

Summer Sermon Series: – Unbiblical Sayings: “God Helps Those Who Help Themselves” (selected Scriptures)

Introduction

- For the remaining of the summer, we are going to embark on a short “Summer Sermon Series” (as we have done in previous years). This summer’s sermon series is titled: “Unbiblical Sayings.” My heartfelt and prayerful desire is to bring God’s Word to bear on some of the more common religious expressions or beliefs that are not in the Bible. These are not misused or misunderstood verses of Scripture (that was a summer sermon series in 2015), but religious/evangelical sayings that are neither in the Bible nor are they biblical.
- The first unbiblical saying that we are going to study together is “God helps those who help themselves.” This saying (“God helps those who help themselves”) sounds very religious and astute. In fact, many – as many of 80% of Americans – believe it to be taken right out of the pages of Scripture; but this is not a biblical phrase, nor it is a biblical concept or teaching.

✓ **Illust:** “The belief that this is a phrase that occurs in the Bible, or is even one of the Ten Commandments, is common in the United States. The beliefs of Americans regarding this phrase and the Bible has been studied by Christian demographer and pollster George Barna of The Barna Group. To the statement ‘The Bible teaches that God helps those who help themselves’; 53% of Americans agree strongly, 22% agree somewhat, 7% disagree somewhat, 14% disagree strongly, and 5% stated they don’t know. Of ‘born-again’ Christians 68% agreed, and 81% of non ‘born-again’ Christians agreed with the statement. In a February 2000 poll, 53% strongly agreed and 22% agreed somewhat that the Bible teaches the phrase. Of the 14 questions asked, this was the least biblical response, according to Barna. A poll in the late 1990s showed the majority (81%) believe the concept is taught by the Bible, another stating 82%.

Despite being of non-Biblical origin the phrase topped a poll of the most widely known Bible verses. Seventy-five percent of American teenagers said they believed that it was the central message of the Bible” (Wikipedia: “[God helps those who help themselves](#)”).

- While it may sound like a particularly contemporary American “self-help” axiom (commonly attributed Benjamin Franklin, as it appeared in its present form in his “Poor Richard’s Almanac” in 1757), versions of it actually appeared in Greek literature (i.e. Aesop’s fables) as early as the seventh century B.C., and continued to occur in ancient writings throughout the centuries.

At first this surprised me because I was under the impression that it was a contemporary (American) maxim. However, after thinking about it, I came to the realization that it should not be surprising because it is a declaration of our sinful condition – self-help, self-reliance, self-sufficiency, self-confidence, self-righteousness, etc.

- To be sure, God blesses and uses our obedience, and prohibits laziness. There are many verses in Scripture commanding Christians take the initiative in their obedience to and submission to Christ: “*abide in [Christ]*” (Jn.15:4), to “*draw near to God*” (Jms.4:8), to be “*zealous for good works*” (Tit.2:14), to “*train [themselves] for godliness*” (1Tim.4:7), and to “*work out their own salvation with fear and trembling*” (Phil.2:12). Christians are called to actively, earnestly, participate in their own Christian sanctification and spiritual growth.

But this unbiblical proverb intimates that God’s help is conditioned upon us first helping ourselves; that God (only) works in response to our initiative, that God is waiting for us to help ourselves before He will intervene or give us help. In the Bible, as we will see, teaches the exact opposite. Thankfully, God is the Helper to the helpless.

➤ Unfortunately, but not surprisingly, this unbiblical saying is very popular in America today – especially among deists, Arminians (Semi-Pelagians), and various religions that either emphasize God as a “distant” (passive) deity, or a “do-it-yourself” (self-reliant, legalistic) type of religion/belief.

A more accurate, biblical, proverb would be: “God helps those who cannot help themselves.” In God’s Word we read that unbelievers are spiritually “*dead in ... trespasses and sins*” (Eph.2:1), “*by nature children of wrath*” (Eph.2:3), in the “*domain of darkness*”(Col.1:13), and “*desperately sick*” (Jer.17:9) with “*nothing good*” dwelling in their flesh (Rom.7:18; cf. Rom.3:10-12). As unbelievers, we are simply too bad – too corrupt, too foolish, too helpless – to help ourselves.

➤ To be sure, there are varying utilitarian, ever-nuanced, definitions of “free will” and various implications for whatever definition one chooses to use (see John Piper’s article: “Six Practical Reasons ‘Free Will’ Matters”). For our purposes, I will be focusing on the perspective of “free will” as it specifically relates to God’s ultimate sovereignty over all creation, and how “free will” is often used with regard to assertions like “God helps those who help themselves.”

The unbiblical fallacy: Humans have a “freedom of will” which enables them to be, live and/or act independent from God’s sovereign authority and will.

➤ The Bible teaches that God is completely sovereign over all His creation (i.e. everything), and therefore mankind is ultimately subject to God’s sovereign authority and power. The modern concept of human “free will” (falsely) declares an autonomy from God. It suggests, if even partially, that God would never interfere with, or intervene against, the “free will” of humans – especially in things concerning salvation or eternal judgment. It declares that human “free will” trumps or resists God’s sovereign will. It presumes that God is somehow bound to honor our “free will” choices, and merely responds to our actions and decisions (without violating our “free will”).

While this teaching is extremely popular and prevalent today, even among professing Christians, it finds its basis more in secular psychology/philosophy than it does in the pages of Scripture. Much like God’s response to “*the kings ... and the rulers*” in Psalm two, who took “*counsel together, against the LORD and His anointed*” (vs.2) demanding their freedom from God, God laughs at the folly of humanity’s cry for “free will” apart from His sovereign authority and power. As we will see, sayings and ideas that suggest that God merely reacts or responds (rather than initiates) according to our “free will” decisions and actions is neither biblical nor sound theology. The concept of human “free will” satiates our pride, but it violates the teaching of God’s Word and it seeks to diminish the absolute necessity of God’s gracious work in our lives (and salvation).

➤ Humans, however, are not puppets or robots. God has graciously given us the “freedom of choice”, and we are completely culpable for the decisions we make and the actions we take. But this freedom is never outside of God’s sovereign authority or control, nor is it ever absolutely free from bonds of spiritual forces that rule over our lives.

✓ Illust: “Free will I have often heard of, but I have never seen it. I have always met with will, and plenty of it, but it has either been led captive by sin or held in the blessed bonds of grace” (Charles H. Spurgeon; sermon “Our Change of Masters”, July 6, 1879).

✓ Illust: “The problem with the unconverted man is this. Though he is dead, and though he is blind and though he is deaf, he thinks of himself as someone who is alive, someone who can see, and someone who can hear, so the deception is very genuine and deep seated” (Martin Luther; quoted in sermon by Erwin W. Lutzer: “The Lie That God Helps Those Who Help Themselves”, Dec. 5, 1999).

Rom 6:17-18 ~ “But thanks be to God, that you who were once slaves of sin have become obedient from the heart to the standard of teaching to which you were committed, ¹⁸and, having been set free from sin, have become slaves of righteousness.”

Rom 6:20-22 ~ “For when you were slaves of sin, you were free in regard to righteousness. ²¹But what fruit were you getting at that time from the things of which you are now ashamed? For the end of those things is death. ²²But now that you have been set free from sin and have become slaves of God, the fruit you get leads to sanctification and its end, eternal life.”

The Biblical truth/reality: While possessing a God-given “freedom of choice”, all humans are ultimately and utterly dependent upon God for everything.

➤ God is not a “distant deity.” He is not like some divine clockmaker who simply created the world, wound it up, and leaves it alone. God is not some divine “absentee landlord”, He is neither aloof nor disengaged from His creation. He is directly and sovereignly ruling over all creation, without ever being unduly influenced – or ever being changed – by it.

To be sure, God is transcendent (separate from and beyond/above His creation) but He is also immanent (ever-present and active among His creation). God has never, nor will He ever, relinquish His sovereign right to providentially rule over His creation. Likewise, God has never, nor will He ever, yield His sovereign will to the “free will” choices of those He has created.

➤ There are at least four ways in which we can categorize God’s sovereignty in and over our lives, and our utter dependence on Him.

I. With regard to birth

➤ Obviously, we had no say in our birth – either where we were born, or to whom we were born. Also, it should go without saying, that there are natural components to conception and childbirth. That aside, Scripture declares that it is ultimately God who is our Creator – both in the general sense of the creation of the world, as well as the creation of every individual human being.

Ps 100:3 ~ “Know that the Lord, he is God! It is he who made us, and we are his; we are his people, and the sheep of his pasture.”

Ps 139:13-16 ~ “For you formed my inward parts; you knitted me together in my mother’s womb. ¹⁴I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made. Wonderful are your works; my soul knows it very well. ¹⁵My frame was not hidden from you, when I was being made in secret, intricately woven in the depths of the earth. ¹⁶Your eyes saw my unformed substance; in your book were written, every one of them, the days that were formed for me, when as yet there was none of them.”

➤ God sovereignly determines our birth, our gender, our race, our ethnicity, our physiology, our parents, etc. (see Ex.4:11). We are not the product of random chance or evolution. The whole human race, and everything in heaven and on earth, has been created by the one and only living and sovereign God. God has given us life, and has divinely created us on purpose and for a purpose.

Jer 1:5 ~ “Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you; I appointed you a prophet to the nations.”

Gal 1:15 ~ “But when he who had set me apart before I was born, and who called me by his grace”

Acts 17:24-28 ~ “The God who made the world and everything in it, being Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in temples made by man, ²⁵nor is he served by human hands, as though he needed anything, since he himself gives to all mankind life and breath and everything. ²⁶And he made from one man every nation of mankind to live on all the face of the earth, having determined allotted periods and the boundaries of their dwelling place, ²⁷that they should seek God, and perhaps feel their way toward him and find him. Yet he is actually not far from each one of us, ²⁸for ‘In him we live and move and have our being’; as even some of your own poets have said, ‘For we are indeed his offspring.’”

2. With regard to life

- As many wrongly believe that God can be confined or restricted to an earthly temple (or church), many wrongly believe that God is confined or restricted to His heavenly throne. But Scripture reveals, again and again, that God is (actively, providentially, sovereignly) among us and even within every true follower of Christ.

Acts 17:24-28 ~ “The God who made the world and everything in it, being Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in temples made by man,²⁵ nor is he served by human hands, as though he needed anything, since he himself gives to all mankind life and breath and everything. ²⁶And he made from one man every nation of mankind to live on all the face of the earth, having determined allotted periods and the boundaries of their dwelling place,²⁷ that they should seek God, and perhaps feel their way toward him and find him. Yet he is actually not far from each one of us,²⁸ for ‘In him we live and move and have our being’; as even some of your own poets have said, ‘For we are indeed his offspring.’”

Col 1:15-17 ~ “He [i.e. the Son] is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation. ¹⁶For by him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities – all things were created through him and for him. ¹⁷And he is before all things, and in him all things hold together [“*hold together*” (*synestēken*); ‘perfectly framed’].”

Heb 1:3 ~ “He is the radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint of his nature, and he upholds [*pherōn*; sustains or maintains] the universe by the word of his power. ...”

1 Tim 6:13 ~ “I charge you in the presence of God, who gives life to all things, and of Christ Jesus, who in his testimony before Pontius Pilate made the good confession”

- The universe, and all of God’s creation, is held together not by an idea, or by chance, or by some cosmological accident, or by some strange or unknown force. It is held together by none other than the Son of the living God – who as perfectly framed, and presently sustains, His creation according to His own purpose and pleasure – including the very lives of every individual human being.

Prov 16:9 ~ “The heart of man plans his way, but the Lord establishes his steps.”

Prov 19:21 ~ “Many are the plans in the mind of a man, but it is the purpose of the Lord that will stand.”

Prov 20:24 ~ “A man’s steps are from the Lord; how then can man understand his way?” (cf. Ps.37:23)

3. With regard to death

- Many will concede that God is sovereign over their births, and even over their lives, but they balk at the idea that God is sovereign over when or how they die. But, Scripture affirms God’s sovereign authority and providential governance, over human life and death. In fact, God Himself unapologetically, unambiguously, declares His sovereign authority over both life and death.

Deut 32:39 ~ ““See now that I, even I, am he, and there is no god beside me; I kill and I make alive; I wound and I heal; and there is none that can deliver out of my hand.” (cf. Ex.3:14)

1 Sam 2:6 ~ “The Lord kills and brings to life; he brings down to Sheol and raises up.”

Job 1:20-22 ~ “Then Job arose and tore his robe and shaved his head and fell on the ground and worshiped. ²¹And he said, “Naked I came from my mother’s womb, and naked shall I return. The Lord gave, and the Lord has taken away; blessed be the name of the Lord. ²²In all this Job did not sin or charge God with wrong.”

Heb 9:27 ~ “And just as it is appointed for man to die once, and after that comes judgment”

➤ To be sure, this raises a number of questions but the truth of God's sovereignty over death ought not to be denied. The most prominent example of this is the death of Jesus Christ. We know God was not only intimately involved in when Jesus died, but where and how He died as well (see Ps.22:6-18; Is.53:10; Jn.7:8, 30; 12:23, 27; Acts 2:22; 4:27-28). We must readily acknowledge God's sovereign authority and providence over both life and death. This is one reason why we are commanded to have the perspective of "*If the Lord wills*" when it comes to making plans for the future (see Jms.4:13-17).

Ps 139:13-16 ~ "For you formed my inward parts; you knitted me together in my mother's womb. ¹⁴I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made. Wonderful are your works; my soul knows it very well. ¹⁵My frame was not hidden from you, when I was being made in secret, intricately woven in the depths of the earth. ¹⁶Your eyes saw my unformed substance; in your book were written, every one of them, the days that were formed for me, when as yet there was none of them."

4. With regard to eternity (salvation/condemnation)

➤ God does not maintain His sovereign authority, and the providential exercise of that authority, over His creation only to surrender it when it comes to things of eternal significance and consequence. He does not leave His eternal plan to chance, nor is He passive (merely reactionary) when it comes to the salvation/condemnation of humans.

Quite the opposite in fact. The Bible reveals that God elects, chooses ("*before the foundation of the world*", Eph.1:4), calls, redeems, regenerates, adopts, empowers, sanctifies, fills, leads, gifts, and seals all those whom He has saved.

John 6:44, 65 ~ "No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws [*helkō*] him. And I will raise him up on the last day.' ... ⁶⁵And he said, 'This is why I told you that no one can come to me unless it is granted [*didōmi*] him by the Father.'"

John 6:63 ~ "It is the Spirit who gives life; the flesh is no help at all. The words that I have spoken to you are spirit and life."

John 17:6 ~ "I have manifested your name to the people whom you gave me out of the world. Yours they were, and you gave them to me, and they have kept your word."

➤ God is the one who initially (sovereignly) enables a person to come to Christ (see Jn.12:39-40; Rom.8:7-8). God alone can awaken the one who is dead in sin (Eph.2:1), He alone can bring light to the one who's heart is darkened by sin (Jn.8:12; 12:46; Eph.5:8), He alone can open the eyes of those who are blinded by Satan (2Cor.4:4), He alone can empower us to live godly lives that are pleasing to Him (Rom.5:6, 8:7-8). To further secure our understanding that God is sovereign over salvation, we find that God's salvific work in those who believe occurred before they were even born – "*before the foundation of the world*":

Eph 1:3-12 ~ "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places, ⁴even as he chose us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before him. In love ⁵he predestined us for adoption as sons through Jesus Christ, according to the purpose of his will, ⁶to the praise of his glorious grace, with which he has blessed us in the Beloved. ⁷In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace, ⁸which he lavished upon us, in all wisdom and insight ⁹making known to us the mystery of his will, according to his purpose, which he set forth in Christ ¹⁰as a plan for the fullness of time, to unite all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth.

¹¹In him we have obtained an inheritance, having been predestined according to the purpose of him who works all things according to the counsel of his will, ¹²so that we who were the first to hope in Christ might be to the praise of his glory.”

➤ Scripture repeatedly and clearly declares that every person is a sinner, completely unable to save themselves and completely deserving of God’s just and eternal wrath. Again, unbelieving (unsaved) sinners are not able to *not* sin, and they are utterly unable (without divine intervention) to see “*the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God*” (2Cor.4:4). Unbelievers are spiritually “*dead in ... trespasses and sins*” (Eph.2:1), “*by nature children of wrath*” (Eph.2:3), and “*desperately sick*” (Jer.17:9) with “*nothing good*” dwelling in their flesh (Rom.7:18).

Rom 3:10-12, 23 ~ “as it is written: ‘None is righteous, no, not one; ¹¹no one understands; no one seeks for God. ¹²All have turned aside; together they have become worthless; no one does good, not even one.’ ... ²³for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God”

Rom 5:8-10 ~ “but God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us. ⁹Since, therefore, we have now been justified by his blood, much more shall we be saved by him from the wrath of God. ¹⁰For if while we were enemies we were reconciled to God by the death of his Son, much more, now that we are reconciled, shall we be saved by his life.”

Rom 8:7-8 ~ “For the mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God, for it does not submit to God’s law; indeed, it cannot [*oude dynatai*]. ⁸Those who are in the flesh cannot [*ou dynatai*] please God.”

1 Cor 2:14 ~ “The natural person does not [*ou*] accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are folly to him, and he is not able [*ou dynatai*] to understand them because they are spiritually discerned.”

➤ Theologians refer to this as the doctrine of “human inability” (or “total [utter] depravity”). The unbelieving (unsaved) sinner is free to choose what sins they wish to commit, but – without the intervening sovereign love and saving grace of God – they are not free to choose to not sin.

Jer 17:9 ~ “The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately sick; who can understand it?”

➤ Every person is a sinner by nature and choice (see Rom.5:12ff). We are sinners because we sin, and we sin because we are sinners. Sin is unrighteousness. Not only are we justly condemned by God for our unrighteousness, we cannot atone for our sin by acts of righteousness.

➤ Scripture clearly states: “*According to [God’s] great mercy, he has caused us to be born again*” (1Pet.1:3). God, by His unmerited favor toward us in Christ, is the one who grants us the ability to repent (2Tim.2:25-26) and even grants us the faith to believe (Phil.1:29).

Rom 8:29-30 ~ “For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn among many brothers. ³⁰And those whom he predestined he also called, and those whom he called he also justified, and those whom he justified he also glorified.”

Acts 13:48 ~ “And when the Gentiles heard this, they began rejoicing and glorifying the word of the Lord, and as many as were appointed to eternal life believed.”

➤ To be sure, there are many things God calls the unsaved to do in response to (e.g. confess sin, repent, seek the Lord, believe, etc.). The repentant (believer) – the one who truly puts their faith in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior – humbly rejoices in God’s gracious salvation (Rom.3:27-28; 4:2; 1Cor.1:29-31; Eph.2:8-10). The unrepentant (unbeliever) is completely culpable for their rejection of the Savior Jesus Christ, and justly condemned in their sin (Jn.3:18, 36; Eph.2:3).

➤ Salvation, from first to last, is ultimately a work of God (see Eph.2:5-10). God sovereignly chooses those whom He saves (Eph.1:4), He predestines them to adoption (Eph.1:5), He calls them to salvation (2Tim.1:9; 2Thess.2:13), He enables them to believe (Phil.1:29), He grants them repentance (2Tim.2:24-25), He causes them to be born again (1Pet.1:3), He empowers them to live righteously and wisely (1Cor.2:14; Rom.8:7-8), and He justifies, sanctifies and glorifies them forever (Rom.8:29-30).

✓ **Illust:** “You contribute nothing to your salvation except the sin that made it necessary” (Jonathan Edwards).

Conclusion

➤ Thankfully, God helps those who *cannot* help themselves!

✓ **Illust:** One of the greatest hymns ever written is “Rock of Ages”, written by Augustus Montague Toplady (in 1776). Apparently, Toplady was traveling in the country when a storm came upon him and he was forced to take shelter in the cleft of a great rock near England’s Cheddar Gorge. While he was waiting for the storm to pass he reflected on the situation spiritually, and the words of a hymn began to form in his mind. Looking down at his feet, he discovered a playing card that someone who had been there earlier had dropped. He picked it up and used it to record these words:

Rock of Ages, cleft for me, Let me hide myself in Thee;
Let the water and the blood, From Thy wounded side which flowed,
Be of sin the double cure; Save from wrath and make me pure.

Not the labor of my hands Can fulfill Thy law’s demands;
Could my zeal no respite know, Could my tears forever flow,
All for sin could not atone; Thou must save, and Thou alone.

**Nothing in my hand I bring, Simply to the cross I cling;
Naked, come to Thee for dress; Helpless look to Thee for grace;
Foul, I to the fountain fly; Wash me, Savior, or I die.**

While I draw this fleeting breath, When mine eyes shall close in death,
When I soar to worlds unknown, See Thee on Thy judgment throne,
Rock of Ages, cleft for me, Let me hide myself in Thee.

✓ **Illust:** “There is no attribute of God more comforting to His Children than the doctrine of Divine Sovereignty. Under the most adverse circumstances, in the most severe troubles, they believe that Sovereignty hath ordained their afflictions, that Sovereignty overrules them, and that Sovereignty will sanctify them all. There is nothing for which the children of God ought more earnestly to contend than the dominion of their Master over all creation – the Kingdom of God over all the works of His own hands – the throne of God, and His right to sit upon that throne.

On the other hand, there is no doctrine more hated by worldlings [unbelievers], no truth of which they have made such a football [controversy], as the great, stupendous, but yet most certain doctrine of the Sovereignty of the infinite Jehovah. Men will allow God to be everywhere except upon His throne. They will allow Him to be in His workshop to fashion worlds and to make stars. They will allow Him to be in His almonry to dispense His alms and bestow His bounties. They will allow Him to sustain the earth and bear up the pillars thereof, or light the lamps of Heaven, or rule the waves of the ever-moving ocean; but when God ascends His throne, His creatures then gnash their teeth; and when we proclaim an enthroned God, and His right to do as He wills with His own, to dispose of His creatures as He thinks well, without consulting them in the matter, then it is that we are hissed and execrated, and then it is that men turn a deaf ear to us, for God on His throne is not the God they love. They love Him anywhere better than they do when He sits with His scepter in His hand and His crown upon His head. It is God upon His throne whom we trust” (Charles Haddon Spurgeon, sermon on May 4, 1856).