**Bumper Sticker Theology - Week 2**

**God Helps Those Who Help Themselves**

**Introduction**The absolute cutest and the funniest people in the whole world are little kids! They don’t even try and they are cute and funny! Think about all the effort we put into trying to look good and trying to be interesting - kids don’t even try and we think they are adorable. Here are some examples of little kids not even trying and they are cute and adorable…

(This is where I got these kids quotes - <https://www.huffingtonpost.com/2015/05/01/funny-kid-quotes-littlehoots_n_7190880.html> I think we should use the following but add our own cute pictures of kids we ask the creative team to find)

* This is from Owen, age 5 explaining to his mom why he was barefoot: ***“When I was in the backyard, my socks fell off and went over the fence!”* (with pic)**
* This is Gabriel, age 4 telling his dad why his eye hurts: ***“Ow! My eye! I didn’t know where my hand was going. I thought it wanted to rest behind my head but it wanted to poke me in the eye!”* (with pic)**
* This is Sophia age 3 just keeping it real: ***“Mommy, I’m not joking. I’m not kidding. I’m not playing. I need chocolate!”* (with pic)**

Little kids can be so cute and so funny! But the one thing that is true of every child as they move from being a toddler to a little kid is that they want to “Do it myself.” All of them want to prove they can do it themselves…

* They want to dress themselves.
* They want to feed themselves.
* They want to do whatever they possibly can ALL by themselves.

I remember when our youngest Caleb was as toddler. It was getting late and we were ready to go to bed, so we poked our heads into his room. We could hear him saying something in his sleep; as we walked into his room and leaned over his bed, we could hear him mumbling, “Self, self, self…I can do it myself.” **(377 words)**

**Do It Myself**

This desire “to do it myself” starts very young. If you have kids or neices/nephews or are around little kids you know at times they can be defiantly independent. Yes, it starts when we are very young; but the truth is, we continue to place a very high value on “doing it myself” even when we grow up!

* We want to make it vocationally – all by myself!
* We want to make it financially – all by myself!
* And it’s something uniquely American – we celebrate the stories and we congratulate ourselves for all the times we pulled ourselves up by our own bootstraps and to make it happen!

When the great French philosopher Alexis de Tocqueville came to America to observe our culture he noticed this “rugged individualism.” As an outsider he described Americans as, ***“…each of them withdrawn into himself is almost unaware of the fate of the rest. Mankind, for him, consists in his children and his personal friends. As for the rest of his fellow citizens, they are near enough, but he does not notice them. He touches them but feels nothing. He exists in and for himself…”*** (Alexis de Tocqueville. *Democracy in America,* New York: Anchor, 1969)[[1]](#footnote-1)

**Bumper Sticker - “God helps those who help themselves”**

And that brings us back to the series that we are in, Bumper Sticker Theology. We place such a big value on independence and doing it ourselves that it when someone says, **“God helps those who help themselves”** we are all inclined to nod with agreement! And this series was born out of a realization that much of what is commonly thought to be good theology (belief about God and God’s word) are not actually based on what is in God’s word, the Bible, our truth source. Sometimes, it’s actually just based on popular thinking; things likely to be found on a bumper sticker! So every week we are asking, “Is this Biblically sound or does this just sound Biblical?” Today’s Bumper Sticker Saying: “God helps those who help themselves.”

Now, I’m not going to embarrass any of us by asking for a show of hands, but the vast majority of Americans belive that **“God helps those who help themselves”** is in the Bible.

* The Barna Research Group did a survey and found that 7 out of 10 people think this is a quote from the Bible. 68% of Christians, and 75% of Americans as a whole, look at this saying and say, “Yep, that is in the Bible!” (George Barna, Boiling Point: How Coming Cultural Shifts will Change Your Life, Regal Books, 2001\, pg. 60.)[[2]](#footnote-2)

And since we believe it, we say it, “**God helps those who help themselves”**...but why? Why do we say it?

* I think sometimes we say “**God helps those who help themselves”** because we somehow believe that we made it all on our own! And if others would just do what we did – they would be ok too. Completely ignoring how much help and how blessed we are.
* Or at times I believe it gets said so that we don’t have to feel responsible for helping others. “**God helps those who help themselves”** clearly lets us off the hook. They would not be in the situation they are in if they would have taken the intiative to help themselves!
* Occassionaly, we say, “**God helps those who help themselves”** out of frustration with people who are lazy and have take advantage of the system.

But the origins of this saying started way before there were bumper stickers or cars to put them on. We have to go all the way back to Greek mythology in the 5th century B.C. There is a line in a story by Aesop where a character prayed to the Greek God Hercules for help and Hercules responds with a charge to get to work because ***“The gods help them that help themselves.”***

Credit for the phrase coming into the American consiousness has to be given to Ben Franklin. “**God helps those who help themselves”** first appeared in America in 1736 in Ben Franklin’s *Poor Richard’s Almanac*, and it’s been part of the American thinking ever since.

Now, that explains why it is in the American consciousness, but why do so many Christians think it’s also in the Bible? It does sound similar to what Paul says in 2 Thessalonians 3:6-12. Particularly in verse 10 where he says, ***“For even when we were with you, we gave you this rule: ‘The one who is unwilling to work shall not eat.’”*** (2 Thessalonians 3:10)To understand what Apostle Paul is saying, we need to understand the context in which he was writing. Back then, church communities had a kind of common fund (similar to a benevolence fund) that everyone shared and would have access to and use as needed. In this situation, they had some people that were slacking in their own work, not contributing to the common fund and just totally relying on the efforts of others. So Paul calls them out in this verse.

* Paul is NOT saying, “Everybody has to go out there and pull yourself up by your own bootstraps and make it all on your own!” No!
* Paul IS setting up some healthy boundaries by saying, “It’s a good thing for us to help each other out when we are down – we should do that! But this is not an excuse for not working. If you don’t work when you could work, then you don’t eat!”

**What does the Bible Say?**

So, if they Bible doesn’t say **“God helps those who help themselves”;** and God’s mandate is not about “Self, self, I will do it myself”, what does the Bible say about who God helps and how God helps?

I think one of the best places to start is chapter 31 in the book of Proverbs. The writer is recounting the sage advice of his mother. Think of the chapter as one long, *“My mom always says…”* In the first few lines of chapter 31 it says, “My mom always said…

* “…good leaders don’t chase after women.”
* “…good leaders don’t drink too much.”
* “…good leaders don’t numb their feelings”

And then it gets to verses 8 & 9 and mom says this:

* ***“Make sure you speak out on behalf of those who have no voice and defend all those who have been passed over.”*** (Proverbs 31:8)
* ***“Make sure to open your mouth, judge fairly, and stand up for the rights of the afflicted and the poor.”*** (Proverbs 31:9)

Now there are lots of places where they Bible calls us to “be still” or “be slow to speak” or “to listen for the whisper of of God.” but for those of us who like to talk… Got any people here who LIKE to talk? This is for you!! Twice in as many sentences, God urges us to say something, to speak out loud, to open our mouths about those in need.

Jim Wallis, the President and Founder of Sojourners, tells the story of the early days in the founding of his organization that speaks out for those who can’t speak out for themselves:

***“One of our first activities was to find every verse of scripture about the poor, wealth and poverty, and social justice. We found more than 2,000 texts that we then cut out of an old Bible. When we looked at the Bible without those verses we were left with a Bible full of holes...”*** - Jim Wallace, Founder of Sojourners

A casual reading of the Bible makes it clear that God cares for those who are vulnerable. There are those around us who need an advocate; who need our voice. And perhaps it’s because they don’t have a voice or because they’re shouting as loud as they can - but no one is listening.

I’m reminded of a speaker we had here at COMMUNITY a few years ago who had directed an amazing documentary titled, “Among the Discarded.” He’d spent a month living on Skid row in Los Angeles with the homeless community. In this film he recounted that surprisingly the most difficult thing to endure was the psychological effect of people walking by without acknowledgment. The hardest part of that experience was being passed over, ignored, discarded over and over again. He said that within the first few days it was devastatingly impactful to his self esteem!

Not only is it not true **“God helps those who help themselves”,** but I believe God is asking each of us to speak out, to open our mouth, to stand up for those who can’t help themselves - the voiceless, the passed over, the poor, the oppressed and the needy because they matter to him.

It’s also important to note God is calling us to “judge fairly” and I think that means we’re supposed to look beyond just the face value. When we see someone struggling in poverty or experiencing homelessness, we don’t just see them as the sum total of their bad choices but also understand the influences beyond their control that contribute to the situation.

In Malcolm Gladwell’s book Outliers, he tells a number of stories that all have one thing in common: advantage is accumulated. Gladwell says, ***“…those who are successful in other words.. are most likely to be given the kinds of special opportunities that lead to further success”*.** – Malcom Gladwell, Outliers

One of my favorite examples is about how someone becomes a great hockey player. It’s skill, right? Along with lots of hard work and effort, correct? Well, it turns out that in any elite group of hockey players -

* 40% of the players will have been born between January and March.
* 30% percent between April and June.
* 20% percent between July and September.
* 10% between October and December.

Why? Why are 40% of all truly great hockey players born between January and February? Gladwell continues, **“*The explanation for this is quite simple. It has nothing to do with astrology, nor is there anything magical about the first three months of the year. It’s simply that in Canada the eligibility cutoff for age-class hockey is January 1. A boy who turns ten on January 2 then could be playing alongside someone who doesn’t turn ten until the end of that year - and at that age, in preadolescence, a twelve month gap in age represents an enormous difference in physical maturity”*** – Malcom Gladwell, Outliers

Now, this example might seem silly, but if something as simple as the month in which someone is born could be the difference in who becomes a successful hockey star or not; how much more might mental illness, socio-economic background or race increase or decrease access to what Gladwell calls, *“…the special opportunities that lead to further success.”*

I want you to just think about some of these other outlier stats; how they might they impact someone’s success or not; and that perhaps there are people who need our voice.

* How might the fact that 25% of the homeless population suffers from mental illness influence their ability to obtain stable housing when the national average for mental illness is closer to 6%.
* Would we judge those incarcerated differently if we were aware of the 2010 University of Chicago study, which discovered 60% of young men who had been in foster care in Illinois, Iowa and Wisconsin had been convicted of a crime compared to the 10% of young men who had never been in foster care.
* If 92% of homeless mothers have experienced severe physical and/or sexual violence at some point in their lives how does that impact further success? How does it impact the future success of their children? (Brown and Bassuk, 1997)
* Might we see prostitutes differently if we knew 80% of those in prostitution were sexually assaulted as children.

Judging fairly means we recognize there are factors beyond simply pulling ourselves up by our own bootstraps that influence outcomes both positively and negatively. Judging fairly means we recognize we didn’t do it on our own and neither will others!

**Truth: God Helps Those Who Can’t Help Themselves**

Stepping into the call God has to help those who can’t help themselves is hard and often messy. And we have to understand that our participation doesn’t begin at the point where we start helping other people. Our participation in the story of God helping those who can’t help themselves began when God helped me…and God helped you. Never forget: while you were far, far from God, he chased after you. When your relationship was broken with him, God provided a way back. I think 1 John 3:17 (MSG) says it so beautifully:

***“This is how we’ve come to understand and experience love: Christ sacrificed his life for us.” -*** 1 John 3:16

God helped me, when I couldn’t help myself. He sent Jesus to create a way for us to find our way back to God. He sent people into my life to point me towards him. He pursued me until I was found. This is how each of us come to understand and experience love. Let that sink in. This is how we’ve come to understand and experience love: Christ sacrificed his life for us. God helped me, when I couldn’t help myself.

And because God helped me, someone who couldn’t help myself John goes on to say: ***This is why we ought to live sacrificially for our fellow believers, and not just be out for ourselves. If you see some brother or sister in need and have the means to do something about it but turn a cold shoulder and do nothing, what happens to God’s love? It disappears. And you made it disappear. My dear children, let’s not just talk about love; let’s practice real love. This is the only way we’ll know we’re living truly, living in God’s reality.*** 1 John 3:17-18

Now, I don’t think John is saying that if we don’t help those in need, God’s love disappears from the world. I think he is saying something more similar to that old song from John 13:35 *“They will know we are Christians by our love, by our love, yes they’ll know we are Christians by our love.”* I think he’s saying, if we are able and don’t allow God to use us to help those in need, the evidence of God’s love in our life will disappear. It is in helping those who can’t help themselves that God’s love is visible through us.

**Kids Hope**

So what does practicing real love look like? What does speaking out and giving a voice to those who don’t have a voice look like? One of the best examples I see at COMMUNITY is our Kids Hope Mentoring program that Community 4:12 organizes in East Aurora, Joliet and Chicago. The program pairs a student who faces systemic inequalities just because of the zip code they were born into with a mentor, prayer partner and scholarship provider. The team practices love by being consistently present and casting hope of a better tomorrow. Here’s Tom Ryan’s story of being a mentor at Brady Elementary School in Aurora.

**Video Testimony – Tom Ryan**

Isn’t that a beautiful story of God’s love being visible through us? As I mentioned before **Kids Hope** is a team approach for which there are 3 ways you can get involved:

* There are **mentors** like Tom, who meet weekly for an hour during the school day building a relationship with their student that is consistent and encouraging.
* There are **prayer partners** who pray for the student and provide support and accountability for the mentor.
* And there are **scholarship providers** who commit to cover the $15 monthly national programing costs for each child.

I’d like to challenge you to step into one of these roles. You can go to www.community412.org and fill out a volunteer application to learn more about the Kids Hope program OR you can check the community 4:12 box on this connection card today.

**Conclusion**

It is childish to say, “Self, self, do it myself.” And it is childish to think that any of us can do it ourselves. It’s not true that “God helps those who help themselves” – NO! God helps those who can’t help themselves. People like you and me.

And one of the ways that we recognize that God helped me and you when we couldn’t help ourselves – is by helping others who can’t help themselves. So, let’s ALL determine that we will use our voice for the voiceless, say outloud what needs to be said outloud for others; lets’ ALL do this - ***let’s not just talk about love; let’s practice real love. This is the only way we’ll know we’re living truly, living in God’s reality.***

**Communion Idea**

There was a moment for me when I came to understand that I could NOT do it all on my own.

* In that moment I had to admit that I can NOT do this life on my own AND I can NOT make it into the next life on my own.
* Self, self, I can NOT do it myself.

That is when I discovered the grace of God; that God helps people like you and me, who can NOT do it on our own.

Communion is that moment; it is a moment when for the first time or once again we get to discover the grace of God by coming to him and admitting “I can’t do it on my own.”

In this piece of bread and in this cup Jesus comes to each of us and says, “I have come to help those who can’t help themselves”…me…you.

1. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)