares his faith in God and declines the offer. As the waters continue to rise the man is forced on to his roof, when a helicopter comes to rescue him, and as they are about to lower the cable to rescue him, the man shouts up, "Go rescue someone else, I am faithful, God will save me!" Shortly after, the waters engulfed the house, and the man is swept away. When in heaven, the man standing before God asked, "I put all of my faith in you God, why didn't you come and save me?" And God said, "Son, I sent you a warning, I sent you a car, I sent you a boat, and then a helicopter. What more were you looking for?"

Scripture tells us we are co-laborers with God, that there is effort needed on our part as well. Paul tells the Corinthian church that they are co-laborers with God. He tells the church at Ephesus that we are created by God and given gifts so that we may do good work in the world, that indeed we are created for that very purpose. Being Christian doesn't mean that we pray to God and then God takes care of the rest. Our faith moves us into action. We pray and we work. We trust and we take action.

The civil rights movement of the 1960's was steeped in theology and informed by scripture and faith. Martin Luther King Jr. prayed, yes, but he also mobilized people. He preached, but he also met with the president and pushed for legal reform. People sacrificed and risked violence and death to move the cause forward. Martin Luther King Jr. called upon the vision of prophets from the Old Testament, but he didn't just wait for God to show up and fix it all.

We pray for a church that will be more inclusive and show God's love to all of God's children, where no one that is LGBTQ will be rejected or harmed by the church again. And we not only pray, but we also write letters, and change laws, and support organizations for queer youth. Our calling upon God gives us the fortitude and strength to work to overturn injustice.

So, while there is some truth to the notion that God helps those who help themselves, there are some aspects of this saying which do damage to the biblical narrative that we are dependent upon God, and that God very much cares for those who cannot care for themselves. God commands again and again in scripture the care of the poor, the widow, and the orphan – those that would otherwise be abandoned by society and cannot care for themselves. The prophets remind us again and again to care for the vulnerable. Hosea reminds us that God “desires steadfast love and not sacrifice.” Psalm 68 likens God to a parent of the parentless and a protector of widows. One of the many rules in the law book of Leviticus instructs farmers to leave a portion of the harvest of the fields behind for those who do not have enough to eat. In the New Testament, the book of James indicates that true devotion to God is to care for orphans and widows. Jesus tells us that we are judged by how we treat the least of these, and the Parable of the Good Samaritan indicates that we are not only judged by our faith, but also by whether our faith leads us to

compassion and service. The Great Commandment given by Jesus is not just to love God, but also to love our neighbor.

This call to care for the most vulnerable in our communities is a reminder that it is not always possible to help oneself, sometimes a helping hand from others is needed. Sometimes people are so far down a hole that it is impossible for them to climb out of it on their own. The phrase of “pull yourself up by your bootstraps,” is fine for many, but it is impossible if you have no boots!

I mentioned Bill O’Reilly’s comments earlier when he highlighted the importance of personal responsibility and said, “while Jesus promoted charity at the highest level, he was not self-destructive. The Lord helps those who help themselves. Does he not?” In response to this, comedian Steven Colbert, who is a practicing Christian, replied, “if this is going to be a Christian nation that doesn't help the poor, either we've got to pretend that Jesus was just as selfish as we are, or we've got to acknowledge that he commanded us to love the poor and serve the needy without condition; and then admit that we just don't want to do it.” If we claim to be people of faith but are not moved to mercy and compassion to help the poor and the most vulnerable because we believe that only “God helps those that help themselves,” then we have missed an essential of the faith and we cannot call it good news.

Not only does the phrase, “God helps those who help themselves,” discount the desire of God to care for and the call of God for us to join in with caring for the most vulnerable, it also discounts God’s grace. One of the essentials of the Reformed faith is that we are not the authors of our own salvation. Put another way, we cannot do anything to earn God’s grace. We cannot work our way into it. “God helps those who help themselves,” posits a spiritual self-help or spiritual self-reliance that is antithetical to our faith. If the primary narrative of our American

experience is the rugged individual, where co-dependence is a negative term, the primary narrative of scripture is dependence on God and one another.

Psalms 121 sings out our faith and declares that our help comes from God, the maker of heaven and earth. In its beautiful imagery, the Psalm pictures the questioner looking to the heavens searching for comfort and guidance. Perhaps you have found yourself in that situation, at a loss and wondering where your help may come from wondering how on earth you might make it through a difficult situation.

There are the tangible needs of food and shelter, of clothing or medical care, but there is also the need for reassurance, acceptance, and a sense of place. We need comfort and peace, love and forgiveness. We need hope. We need a sense of purpose and fulfillment. These are our spiritual needs, and sometimes they are met through the help of others, but at other times you might just experience the still small voice of God, or the gentle presence of the Spirit that offers you a sense of God's grace. This grace is not something that is earned, or that we can work or buy our way into, we cannot help ourselves into this grace. We can only seek it, ask for it, and accept it. It is a blessing and a gift.

We want so much to be self-reliant, to be independent, to think that we can handle all our problems ourselves, that we forget to call upon the strength and grace of God and the community. As I understand them, one of the most powerful things about 12-step programs, is the basis that the person who is seeking recovery must own that they cannot be dependent upon themselves. The person must admit they are powerless over their addiction, and that a power greater than themselves can help restore their life. The person in recovery makes a decision to turn their life and will over to their understanding of God or the higher power. These are the first steps toward recovery, admitting that one cannot be

self-reliant and turning themselves over to the care of God. I would call that being open to God's grace.

In those times of darkness or despair, we turn toward the one who is there to help us. We turn toward, pray for, and rely on the grace of God. There are certainly times when we can and should help ourselves, there are times when we may be the means of grace to someone else who needs help. We cannot go through life expecting to be miraculously rescued by God and ignore the warnings, or the car, or boat, or helicopter. We work toward the purposes of God; we are the hands and feet and face of God.

But there are times where we simply cannot help ourselves. There are things from which we, no matter how hard we try, can save ourselves. We may not have the strength or ability to do so. There may simply be times when we are so much in despair or despondent where we actually believe we don't deserve help. There may be times when we fall into the trap of believing that God only helps those who help themselves. But in those moments, we turn our eyes to the hills and cry out to our God, our refuge and our strength. In those moments when we are weak is when we find our strength in God. When we hear the promises of scripture and our faith that our God is a God who will never abandon us, that we have a God that does not require us to be perfect. That we receive grace upon grace, and that nothing can separate us from that grace and love of God. We receive the blessing of God.

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⁷ The LORD will keep you from all evil;
God will keep your life.

⁸ The LORD will keep
your going out and your coming in
from this time on and forevermore.

This is the message of scripture, yes, there are times when we can help ourselves, or help others, but we find over and over again in the stories of our faith that we have a God that is there for us, that we have a God upon which we can and should depend. That we have a God that does not leave us to our own devices, that requires us to earn God's grace. No, we have a God that gives grace, and gives it abundantly. We have a God that abides with us. A God that keeps our life, now and always.

Amen.