

I can't cook. There, I said it. I mean, I can cook a little. I can scramble eggs. I can heat up spaghetti sauce. In a pinch, I could keep my family alive. But I'm not the cook in our family. My husband holds the title of *chef d'cuisine* in the LaBar household.

But I can bake. I actually quite love to bake. For most of COVID-tide, I've been on a quest to bake the perfect Swiss roll cake. There's just something about a global pandemic and a world spinning out of control that makes me want to preheat the oven and start whipping egg whites. It's instinctual, I think. Or maybe it's just me.

Recently, I've gained a sous chef in my baking adventures. My daughter Ellie loves to bake. And more and more, it's not just about adding the sprinkles or licking the beaters. Ellie wants to do every step, and she wants to do it herself. Reading the recipe. Measuring out the ingredients. Cracking the eggs. (Everything, it seems, but washing the dishes.) When we bake together, me and Ellie in our matching mother-daughter aprons, her most frequent questions are: *Can I do it? Can I do it myself?*

For the most part, I let her. I let her do it herself. It's messier, sure, and more time-consuming, but I let her do most of it herself. (I draw the line at anything involving heat. The last thing this world needs right now is Ellie armed with a brulée torch.) But I'm happy to let her do it herself. I'm proud she wants to do it herself. She's at that independent, self-reliant stage. She wants to be able to do things by herself, and she doesn't want to need help.

And that's a good thing -- in doses. But you know what they say about too much of a good thing? This self-reliant thing... it goes deep for a lot of us. I think many of us prefer to be self-reliant, to never need or accept help from anyone for anything. It's deeply embedded in our American culture, too. As a nation, we value independence and self-reliance. That old "American dream" is a dream of prosperity *and* self-sufficiency. It's what makes us talk about "pulling ourselves up by our bootstraps" (without even

stopping to question what we really mean by that). The ideal of self-reliance is as American as apple pie.

So it's really no surprise that a particular "phantom Bible verse" has taken deep root in this nation of ours. I've heard this "verse" quoted by politicians and public servants on the left and on the right. I've heard it quoted by sports legends and celebrity figures. I've heard them say, "The Bible says, 'God helps those who help themselves.'"

Does it? Does the Bible say that?

I'm sure you've heard that "verse" before. "God helps those who help themselves." It's a "verse" that glorifies self-reliance, and promises God's help and favor in response to that self-reliance. And it sounds logical, perhaps. Reasonable. Even biblical. Here's the problem: that verse doesn't appear anywhere in the Bible. It's actually a saying credited to Benjamin Franklin, though he probably borrowed the idea from earlier thinkers. But it's not in the Bible.

What's more... not only is it *not* in the Bible... but it actually contradicts one of the Bible's most central messages. "God helps those who help themselves"? The Bible says something quite different. We discovered that in our scripture reading for today, this scripture reading from the book of Romans.

This book, this letter to the Romans is considered by many to be the apostle Paul's masterpiece. It contains some of his most quoted writings, some of his deepest theological points, and some of his most comprehensive understandings of our faith. We find one of those fundamental beliefs smack-dab in the middle of this morning's scripture reading, there in verse 6: "For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly." (Romans 5:6, NRSV). Now, I have a hunch that when we as Christians read this verse, we typically focus on that last part -- you know, the "Christ died for the ungodly" part. That last part of the verse takes us to the cross. It reminds us

that we certainly don't *deserve* God's grace, that we certainly don't *deserve* the salvation that God offers to us through Christ. It is a gift of amazing grace for undeserving, ungodly people... like you and me (if you're humble enough to admit you're ungodly, which is a whole other sermon).

When we read this verse, I think we tend to focus on the second part, the wondrous-cross-amazing-grace part. And there's nothing wrong with that. We can all use an extra reminder about the amazing extent of God's grace, right? That last part of the verse is important! It speaks to the very core of our Christian faith. But we don't want to focus so much on the last part of the verse that we miss the first part. Hear it again: "For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly." (Romans 5:6, NRSV).

While we were still weak. While we were still powerless. While we were still helpless. When we couldn't obtain salvation and reconciliation with God on our own, God offered it to us as a gift. When we couldn't help ourselves, God helped us. That's the story of the cross, the story of salvation, the story of grace. When we couldn't help ourselves, God helped us.

This story of the cross, of salvation, of grace? It's pretty much the opposite of "God helps those who help themselves." The story of our faith is: "When we couldn't help ourselves, God helped us." The story of our Christian faith is not a story of self-reliance and human effort. It is a story of grace.

And church... I'm not sure we're always comfortable with that. I'm not sure we're comfortable thinking of ourselves as weak, powerless, or helpless. I'm not sure we're comfortable thinking of ourselves as being in need of help from anyone -- even from God. We might prefer for the story of salvation to be one of self-reliance. We might prefer to depend on *our* efforts rather than *God's* grace. We might prefer to pull ourselves

to salvation by our own holy bootstraps. We might prefer all of that. But God has not tailored the story of salvation to fit our preferences or accommodate our pride. God is not looking for our self-reliant efforts. God is seeking something better: our humble trust and heartfelt acceptance.

That phantom Bible verse -- “God helps those who help themselves” -- isn’t part of the scriptures. In fact, it contradicts the words of scripture. It denies one of the most fundamental truths of our faith: the truth of grace. It stands in opposition to the way that God has actually chosen to work in this world. God helps those who help themselves? No! God helps those who cannot help themselves -- starting with you and me!

Church, this phantom Bible verse isn’t in the Bible. Not only that, it doesn’t even harmonize with the teachings of the Bible. But not only *that*: it can actually *interfere* with how we live out the commandments of the Bible -- namely, the “two greatest commandments.”

You might remember the story: An expert in the law comes forward to test Jesus, and asks him to name the two greatest commandments of the law. Jesus turns the question back on him, in classic Jesus fashion, and asks, *Well... what do you think?* The lawyer responds: “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself.” (Luke 10:27, NRSV). Basically? Love God and love your neighbor. They’re the two greatest commandments, and they cover just about everything.

So what does this story have to do with this whole “God helps those who help themselves” thing? Everything. You see, I think that clinging to this phantom Bible verse actually prevents us from following these two commandments.

Let's look at the first one: "Love the Lord your God with all your heart." The first of the two greatest commandments. And this whole "God helps those who help themselves" thing gets in the way of doing that, of nurturing that relationship with God. You see, if you put your faith in this phantom Bible verse, you begin to lose sight of your own dependence on God and your need for God's grace. It can cause you to become arrogant, to put your faith in yourself as much as in God... and that can diminish your understanding of God's role in your life. For you, God shrinks. God becomes a helpful presence, but not a necessary one. Perhaps even a little irrelevant. You and God... you're more like colleagues. You don't offer your grateful heart to a mere colleague. I'm exaggerating, maybe... but then again, maybe not. I think that's the line of thinking that results from placing too much faith in this phantom Bible verse and the self-reliance it enshrines.

And then, there's the second of the two greatest commandments: "love your neighbor as yourself." Clinging to this "God helps those who help themselves" phantom verse can get in the way of that, too. You see, this "verse" kind of implies that those who are in the most need are in that situation because... what... they just didn't extend the effort to help themselves? Are we really saying that? Because that condemns those who are already struggling enough. It turns poverty into a moral issue rather than a social and economic one. It willfully ignores the realities that are systems of injustice and cycles of poverty and unequal access to resources. It completely skews one's perspective on poverty. But worst of all? This "verse" can lessen your motivation to help others. After all, if God helps those who help themselves... then just let other people help themselves, and God will handle the rest. No need for you to be charitable or kind or generous or helpful at all. Certainly no need to work to dismantle the systems of injustice that create generational poverty. Again, maybe I'm exaggerating... but then, maybe not. Because

that's the line of thinking that can result from placing too much faith in this phantom Bible verse and its troubling implications.

Do you see what's at stake with this whole "God helps those who help themselves" thing? This phantom Bible verse isn't merely unbiblical. It's... malignant.

Thankfully, we are people of faith, people of Christ, people of this book. We can see through this phantom Bible verse, see through its holes, right to its troubling implications. We know that this whole "God helps those who help themselves" thing is an empty proverb, one that doesn't hold up in the light of scripture. We know this because, as Romans tells us, "while we were still weak," powerless, helpless... God helped us and showered us with grace. We know that God helped us precisely when we could not help ourselves.

And that should inspire us! That should inspire us to place our trust all the more in the God who reaches out to us in our weakness, who helps us in our helplessness, who asks nothing more from us than humble acceptance and obedience and love. And that should also inspire us to extend help to others, because we know what it means to need help; we know that on the one thing that matters most, *we ourselves* have needed help; and we know that the God who has helped us now calls us, in grateful response, to help others. Jesus has called us -- commanded us, really -- to love God and to love others. This phantom Bible verse may get in the way of that... but the truth in the book of Romans inspires us to do just that.

God helps those who help themselves? Let's put that phantom Bible verse, and all of its troubling implications, to rest. It's unbiblical to the point of toxic. Instead, let us proclaim the truth of our faith, the truth of the gospel, the truth of grace: God helps us when we *cannot* help ourselves. That's just God's jam. And once we recognize that, once we recognize the depth of our own need and the extent of God's grace, may we respond

in the only way that makes sense: with love and compassion and help and justice and hope for others.

Benediction: Jeremiah 17:5

The LORD proclaims:

*Cursed are those who trust in mere humans,
who depend on human strength
and turn their hearts from the LORD.*

Trusting in ourselves, it seems, naturally turns our hearts inward and away. The more we focus on what we're doing, the less we focus on what God has done.