

Today's bumper sticker theology phrase doesn't really come from the Bible. There was a Barna study- that is a nationwide study on religious beliefs- given in 2000. In this particular study they asked 14 questions about basic Christian beliefs. The results were stunning. 53% of Americans polled strongly believed that the phrase "God helps those who help themselves" is in the Bible. 22% of Americans polled somewhat believed that it was in the Bible. Total that is 75% of those surveyed who either absolutely believed or mostly believed that this phrase comes from the Bible. Another poll attempted to collect people's favorite Bible verses. The #1 verse wasn't in the Bible at all. It is our phrase to explore more closely today. "God helps those who help themselves." And to top that all off...Jay Leno used to do a segment on The Tonight Show called "Jaywalking." It's where Jay or one of his staff would interview random people on the street. Some called it "Sidewalk Talk." Anyway, on one particular episode of "Jaywalking," Jay was polling people to name just one of the Ten Commandments. Just one. You guessed it. A startling number of people answered by saying, "God helps those who help themselves" (Adam Hamilton, *Half-Truths*). To be clear, that is NOT one of the Ten Commandments. But if this phrase isn't in Scripture, then where did it come from? Some of you may respond with Benjamin Franklin, who used it in his *Poor Richard's Almanac* in 1736. However, that is not where it originated. It came to be five centuries before Jesus was born- in Greek mythology. Aesop of Aesop's Fables is believed to be the author. One of the stories where it appears involves Hercules riding in a wagon when the wagon falls into a ravine and gets stuck. Hercules instructs someone asking him to pick up a heavy wheel to "get up and put

your own shoulder to the wheel.” You can see how the “pick yourself up by your bootstraps” mentality has been passed along. So where do we go with this today? Instead of being half-truth maybe this saying is ¼ truth? In other words, this phrase hints at an important truth. God’s help does not remove our responsibility. If I am unemployed and simply sit around praying, “Please give me a job, Lord,” it might be a long wait, especially if I haven’t written a resume or filled out some applications or actively looked for job openings. God gives us resources but many times we don’t see or use them. Some of you have heard that famous story of the man who lived in a two-story house by a river. One day the river flooded. Jeeps were sent out to rescue people and ask them to evacuate. A jeep stopped at this man’s house and the person driving told him of the impending danger and offered to give him a ride to safety, and the man said, “No, I have faith. God’s going to take care of me. I’ll be OK. This flood is not going to get me.” The waters rose and now water was in his house. A boat pulled up to what used to be his back yard and the driver warned him that if he didn’t come with him, he would drown. The man told the boat driver the same thing he told the jeep driver. An hour or so later, the waters were now up to the second floor, and the man went on the roof to try and escape the rising waters. Soon a helicopter saw the man and threw down a rope to rescue him. The man declined in the same spirit he had had with the others, and the man drowned. At the pearly gates, this man was really irritated with God. “I had faith, why didn’t you save me from drowning?” God said, “I sent a jeep, a boat, AND a helicopter to rescue you, and you refused. What else did you want me to do?” Sometimes we take things too far. The bottom line is we

can pray and pray, and we also have to do some work in the process. Find and use our resources, including those God provides to advise and walk with us on our journey. All these are God's gifts to us, but it is up to us to use them. Paul had to address this same issue as he wrote to new Christians in Thessalonika. Paul had taught the followers of Christ there to trust in Jesus Christ and to trust that Jesus might come back at any moment. Well, the folks took that to mean that trusting in Jesus meant to quit their jobs and wait for Jesus' imminent return. They thought they didn't have to work because God would provide for them. So when word of this reached Paul, he wrote with some instructions. Among those was this verse, "If anyone doesn't want to work, they shouldn't eat" (2 Thess. 3:10). This what I heard a pastor quote at this week's contentious County Council meeting. He was quoting this in reference to speaking against the Council raising the budget, thus raising taxes for the first time in 30 years, so that more money can be allocated to affordable housing and transportation and other things to help those in need in our community. He was insinuating that those experiencing homelessness or on the edge of that experience don't work or try to work so why should his tax dollars need to be increased to help them? Regardless of his stance and cherrypicking, I wanted to stand up and let this pastor and others know that in my experience- contrary to popular misconceptions- many people, including those experiencing homelessness, are employed, often full time, but in earning only minimum wage or even a little more, they do not earn enough to eat and also afford even the most basic housing not to mention healthcare. HUD's estimate of fair market rent in the Greenville area for a one-bedroom apartment last

year was \$871 per month. The average reported monthly income for people in emergency shelter was \$836. Yet, according to rent.com, the average monthly rent for a one-bedroom apartment in Greenville as of June 4 was \$1,427 ([rent.com](https://www.rent.com)). Because of the array of challenges facing people experiencing homelessness or housing insecurity, finding truly affordable housing is often only one of the steps in improving their situation. Talk about overcoming enormous obstacles and needing help?

Back to this phrase. There's a danger here that we begin to believe that we are the center of all things, that it is up to us to determine our destiny, and that God is merely our assistant, not our foundation. To be very clear, in Scripture, God calls us over and over again to help those who cannot help themselves. Showing compassion and mercy for those who struggle is very much part of God's MO. "Yes, certainly, we all should do what we can to support ourselves. However, sometimes people face challenges they don't know how to overcome on their own, or they simply don't have the resources to do it. Our calling is not to shrug off responsibility for helping our neighbors by invoking this phrase. Instead, God commands God's people to take a special concern for the poor, the orphan, the widow, and the needy. In my experience, God typically meets the needs of those who are poor or struggling or hurting by acting through other people" (Hamilton). We are God's instruments- Christ's hands and feet. This is where today's Scripture comes in. Now the context. Right before our reading today in Mark's Gospel Jesus has given- or the third time- a "passion prediction," where he foretells his trial, death, and resurrection,

and the disciples still don't get it. We only know a little because we're on this side of the story. Jesus has been with his disciples on the way to Jerusalem...on the way to the cross and along the way he's teaching them about what true discipleship looks like. Before reading God's Word, let us first pray. **PRAY. READ.**

Here we find the disciples and brothers, James and John, whom Jesus called "Sons of Thunder," "an apt name for two young men so zealous and hotheaded, they ask their Teacher elsewhere in the Gospels to rain down heavenly fire on a Samaritan village that refuses Jesus its hospitality" (Debie Thomas, journeywithjesus.net). After Jesus finishes telling again of what is to come for him in Jerusalem, cue the Sons of Thunder: "Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you" (v. 35) Look at how Jesus responds. There's a word for God's mercy toward those who cannot help themselves- even when it comes to sticking a foot in the mouth. It's called grace. And Jesus shows this grace to James and John. "What is it you want me to do?," Jesus asks them (v. 36). Notice he didn't shame them or shut them down. Without hesitation they respond, "Grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory" (v. 37). It sounds like my brother and I calling who got the front seat on the way to school. Sadly, these brothers don't understand that the ironic play of "glory" is the cross- and that two criminals will "sit" on his right and left there (C. Campbell, *FOW*). Though they don't get it, you've got to admit that the Sons of Thunder are showing lots of faith in and loyalty to Jesus. After all they've been with him for three years or so after dropping their nets and their

father's trade of fishing to follow Jesus. "While these brothers and disciples get a few things right, they also get a key thing wrong and that's where the heart of this Gospel lies. Even though they don't get it either, the other disciples become angry with the brothers. Jesus corrects their vision by holding up the example of Roman rulers as being antithetical to the kingdom of God. In other words for Jesus, the ruler must be a servant leader, not a tyrant. The goal is to serve, not to be served. "What James and John fail to understand is that service in the kingdom of God is not a second-class means to a first-class end. Service is the end. Service is abundance. Service is power. Service is glory" (Thomas). "Whoever wishes to be great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first must be slave of all." "The only path to success in Jesus' kingdom of economy is through the surrendering of our most cherished forms of entitlement. By all means aspire to glory! But recognize that glory by Jesus' definition is not privilege. It's not upward mobility. It's not permission to guard, hoard, and multiply your own. Glory in God's kingdom is movement downwards; an exercise in subtraction; the generous and perpetual expending of one's self in love" (Thomas). In this text, Jesus calls us to an alternative way of being in the world. He reminds the Sons of Thunder and each of us of our calling to serve, to help- with God's help, of course. There are a myriad of Bible stories that demonstrate God helping the helpless. Christ compels us to reflect that same compassion and mercy in our own actions- through service towards others. Here at Triune we recommend that those volunteering read one of two books: *When Helping Hurts* and *Toxic Charity*. While debatable, these books are helpful in demonstrating

the best ways of helping and not hurting, empowering while not enabling, creating independence and not dependence. “What is not debatable, however, is our calling to help” (Hamilton). Martin Luther King Jr. once said: **“Life's most persistent and urgent question is: What are you doing for others?”** But recognize that he who is greatest among you shall be your servant. That's a new definition of greatness. By giving that definition of greatness, it means that **everybody can be great because everybody can serve**. You don't have to have a college degree to serve. You don't have to make your subject and verb agree to serve. You only need a heart full of grace. A soul generated by love.” What I especially love about Dr. King’s quote is that even when we are the ones receiving help, everybody can serve. Anyone can wipe down a table after a meal here at Triune or visit with others or sweep the floors or take out the trash. And “sometimes we can’t help ourselves, not because we are poor or destitute or without resources but because we have descended too deeply into sin or despair” (Hamilton) or shame. Here’s the thing...we are all, at times, helpless. Christ is in the business of redeeming the broken, whether we deserve it or not. There are things from which we simply cannot save ourselves, no matter how hard we try. “Times when you don’t have the strength or resources or knowledge- times when you don’t believe that you deserve help because you know you are responsible for the difficult situation in which you find yourself” (Hamilton). Grace is not something we can work for or buy or even earn. We cannot help ourselves into grace. We can only ask for and receive it. The essence of grace is that God helps those who cannot help themselves. Stated simply: God helps. God is our helper, our refuge, and

our strength. Thanks be to God for helping those who cannot help themselves! May we be instruments of God's love and mercy in this world as we serve Christ through serving others. Amen.