

SERMON: God Helps Those Who Help Themselves?

TEXT: Psalm 10:12-18

“Help! I need somebody. Help! Not just anybody. Help! You know I need someone. Help! When I was younger - so much younger than today - I never needed anybody’s help, in any way. But now these days are gone; I’m not so self assured. Now, I find I’ve changed my mind. I’ve opened up the doors. But now my life has changed in oh so many ways. My independence seems to vanish in the haze. But every now and then I feel so insecure. I know that I just need you like I’ve never done before. Help me if you can, I’m feeling down. And I do appreciate you being ‘round. Help me get my feet back on the ground. Won’t you please, please help me? Help me! Help me!”

I’m fairly certain that no matter what generation you’re from, you recognize these words as the lyrics to the song called, *Help!* by the Beatles. "*Help!*" served as the title song for both the 1965 film and its soundtrack album. It was also released as a single, and was number one for three weeks in both the United

States and the United Kingdom. In 2004, "*Help!*" was ranked number 29 on Rolling Stone's list of "The 500 Greatest Songs of All Time".

According to the website, genius.com, "John Lennon [was] very open and honest about the song's meaning: *Most people think it's just a fast rock and roll song. Subconsciously, I was crying out for help. I didn't realize it at the time. I just wrote the song because I was commissioned to write it for the movie.*"

If my grandmother had ever met John Lennon, she wouldn't have known who he was, nor cared. But she wouldn't have hesitated to tell him to get a haircut and to advise him that, "God helps those who help themselves."

These were words to live by for my grandmother, and she truly was a strong, independent woman. Furthermore, she is in good company for her generation, as well as generations of people younger than she, who value this ideal highly.

According to the book, *Half Truths*, by Adam Hamilton, "A survey by the Barna Group, a Christian polling firm, found that better than 8 in 10 Americans think "God helps those who help themselves" is in the Bible. In fact, more than half of [survey] respondents were strongly convinced that this is one of the major messages of Scripture."

On the contrary, especially in the Psalms, we see repeated cries to God for help. One of my Bibles at home is called, *The Spiritual Formation Bible*, and it is designed to help readers "listen for a word from God" for our own lives. In the introduction to the book of Psalms it says, "The life of prayer, like life itself, is not always happy and peaceful. Into prayer we take our anxieties, loneliness and discouragement along with our joy, awe and celebration. In order to deepen any intimate relationship, we must be honest about our feelings... The book of Psalms demonstrates such honest prayer.. As we read we share the psalmists' loneliness, sickness, grief and dread. We experience with them the ups and downs of their genuine spiritual journeys."

Let's hear again the passage from Psalm 10, which is a good example of such honest prayer, as well as a clear petition for help. *"Rise up, O Lord; O God, lift up your hand; do not forget the oppressed. Why do the wicked renounce God, and say in their hearts, 'You will not call us to account'? But you do see! Indeed you note trouble and grief, that you may take it into your hands; the helpless commit themselves to you; you have been the helper of the orphan. Break the arm of the wicked and evildoers; seek out their wickedness until you find none. The Lord is king forever and ever; the nations shall perish from his land. 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, so that those from earth may strike terror no more."*

Furthermore, today's gospel lesson from Matthew lifts up two stories where people from all walks of life come to Jesus for help. One is a leader of the synagogue, who kneels before Jesus, saying, "My daughter has just died; but come and lay your hand on her, and she will live." The other is a woman who had been

suffering from hemorrhages for twelve years. She reached out to touch just the fringe of the cloak Jesus was wearing, believing, "If I only touch his cloak, I will be made well."

Even for those who are afraid or unable to ask or to reach out for help, we can be assured, as Jesus assured Zacchaeus, "For the Son of Man came to seek out and to save the lost." (Luke 19:10)

We cannot save ourselves. We cannot earn our way into heaven. Not by obedience or faith. Not with large financial contributions to the church. Not with the time we volunteer and not with our skills and talents. We are saved only by Jesus, who was obedient to God and sacrificed himself for us. It's why he died. It's the meaning of grace. Unearned and undeserved.

But we live in a world that tends to shame us for needing help. "Just pull yourself up by your bootstraps," we're told. But I read in a blog that this expression makes no sense. "You can't physically pull yourself up by your bootstraps. Go ahead: put on

some boots, grab the straps, and try to pull yourself off the ground: You won't manage to "*pull yourself up*" in any meaningful sense because gravity is a thing.... You need help, which makes "pull yourself up by your bootstraps" a nonsense expression on a literal level. But the *idea* [of the expression] —that a lone individual can succeed through their own work, with no help from anyone else—is also fiction. You can't pull yourself up by your bootstraps, and thinking you can is fantasy." (Justin Pot, "You Can't Pull Yourself Up By Your Bootstraps, zapier.com, December 3, 2021)

Years ago, my brother-in-law was suffering from severe depression and insomnia, and he could barely function. We were visiting that summer, and one of us suggested that we all go out for ice cream. I remember watching as my sister asked him if he'd like to go along. It was his favorite ice cream place, but he couldn't decide. It sounds silly, I know. Who says "no" to ice cream? But if someone had offered him a thousand dollars at that moment, he still would not have been able to make such a simple

decision. His struggle was genuine and heartbreaking to witness. He needed help.

Unfortunately, in our ignorance about mental illness, we might make the mistake of saying or thinking, "God helps those who help themselves." Just get out of bed. Just go outside. Just take a walk in the sunshine. Just have some ice cream. Just snap out of it. It's hard for us to understand that it is JUST not that easy.

For those who are mentally well, it can still be tempting to expect God to do it all. I know you've probably heard the story of the man who was trapped in his house during a flood. A rescue truck came by, a boat came by, a helicopter came by, but the man had been praying for God to help and insisted on waiting for God. In this example there is some truth in the old adage, "God helps those who help themselves."

Finally, when we refuse to accept help from another, we are robbing the helper of the joy and the opportunity to serve. A friend of mine recently spoke of this very thing. Helping is one of her spiritual gifts, and she not only wants to help others, she *needs* to help others. This is how she fulfills her calling from God.

GOD HELPS THOSE WHO HELP THEMSELVES? No. It's not in the Bible. And it's not a helpful message. We need never be ashamed to ask God for help. And we need one another. We belong to one another as children of God. And we are called to help each other. May we believe it and live it... to the glory of God!

AMEN