Series: Half-Truths

Addressing the Cliché's, Canards, and Fallacies of Pop-culture Christianity

Today's Message: "God helps those who help themselves"

July 15th 2018 / Jeff Kennedy

The Origin of the Phrase: Ben Franklin quoted Poor Richard's Almanac. He in turn quoted from Hercules in Aesop's Fables—and this proverb has been found in other religions such as Islam.

What it means: The phrase is an appeal to take action, and take responsibility for your own life.

It's a caution against praying for divine intervention where God has ordained the solution through human agency.

And the Bible does teach the need for personal responsibility. God is not going to do for us that which he's commanded us to do.

Prov. 6:6-11 Go to the ant, O sluggard; consider her ways, and be wise. Without having any chief, officer, or ruler, she prepares her bread in summer and gathers her food in harvest. How long will you lie there, O sluggard? When will you arise from your sleep? A little sleep, a little slumber, a little folding of the hands to rest, ...

1 Tim. 5:8 But if anyone does not provide for his relatives, and especially for members of his household, he has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever.

1 Cor. 13:11 When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child. When I became a man, I gave up childish ways. The emphasis here is on putting away childish irresponsibility.

2 Thess. 3:11-18 For we hear that some among you walk in idleness, not busy at work, but busybodies. Now such persons we command and encourage in the Lord Jesus Christ to do their work quietly and to earn their own living. As for you, brothers, do not grow weary in doing good.

But today, the notion of taking personal responsibility is under siege: The loss of individual obligation and the ethic of hard work is most notably present in the grievance and offense culture, the victim mentality, and also an inexplicable interest in socialism. What this worldview breeds is…

- Complacency
- Laziness
- Blame-shifting: permanent victimization status. These people have bought the lie that they are a permanent class of victims of the rich and powerful—so they create invisible walls and simply protest at the gates. Or, they constantly transferring the blame for their situation to someone else. Taking personal responsibility.
- Self-indulgence vs. self-sacrifice—when a culture and its people become terminally self-indulgent rather than sacrificial.
- Easily Offended: people lack a mental toughness. A soft and indulgent culture has made soft men and women who are too easily offended and lack mental toughness. And the result: no one in this culture can take a joke. And hardly faction in America can take genuine, legitimate criticism.

There is a half-truth here. It's not all wrong.

- The half part of the half truth is that God expects us to be actively engaged in life and faith rather being complacent and passive and idle.
- God expects us to work hard and work smart, in place of being lazy.
- God requires us to take personal responsibility for our sins, our failures, our attitudes.
- God calls us to a life of carrying the cross—personal sacrifice rather than an endless experience of personal indulgence.

- And God causes us to put steel in our souls in place of soft, easily offended, weak minds.

Transition: It would be easy to end the sermon there but there is another truth—another side to this saying that is so important. And that is: we are completely helpless to lift ourselves to his standard of righteousness.
We are entirely dependent on Christ's work in the cross.
Let me show you this principle in the Scriptures:
Rom. 5:6-11 "For while we were still helpless, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly. [7] (For rarely will anyone die for a righteous person, though for a good person perhaps someone might possibly dare to die.) [8] But God demonstrates his own love for us, in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us. [9] Much more then, because we have now been declared righteous by his blood, we will be saved through him from God's wrath. [10] For if while we were enemies we were reconciled to God through the death of his Son, how much more, since we have been reconciled, will we be saved by his life?[11] Not only this, but we also rejoice in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received this reconciliation."
This is a truth about salvation that is difficult to imagine. Because it requires such benevolence, such an act of grace to redeem us that it's hardly fathomable. Even those of us who believe in salvation by Grace alone—still have trouble relating to God this way. And it's because every other arena of life is…
A Meritocracy: A system where men and women are rewarded based on their talent, effort, and achievement. There are certainly exceptions to this, but generally, we live in a world where we get what we earn.

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Let's tease out the various aspects and truths of this passage.

1. Without Jesus, we are left helpless in our Sin.

5:6, 8 "For while we were still helpless…But God demonstrates his love in this, while we were still sinners"

Doctrine of Original Sin: Also known as "Legacy Sin"—that is to say, that you and I are born into a sinful state and this is inherited from the original sinners—Adam and Eve. But does the Bible teach this? I think it does without question.

- Ps. 51:1-5 "Have mercy on me, O God, because of your loyal love!
  Because of your great compassion, wipe away my rebellious acts!
  2 Wash away my wrongdoing!
  Cleanse me of my sin!
  3 For I am aware of my rebellious acts;
  I am forever conscious of my sin.
  4 Against you—you above all—I have sinned;
  I have done what is evil in your sight.
  So you are just when you confront me;
  you are right when you condemn me.
  5 Look, I was guilty of sin from birth,
  a sinner the moment my mother conceived me.
- Eph. 2:1-3 "And although you were dead in your transgressions and sins, 2 in which you formerly lived according to this world's present path, according to the ruler of the kingdom of the air, the ruler of the spirit that is now energizing the sons of disobedience, 3 among whom all of us also formerly lived out our lives in the cravings of our flesh, indulging the desires of the flesh and the mind, and were by nature children of wrath"
- Ps. 14:3 The Psalmist says that God's eyes search the world for one righteous person who seeks God and what does he find? "there is no one who is righteous, not even one."
- Rom. 5:12ff. "12 So then, just as sin entered the world through one man and death through sin, and so death spread to all people because all sinned— 15. For if the many died through the transgression of the one man…17. For if, by the transgression of the one man, death reigned through the one,

If the authors of Scripture wanted to be clearer about the fact that we are legacy sinners how could they say it more clearly? If they wanted to communicate to us that sin has entered through Adam and Eve, reigned in human nature, and that we have all acted on that impulse through individual disobedience resulting in our death and condemnation—How clearer could they have said it?

Illus: And our repeated and uniform Experience tells us this: (Picture of My Kids): To illustrate this fact, let's look at picture 1:

Ah, doesn't that make your heart smile. A perfect moment. ***Until this…***
Picture 2:

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Paradise is broke. A perfect, adorable little moment turned into a raging, screaming fit.

Doctrine of original sin is both biblical and it squares with reality. It makes sense of the world as we find it.
If you think your little children are faultless little cherubs from heaven, and you fail to give them moral instruction, correction or discipline before the age of 7-8; you are permanently handicapping that Kid for the rest of their adult lives. Because we know that a child's character is usually set by the age of 6-7, and some developmental psychologists think it's closer to 4-5.

We are still in the image of God: What does it mean for us to bear God's image and likeness.

- Evidence for God's image and likeness:
  - We are moral creatures, capable of altruism and capable of experiencing shame. People are redeemable.
  - We are world conquerors and while we have perverted that godly vocation we are still acting on that nature. We were originally given the vocation of being stewards of God's earthly Kingdom. We are vice-regents who are to responsibly manage the eco-system and biosphere he's given us, and we are to responsibly manage and reign over the animal Kingdom; and responsibly develop land for habitation. But we are corrupted through sin. So we have pollution, and an ocean filling up with plastic and our garbage; we poach certain species to extinction; we over-develop certain areas and deplete those natural resources.

Yes. We're legacy sinners. Born into a sinful race, acting on a sinful nature—receiving in ourselves the due penalty for that sin—but still bearing the image of God. Capable of moral guilt and shame. Capable of benevolence, generosity and philanthropy. **Not one scintilla of which God takes into account for our salvation.**

Paul says, "While we were helpless, while we were yet sinners…" But thanks be to God that's not the end of the story.

2. In response to this helplessness, Christ paid the ultimate price.

5:6, 8 "While we were helpless, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly…But God demonstrates his own love for us, in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us."

While God will often inhabit holy effort—while the Holy Spirit does often bless an industrious person with abundant life (but even that itself is a grace to us)—we are helpless in saving ourselves. While we were powerless, unable to do anything about our plight—God took the initiative and Christ died for us all.

He didn't wait for us to get our act together first.

We take two really big ideas out of this entire Romans 5 passage:

- **God loves us. Rom. 5:5 "**And hope does not disappoint, because the love of God has been poured out in our hearts through the Holy Spirit who was given to us…But God demonstrates his own love for us." What motivates God is pure love for his creatures. Love sparks compassion, and compassion leads to action…
- **God has acted on his love.** Paul uses several "past tense" or Aorist terms that describe what God has already done before we knew about him, knew of his love for us, or had any knowledge of the rescue effort.
    - **Rom. 5:1, 9, 16 "Since we have been justified by faith"** A legal declaration that we are in the right (righteous). We have this justification "by faith" meaning "by the instrumentality of a confidence assurance." **And Eph. 2:9 tells** us that this faith is "not of ourselves" so that we have no grounds to boast in our flesh or our efforts.
        - **Ontological Faith**—faith by nature. We show evidence of this all the time (planes etc).
        - **Special Faith**—saving faith at the moment of conversion.
    - **Rom. 5:1b, 11 "reconciled with God through Jesus the Messiah—our Lord"** having repaired the rift in relationship through Jesus' death and resurrection. We now have access to the God who dwells in unapproachable light, resplendent glory—that God welcoming us back into fellowship with him.
    - **Rom. 5:** Now the law came in so that the transgression may increase, but where sin increased, grace multiplied all the more, [21] so that just as sin reigned in death, so also grace will reign through righteousness to eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Illus. The Thailand kids trapped in a flooding cave. When the rescuer popped up, the kids burst into tears and gratitude, "Thank you. Thank you." Three things struck me:
1) As the water in the cavern increased, the grace of rescue efforts increased commensurately. The more pressing their need for rescue, the more urgent the rescuers increased their efforts,
2) The kids and the coach likely had no idea of the herculean efforts being made on their behalf—rescue efforts, money and treasure and man hours were being spent on their behalf and they were likely oblivious to the massive and international focus on their rescue.
3) The heart of gratitude. I think it's normal and natural to burst into tears of gratitude and relief—when you understand the depths to which you are lost and hopeless to save yourself. I think it's normal and natural to say thank you, not "God look what I've done to achieve salvation. Look what I've done to help myself."

If you want a good marriage, you're going to have to help yourself. Learn the habits of passion and healthy communication skills. The Holy Spirit will bless holy effort and commitment.

If you want a prosperous career, you're going to have to help yourself. Get up, get to work, put your hand to the plow and God will inhabit holy effort he will invade your space with the miraculous.

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If you want to grow as a believer—you're going to have to discipline your body and make it your slave (1 Cor. 9); you'll have to say no to the passions of the flesh which war against your soul, you and I will have to actively, intentionally submit our bodies to God as a living sacrifice which is a reasonable act of worship—refusing to conform to the pattern of this world but renewing our minds in God's Word. The Bible.

In those ways and things where personal responsibility is called for—nothing else will substitute.

But when it comes to our salvation it is Christ's effort that counts towards righteousness. It is his obedience that God accepts as faultless. It is Christ's life extended to us and we are awed that God extends this astonishing act of grace—a crucified Messiah in disgrace, raised in glory.

And the ransomed heart cries out "thank you! For doing something for me I could not do for myself. For mounting the effort to justify me, reconcile me, and set me on the path of an abundant life in Christ."

That's the whole truth.