2 Thessalonians 3:10-12; Leviticus 23:22; James 1:27; Psalm 18:6,16 May 13, 2018

*Half Truths, Part 2*

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*Ancient Words by Michael W. Smith*

Holy words long preserved for our walk in this world
They resound with God's own heart. Oh, let the ancient words impart
Words of Life, words of Hope. Give us strength, help us cope.
In this world, where e'er we roam, ancient words will guide us home.

Ancient words ever true. Changing me and changing you.
We have come with open hearts. Oh, let the ancient words impart.
Holy words of our Faith, handed down to this age,
came to us through sacrifice, oh heed the faithful words of Christ.

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Ancient words ever true. Changing me and changing you.
We have come with open hearts. Oh, let the ancient words impart.

Today we are jumping into the second phrase from our new ‘Half-Truths’ sermon series. A half- truth is just what it says, ‘half true,’ and unfortunately there are many phrases that Christians use to try to comfort and encourage one another that are not true to Scripture and therefore often end up causing more harm than good. As disciples of Jesus we should want to speak only those words that are wholly true, for those are the words that can bring a deep healing balm for the hurting.

Last week we looked at the phrase ‘Everything happens for a reason.’ The phrase itself, on its own, is actually true. Everything does happen for some reason, whether that reason is based on the choices we make and the consequences of those choices, whether that reason is based on the natural order of things running their intended course, or whether that reason is God-inspired. But what is NOT true about that phrase is what is ***implied*** when we use it – meaning that God himself has a purpose and a reason for ***everything*** that happens the way it does, that God is micromanaging everything for some pre-determined reason.

The truth is that God causes some things to happen in our lives for a reason that he alone knows at the time. But what we learned last week is that as disciples of Christ, out of all the things that happen to us (good and bad), we are offered the opportunity to allow God to weave something good and Christ-honoring in, around, and through them. So what might be better to say to someone going through a difficult time? “I know this is hard. It’s so hard to understand why this happened. But God is here. He is ready to help you through it. Is there anything I can do to help?”

*Let us pray: Good and gracious and merciful God, thank you for teaching us. Help us to be ever-ready to listen and to move at the impulse of your love. Thank you for the perfect way you are attentive and involved in our lives, working all things together for good for those who love you and who are called according to your purpose. Thank you for the gift of one another in the church, brothers and sisters who can help and guide us to the kingdom goodness you desire for all your children. I pray now that the words that I speak would be fully true, that your voice would be the one we hear and obey, to the glory of your name. This we pray in Jesus’ name, Amen.*

Today our half-true phrase is ‘God helps those who help themselves.’ In 1736 Ben Franklin popularized the phrase “God helps those who help themselves” in *Poor Richard’s Almanac*, giving the phrase a permanent place in American thinking. A recent survey by the Barna Group, a Christian polling firm, found that more than 8 in 10 Americans think this phrase is in the Bible. It is not. “God helps those who help themselves” is not found in the pages of Scripture. It does capture a biblical teaching, which we will see in a moment, but in other very important ways it sends a message that is the direct opposite of what God is saying to us in his Word.

Let’s begin with the part that is true. When we sit down to eat and say our blessing, food doesn’t magically appear on our plate. We work for our supper. We went to the grocery store or out to the garden, we brought into our homes, we put it away to store it properly, and we prepared it for eating. When we bow our heads at mealtime we are thanking God that we have the ability to earn a living, but we are also thanking God for all the farmers, the truckers, and those who handled it before we purchased it. Yes, ultimately all the food we eat comes from God, but it only appears on my plate because I and many others did our part. God does help those who help themselves. If we need a job, we have to do more than ask God to get one for us. We have to get out there and do our part looking for one. God blesses us with a mind to think, with strength, and with wisdom, and God provides other people to advise us. God does help those who help themselves.

The Apostle Paul addressed this with the new believers in Thessalonica. He had taught them to trust in Jesus, and trust in his promise to come back at any time. So some of the folks there came to believe (falsely) that trusting Jesus meant they should quit their jobs and wait for his imminent return. They thought they didn’t have to be careful with their spending or continue to work to earn a living. Paul wrote the following words to them, *“****6****In the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, we command you, brothers and sisters, to keep away from every believer who is idle and disruptive and does not live according to the teaching[*[*a*](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=2+Thessalonians+3&version=NIV#fen-NIV-29685a)*]you received from us.****7****For you yourselves know how you ought to follow our example. We were not idle when we were with you,****8****nor did we eat anyone’s food without paying for it. On the contrary, we worked night and day, laboring and toiling so that we would not be a burden to any of you.****9****We did this, not because we do not have the right to such help, but in order to offer ourselves as a model for you to imitate.****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.****13****And as for you, brothers and sisters, never tire of doing what is good.”*

Did you catch that ending? It’s not just about working for a living, it’s about working so that we can do the good that God wants to do in the lives of the people around us. That’s the biblical teaching that is true in this often-used phrase: God does help those who help themselves, but not so that we can hoard more and more for ourselves. God helps those who help themselves so that we can help others who can’t help themselves – and that leads us to why the phrase is biblically unsound.

In Luke 10:27 Jesus said to love the Lord our God with all our heart, soul, strength, and mind and to love our neighbors as ourselves. Loving our neighbors carries with it the mandate to help our neighbors if they are in need. The fact is that some people truly cannot help themselves. Some people simply cannot “pull themselves up by their bootstraps.” They don’t have any boots. They don’t have anything. Sometimes people are in a hole so deep that they cannot climb out without help – and who is going to help them? God commands his people, His People, to take special concern for the poor, the orphan, the widow, and the needy. Let’s look at some Scriptures:

Psalm 10:14b,17-18a, *“The helpless commit themselves to you; you have been the helper of the orphan…O LORD, you will hear the desire of the meek; you will strengthen their heart, you will incline your ear to do justice for the orphan and the oppressed.”*

In Leviticus we read about God’s command to farmers to intentionally leave a portion of their crop in the fields, unharvested, so that those who need the food could come to get it. ***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.’”* (Leviticus 23:22). Everything we have has come to us from God, and we are commanded to share with those in need as a testimony to God’s generous love & grace in our lives.

James 1:27, *“True devotion, the kind that is pure and faultless before God the Father, is this: to care for orphans and widows in their difficulties.”*

Proverbs 19:17, *“Those who are gracious to the poor lend to the LORD, and the LORD will fully repay them.”*

Proverbs 21:13, *“Those who close their ears to the cries of the poor will themselves call out but receive no answer.”*

As long as we are being responsible to meet our own obligations, how many of us have discovered that the more you give, the more you have to give? That’s God’s economy. That’s God’s miraculous, gracious economy. They don’t teach that in college level economics classes. That only comes in print and in practice for those whose lives have been yielded to the LORD.

Many years ago, when we were taking trips to Camden, NJ to minister alongside the good folks at The Romero Center, we learned in very hands-on ways about the cycle of poverty. We learned how once a person is caught in the cycle of poverty, it is close to impossible for them to break out of it. The cycle of poverty is defined as the *"set of factors or events by which poverty, once started, is likely to continue unless there is outside intervention".* The cycle usually continues for at least three generations - enough time that there are no surviving ancestors who can pass on the necessary skills needed to stay out of or change their impoverished condition. What is the outside intervention that is most often on-the-job? The people of God! The Body of Christ! We must be careful not to use this phrase “God helps those who help themselves” as a way of avoiding caring for people with real economic need. Disciples of Jesus are called to help those who are in need. God, through us, helps those who can’t help themselves get to a new place of stability (financial and otherwise). Sometimes I am asked, “How long are we to do this for a family?” My answer is almost always the same, “As long as God calls us to meet the need.” Jesus said, “The poor will always be with you.” (Mark 14:7) That was true when he was here on earth and it’s certainly still true today.

But the needs of others, and ourselves sometimes, goes way beyond economic need. Sometimes we can’t help ourselves because we have descended too deeply into sin or despair. Is it our own doing? The sin part, absolutely. We may have strayed so far from God’s path for his children that we simply cannot find our way back. We are so strung out on drugs or alcohol, or completely tied up in addictions of just about any and every kind, that we cannot find our way back to the highway of holiness. Our spiritual sight has grown dim. As Ravi Zacharias says, *“Sin will take you farther than you want to go, keep you longer than you want to stay, and cost you more than you want to pay.”* Our sin can take us to a place where we are helpless to help ourselves. The church is here as a hospital for sinners. We need to help. We need to resist the temptation to give up on people because we think they are beyond help. Isaiah 59:1 declares, *“Surely the arm of the LORD is not too short to save, nor his ear too dull to hear.”*

But sometimes it’s the circumstances of our lives that take us to a place of helplessness. We just don’t want to deal for another moment with the hard realities of life. Tragically, this is the place where people often make the choice to end their lives. Good people. Productive people. Intelligent people. People who seem to have everything going for them. But all of a sudden, the darkness seems too dark and they cannot go on. The family and friends of Nathan Patterson are now having to live with the result of Nathan’s choice to end his life this past week. We ask ourselves, “What did I miss?” “Could I have prevented this?” “Why didn’t he ask for help if things were so bad?” Unfortunately, those questions go on and on and on in the lives of the survivors. It can be debilitating! If only he would have called out to the Lord and waited long enough for the Lord to answer him. The Lord would have answered him. He would have sent someone to help him work through his pain…

The truth is that God, through the Holy Spirit and through His people helps those who cannot help themselves. We read it in our call to worship: *“In my distress I called upon the Lord; to my God I cried for help. From his temple he heard my voice, and my cry to him reached his ears.”* (Psalm 18:6)

Ultimately, it all comes down to grace because the very essence of grace is that God helps those who cannot help themselves. Apart from Jesus, I can’t be saved from my sin. Apart from Jesus, none of us can be saved from our sin. But by his grace, he opens our eyes to see what he did for us on the cross, he opens our heart to receive his forgiving love, and by his grace, he saves our souls. When we are aware of the magnitude of God’s grace in our lives, that grace cannot help but flow out into the lives of others, because we know that we know that we know that in our own helplessness, God sent Jesus to set our feet on solid ground.

In May of 1999 I was preparing to take my ordination exams. I had all but finished the rigors of 4 years of seminary education, but these four exams from the denomination still stood in my way like nothing else had. I was in a dorm room still cramming for the exams the next day when God put the words of Isaiah 41:8-10 into my mind. *“But you, Israel, my servant, Jacob, whom I have chosen,
you descendants of Abraham my friend,* ***9****I took you from the ends of the earth, from its farthest corners I called you. I said, ‘You are my servant’; I have chosen you and have not rejected you.* ***10****So do not fear, for I am with you; do not be dismayed, for I am your God. I will strengthen you and help you; I will uphold you with my righteous right hand.”* Through my anguish, God gave me this Scripture and he gave me a melody to sing God’s promises back to him. The worship song, “Lord, You Have Promised Me” was born that day, and by God’s grace, the song not only got me through my ordination exams, it has also proven to help many others in times of need. When I asked Jenna Hampson what some of her favorite worship songs were, this was one of them. Jenna graduated yesterday from Shippensburg University with a Bachelor of Arts in Psychology. The road has not been easy. She has had some very difficult personal times in the midst of the coursework - the sudden death of her beloved grandfather, Jim Fogal nearly 3 years ago and the courageous decision to break off an engagement that she knew wasn’t God’s will for her.

It is true that God helps those who help themselves. We work hard, we study hard, we do what God is calling us to do, and God helps us. Jenna knows that to be true. But it is also true that God helps those who cannot help themselves in certain times of financial, physical, emotional, relational, and spiritual need. She knows that to be true too. In the middle of it all, is Grace. May the Holy Spirit help us know our part in his work of grace today in the lives of others as we seek to follow Him. And today, may those of us in need (in any way) find help and encouragement as we sing together, reminding God of his promises to his people. He will help us, he will strengthen us, he will uphold us with his victorious right hand.

*Lord, You have promised me*

*that Your right hand will take ahold of mine (repeat).*

*I need You, Lord, Oh, I need You, Lord.*

*I need Your hand to take ahold of mine.*

*I need You, Lord, Oh, I need You, Lord.*

*I need Your hand to take ahold of mine.*

*Lord, You have promised me*

*that Your right hand will take ahold of mine (repeat).*

*I trust You, Lord, Oh, I trust You, Lord.*

*I trust Your hand to take ahold of mine.*

*I trust You, Lord, Oh, I trust You, Lord.*

*I trust Your hand to take ahold of mine.*

*Lord, You have promised me*

*that Your right hand will take ahold of mine (repeat).*

*I love You, Lord, Oh, I love You, Lord.*

*Tomorrow I will love You even more.*

*I love You, Lord, Oh, I love You, Lord.*

*Tomorrow I will love You even more.*

*Lord, You have promised me*

*That Your right hand will take ahold of mine.*

Isaiah 41:8-10