

God Helps Those Who Help Themselves?

Luke 18:9-14

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Please turn in your Bible to Hezekiah 18:9-14. It's located right next to the Book of Hesitations. Let me know when you get there.

Actually, this book is not in the Bible...and neither is our *phantom phrase* for today: *God helps those who help themselves*. We're wrapping up our CONTEXT series by examining a popular phrase quoted by both Christians and non-Christians. If you missed any of the sermons in this series, jump on edgewoodbaptist.net or use our free mobile app to catch up.

When I did a Google search on, "*God helps those who help themselves*," I received over three million results! I didn't get through all of them (lol) but did discover that the earliest record of this quote is from Aesop's Fables. Benjamin Franklin was also fond of this phrase.

Unfortunately, according to one poll that was conducted, 81% of Americans believe this statement comes right from the Bible. 75% of teenagers said that this is the central theme of Scripture. Sadly, half of all Christians believe that the Bible teaches this. Amazingly, this phrase topped another poll as the most widely known Bible verse. A few years ago, on the Tonight Show with Jay Leno, this phrase was cited as one of the Ten Commandments.

Before going much further, let me point out that we *are* to be disciplined and devoted to the things that God calls us to do. Spiritual growth is intentional, not automatic as we see in 2 Peter 3:18: "***But grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.***" In addition, the Bible does not espouse laziness or the lifestyle of a sluggard. One example is found in 2 Thessalonians 3:10: "***...If anyone is not willing to work, let him not eat.***"

With that as a caveat, let's determine to excise this expression from our vocabulary. We could put it like this: *God doesn't help those who help themselves; He helps those who are helpless*. Speaking of common cultural catchphrases, you're no longer saying *God won't give you more than you can handle* are you? Remember: *God **will** give you more than you can handle but He'll never give you more than **He** can handle.*

Please turn to Luke 18:9-14 where we will see that *God helps those who are helpless.*

This parable is unique to Luke and follows the account of the persistent widow who prays both day and night. Jesus has just asked his listeners a probing question related to whether or not He will find faith on the earth when He returns. Now, using contrasts again, Jesus gets to the heart of how to be justified. We see here two keys to prayer – persistence and penitence.

Verse 9 gives us the purpose statement: ***“He also told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and treated others with contempt.”*** The phrase ***“to some”*** literally means, *“the certain one.”*

These words are directed to those who think they are righteous while everyone else is rotten. Some of us think our sins smell better than other people’s as we look down on those who sin differently than we do. When we congratulate ourselves we usually end up condemning others. The phrase, ***“contempt”*** is the opposite of honor and means *“to despise, to treat with scorn and as nothing.”*

Have you ever compared yourself to other people and secretly thought something like this? *“I know I’m not perfect, but I’m sure better than that guy I work with or at least I’m nicer than my neighbor or the person down the pew.”*

- Do you ever look at people who don’t go to church and think you’re better than they are?
- Do you think you’re superior to those in a different political party?
- Have you ever looked down on someone because they’re young? Because they’re old?
- Do you ever scoff at someone who uses drugs or breaks the law?
- Do you think your race or ethnicity is better than others?

Proverbs 30:12 says: ***“There are those who are clean in their own eyes but are not washed of their filth.”*** C.S. Lewis once said, *“A proud man is always looking down on things and people; and of course, as long as you are looking down, you can’t see...above you.”*

The People in the Parable

Jesus then describes two different kinds of people in verse 10: ***“Two men went up into the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector.”*** The temple was Israel’s most holy site and people would often go there to praise and to pray twice a day. In Jewish society the Pharisee was the cream that rises to the top while the tax collector was like scum found on the surface of a putrid pond.

1. The Pharisee. In order to correctly understand this parable, we must consider how Pharisees were regarded in that culture. The Pharisees were literally the *“separated ones.”* While we look down on them because of their hypocrisy and legalism, they were the guys with the white hats, the ultimate “good guys.” There were only a few thousand of them at a time and they were known for their careful observance of the Torah, which are the first five books of the Old Testament.

2. The tax collector. In contrast to the Pharisees, tax collectors were considered the low lives of society, often lumped with “sinners and prostitutes.” In our culture, they would be like drug dealers, pimps and murderers. Working for the pagan Romans, these Israelite traitors owned tax franchises, and would charge exorbitant rates and then keep most of the money for themselves. They were not allowed to give testimony in court because their word was considered worthless. If someone accidentally touched a tax collector they were to spit instantly to express their disgust and then go home immediately, burn their clothes and take a scalding bath. In this parable the tax collector would have been considered the villain, or the wearer of the black hat.

The Pharisee is the most religious, respected and revered while the tax collector is the most despised, disrespected and despicable individual around.

The Prayers in the Parable

These two men were at the opposite ends of the spiritual spectrum. Their prayers were the exact opposite as well.

1. A Prayer about Me. In the Pharisee’s prayer, God’s name is used just once while there are six references to *“himself”* or *“I.”* Look at verses 11-12: ***“The Pharisee, standing by himself, prayed thus: ‘God, I thank you that I am not like other men, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week; I give tithes of all that I get.’”***

The phrase “**standing**” means that he “*took his stand*” or that he “*set himself in place*.” The idea is that he is striking an ostentatious attitude. Jesus addresses this arrogant attitude in Matthew 6:5: “***And when you pray, you must not be like the hypocrites. For they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, that they may be seen by others.***” One commentator suggests that he stood in the center of the court so the sunshine would make him even more visible.

The NKJV says that he “***prayed thus with himself.***” More literally in the Greek, he is praying “***to himself.***” I wonder if he said something like this: “*God, I thank you that I’m so marvelous!*” He’s essentially giving a soliloquy to his own soul; like an exaggerated eulogy about himself. He found a prominent place, his posture was self-promoting and his prayer was pompous...and he made sure it was loud enough for others to hear.

He gives God no honor and makes no request because he believes he’s already better than everybody else. This Pharisee is all about himself and so he lists the *vices* that he avoids – he is not an extortioner or an evildoer, has not been unfaithful to his wife, and is certainly not a traitor or a cheat like the tax collector. Note that in his prayer he calls out “***this tax collector,***” which shows how much disdain he has for him. Ultimately, those who rely on their own righteousness end up looking down on people who, compared to them, are rotten.

According to the Mishnah, at that time there was a delegation of Jews who were responsible to rid the Temple of anyone who was unclean, throwing them out through the eastern gate. Perhaps this Pharisee was wondering why the bouncers had not ushered out this traitorous tax collector.

After recounting how self-righteous he is by avoiding some self-selected vices, the Pharisee then spells out two religious *virtues* that he’s really proud of. He begins by what he doesn’t do and then focuses on what he does do. He wants everyone to be aware of his religious resume.

- **He fasts twice a week.** Leviticus 16:29 says the Israelites only had to fast one day of year on the Day of Atonement. This guy is fasting over 100 times a year! It was common for Pharisees to fast on Mondays and Thursdays because they believed Moses went up Mount Sinai on a Monday and came down 40 days later on a Thursday.

But there's another more nefarious reason - Mondays and Thursdays were big market days and their fasting would make a fantastic show before the big crowds.

- **He gives a tenth of all he possesses.** Sounds like a good Baptist, right? Actually, I hope you *are* using the tithe as a good *starting point* for your giving. Notice that he not only gives a tithe on what he earns, he also gives 10% of all that he **“gets.”** It's quite possible that he was a guy who tithes on what he buys, what he's given and Matthew 23:23 says that many even gave 10% of their *“parsley, sage, rosemary and thyme.”* On average, evangelicals are giving only about 2% of their income. How many of us give 10% on our income, plus 10% of the cost of our homes and cars? This guy is trying to cover all his bases.

He's self-righteous because he's proud of what he doesn't do and he's religious because he's proud of what he does do. A man named Rabbi Simeon is recorded as saying, *“If there are only two righteous people in the world, I and my son are these two. If there is only one, I am he.”* This reminds me of the old Mac Davis song: *“Oh Lord it's hard to be humble when you're perfect in every way. I can't wait to look in the mirror 'cuz I get better looking each day.”*

One pastor listed some characteristics of this prayer:

1. His standard of righteousness was external, focusing only on outward deeds
2. He boldly approached God without regard for His holiness
3. He compared himself with others while criticizing them and commending himself
4. He thanked God for nothing other than what he was, in and of himself
5. He didn't ask God for anything because he believed he already had everything

Jesus has no tolerance for religious people who parade their righteousness before others as stated in Matthew 6:1: ***“Beware of practicing your righteousness before other people in order to be seen by them, for then you will have no reward from your Father who is in heaven.”***

Let's admit it. The man was outwardly moral but a mess inwardly. The truth is that righteousness doesn't come from self-righteous rule keeping or by avoiding

unrighteous behavior. *God doesn't help those who help themselves; He helps those who are helpless.*

2. A Prayer for Mercy. The tax collector didn't list his merits but instead longed for mercy in verse 13: ***“But the tax collector, standing far off, would not even lift up his eyes to heaven, but beat his breast, saying, ‘God, be merciful to me, a sinner!’”*** Let's ponder his prayer.

- **His position.** While the Pharisee was probably standing as close to the holy place as possible so everyone could see him, the tax collector is ***“far off,”*** standing timidly on the outer edge of the Court of the Gentiles. We read in Luke 7:12 that the ten lepers ***“stood at a distance.”*** He's not thinking of anyone else and doesn't want any attention. Someone has said that he ***“slumped in the shadows”*** because he was afraid to approach the Almighty in his unworthy condition.
- **His posture.** He not only stood far away, he was unwilling to lift up his eyes due to guilt and shame. It's a double negative – he would not so much ***“as lift his eyes to heaven.”*** This attitude is captured in Ezra 9:6: ***“O my God, I am ashamed and blush to lift my face to you, my God, for our iniquities have risen higher than our heads, and our guilt has mounted up to the heavens.”***
- **His penitence.** To beat one's breast was the outward sign of an inward pain in one's soul. It was done to show grief when someone died. This man is grieving his guilt and locating his depravity as coming from his own heart. The tense indicates that he was ***“beating himself again and again.”*** Using his fists he hammers his unholy heart rapidly and repeatedly.
- **His plea.** His prayer contains only seven words. After addressing the Almighty, he begs for mercy. In the Greek, he calls himself ***“the”*** sinner because he's not comparing himself with anyone else. Psalm 41:4: ***“As for me, I said, ‘O Lord, be gracious to me; heal me, for I have sinned against you!’”*** In his eyes, he's the worst sinner there is. He gives no excuses, no explanations and no rationale for his unrighteousness. The Apostle Paul figured this out as well in 1 Timothy 1:15 – this was one of the passages from the Bible Reading Guide this week: ***“The saying is trustworthy and deserving of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am the foremost.”***

Look at the beginning of his prayer: “**God...**” and at the end: “**...me, a sinner.**” When we begin with God, we can’t help but see a gulf because we are guilty. That’s why he cries out in the middle: “**...be merciful to me...**” Notice that he says, “**to me,**” which reminds us that there is no group plan – we must cry out personally.

The phrase “**be merciful**” literally means to “*be propitiated towards me.*” This big word simply means to be satisfied. The only way God would be satisfied with this sinner would be if God chose to be merciful. This is the verb form of the noun that referred to the “Mercy Seat,” which was the lid on the Ark of the Covenant. It’s as if the sinner is saying, “*God, be mercy-seated to me.*”

Once a year, on the Day of Atonement, a goat was slaughtered and his blood was sprinkled on the Mercy Seat. When God looked down he saw the blood of the sacrificial substitute that covered the sins of His people. 1 John 2:2 says this about Jesus: “**He is the propitiation for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the sins of the whole world.**”

One man gushed with pride, the other oozed poverty. One felt religiously rich, the other knew he was spiritually rotten. One man was impressed with his own accomplishments; the other was depressed by his iniquity. One boasted, the other begged.

As Jesus loves to do, He uses this story to surprise His audience with a shocking summary in verse 14: “**I tell you, this man went down to his house justified, rather than the other. For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but the one who humbles himself will be exalted.**” *God doesn’t help those who help themselves; He helps those who are helpless.*

This was an outrageous reversal to the ears of the religious guys. It would have made them gasp. The word “**justified**” means to be acquitted from any charges and to be accepted by God as righteous.

To be justified means, “*not guilty,*” but it’s more than that. It also means, “*to be declared righteous.*” It involves propitiation and justification. He received a righteousness not his own, but imputed to him.

Job 9:1 asks the question: ***“But how can a man be righteous before God?”*** Let me boil it down. There are only two options. Either you can make yourself right before God or you can’t. Either you help yourself or you admit that you are helpless. Either you satisfy God’s righteous standards or you cling to a substitute who has done it for you. Later we read in Job 19:25: ***“For I know that my Redeemer lives, and at the last he will stand upon the earth.”***

These two guys represent two paths that are followed today.

- **Merit.** Trust in your goodness and you’ll end up in hell.
- **Mercy.** Trust in God’s goodness and end up in heaven.

Are you on the merit path or the mercy path?

Listen. You will never be saved until you admit that you’re a sinner. Evangelist Eddie Martin once conducted a crusade in West Virginia. When he gave an invitation for salvation, a well-dressed woman came forward and he asked her to repeat this prayer: *“Lord, I know I’m a sinner and can’t save myself. I need forgiveness for my awful sins. I repent and receive Jesus Christ as my substitute when He shed His blood on the cross and rose again on the third day.”* But as he prayed, the woman stayed silent. He looked up at her and asked, *“Don’t you want to be saved?”* To which she replied, *“Yes, I want to be saved but I’m not a sinner.”* The evangelist quickly said, *“Then you can’t be saved because Jesus only died for sinners.”* She persisted, *“But, Rev. Martin, I’m a good sinner.”*

It struck me that this is similar to what O.J. Simpson said in his parole hearing on Thursday: *“I was always a good guy.”*

Listen. If you think you’re good, you still need grace. If you’ve been leading a moral life, you still need mercy. Why? Because you’re a sinner in need of the Savior. Entrance into God’s kingdom depends not on our merits, but on God’s mercy.

God doesn’t help those who help themselves; He helps those who are helpless.
Let’s look at some things we can learn from this lesson.

1. Humble yourself now or God will do it for you. Proverbs 3:34 says, ***“Surely He scorns the scornful, but gives grace to the humble.”*** I want you to know that I

am more like the self-righteous Pharisee than I am the broken and tender tax collector.

As many of you know, we lived in Pontiac, Illinois for 14 years. Shortly after we moved there, I went with some guys from our church to lead a service in the Pontiac Correctional Center. I had two thoughts as I drove up and the officers began to search my car. First of all, I was afraid. I had asked the ministry leader if I should take my tie off before I went in. He told me I should. I then asked him, “*You don’t wear ties because you don’t want them to use it to hang themselves, right?*” Paul smiled and said, “*No, it’s so they don’t hang us!*”

But, I had a second thought as well. One I’m embarrassed to admit. As we were taken through several big iron doors and then ushered into a windowless room for the service, I began to feel self-righteous. I looked at the guys and inside I thought I was better than they were.

But then, something happened. God used the song, “Amazing Grace” to get my attention – we just sang it today. As the 20 prisoners and our team of four stood to sing, I was convicted by my conceit and saddened by own smugness. After verse one, one of the inmates standing next to me shouted out, “*I’m a new man.*” This man knew what mercy was all about. These guys were free and I was the one locked up by my own pride.

And then it hit me. I was the phony Pharisee trusting in my merits who had come face-to-face with a group of tax collectors who knew what mercy was all about. God humbled me big time...again. And He will again...because I need it...and so do you.

Friend, where are you today? Are you on the merit path or the mercy path? The Father is looking for prodigals and He’s looking for the proud. He welcomes *sorry sinners* and *smug saints*.

Someone has said that the only person God will send away empty is the one full of himself. Luke 1:53 says, “***He has filled the hungry with good things, and the rich he has sent away empty.***” Will you admit your individual arrogance before the Almighty? James 4:10: “***Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will exalt you.***”

The English preacher and martyr John Bradford, when watching criminals being led out for execution, said: *“There but for the grace of God, goes John Bradford.”*

2. Begin your prayers with confession. I appreciate the reminder found in Psalm 66:18: *“If I had cherished iniquity in my heart, the Lord would not have listened.”* While the ACTS acronym is a useful outline for prayer – Adoration, Confession, Thanksgiving, and Supplication, I prefer to follow CHAT – Confess, Honor, Ask and Thank because it helps me begin with confession.

I hope you’ll be here for Labor Day Weekend because we’re going to focus on prayer during all three services, using CHAT as an outline.

3. Don’t go home without being justified. There are two attitudes that keep people from coming to Christ:

- *I don’t need to be saved because I’m basically a good person.*
- *Jesus won’t have me because of how badly I’ve been living.*

I urge you to go home justified today! You can have immediate salvation...right now. Admit your sin and accept the Savior as your substitute. You don’t have to *do* anything because Jesus has already done all that needs to be done.

You don’t have to clean up your act and start doing a bunch of religious rituals. You don’t have to perform penance or seek out a sacrament.

God doesn’t help those who help themselves; He helps those who are helpless. Jesus said in Luke 5:32, *“I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners, to repentance.”*

I have some great news for you today. You can go home justified by crying out for mercy. Or you can leave here self-satisfied, thinking you somehow merit God’s favor because of how good you think you are. What will it be?

I like one of the illustrations found in *Anchor for the Soul* by Ray Pritchard. By the way, in June alone, 17,000 copies of the new Spanish version were shipped to chaplains who minister in jails and prisons throughout America! I’m grateful to Gary and Kathy Pinger, Don Nugent and Mike Russell for doing all this shipping. And thanks to Edgewood for giving enough in our Christmas offering to purchase 14,000 of these copies!

I also wanted to share that there's a brand new version of *Anchor* in the Myanmar (Burmese) language. God worked this out through a conversation Beth and I had with a pastor from Myanmar we met in Israel five years ago! He just finished the translation last week! I've passed it along to a Myanmar pastor here in the QCA and also to a waitress from Myanmar who works at a Thai restaurant in Moline. I'm thrilled that it will also be available online for people to access all over the world.

Here's the illustration – it's totally imaginary but it makes an important point. Peter is sitting at the entrance desk to the gates of heaven. A fine-looking man rings the bell and Peter asks, *“Can I help you?”* The man replies, *“I'd like to have entrance into heaven.”*

Peter ponders for a moment and then says, *“In order to enter heaven you have to earn a thousand points.”* The man proudly declares, *“That shouldn't be any problem. I have been a very good man all my life. I've been very involved in my community and have given a lot of money to charitable causes. For twenty-five years I was the chairman of the YMCA.”*

As Peter writes it all down, he says, *“That's a marvelous record. That's one point.”*

Taken aback, the man adds, *“I was married to my wife for forty-five years. I was always faithful. We had five children. I always loved them and spent a lot of time with them and made sure they got a good education. I always took good care of them and they turned out so well. I was a real family man.”*

Peter replies, *“I'm very impressed. We don't get too many people up here like you. That's another point.”*

Sweating profusely now, the man starts shaking. *“You don't understand. I was active in my church. I went every Sunday. I gave money every time they passed the plate (and even gave digitally through their cool app). I taught Sunday school for twenty years.”*

Peter says, *“Your record is certainly admirable. That's one more point. Let me add all this up. That's one, two, three points. Only 997 to go!”*

Trembling, the man falls to his knees. In desperation he cries out, *“But for the grace and mercy of God nobody could get in here!”* Peter looks at him and smiles, *“Congratulations, you’ve just received one thousand points.”*

This illustration makes a key point but breaks down as well. Peter is not guarding the gates and even if he were, it would be too late for the man to get in because he had already died.

Don’t wait until it’s too late. Please don’t turn to the Book of Hesitations but instead repent, believe and receive Jesus Christ right now.

If you’re ready to take care of business so you can go home justified, then pray this prayer with me: *“God, have mercy on me, the sinner. I have failed and fallen so many times. My sins have broken your laws and your heart. I repent from trusting in my merit and cry out for mercy. I plead with you now to forgive me and by faith I receive the Substitute, the Lord Jesus Christ as my Savior who died in my place and rose again on the third day. Please apply what He did on the cross to my account so that I can be free and forgiven. Thank you that His sacrifice of blood fully satisfied your righteous demands. Jesus, I want to go home justified and want to be declared righteous. Help me to live for you for the rest of my life. In Jesus name I pray. Amen.”*

Closing Song: “Lord I Need You”