Psalm 10:14, 17-18; Romans 4:4-5; 5:6-8 *Christianisms: God Helps those Who Help Themselves*

***Save Me***When I was in college and seminary, my favorite Christian musician was Rich Mullins. Rich was a quirky guy. He played the dulcimer hammer, he liked to hang out on Navajo Indian reservations, he wore his hair in a mullet, and he pictured himself as a modern day prophet. In fact, he wrote a song that said: “But when I leave I want to go out like Elijah/With a whirlwind to fuel my chariot of fire”, and that’s what happened—in 1997 he died when his jeep lost control and rolled on the interstate.

Rich Mullins’ most famous song was probably one he wrote for Amy Grant: “Sing your praise to the Lord.” The song that he recorded that is probably the best known is “Awesome God”, with its chorus: “Our God is an awesome God/he reigns from heaven above/with wisdom, power and love/Our God is an awesome God.”

But it’s one of his lesser known songs that I’ve been thinking about lately. It’s a short song he recorded in 1986 that includes the line: “Save me from any woman who would be turned on to the aftershave I use.” And, it also **included this line:**

Save me from trendy religion that makes
Cheap cliches out of timeless truths
Lord save me, please save me.

That line has sort of stuck with me for the last couple of decades. And today, we’re gong to start a series of sermons that is inspired by that line. This is a sermon series I’ve been thinking about doing ever since I became a preacher. I’m calling it: “Christianisms.” And the subtitle is: “Things we think are in the Bible, but are not.”

What I have in mind is looking at some sayings that we Christians tend to use a lot. Short, memorable statements that sound like truth, that sound pious, that sound good in greeting cards, that we use so often within the Church that we just assume they must be a quote of the Bible.

Like the Rich Mullins song says, they are “cheap clichés.” A cliché is defined as a “phrase or opinion that is overused and betrays a lack of original thought.” These are statements that we tend to make without really thinking them through. We hear them so often that we accept them uncritically. Some of the statements we’ll be considering in the next few weeks are: “Time heals all wounds.” “God will never give you more than you can handle.” And “Charity begins at home.” These are statements we have all heard, many of us have probably said them, but the first and most important thing to know about them is that they do not come from the Bible.

Please understand, my goal is not to make anyone feel bad if you have used these phrases. My goal is not even, necessarily, to get you to stop saying them. I just want us to know that they are not Bible verses, and get us to think a little more carefully about what these things mean. My plan, then, with each statement is threefold:

First, I want us to ask **if there is any Biblical truth in the statement.** These are not Bible quotes, but there must be some Biblical truth in the idea or Christians wouldn’t say them so much. So we’ll look to see what truth the statement conveys.

I told you that I’ve had the idea to do this series for almost 20 years. Well, as it turns out, somebody beat me to it. As I started researching I discovered that Adam Hamilton, the pastor of a large Methodist Church in Kansas City, wrote a book in 2016 that is pretty much exactly what I had in mind. He looks at 5 phrases in his book, and three of them are phrases I had already picked out to talk about.

And I really like the title of his book: he called it “Half-Truths.” I really like that, it’s probably a better title than “Christianisms”, because it gets at the idea that there is at least some truth in these statements. There is a reason Christians keep saying them. So we’ll start there.

But then, second, I want us to ask: **where does the statement go wrong?** This is where we need to think critically. Just because these statements get used so often, that doesn’t mean they are entirely true. In fact, with each Christianism I’ve picked out for us to look at, there is at least one thing, if not more, that I feel is critically wrong with it. There’s something that makes it more of a cheap cliché then a timeless truth. And I want us to look carefully at what that might be to keep us from saying things to one another that are really not that helpful.

And then, third, with each statement I want us to ask: **Is there better news in the gospel?** If these are not Biblical ideas, we need to look to see what the Bible really does say. Each of these statements is an attempt to convey good news, but in each case I believe the gospel of Jesus Christ gives even better news. And that, of course, is where we want to base our faith. It’s upon the good news of Jesus that we want to build our lives.

***Jaywalking***So, let’s get started. The phrase that I have chosen to **begin this series with is:**

God helps those who help themselves.

How many of you have heard this phrase? How many of you have said it? Pretty much all of us.

Just to be clear, this phrase is not in the Bible. But lots of people think it is.

Before Jimmy Fallon, Jay Leno was the host of the Tonight Show. And Leno had a recurring comedy gag that he called “Jaywalking.” The idea was that he would go out on the street and ask random people really basic questions. Like he would show people a picture of the current vice-president and ask them to identify that person. The comedy came in how often people would get the simplest questions wrong.

One night, the premise of Jaywalking was to ask people to name one of the 10 Commandments. Overwhelmingly, the most popular response was: “God helps those who help themselves.” Despite the fact that this is not even a command, it’s not one of the 10 commandments, and, as I have said, it’s not even found in the Bible.

Christian pollster George Barna has often used this phrase to measure Biblical literacy in America. I don’t want to overwhelm you with numbers, but he has found that about 75% of Americans agree strongly or agree somewhat that the Bible teaches that God helps those who help themselves. Among Christians, about 68% agreed that the phrase was Biblical. In another poll, the phrase came in first as the most widely known Bible verse. And seventy-five percent of American teenagers said it summarized the central teaching of the Bible. (<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/God_helps_those_who_help_themselves>)

Again, just think about that. This is the best known Bible verse in America, and it’s not even a Bible verse!

So let’s look it over. As I said, there are three questions for us to ask: Is there any Biblical truth? Where does the statement go wrong? And is there better news in the gospel?

***The Value of Hard Work***Let’s start with**: is there any Biblical truth?** If the phrase “God helps those who help themselves” is not in the Bible, is the idea at least found there? And the answer is: yes, sort of. If you see the phrase as promoting a form of **personal responsibility**, then it is something the Bible teaches.

Consider **2 Thessalonians 3:10-12:**

**10**For even when we were with you, we gave you this rule: “The one who is unwilling to work shall not eat.”

**11**We hear that some among you are idle and disruptive. They are not busy; they are busybodies. **12**Such people we command and urge in the Lord Jesus Christ to settle down and earn the food they eat.

One of the themes of Paul’s letters to the Thessalonians is the return of Jesus. Paul had encouraged the Thessalonians to put their faith in Jesus, and also to trust that Jesus could return at any time. As a result, however, some had taken the extreme step of quitting their jobs and spending all of their money in the assumption that God would provide them with all that they needed.

When Paul hears about this, he is quick to nip it in the bud. Trusting in Jesus does not mean that you stop taking responsibility for yourself. Believing that Jesus will take care of you does not mean that you simply sit on the couch all day and wait for your food to miraculously appear. You can pray for your daily bread, but then you should also go out and earn it. **Proverbs 10:4** says much the same thing:

**4**Lazy hands make for poverty,
    but diligent hands bring wealth.

The Bible has a pretty strong doctrine of personal responsibility. Benedictine monks use a Latin phrase, *ora et labora*, which means “pray and work.” Our faith is meant to move us to action. Even as we pray, we are expected to go to work. In that sense, “God helps those who help themselves” is a Biblical idea.

The phrase itself, however, has an unbiblical origin. Scholars believe, in fact, that the idea first appeared about 400 years before Paul wrote his letter to the Thessalonians. The Greek playwright Sophocles wrote:  "No good e'er comes of leisure purposeless; And heaven ne’er helps the men who will not act.”

At about the same time that Paul was alive a collection of stories known as Aesop’s fables was being put together. One was called “Hercules and the Waggoner”, and told the story of a man whose wagon was stuck in the mud along the side of the road. The more the man’s horses strained against the traces, the deeper his wagon sunk. So he kneeled down and prayed for Hercules to come along and help him, at which point Hercules appears and says something along the lines of: “Put your shoulder to the wheel, man, and urge on your horses. Do you think you can move the wagon by simply looking at it and whining about it? Hercules will not help unless you make some effort to help yourself.”

In English, the phrase was probably made most famous by Benjamin Franklin, who included it in his Poor Richard’s Almanac in 1736. Ever since, “God helps those who help themselves” has been considered a very American way of looking at things. It praises the value of hard work and cautions us against laziness.

If you’ve ever prayed for God to make a situation different, and then decided to go to work to try to make some changes, you have captured the essence of this phrase. You are praying and working:

* The person who prays for better health and then begins an exercise program;
* The person who asks God for a better job and then starts mailing out resumes and working the phones;
* The person wants help to stop swearing and then starts putting a dollar in the swear jar with every bad word;
* The person who prays for a neighbor to come to know Jesus and then sets about developing a friendship with that neighbor;

These are all examples of praying and working. These are ways that the phrase “God helps those who help themselves” can be Biblical and helpful.

And so, if you are taking notes, you can put a little smiley face here. Personal responsibility is a Biblical idea.

***Callous Hearts***But there are also ways that this statement can be harmful. Now we need to ask, **where does it go wrong?**

Sometimes this phrase can be used as a way of avoiding our obligation as Christians to help others, of doing our part to love our neighbors. Use of this phrase can sometimes be used to blunt **our responsibility to the poor.**

“The fact is that some people truly cannot help themselves. And for many others who find themselves trapped in poverty or struggling financially, self-help often isn’t nearly so simple as summoning the will and pulling themselves up by the bootstraps.” (Adam Hamilton, *Half-Truths*)

Back in the Christmas season of 2010, political commentator Bill O’Reilly had a guest named Jim McDermott on his show talking about a debate to extend expiring unemployment benefits through the end of the year. McDermott said this: “This is Christmas time. We talk about [Good Samaritans](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Parable_of_the_Good_Samaritan), the poor, the little baby [Jesus](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jesus) in the cradle and all this stuff. And then we say to the unemployed we won't give you a check to feed your family. That's simply wrong."

In response, O'Reilly argued for a more selective approach to unemployment benefits, and the importance of individual responsibility, concluding "while Jesus promoted charity at the highest level, he was not self-destructive. The Lord helps those who help themselves. Does he not?"

For O’Reilly, this non-Biblical phrase became a justification for not helping those in need. A couple of days later, the comedian Stephen Colbert called out O’Reilly’s hypocrisy, saying: "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."

I don’t want to get political, nor do I want to get into the question of whether the government is the best solution to poverty; but from a Biblical perspective Colbert is much closer to the mark than O’Reilly. As Christians, we cannot shrug off our responsibility to help our neighbors in need by simply invoking the phrase “God helps those who help themselves.” Instead, God commands His people to show special concern for the poor, the orphan, the widow, and the needy.

Some Bible verses. **Leviticus 23:22** says:

**22**“‘When you reap the harvest of your land, do not reap to the very edges of your field or gather the gleanings of your harvest. Leave them for the poor and for the foreigner residing among you. I am the LORD your God.’”

This was the Old Testament equivalent of unemployment benefits: God insisted that famers intentionally leave a portion of their crop unharvested. Instead of consuming it all themselves, or selling it for their own profit, this portion was left for the poor to come and harvest. This charity still involved the dignity of work—the poor had to do the harvesting themselves—but they were being provided for through the generosity of the farmers. The farmer who kept the entire harvest for himself was being selfish with what God had given him.

Or, again, **Deuteronomy 15:7-8:**

**7**If anyone is poor among your fellow Israelites in any of the towns of the land the LORD your God is giving you, do not be hardhearted or tightfisted toward them. **8**Rather, be openhanded and freely lend them whatever they need.

Do not be tightfisted. Scripture does not ask us to judge why the poor are in the situations they are in. It doesn’t ask us to make judgments about whether they are able-bodied enough to get out of poverty on their own. It simply says “be openhanded and freely lend them whatever they need.”

One more passage, **James 1:27:**

**27**Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world.

In scripture, God consistently calls us to help those who cannot help themselves. In fact, in the material sense, it seems that God’s preferred way to help those who cannot help themselves is through the compassion, generosity and creativity of His people. Personally, I’ve never directly observed God sending angels to bring food, clothing, and shelter down from heaven. But I have heard countless testimonies—many from people in this congregation—of people who have received timely help and encouragement from Christians when they we at moments of great need.

We can and should debate the best ways to help without hurting, of creating independence and not dependence. But what cannot be debated is our calling to help. Adam Hamilton says:

People who think they are Christian and yet have no compassion for those in need and do little to care for them, believing “God only helps those who help themselves,” have missed an essential component of the gospel.

And so, if you are keeping notes, you can put a sad face by this one. Saying “God helps those who help themselves” is not an excuse for ignoring our responsibility to the poor.

***The Better News of Grace***Then, our third question: **Is there better news in the gospel?** If the phrase “God helps those who help themselves” is not found in Scripture, is there something in scripture that gives even better news? I would say “yes.” Very much, “Yes.”

In fact, probably the worst thing about this phrase is that it runs counter to the Bible’s most important message, and that is **God’s responsibility for us**. Rather than “God helps those who help themselves”, I would argue the central message of the Bible is that God loves to help those who cannot help themselves. It is at our point of greatest need that God loves to enter in and help. Consider **Psalm 10:**

**14**But you, God, see the trouble of the afflicted;
    you consider their grief and take it in hand.
The victims commit themselves to you;
    you are the helper of the fatherless.

**17**You, Lord, hear the desire of the afflicted;
    you encourage them, and you listen to their cry,
**18**defending the fatherless and the oppressed,
    so that mere earthly mortals
    will never again strike terror.

Look at those phrases. “Victims commit themselves to you.” “You are the helper of the fatherless.” In other words, God helps those who are helpless. The orphan, the one with no resources. Verse 17: “You, LORD, hear the desire of the afflicted, you encourage them, and you listen to their cry.” God isn’t waiting around for us to push our wagon out of the mud. He’s waiting for the cry of those who realize they can’t fix things on their own.

Adam Hamilton writes:

God is the God of the hopeless cause, the God who loves sinners, the God who walks with us through the darkest valleys. He is the God who brings light into our darkness and helps us find peace amid our times of anxiety and despair. God rescues, redeems, and forgives. We receive blessings from God even though we cannot earn them and don’t deserve them. Even when we have made a mess of things and can’t fix them, God extends mercy to us. There’s a word for God’s mercy toward those who cannot help themselves. We call it grace.

The danger of the phrase “God helps those who help themselves” is that it can turn our salvation into a salvation of works. It gives the impression that we must earn our way to heaven. That only those who prove themselves good enough will be accepted by God. And the problem with that is that none of us will ever prove ourselves good enough. None of us can earn our way to salvation.

Paul addresses the idea of earning salvation through works in the book of Romans. Talking about Abraham, he examines the idea of whether it was Abraham’s good works or his faith that brought him into favor with God. Paul quotes Genesis 15, which says that “Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness.” **Then he writes:**

**4**Now to the one who works, wages are not credited as a gift but as an obligation. **5**However, to the one who does not work but trusts God who justifies the ungodly, their faith is credited as righteousness. (Romans 4:4-5)

In other words, the Bible would not say that Abraham was credited with righteousness if it was something he earned. If God was rewarding Abraham because Abraham first helped himself, then it wouldn’t be salvation by grace, it would be salvation by works. And that would mean that God was waiting around for all of us to make ourselves good enough for His love.

But that’s not how it works. That’s not the good news of the gospel. In the next chapter of Romans, **Paul puts it like this**:

**6**You see, at just the right time, when we were still powerless, Christ died for the ungodly. **7**Very rarely will anyone die for a righteous person, though for a good person someone might possibly dare to die. **8**But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us. (Romans 5:6-8)

Do you hear that? “When we were still powerless.” Christ didn’t wait for us to help ourselves. We were powerless to do so. We were still lost in our sins. But that didn’t stop God. He sent Christ into the world and Christ died for us while we were still unlovely.

The message of the secular world might be that God helps those who help themselves. In a competitive, individualistic culture, it is everybody for themselves and you better get what you can while you can.

But the better news of the gospel is that God helps those who cannot help themselves. The better news of the gospel is Grace.

And it is essential for all of us to recognize how much we need God’s grace in our lives. It is essential for us to recognize that in the face of our sin and our unrighteousness, we are powerless to help ourselves.

So what about you? Are you going tell God to stand aside while you figure things out for yourself? Are you going to try to earn your standing with God through a little self-determination and elbow grease?

Or are you going to admit that you are a sinner in desperate need of grace? Are you going to acknowledge that you are helpless to do anything about your plight, and ask Jesus to come to your rescue?

God helps those who cannot help themselves. That’s the good news of the Bible. That’s the best news of all.