Is the saying, “God helps those who help themselves,” in the Bible? Those shaking their heads are correct. The saying does not appear in the scriptures. It does sound kind of biblical though, doesn’t it? It’s not unusual that when we hear a saying like this and especially when it catches on and becomes popular, we like to think it has some authority behind it. This is exactly what happened with this saying.

The Greek philosopher Aesop was the one who coined, “The gods help those who help themselves.” About 2,300 years later, Benjamin Franklin appropriated it and changed it to “God helps those who help themselves” when he published Poor Richard’s Almanac. The expression became widely popular and eventually people began believing that it was found in the Bible. While the saying is not found anywhere in scripture, this is one of the sayings that does have some truth to it. Let’s explore that ...

For example, Adam Hamilton states that it’s a good thing to pray for God’s guidance when unemployed and beginning a search for a new job. However, it’s highly unlikely that it will be very productive if you just stop there. Without building a resume, filling out applications, going to interviews, you’re going to have a hard time finding a job. God will certainly give you guidance if you ask, but God also expects you will not just sit around and let God do all the work. You have to take some ownership of your situation and you have to take some action.

When the apostle Paul started the church at Thessalonika, he taught the converts there that they should trust Jesus = and trust that Jesus would return someday, possibly very soon. Paul eventually left but apparently some of the converts believed his teaching to “trust Jesus” a little too literally. Word reached Paul that some had actually quit their jobs and going on a spending spree with the idea that God would provide for all of their needs without their needing to work or save. In his Second Letter to the Thessalonians, Paul made it clear that trusting Jesus did not mean quitting their jobs and waiting for manna and money to appear out of the sky.
In other words, Paul wanted them to exercise their common sense. Yes, God will provide and God will send help. However, this does not free us from the responsibility of doing our part to secure our provision.

God’s help does not always come in the form of big, miraculous, spectacular ways. More often, God’s help is found in subtle ways, in ways that we never expect. God often uses other people in order to help us and we see this time and time again in scripture how God uses people in the course of God’s work.

I hope we agree so far that the saying “God helps those who help themselves” has some truth to it. Now I want to shift gears and talk about how this saying is not true. The reading from 2 Thessalonians 3:10-12 is often used to justify not helping the poor, particularly verse 10 where Paul writes, “Even while we were with you, we gave you this command: ‘Those unwilling to work will not get to eat.’”

Let’s say, for example, that you’re down on your luck. You have tried all you can do. You’re starving. Your family is starving. You go to your best friend and ask for help. Instead of helping, your friend simply tells you, “No, God helps those who help themselves. And remember what Paul said about not working and not eating? That’s you.” Those of us who claim to be disciples of Jesus Christ know that this simply is not acceptable. Even in the Old Testament book of Leviticus, there were instructions to leave part of the fields unharvested so that the poor could glean from them for their survival. Time and time again in scripture we see instructions to help the poor, and how the poor have a special place in God’s heart. God does help those who help themselves but God also helps those who can’t.

It’s important to note that in scripture God consistently calls his people to help those who cannot help themselves, or who require help before they can help themselves. James writes these familiar words in the New Testament: “Religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father, is this: to care for orphans and widows in their distress.” In the Parables of the Sheep and the Goats and the Good Samaritan Jesus tells us that God judges us not only by our faith, but by whether our faith has led us to a greater compassion for the poor and needy.

God does help those who can’t help themselves. This is a part of the very character of God—God’s compassion and mercy for those are struggling, God’s ability to discern how someone ends up in poverty or living on the streets or struggling to make ends meet. We can
debate the best ways of helping and not hurting, of creating independence and not dependence and we should. Any people who think they are Christians and pleasing God, but have no compassion for those in need and do little to care for them, believing “God only helps those who help themselves” have missed an essential component of the gospel. And when I think of how God helps those in need, it’s clear that God doesn’t send angels, nor drop food or clothing or shelter down from heaven, but instead he puts it on the heart of others to help.…

There’s one final sense in which, thankfully, God helps those who cannot help themselves: Consistently in the Bible God saves, rescues and helps human beings who cannot save themselves. God is the God of the Hopeless Cause. God is the God who loves sinners. God is the God who walks with us through the darkest valleys. God is the God who brings light into our darkness and peace to our times of anxiety and despair. God rescues, redeems and forgives sinners. This help is extended to us even though we can’t earn it and don’t deserve it. There’s a word for this truth of God’s help for those who cannot help themselves. We call it grace.

We need two kinds of help in life. The first is the physical kind—food, shelter, clothing, security, healthcare. If you remember your high school psychology, these were the most basic needs in Abraham Maslow’s “Hierarchy of Needs.” God meets these physical needs through community, through others; we are our brothers’ and sisters’ keepers. Second, on the higher or deeper needs – the existential, interior and spiritual needs for love, hope, peace, comfort, interior strength, forgiveness, meaning and purpose – our faith in God and God’s work by his Spirit provide a different kind of help. Again, we find this help is given to those who cannot help themselves.

Listen: God responds to those who cry out to God for help. Do we need God’s help today? Here are two ways we can find help from God. God helps those who:
1. Admit they are powerless to help themselves. That’s not as easy as it sounds because we don’t want to admit we are weak.
2. Trust God alone for help. God is not one of several sources of help for us; God is the only source of eternal help.

The next time we hear someone say, “God helps those who help themselves,” be sure to say, “Not so. In truth, God helps the helpless!”
When I think of crying out to God for help, I recall words of the psalmists: “In my distress I called upon the Lord; to my God I cried for help. From God’s temple God heard my voice, and my cry to God reached his ears...God reached down from on high, God took me; the Lord drew me out of mighty waters.” The Psalmist also wrote, “I lift up my eyes to the hills—from where will my help come? My help comes from the Lord, who made heaven and earth.”

There are times you can help yourself, and you should—God is counting on you to do so. But you will find in life, if you haven’t already, that there are times you cannot help yourself. There are things from which you cannot save yourself.

Thanks be to God that God does indeed help those who cannot help themselves. That includes you and me. That is the picture we have of God in scripture—a God who sees us at our worst, our most despicable, our weakest, most pitiable and afraid, and who reaches down to say, “I am here. You matter to me. I will forgive you. There is hope. Your life has meaning. You are loved.” And that’s what we call grace.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.