

G3 Sermon for 1/15/17  
Part 2

Good morning. My name is Bob Richardson, and I am the assistant pastor here at G3. Thanks once more for allowing me the blessing of worshipping our Lord with you today.

(FIRST SLIDE-The word “Brigand”) I invite us all to consider the word “Brigand”. (I realize I’m showing my age here, but suddenly I feel like Allen Ludden giving out the clue cards on the old “Password” show. “The password is Brigand”.) In modern terms the word brigand means bandit or thief, but at one time it denoted a foot soldier or army scout. Brigand is the foundation of the word “Brigandine”, which was the uniform that the soldier wore. Brigandine is one of those wonderful words almost never employed (but just you wait: now a national spelling bee is going to be won on the word brigandine) but the word is in the Bible, in a couple of different places, notably Jeremiah 46:4 and 51:3, if you read what are often called the historical translations. It’s a cool word, and it’s in the Bible! It’s one of those words you may never have heard of, but it’s in the Bible. The Bible deals with the word brigandine!

(SECOND SLIDE-Benyay the turtle) My wife Susan loves turtles. We have a few hundred turtle...things...figures, magnets, towels, t-shirts....around the house. We have a Christmas tree that is adorned exclusively with turtle ornaments. And, we have our own pet turtle, the very handsome fellow you see here, Benyay. Benyay is, I declare, a living, breathing, fin-flapping Serenity Prayer. Honestly, I dare you to watch Benyay for but a minute or two and not have your disposition calmed. He has that effect. Did you know that the historical translation of the Bible deals with turtles, for example in Song of Songs 2:12? That’s right! Turtles are in the Bible.

(SLIDE THREE-Picture of “I Never Knew That Was In The Bible”) Several years ago Martin Manser published a book of terms entitled “I Never Knew That Was In The Bible”. Words like latchet, flagon, minish, privily are all discussed. Even the origins of unicorns is covered! This is a treasure trove of items, ideas, and references that I never knew were in the Bible.

As I’ve prepared for this sermon I’ve thought about what might be more...dangerous...for want of a better term. Is it those things that are in Scripture, matters a bit more profound and important perhaps than flagons and brigandines, things that have nonetheless escaped my awareness? Or, is it the matters that time and repetition have convinced me are of Scripture, and yet are not Biblically based at all?

As Stephanie mentioned, we are beginning today a series of sermons based on Pastor Adam Hamilton's book *Half Truths: God Helps Those Who Help Themselves and Other Things the Bible Doesn't Say*. By way of introduction, Hamilton is the lead pastor at The United Methodist Church of The Resurrection in Leawood, Kansas, and one of my favorite theologians. Hamilton writes that (SLIDE FOUR-Quote) "Most of us as Christians have things we believe, and tell others, and even count on, that we've not carefully examined. Some of these things we accept and repeat to others sound so true, and we've believed them for so long, that they become 'Sacred cows'—things above question or criticism." Hamilton's purpose in writing the book is to explore what he calls "half truths" that have become the hallmarks of many who proclaim the faith, and yet run the danger of doing far more harm than good in misrepresenting God's word with these half truths. Hamilton takes to task expressions like: (SLIDE FIVE)

**Everything Happens for a Reason  
God Helps Those Who Help Themselves  
God Won't Give You More Than You Can Handle  
God Said It, I believe It, That Settles It  
And,  
Love The Sinner, Hate The Sin**

So, these are the notions that we'll be looking at in the next few weeks, for in doing so, we'll see that there may be some truth to be found in these half truths. Hamilton is inviting us to consider whether these declarations are as Christian or as true as we would otherwise suppose. It's his hope that an examination of these half truths will lead us to the greatest truth to be found in Christ Jesus.

This morning I get to look at the second half truth in Hamilton's volume, the proclamation that "God helps those who help themselves". Several years ago when Jay Leno hosted *The Tonight Show* he had a segment called "Jaywalking", in which he would ask random questions of random people on the street. Let's be honest: it was Jay's attempt at showing how utterly misinformed folks could be, and more often than not he was given plenty of ammunition to back up his assertion.

Anyway, on this particular episode, he asked folks to name one of the Ten Commandments, and a majority of the respondents said, wait for it, "God helps those who help themselves". The problem with the answer is that it is not one of the Ten Commandments. Ouch! But Jay Leno, or I for that matter, should not point a

condescending finger at the random folks he questioned. There's a *Christian* polling firm called the Barna Group, emphasis on the word Christian. In a survey Barna found that better than 8 in 10 thought that "God helps those who help themselves" was in fact Scriptural, thinking it one of the Bible's primary messages.

There is no such verse in the Bible. The quote actually has its roots five centuries before the time of Christ, in Greek mythology, and was trumpeted by various philosophers over the next one thousand plus years. But if we really want to lay it at the throne of any one person for its notoriety that person is this guy (**SLIDE SIX-Ben Franklin**). Ben Franklin gave it cred and popularity in the 1736 edition of Poor Richard's Almanac. After all, if Ben said it, it must be true. He was the key and the kite guy y'know.

So, that's an introduction to how it came to gain its momentum. Fundamentally though, we can declare that it is not in the Bible. Though that's the case, does that mean it has no truth to it, at least from a perspective of theology? The title of Hamilton's book is "Half Truths". Does that mean he is saying that "God helps those who help themselves" is half right? While I never liked fractions in school I would argue that the statement is closer to one third true. But that means that in two other very important ways the phrase is categorically untrue, and in fact is antithetical to the Bible's foundational truth.

So, while the statement is only a partial, or one third truth, that does mean that it holds some veracity. I keep thinking of Jim Carrey in "Dumb and Dumber" saying (**SLIDE SEVEN-Jim Carrey**) "SO you're telling me there's still a chance." Before a meal, we say the blessing. It's the coolest thing! Susan and I are sitting at an empty dining room table, and we say the prayer, and when we open our eyes (Y'know, God only responds to the prayers where eyes are closed) magically food has appeared on our plates! WOW!

If I expected my waffles to arrive with butter and syrup just because I have prayed for waffles, then that's a pretty strong way to insure that I go waffle less. In other words, I worked for my waffles by going to work and earning a paycheck. I took that money to the store and bought my favorite waffle mix, Aunt Jemima, and butter. Then I hauled out the waffle iron and made the waffles. Am I not helping myself? So, when I bow my head and close my eyes to pray (because God only responds to prayers where eyes are closed) I'm thanking God for the job by which I make the money to take to the store to buy the waffle fixins'. I'm thanking God for the farmers who produced the ingredients, the truck drivers who delivered those goods to market, for the folks who stock it on the shelves. What I'm saying is that I recognize that ultimately my waffles come from God. But they only appear because I, and a whole lot of others, did their part.

Put another way, let's consider employment. When we first moved to Winston Salem from Reidsville in 2005, I really wanted the job I have now. It was a dream come true to be able to work with addicts trying to recover, and I enlisted everyone I could to pray that I would get it. I still remember being in a circle with Pastor Ron praying "Convince them Lord. Convince them!" Ultimately I got the gig, but it was not just because of the petitions of God's people on my behalf. I had to submit an application and a resume. I

had to traverse several interviews. Without those efforts, I'm probably jobless. I had to help myself.

What's the moral of all of this. God's not going to drop waffles on my plate, put me on the payroll at Insight Human Services. I can pray and pray and pray, and I do. I urge you to do the same. But we also have to do some work in the process. Put another way, we have to help ourselves.

The apostle Paul addressed this issue when he wrote to the church at Thessalonika. On his second missionary journey Paul had established a church there, and had taught his flock there to trust in Jesus and His imminent return. Unfortunately, the congregation turned the lesson upside down, and chose to quit their jobs and wait for Christ's arrival. When word of this approach reached Paul he admonished his fellows with these words: **(SLIDE EIGHT-2 Thessalonians 3:10-12)**

**"When we were with you we were giving you this command:  
'If anyone doesn't want to work, they shouldn't eat.'  
We hear that some of you are living an undisciplined life.  
They aren't working, but they are meddling in other people's business.  
By the Lord Jesus Christ, we command and encourage such people  
To work quietly and put their own food on the table."**

There's a Latin phrase used by Benedictine monks: *Ora et labora*. It means "pray and work". That's what Paul was saying to the church: Trust in Jesus to be sure. But don't forget to punch the clock and put in your eight hours as well. Don't forget to help yourself. Don't just sit around and wait for God to fix it, though He can. More often than not, and Scripture reveals this over and over again, God brings about change through His people, using them, us, as instruments to change the world. Think of the civil rights movement in the sixties **(SLIDE NINE-Selma March)** Those who fought for civil rights did not simply show up at area churches and pray before marches in Selma. They prayed and then they marched, knowing they would probably be beaten and arrested along the way, but also knowing they could rely on a God who would see them through.

So, it can be argued that the saying "God helps those who help themselves" has some Scriptural basis. Maybe one third basis. But what are we to say about the other two thirds, which Hamilton sees as fundamentally unbiblical.

First, there is the reality of God's grace, a lynchpin of our faith. Grace is God's help for the helpless, and when all is said and done, we are all the helpless in one form or another. God offers to us a grace that cannot be earned or purchased or worked toward. We cannot help ourselves into grace. We can only ask for it and accept it, and we can only eternally and divinely receive it from the One who is, well, eternal and divine. This concept of grace is central to the Christian gospel. It is the undeserved work of God in our lives, the unmerited favor of God. The essence of God is that God helps those who cannot help themselves, and friends I will say it again: that's all of us in at least one area of our lives, probably more. We all have that thing, whether you call it sin

or character defect or poor choice, from which we cannot save ourselves, no matter how hard we try. I've got plenty of willpower. I shared a few weeks ago that I ran the Boston Marathon. That takes some willpower. I get up most every morning at about 4 to work out. That takes some willpower. But I'm also a person in recovery from addiction, and I'm out of my league in that regard. Only Jesus was going to take that from me. I wasn't going to help myself out of my battle with drugs and alcohol. Only Jesus could do that. Only grace does that. To say that I can help myself is to put my efforts before God's grace, and it doesn't work that way. It just doesn't.

Finally though, there is what I see as a very dangerous implication that results from relying on the phrase "God helps those who help themselves." The declaration surely has been used as a way of avoiding our obligation as Christians to help others, of doing our part to love our neighbors. The fact is that some people some people truly cannot help themselves, and that's where we come in. Self help isn't going to cut it. God commands us to take special care of the poor, the orphan, the widow, the needy. **SLIDE TEN-Leviticus 23:22)**

**'When you harvest your land's produce,  
You must not harvest all the way to the edge of your field;  
And don't gather every remaining bit of your harvest.  
Leave these items for the poor and the immigrant;  
I am the Lord your God.'**

This is a serious command. You can tell it is by the way it ends with "I am the Lord your God", rather the Bible's way of saying God was, as we say in New Hampshire, "Wicked serious". God insisted that farmers intentionally leave part of their crop unharvested, essentially saying to His people, "I'm not making you share your bounty, because it was never yours to begin with. It's mine ultimately. I'm just urging you to leave part of my field unharvested so that those who are struggling will have enough to as well as you." This message is not just found in Leviticus, but throughout Scripture, from James 1:27, Matthew 25, Luke 10, Galatians 5:6, Proverbs 19:17 or 22:9, among many others. God's wicked serious. He wants to help those who cannot help themselves, and He enlists us to do the same.

In closing, one of our members here at G3, Stefani Daroci, shared a story of something that happened to her a couple of weeks ago, and I'd like to share it with you as well. Seems that Stefani happened upon a woman who was struggling to hold a diaper bag, push a stroller, and keep a blanket from flying off a car seat that held her baby. Stefani said that she felt an urge to help the woman. Stefani parked her car and ran after the woman and asked if she needed a ride. It turns out the woman was trying to get to a follow up appointment with her doctor after delivering, one week earlier, the baby by c-section. The woman had budgeted 90 minutes for what took Stefani ten minutes to drive. Now, Stefani could have listened to Ben Franklin and random folks from the Tonight Show who would argue that God would help that woman if she would just help herself by hold the diaper bag and push the stroller and keep the blanket on her baby while walking 90 minutes. Who am I kidding? I know Stefani, and if she could never

leave that woman to fend for herself, to help herself. Her very DNA would crumble. She had to step out and help that child of God because she's a child of God too.

Each of us is called to do just the same. What are we going to do about it?

Let us pray.