

Every time I drive home from Walmart, I am confronted by a homeless man. No, he does not approach me, he doesn't even stand. He only looks up from his chair with a sign: “Homeless please help.” This request reaches me in the deepest part of my soul.

I wonder. Who is this man? How did he get here? Where is his family? What is his story? Should I help or not?

Sometimes I roll down my window and offer him a couple of dollars if I have cash. Sometimes I am unable to make eye contact at all and I pray for the light to turn green.

When we are faced with the poverty of our neighbors, so often we are uncertain about how to respond to their needs. It can be especially difficult for us to help those we don't know, those whom we have no relationship with, and yet God calls us to love and help our neighbors.

Today we continue week three in our “Sticks and Stones” the things we say sermon series. Our phrase for today is, “God Helps Those Who Help Themselves.” This is another phrase that many people attribute to the Bible, and yet, this specific phrase cannot be found there. In fact, Pastor Jeremy Bouma, shares that “one in 8 Americans believe the Bible not only teaches this, but that it says this, too.”<sup>i</sup>

Unlike the phrase “You will be in my thoughts and prayers” which is a uniquely American phrase, the phrase “God helps those who help themselves” is used all over the world.<sup>ii</sup> We all desire for people to be able to help themselves. The phrase we are studying today can be likened to the old Chinese proverb: “Give a man a fish and you feed him for a day. Teach a man to fish and you feed him for life.”<sup>iii</sup>

So where did our phrase from today come from?

Presbyterian pastor, Donny Freiderichsen, shares that people attribute the origin of this phrase to Benjamin Franklin because the book he wrote “Poor Richard's Almanack” includes this phrase.<sup>iv</sup> He goes on to share the others attribute the origin to “early Greek and Roman folklore or Aesop's fables where the version of this saying are found.”<sup>v</sup>

Some believe this phrase originated from Algernon Sidney's Discourses Concerning Government, but Freiderichsen shares that the reason this phrase is so

often used by Christians is because it showed up in a Christian commentary written by Matthew Henry.<sup>vi</sup>

Pastor Matthew Henry was a highly influential writer of his time. George Whitfield was known to read through his commentary time and time again. Historians speculate that “one reason people think this phrase is in the Bible is because Henry's writings were so thoroughly biblical, if he wrote it, it might as well be in the Bible.”<sup>vii</sup>

This phrase is used to say that people can come to a different situation in life, if they act on their own behalf. I think we say this phrase because we want to believe it. We want to believe that people can change their life situations no matter the odds. In our lives I think we can all probably name someone we know who was able to take action to get out of a bad situation. On the other side of the coin, I think we can all name someone who is unable to help themselves and needs someone to come alongside them to help support them.

In our Scripture for today, Jesus teaches us that God’s sustenance is available to everyone through their faith and that we are called to offer this sustenance to others.

In Luke 11, Jesus teaches the disciples the Lord’s Prayer. A prayer that is still relevant to our lives today. A prayer that names God is our Father, asks for God to provide for our needs, and to forgive and to protect us.

I am always struck with this particular part of the prayer: “Give us this day our daily bread” (Luke 11:3).

When Jesus teaches the disciples this part of the prayer he is showing them that God will sustain them in their physical needs. This part of the prayer is reminiscent of the manna that God rained down from heaven in the Old Testament book of Exodus 16. You may remember this Scripture where the Israelites were complaining to Moses and Aaron, saying they wished they would have stayed home instead of following Moses into the wilderness.

Then God responds by raining manna down from heaven, but there is a catch. God tells the Israelites that they must only take what they need each day and leave the rest. If they were to take any extra manna it would rot, and they would not be able to eat it. What was amazing was that God rained down manna from heaven each day, and the people were sustained.

Bread was an important part of the Israelites life. When they were fleeing Egypt they did not have enough time to let their bread rise. Then God commanded them to only eat unleavened bread during the season of Passover to remember God’s saving action upon their lives.

Bread is important to us today too. When we hear there is going to be snow in Virginia, the first thing people buy at the grocery store is milk and BREAD! We even show the importance of bread in our slang. Author R. C. Sproul remarks: “It’s interesting to me that in the language of Western culture, we sometimes speak of ...the [highest] wage earner of the home as ‘the breadwinner.’ Even in our slang, we use the word *bread* as a synonym for ‘money.’ Bread remains, at least in our language, as a powerful symbol of the rudimentary basis of provision for our needs.”<sup>viii</sup>

As we read further in our Scripture from Luke 11, Jesus speaks more about bread. Jesus tells the parable about a man, who in the middle of the night, goes and asks for three loaves of bread from his neighbor. This man had unexpected company and he was not able to provide for their needs, so in the tradition of the time, he asked his neighbor for help.

Well his neighbor is in bed and basically says, “It is late, leave me alone.” But the man is persistent and finally the neighbor relents and gives him the bread. Then we hear the very familiar scripture:

“Ask, and it will be given to you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you. <sup>10</sup>For everyone who asks receives, and everyone who searches finds, and for everyone who knocks, the door will be opened” (Luke 11:9-10).

Here again we hear Jesus telling us about God’s provision for our lives. That God will take care of us. Then to drive his point Jesus asks some pointed questions:

“<sup>11</sup>Is there anyone among you who, if your child asks for a fish, will give a snake instead of a fish? <sup>12</sup>Or if the child asks for an egg, will give a scorpion? <sup>13</sup>If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!”<sup>ix</sup>

God gives us all we need, but like the Israelites it is easy to live with the mindset of scarcity. Do we have enough? I think this is why it is hard to give to our neighbors in need. We may wonder if I give them something this time, will they ask me again? Will I be able to continually provide for their needs?

Yet, God calls us to care for our neighbors the same way that God cares for us. The truth is sometimes our neighbors are not able to help themselves. This inability to pull themselves up by their bootstraps could be because they are going through a difficult illness, or because they have experienced a loss. It could be because they are going through addiction or depression. It is true, sometimes our neighbors cannot help themselves and when this happens, we are called to act.

In her book, “Everything Happens for a Reason and Other Lies I’ve Loved,” Kate Bowler shares about how her friends took action while she was in shock about her cancer diagnosis. They even helped her when she had strange requests. One of the requests she made to her friend was to burn the dress she was wearing when she found out she had cancer. She no longer wanted this symbol of her old life. So, without question, her friend took her dress and burned it.<sup>x</sup> Now that is a good friend! Kate was unable to help herself, but her friend’s actions provided her much needed peace.

We can help provide for the needs of our neighbors when we recognize that we already have all the bread we need, because we have the bread of life, Jesus Christ.

In the nativity story, we hear how Jesus Christ was laid in a wooden manger in the town of Bethlehem which means “house of bread.” The Savior of the world was placed in a wooden manger to be the bread of life for the world.

He used this bread the night before he died to symbolize that his body would be broken for the sins of the world. Christ gave his life for us so that we could continue to be sustained in our relationship with God.

**The good news for our lives today is God is still offering us the bread of life and providing for our needs.** We are called to do likewise. Like the request of the man to his neighbor, we too are called to share our resources with our neighbors who have none.

We have an incredible opportunity this coming Thursday to offer literal and spiritual bread to those who are hungry. To remind them that God is still providing

for their needs each and every day, to remind them that they are cared for by the people of God.

One of the things I love the most about My Brother’s Table is that I get to sit down and hear the stories of those who come, those who are hungry. When we sit down at a table with our brothers and sisters in Christ, we find that we have more commonalities than differences. We find that people have suffered great loss and great pain. In the sharing of stories over the breaking of bread, we find that God is still at work.

One of the most moving moments for me the last time we did this ministry was to sit down beside a young man who came in with his two friends. He knew the Bible backwards and forwards, he was involved in a church community in town who welcomed him with open arms. Even in his difficult circumstances he still knew that God loved him. I went there expected to give the love of God to those who attended, but he embodied God’s love to me through his welcoming spirit.

May we continue to care for one another and share the excess of God’s provision in our lives and may we continue to journey with those who cannot help themselves. In the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> <https://www.biblegateway.com/blog/2017/06/did-you-know-the-saying-god-helps-those-who-help-themselves-isnt-in-the-bible/>

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<sup>iii</sup> <https://quoteinvestigator.com/2015/08/28/fish/>

<sup>iv</sup> <http://www.reformation21.org/blog/2018/05/god-helps-those-who-help-thems.php>

<sup>v</sup> Ibid.

<sup>vi</sup> Ibid.

<sup>vii</sup> Ibid.

<sup>viii</sup> <https://www.ligonier.org/blog/what-does-give-us-day-our-daily-bread-mean/>

<sup>ix</sup> Luke 11: 9-13

<sup>x</sup> Kate Bowler. “Everything Happens for a Reason and Other Lives I’ve Loved.” Random House Publishing. New York: New York. 2018. P. 11.