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“God Helps Those Who Help Themselves”

A speaker used the quotation, “God helps those who help themselves.” After the meeting, someone asked what his source was for this quotation. He said he had taken it from the Bible. The other person replied: “You must have *taken* it from the Bible, *it’s not in there now!*”

The original source for this saying is probably *Discourses Concerning Government*, a book published in 1698. It is better known from Benjamin Franklin’s *Poor Richard’s Almanac* for 1733 which worded it: “God helps him who helps himself.”

Though not a biblical quotation, it does make a valid point, when rightly understood. Numerous times the Bible mentions situations in which God did indeed help those who—in a sense—helped themselves. They did what they could do: the *possible*. Then God did the *impossible*. A gospel chorus from years ago comes to mind:

*Got any rivers you think are uncrossable?
Got any mountains you cannot tunnel through?
God specializes in things thought impossible,
He can do what no other power can do.*

Originally, similar words were used by a construction company. By changing the words slightly, a pastor applied them to God. It is *God* who does the impossible, not we human mortals. *However*, actions we take *can* trigger God’s answer. Actually this is what prayer is all about. As awesome as it is, we *can* be “workers *together* with him” (2 Cor. 6:1).

Four lepers sat at the gate of Samaria asking each other: “Why sit we here until we die?” Severe famine was within the city, but in the Syrian camp there was food. They decided to march right over to the Syrian camp. If the Syrians killed them, they were dead men anyhow; if they spared them, at least they would have food to eat.

So in the twilight they rose up and marched toward the enemy camp. This was a simple act, but by so doing they obtained the help of the LORD. “For the LORD made the host of the Syrians to hear a noise of chariots, and a noise of horses,

even the noise of a great host” and they fled, leaving their food, silver, gold, and supplies behind! (2 Kings 7).

If one tries to do **something** and *fails*, it is better than if he tries to do **nothing** and *succeeds!*

Four men once brought a paralytic to Jesus for healing, only to find they could not get into the building because of the crowd. They could have piously folded their hands and said: “If it be God’s will to heal this man, he will be healed. There is nothing *we* can do.” But no! They climbed up, tore off a portion of the roof, and lowered the man to Jesus. Admittedly, this was extreme and unorthodox. But Jesus did not rebuke them. He saw this as an act of faith and healing came as a result of *their* faith! (Luke 5:20).

When the woman with the issue of blood was healed by pressing through and touching the hem of Jesus’ garment, Jesus did not say: “I have healed you,” but rather, “*Your* faith has made you well.” Of course the healing came from God—the healing power was in Jesus. But God’s help came because the woman dared to act in faith (Matt. 9:22).

The Bible often tells of people who were helped by God, but only after they did certain things to help themselves. It is the story of Paul and Silas in jail—who praised God even though they did not feel like it—and deliverance came as a result. It is the story of Zacchaeus, refusing to make excuses for his small stature, who got the attention of Jesus because he was willing to climb up higher. It is the story of Naaman who was healed of leprosy because he became willing to dip seven times in the Jordan River, even though Syria’s rivers were cleaner! This incident has provided the catchy sermon title:

“SEVEN DUCKS IN MUDDY WATER”

Suppose that summer after summer a community faced a multitude of problems, including the loss of crops, because of water shortage. Someone might say: “Let’s just pray and trust God to send rain.” While we certainly believe in prayer, God also wants us to apply the intelligence he has given us. It would not be going against God if the community built a dam in a nearby canyon to store up water from the spring runoff. Pipes could then provide water all year long. The principle of storing up in times of plenty, so needs can be met later, can be

illustrated from a number of biblical examples (Gen. 41:35,36; Proverbs 6:8).

Some people are against the use of medicine—they say they are trusting *God*. But, again, if one knows what to do for himself, it is not going against God to do so. Paul certainly believed in God’s healing power (Rom. 15:19). But when the drinking water caused Timothy to “often” have stomach problems, Paul did not hesitate to tell him to add a little wine to the water he drank (1 Tim. 5:23).

In a parable of Jesus, the Good Samaritan treated the wounds of the brutally beaten man with oil and wine (Luke 10:34). The oil soothed the wounds; the wine’s alcohol content fought infection.

If using medicine is wrong, how could we explain verses like: “A merry heart does *good* like a medicine” (Proverbs 17:22)? If the use of medicine is *bad*, why would the Scriptures call it “good”? If using medicine is against God, the comparison in this verse would make no sense.

We cannot solve all the problems in the world, but we can do things to contribute to our own *peace*. In choosing a house, I think it is best to live on a quiet street. If this is not possible, we can at least control the noise inside by not letting the television and radio blare away day and night. Family members can refrain from yelling from one end of the house to the other. Noise causes tension—whether we are immediately aware of it or not. “God is not the author of confusion, but of peace” (1 Cor. 14:33; cf. Rom. 14:19).

The Lord can speak peace to us, even in the midst of storms. An old hymn expresses it this way:

***Blessed quietness, holy quietness,
What assurance in my soul!
On the stormy sea,
He speaks peace to me,
How the billows cease to roll!***

An atmosphere of peace is not only set by our words and behavior, but even by the order (instead of *disorder*) of physical things in our home. A cluttered bedroom, for example, with clothes thrown haphazardly on the floor, bed unmade, and papers scattered around, can hardly contribute to pleasant sleep or romance. A neat and orderly room helps send messages to the brain about an orderly life! (cf. Col. 2:5).

Suppose we are driving down a residential street. We notice a house that is a reproach to the neighborhood. It needs painting. Weeds are growing in the front yard. A portion of the fence is falling over. A car parked in front is badly in need of washing, a hubcap is gone, and a tire is flat. Junk is scattered here and there. Compare this with another house—and it need not be an expensive house—that is kept up. The yard is neat. The weeds are pulled. Which provides the best testimony as a Christian?

A meal can be a special time together. It need not be elaborate or expensive to be special. Of the early church it was said, “They did eat their food with gladness” (Acts 2:46). Meals should be pleasant times. With just a little extra effort, a family

can come to the table with a neatness and charm that is conducive to digestion and harmony. But a cluttered table, arguments while eating (God forbid!), food presented in a distasteful way, are all negatives that work against the well being of a home.

“Cleanliness is next to godliness,” has come down to us from a sermon of John Wesley in 1740. Like the quotation, “God helps those who help themselves,” it is not a verse in the Bible, but it does make a valid point. At one time or another, most ministers—myself included—have been invited to a house for a meal where cleanliness was not a priority.

A pastor in whose church I spoke years ago, told me about a time he and his wife were invited to a woman’s house for a spaghetti dinner. The house was filthy. Prior to the meal, while food preparation was being finalized, flies were walking around on the food and plates.

Not wanting to offend, the pastor was able to grin and bear it. But his wife had a sensitive stomach and could hardly eat the spaghetti on her plate. She picked at it until the woman who invited them went into the kitchen for a moment. Right by her chair was a huge dog lying on the floor. Realizing her opportunity, she lowered her plate and the dog quickly cleaned it off. SLURP!

When the woman returned from the kitchen, she remarked: “Oh! I see you’ve already finished your spaghetti,” and dumped another large helping on her plate!

We can pray, “God give me a closer walk with you.” This is not a bad prayer, but the Bible tells us something *we* need to do: “Draw near to God, and *he will draw near to you*” (James 4:8). It is our move. “Faith without works is dead” (James 2:20).

Under the leadership of John and Charles Wesley, the early Methodists emphasized regular Bible reading, daily prayer, visiting the sick, reaching out to others in systematic ways. It was because of their *methods* they came to be called “Methodists.” They planned their work and worked their plan.

Some folks desperately pray: “God, help me pay my bills!” Not in every case, but often when people face financial disaster, there are things *they* could have done to avoid that disaster. There are people who make good salaries, yet never seem to have anything to show for it. It is like they are under a financial curse. As the prophet Haggai phrased it, they make money only “to put it into a bag with holes” (Haggai 1:6).

Other people, with some basic planning, make less but do more. They don’t make unnecessary bills. They don’t spend money they don’t have. They don’t go now and pay later. They budget. They keep some reserve in the bank for emergencies, so that an emergency does not take them under.

If a person doesn’t have the answers, find someone who does. Be willing to learn. Henry Ford was successful, not because he always had the answers, but he was able to find those who did. Good information is available. With a little thought and organization, a person can have more money to spend for productive and enjoyable things, even without a higher salary.

For most people, having a checking account is a good idea. Instead of wasting time and money going in person to pay the gas bill, the electric bill, the phone bill, the water bill, etc., in just a few minutes, checks can be written, placed in the mail box, and the mail carrier can do this running around. This is his job—he's going that way anyway! Electronic transfer is even better. Instead of running all over, wasting valuable time, one can use the telephone or internet, make price comparisons, and narrow down the market.

In using a checkbook, record the checks and deposits faithfully—instead of inviting the chaos of bounced checks, late charges, etc. Occasionally a check will bounce from a book order we receive. It is not uncommon for the resulting bank charges to be more than the price of the book. It makes more work and expense for everyone.

For many, using a credit card can be helpful in several ways. But the bill should be paid each month so there are *no* interest charges. Some get this credit card and that credit card—and end up owing money on all of them. They pay a ridiculously high interest rate, they get deeper in debt, all of which leads to stress, arguments over bills, and unhappiness.

“Pity the poor man who has a big load of debt and doesn't know how to **budge it** [budget]!”

A car can be a blessing; but some people never get ahead financially because they keep buying cars—on credit. They are always loaded down with payments, interest, and heavy insurance premiums. Instead of always owing money on a car, what if a person put back that payment money each month (thus making interest instead of paying it out), and then pay cash for a car? With cash a better deal might be possible. Unfortunately many lack the self-control to do this.

They will manage some way to make the payments, but claim they can't afford to put back the money ahead of time! Look at it this way. A few hundred dollars extra, and people can be the head and not the tail (Deut. 28:13).

One man wanted a vacation home, a boat, and other “things” which he managed to buy “on time.” But because of the pressure of payments, he ended up working two jobs. With the heavy work load, he hardly had time to get away to the vacation home or use the boat! When he did, he was so tired he couldn't enjoy the “things” he thought he wanted. Is it worth it? There is a way to enjoy life—without all the unnecessary complication.

In times of trouble, we believe we can go to the Lord in prayer (Psalms 46:1). But prayer should not be used as an excuse for failing to avoid trouble in the first place! We don't purposely commit sin just so we can ask God to forgive us. We don't purposely get sick just so we can ask God to heal us. We don't drink poison just to pray for a miracle.

It doesn't cost any more to keep the gas tank full, instead of driving around on “empty.” If the car has a bad fan belt, and you are leaving on a trip, doesn't it make more sense to get it fixed locally than to be stranded along a highway? If the tires on your car are not good, it is no time to drive 70 miles an hour.

A man should not only consider his own safety when driving, but also that of his family and anyone else in the car.

In parking at a large grocery store many (understandably) try to park as close as they can to the front door, even to squeezing into an inconvenient parking space. Having had a motor home at one time, I learned to park (of necessity) where there is open space. Even with a car this can be beneficial. One might have to walk a hundred feet further, but exercise has value. By using a less congested parking space, one can often simply drive away without having to back up and maneuver around.

I knew a man years ago (actually *many* years ago, as the reader will notice by the prices) who might drive around a downtown block many times to find a parking meter with time on it. This may have saved him a dime. Though gasoline at that time was only around .50 cents a gallon, when one factors in his time and extra effort, how much did he really save?

Have you ever heard of buying postage stamps for *less* than their face value? I had not, but back in the 1960s, a stamp dealer in Arizona said he could mail us \$100 worth of stamps for \$80. Sure enough, I received the stamps for this price. They were all valid stamps, but they were old—leftovers. Some were holiday stamps from years past. They were all odd amounts: 13 cents, 7 cents, 3 cents, some (if I recall correctly) were even amounts like 1½ cents!

It ended up, packages of books we mailed were decorated with an interesting variety of stamps! Postal clerks were amused. Many of the stamps they could not remember seeing before. Though these stamps cost less money, it took five times as long to use them. The time involved offset any benefit. Sometimes the *cheap* way of doing things costs *more*!

A few years ago we had a problem with the dishwasher. It would not drain properly. Reluctantly, I phoned an appliance repairman. As he checked it out he asked, “When was the last time you cleaned the filter?” I must confess my ignorance: I had *never* cleaned it. *I did not even know it had a filter!*

“People are destroyed for lack of knowledge” (Hosea 4:6).

Someone might pray: “God, give me friends.” There is nothing wrong with this prayer; but, there are things *we* can do about this. “A man who has friends must himself be friendly” (Proverbs 18:24). Don't be a scratchy person; be a pleasant person. Don't be egotistical. Don't ask personal questions that are none of your business. Be honest, considerate, sincere.

If you want friends, don't make a habit of dropping in unannounced. If possible, check first by phone. Make certain the other people do not have plans for the evening. Don't smother people. When it's late and your friends are yawning and looking at their watches, isn't it time to go home?

Don't be a non-stop talker. “Let every man be swift to hear, slow to speak” (James 1:19). People who do all the talking—marathon talkers—regardless of good things they may say, do not usually win friends and influence people. People may hesitate to phone them, knowing they might be tied up for an hour or longer.

Don't always be "right"! A car salesman tells how he used to constantly correct people on fine points. He really knew cars. A customer might say a certain feature was on the 2013 model; the salesman would disagree, insisting that it was not until the 2014 model that this was included! Another statement by the customer—*unessential* to the business at hand—would also be countered by the salesman. He felt he must always be right. He thought he won a lot of arguments in those days—but *he didn't sell very many cars!*

The Bible mentions "variance" as a work of the flesh—right along with such things as idolatry, murder and witchcraft! (Galatians 5:20). Some folks—it doesn't matter what the subject is—tend to find a point of disagreement. It is as though their mission in life is to correct others! A lot of times it doesn't really matter. In telling an incident, suppose a man mentions he bought an item that cost \$1.98. The wife interrupts and corrects him, saying it was \$1.99. Unless this slight difference is of some consequence, it is surely in bad taste to correct the other person, especially when the difference is not essential to the point that is being made.

Have you ever been in a situation in which several people are talking, each interrupting the other? One person is telling something, then another interrupts with his idea. The person who does this may not realize the impression it gives. It is like saying, "Hey, I can tell this better than you; I know more than you do." When he is through, the other person tries to continue the conversation, only to be interrupted again. We should not ask God to give us friends, only to short-circuit friendships by failing to follow simple rules of common courtesy.

My father used to tell me: "When you're through with the hammer, don't just lay it down. Put it where it goes." I am still working on that! Have you ever tried to fix something and spent more time trying to find the tool than it takes to fix the problem?

Which makes sense: to have a place to put tools so one always knows where they are—or to just leave things scattered here and there? If reading glasses are always kept in the same place, one does not waste time looking all over the house for them. Getting it together, sharpening up even in these areas, tends to encourage more self-confidence and sense of achievement. It helps a person feel better about himself.

Some people continually look for their keys. "Where are my keys? I can't find my keys. I am going to be late to work!" *Frustration!* But if one specific place is designated for those keys, if those keys are always kept there, those keys will never be lost. It could be as simple as driving a nail in the wall.

One evening I stopped by to see a dear Christian lady I had known a long time. On the dining room table were all kinds of notes, receipts and papers. She was working on her income tax—but not for the year that had just passed. She told me she was *three years behind!*

"Set your house in order" (Isa. 38:1). Throw away things of no value. Give away useful items that you no longer use. Aim at making life more simple; not more complex. Catch up on little odd jobs that have been put off. See to it that your business is

in order. Save your family and heirs from needless hassle in the future. Prepare a Will or Trust that will complete your earthly life in an orderly and God-fearing fashion. Especially if one has a family with children to raise, it is a good idea to have a life insurance policy. If you don't manage your life, it will be managed for you—by bill collectors, re-possessors, tax agents and judges.

As a young preacher I stayed with a pastor and his wife for a couple weeks while holding revival meetings at their church. They were fine people, loved God, and their lives were above reproach. But they were not well organized. Every day, I noticed, they went to the grocery store—often just for one or two items. By simply making a *list* of all they would need, this could have been done once a week. Less trips would allow for a better use of their time.

We have **1,440** minutes in each day. (This number stands out to me because 1440 was the place on the dial for KPRO, a nearby radio station when I was growing up in Riverside, California.) As Christians, we are not to waste those 1,440 minutes (Col. 4:5), we are not to walk around in circles (Eph. 5:15), we are not to be as one who beats the air (1 Cor. 9:26).

On two different occasions I have spent time at the Library of Congress in Washington DC. With over 800 *miles* of books, it is the largest library in the world. Though my ministry in recent years has been more localized, for many years I travelled and spoke in churches in numerous states and Canada. Meetings often lasted two weeks or more. While in a town or city, I might spend one day at the local public library. My research would primarily involve Bible-related information, but for a brief diversion I might switch to books in the "self-help" category. Such books, *while certainly not infallible*, can provide motivational, practical principles to help us "get with it." As the writer of Ecclesiastes 9:10 phrased it:

"Whatever your hand finds to do, *do it with your might.*"

Some things in life we can't change. But when there is chaos and frustration because we don't follow a few simple common-sense rules, it is our own fault. Some become losers because of *little* things that could be easily corrected. Little erosions grow into deep canyons of disorder. "The little foxes spoil the vines" (Song of Solomon 2:15). —RW

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