

God Helps Those Who...

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Scripture: Romans 10:1-13

“God Helps those who help themselves.” One of the best-known verses in the Bible. You’ll find it in 2 Hezekiah, chapter nil verse naught. (Not our text today.)

I hope every one of you knows I’m joking. But it’s no laughing matter when a common fallacy sums up the exact mindset which prevents so many people from enjoying new life in Christ, life from above. Jesus freely gave His life on the cross so that people could recite pabulum like this in times of trouble?

And remember Martin Luther, that good Catholic monk and doctor, professor of theology, whose desire to see Christ’s Church again reflect something of Jesus and whose main sin was that he feared God more than he feared men and institutions and their threats? Martin Luther, whose courage and spiritual acuity and faithfulness to God we celebrate today on Reformation Sunday—Martin Luther risked his career, his freedom, his life, for this sort of gospel? Please.

[I am convinced that we today cannot, however hard we try, even begin to understand the terror which compelled Luther to hammer up his “95 Theses” on the door of the Wittenburg Cathedral October 31, 1517. We cannot begin to understand because there’s not one person in Orange County today who takes as seriously the question “Are you justified?” or the prospect of living separated from God forever if we don’t live a more “holy life;” or the terrors of the torments of hell as Luther and most Europeans in 1517 did. A pale, thin, shadow of a comparison might be the feeling of those Shearson-Lehman employees, traders and secretaries and mail sorters alike, who were one day on top of the world and the next day unemployed and carrying out their belongings onto the street in boxes—aware that there would soon

be thousands of others, like them, looking for jobs which no longer exist. Or when one hears from her beloved husband of 26 years, “I’m sorry, but this morning I’ve filed for divorce. I’m moving out this afternoon.” But Luther had all eternity in mind.]

Luther is justly famous for his efforts to reform the medieval Catholic Church; one summary of his vast output of brilliant theology was “**sola fide, sola gratia, sola Scriptura.**” We are saved thru faith in Christ alone, by God’s grace alone, the truth of which we comprehend thru the Bible alone (as opposed to the teaching of the Church).

This summary may sound nice in church, but it collides head on with one truth of human nature: we would all prefer to pay our own way, feel good about ourselves. “Help ourselves.” We do not want to receive “charity” or live on spiritual welfare, thank you, even from God. Every religion I know, including those who mistakenly try to make our Christian faith into a “religion,” provide ways in which we humans may, by acts of virtue and piety and self-denial, ascend to the Higher Result with God. The five pillars of Islam; working the eight-fold path of Buddhism to be past suffering; the Hindu struggles of merits and demerits thru the eons for each being to ascend the karmic ladder to Nirvana; as we heard, the call of Moses to Judaism to “do these things and so to live by them”—obey the Law. In each case: we embrace the tenets, we follow the rules, we change our lives and our behavior and we climb up the holy ladder from humanity toward God—and so we earn God’s favor, we become more lovable or more worthy; we deserve the prize. We help ourselves.

Jesus came to teach us something radically different. God helps those who give up.

I grew up not far from San Francisco, and

I'm sure many of you have visited the City. Maybe you've ridden on a cable car (I doubt they still let you hang onto a pole and dangle out over the street, but that sure was a highlight for a young boy.) Maybe you've been to the sun-splendored heights, to look down on the fog and the smog and the bustle and the skyscrapers and the Golden Gate Bridge and Treasure Island and Alcatraz and across to Tiburon and Oakland. It's glorious up there!

Do you know why cable cars came into use in San Francisco? Right: because of the steep hills. A century ago major cities had horse-drawn streetcars and cobblestone streets; nobody had cars. But in San Francisco the hills are so steep and the roads so slick the horses hadn't enough strength and couldn't get enough traction to pull up the streetcars.

Engineers came up with an ingenious solution: bypass the horses. They built powerhouses and from them steel cables which still, on the tourist route, continuously loop around under the cable cars, which are equipped with grabbers/"grips" which reach down under the street surface to grab onto the continuously moving cable. The car has no motor of its own—it "grabs" onto the cable. Then the whole car and all the riders get a free ride up to the top.

How do you get to the top? How do you rise above the anxieties, the vicissitudes and challenges of a very imperfect life in this world? How do you define yourself, ultimately? What will be written on your tombstone? How do you spend your time, your energies? From where or Whom does your security, your fulfillment, your motivation, your "marching orders," your life-map, your hope, your peace come?

"God helps those who help themselves."

Oh, I hope there are none of you left in these pews who live this way. (But we all tend to forget. If you needed a reminder, just go ahead.) Go ahead, all you who want God to help you after you've done the heavy lifting. Keep struggling along with all the other "religious" folks, along with those who look down upon "church" and turn instead to self-help and therapy and mood-stabilizing prescription drugs and a vague "spirituality." Go ahead; spend

your time trying to make more money to buy more security; trying to work out more to look better, keep trying even harder to not disappoint the ones you love. Go ahead; keep struggling to leave your shame and your heart-breaks and your bad habits and your broken dreams behind; keep trying to entertain and amuse yourself so those wounds don't seem so deep, don't keep getting you down. Keep tidying up your apartment down there in the gloom and fog of Market Street, keep trying all your life to pretend you didn't really want to see the glorious view from above, didn't want to live in the glorious Kingdom anyway.

Go ahead and spend your time and energy trying to polish those horseshoes so God will be more pleased with you; so you can become worthy of the heights of heaven. Go ahead, keep beating those horses with guilt and condemnation and threats and fear. Go ahead, all you who think that's a workable strategy. Go ahead, if you thought this was the Christian faith.

To you and to me, Jesus says, "Stop. Rest. Do you not know how much I love you? Will you not be still long enough to allow Me to reach out to embrace you?"

How we all long to rest in the Presence of His Holy Spirit; how ridiculous and how self-defeating we all know is this frantic vision of life—yet we keep pursuing it. No one in our time is living a life flagellating away his impure thoughts for fear of everlasting hell, as Luther did for years. But here's the irony: all his life of self-deprivation only taught him that no amount of self-deprivation would ever make him pious enough. No amount of praying and fasting could ever get him up the hill to the fresh air. The harder he tried the more discouraged he became.

Just so, we share in the irony. Many of us work long hours competing in commerce, and still only become more aware of all those beautiful homes larger than ours. We twist our psyche into pretzels to try to please those around us, only to find they don't love us the way we would like anyway, and the harder we try the more surely they tune us out. We practice at holiness, only to discover that the life of prayer and communion with

God recedes before us, the harder we try. If this is our understanding of Christianity, we are only aiding and abetting the confusion and playacting and pain.

Luther learned all this down to the depths of his being, because he applied himself so rigorously. He was scared almost to death, and after years of this sort of torment he finally concluded that the distance from us sinful persons to a holy and righteous God is infinite. However hard we work our religion, however mercilessly we beat the horses, we can't get there from here.

“Wretched man that I am! Who shall set me free from the body of this death? Thanks be to God thru Christ Jesus our Lord!” [Romans 7:24-25]

In his desperate battle with the demons, Luther stumbled over the gospel of Jesus Christ. “Christ is the end of the Law!” Our failure in being perfect brings us to Him, to His mercy. Our failure to obey the Law brings us death; Christ brings us into eternal life.

“God helps those who give up!”

God helps those who give up on our own efforts and throw ourselves headlong into the arms of His mercy.

If I miss this element of “giving up” on my own prospects, all my learning and Bible Study and nice behavior self-denial and praying will lead only to further frustration. My “giving up” is not for its own sake, but in order to allow the renewing love of God in Christ to enter into me and change me.

(Apart from Jesus, “giving up” on my life is merely spiritual suicidal. A vague if benign “love of God” is never the same as the gospel of Jesus the Christ. When times are easy and the mortgage is paid and the kids are getting straight A's and I'm good with my wife, “the love of God” might do. But when the storms come, when my portfolio crashes and the kids go AWOL and the dog dies and I get weary even of trying to do the right thing, the generic “love of God” doesn't help much. God has come to this earth in Jesus; His love is the most sure peg in all the world on which to hang our hopes and our doubts and our disappointments. The one God over every nation, every religion, has

spoken surely in the living Word, Jesus the Christ.)

[Apart from Jesus, how would we truly know God? Breathe quietly and become more self-aware? No telling who or what we find in the center of our own awareness. Measure the scope of the galaxies, which would tell us the Creator is capable of vast things—but how then would we know the Creator is love? How ever would we apprehend or experience the timeless, transcendent, omniscient One who is Spirit?]

Luther uncovered a particular irony of the Protestant variety: instead of falling short in our efforts to obey the Law, what if we discovered we fall short in this new one thing we need: our ability to trust in God? (Apart from the assurance of the Spirit and the grace of God the demons will have us doubt our ability even to “grasp the cable” or to manufacture the faith necessary to lay hold of the grace of God.)

Yet God means for even our trust to be His gift to us—we are incapable of manufacturing it. So we give up on this, too, and depend upon the grace of God to supply our faith, our belief, our hanging in there with Him—our trust—for us. The love of God in Christ means no anxiety; no worries in the life of faith. God freely supplies it all to those who will “give up” and receive it all: the inexhaustible power, the ever-looping cable, even the strength for the gripper.

The radical insight of Luther brings up one more question: what about our “works,” what about the result of our trusting in God? Jesus asks us to give up our own life for His sake, if we want to be His disciple, in order to gain His greater life. But our trusting relationship with Him is not an end in itself. “Faith without works is dead,” says the Scripture, even if it is from James.

Paul explains, “Christ is the end of the Law *so that* there may be righteousness for everyone who believes.” [10:4] Our following the Law, our achievement, our obedience is the *result*, never the cause, of our trusting in Jesus—the ability and the perseverance and the power to obey the Holy Spirit and to live as disciples of Jesus in the Kingdom of God come as gifts. (My word: had these benefits come as a result of obedience to

the Law, Paul wouldn't have needed Jesus! He of all people could have saved himself a world of trouble—yet he of all people knew what it means that “everyone who calls upon the name of the Lord shall be saved.” Not “everyone who follows the Law really fastidiously will be saved.”) We can't get up there from down here by our scrambling or being preoccupied with being “good”—however desperate, however well-intentioned. We cannot cause God to love us.

Jesus expects our faith to lead to a new kind of life, including a life of obedience to His present Holy Spirit. If not, we're only kidding ourselves about what we say we believe or whom we pretend to trust. (Jesus commends the Roman centurion, among others, not for his passiveness, not for his theological learning—but because the Roman acted upon his faith and went out on a limb trusting that Jesus would cure his ailing son.) To live a life of quiet indifference is not pleasing to God whether we're Catholic or Protestant (or Orthodox or Pentecostal or Charismatic) or anything else. Every disciple of Christ is called upon to bear fruit.

The question is whether we strive to do good works in order for God to love us, or because we trust we are loved and that we have been restored by God who loves us anyway. Perhaps a subtle distinction—but it makes a lot of difference whether we live our life out of guilt or gratitude, fear or fulfillment. At first, when the ground is fairly level, the difference seems insignificant, whether we start walking on those cobblestones up the hill or whether we grab onto the cable. At first, we feel better providing our own ride, pulling our own way. But we will never make it above the fog; we will never make it out of this world alive if we insist on pulling our own way.

[“For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God—not the result of works, so that no one may boast. For we are what He has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life.” [Ephesians 2:8-9]

I know our American predisposition toward self-sufficiency is to try to produce, to climb, to

“deserve” our way upward. In many situations this is a fine strategy. But sometimes we need to loosen our grip, relax our pace, and let down our guard. Sometimes we need to allow Jesus to embrace us rather than crashing the Kingdom Party by our pugnacious efforts and our overachieving discipline and zeal.

Sometimes what we need to do is give up and be still and rest in our Lord Jesus.

Brennan Manning tells this story (I'm sorry; I know a few of you have heard it.) Once upon a time there was a young Jewish boy named Mordecai, whose parents had dedicated him to the Lord. He grew up to be a fine boy, well loved and plenty curious. In fact Mordecai grew up to be quite rambunctious. He loved the world; he loved climbing the trees and playing in the meadows and swimming in the lake during the days, and dreaming at night. As he grew older, his parents sat him down to tell him it was time for him to settle down and go to the synagogue to learn the word of God. But the day came for him to go, and still he kept swimming in the lake and climbing in the trees and playing in the meadow.

His pious parents were distressed and embarrassed when they knew all the village was aware that Mordecai had not shown up at the synagogue. They sat him down for another talking to, but could not change his ways. They were at a great loss until one day the Great Rabbi came passing thru their village. He was such a large, gruff man they were afraid to leave their little Mordecai alone with him. But they had no other hope. It was for his own good.

“Leave the boy with me,” barked this lion of a man. Frightened, Mordecai's parents did so, and left. “Boy, come here,” the Rabbi commanded the trembling youngster. Mordecai walked slowly to the Great Rabbi, who leaned down and scooped him up, holding him silently against his heart.

The next day Mordecai went back to the trees and the meadow and the lake—but this time it was after he had been in the synagogue to learn the word of God. The young boy kept his untamed spirit, so the word of God came alive in him. Mordecai grew up to become a great man

who helped many, many people. When they asked, he said, "I first learned the word of God when the Great Rabbi held me silently against His heart."

Romans 10:1-13

Brothers and sisters, my heart's desire and prayer to God for them is that they may be saved. I can testify that they have a zeal for God, but it is not enlightened. For, being ignorant of the righteousness that comes from God, and seeking to establish their own, they have not submitted to God's righteousness. For Christ is the end of the law so that there may be righteousness for everyone who believes.

Moses writes concerning the righteousness that comes from the law, that "the person who does these things will live by them." But the righteousness that comes from faith says, "Do not say in your heart, 'Who will ascend into heaven?'" (that is, to bring Christ down)" or 'Who will descend into the abyss?'" (that is, to bring Christ up from the dead).

But what does it say? "The word is near you, on your lips and in your heart" (that is, the word of faith that we proclaim); because if you confess with your lips that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For one believes with the heart and so is justified, and one confesses with the mouth and so is saved. The scripture says, "No one who believes in him will be put to shame." For there is no distinction between Jew and Greek; the same Lord is Lord of all and is generous to all who call on him. For, "Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved."

In one of *Luther's images*, "A wavering heart that does not firmly [trust in the grace of God] will certainly get nothing, because God cannot give it anything, much as He would like to. Such a heart is like a vessel a man holds in his hands...but constantly moves it to and fro. It will be impossible to pour anything into it...so it is with a wavering, unbelieving heart. God would like to give what we need. But there we stand, like a foolish beggar, holding out our hat for gifts and yet not holding it still." [*Foundations of the Christian Faith*, IVP, James M. Boice, p 453]

I have no idea what may be holding you back, and unless you choose to tell me I don't need to know—I know of one more huge obstacle to us church people who feel frustrated by the Christian life. Our prayer doesn't seem lively; the talk doesn't match our walk. We think we're doing everything we can, but still the power of God seems to elude us. We're tired, defeated. (Tempted maybe even to try a different path of faith, except that we know it is Jesus who has the words of eternal life.)

This is an imaginary account, from the late Dietrich Bonhoeffer, of a pastor's conversation with a young Christian. "I have lost the faith I once had," laments the parishioner. "You must listen to the Word as it is spoken to you in the sermon," the pastor counters. "I do," protested the young man, "but I cannot get anything out of it. It just falls on [my] deaf ears." "The trouble is, you don't really want to listen," responds the pastor again. And again, the man insists he indeed does want to hear.

At this point in the conversation, too often the pastor throws in the towel, leaves the poor man to his fate, and gives up...what more can be said? But Bonhoeffer notes, "This ought to be the turning point of the interview. The pastor should give up arguing with him, and stop taking his difficulties seriously. That will be in the [fellow's] best interest, because he is only trying to hide behind this [excuse]. It's now time for the pastor to take the bull by the horns and say, "Only those who obey believe... You are disobedient, and you are trying to keep some part of your life under your own control. That is what is preventing you from listening to Christ and trusting in His grace. You cannot hear Christ because you are being willfully disobedient. Somewhere in your heart you are refusing to listen to His call. Your difficulty is your sin. Tear yourself away from all other attachments and follow Him." [quoted in *Christian Doctrine*, Shirley Guthrie, John Knox Press, p 326]

Lord knows, I have my hands full tearing myself away from all other attachments and following Him.