

“Helpless”
Romans 13:8-14

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Owe no one anything, except to love one another; for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law. The commandments, ‘You shall not commit adultery; You shall not murder; You shall not steal; You shall not covet’; and any other commandment, are summed up in this word, ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’ Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore, love is the fulfilling of the law. Besides this, you know what time it is, how it is now the moment for you to wake from sleep. For salvation is nearer to us now than when we became believers; the night is far gone, the day is near. Let us then lay aside the works of darkness and put on the armor of light; let us live honorably as in the day, not in reveling and drunkenness, not in debauchery and licentiousness, not in quarrelling and jealousy. Instead, put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires.

Some statistics to share with you this morning...

Only 40% of Americans can name more than four of the Ten Commandments.

Only 50% can name any of the four authors of the Gospels.

(Striking when you realize that 59% of Americans can name the Three Stooges)

12% of Americans believe that Joan of Arc was Noah’s wife.

Now, in terms of true spiritual significance these are perhaps, meaningless numbers. While they may speak to a general educational decline in our nation at large and maybe in our churches as well, they might not be the kind of statistics that should have us completely up in arms and concerned about the future of Christianity or anything like that.

Let me give you one more, though, that does matter: 75% of Americans believe that the Bible teaches that “God helps those who help themselves.” Let me say that again. 3 out of 4 Americans believe that this idea was NOT said by Benjamin Franklin, but actually springs from Scripture. Ben Franklin – likeable guy, I’m sure – had a lot of good ideas – ran outside with a kite and a key in an electrical storm – he’s the one, by the way, who said that “God helps those who help themselves.”

Yet 75% of Americans think that comes from the Bible. What’s crazy about that number is this: not only is “God helps those who help themselves” not biblical—it’s *counter-biblical*! In fact, simply thumbing through the gospels, one could argue that few things are *less* biblical!

The Gospels are full of radical calls to love neighbor and stories where men and women were helped by God who simply *couldn’t* help themselves:

The paralytic being lowered through the hole in the roof to be healed by Jesus

The story of the good Samaritan, who helped the wounded traveler by the side of the road.

The 10 lepers who were cured by Jesus. Granted, only one of them returned to thank Jesus, but the point is, *none* of them were able to help themselves.

The invalid lying beside the pool waiting and waiting for years on end for someone to lift him into the water so that he could be healed. Is there a more stark example of God helping those who cannot help themselves than when Jesus comes to him and offers healing?

And then we come to the passage from Romans that we heard just a few minutes ago.

“Owe no one anything, except to love one another.”

“The one who loves another has fulfilled the law.”

All the commandments “are summed up in this word: love your neighbor as yourself.”

“Love is the fulfilling of the law.”

This radical, biblical call for us to live in love with one another lies at the very heart of who we are as Christians – it cannot be missed in the Bible. Why, then, would 75% of Americans believe that “God helps those who help themselves” is scriptural? It’s not as though these are people who aren’t attending church or who don’t call themselves Christians in the first place. Let’s play with the numbers a little bit. Statistically speaking, it’s safe to say today that roughly 83% of Americans call themselves Christians. Granted, the percentage of Americans attending church every week is hovering right around 30%, but it’s safe to say that American culture is saturated with people who at least aspire to call themselves Christians.

That still makes room for an enormous number of American Christians who believe that God helps those who help themselves. Can you guess why that is?

I have an idea, or at least a partial one, and it’s this. At the core of the American psyche (at the core of the psyche that’s been nurtured in us as children and into adulthood) there is, I believe, a nagging sensation that ultimately we are not worthy of goodness. No, that’s not it. Not completely. Let me add one phrase. At the core of the American psyche there is a nagging sensation that ultimately we are not worthy of goodness *unless we earn it*. Unless we’ve proven ourselves. Unless we can show that because of what we’ve accomplished, because of what we’ve achieved, we deserve it.

We often equate goodness with success. We often measure success with salaries and possessions. Salaries and possessions are things we work really hard for. And in the end, without thinking about it too much, we’re working hard for our own goodness’ sake.

To put it another way, we could ask the question, “How do I know I am good?” Have you asked yourself that question in a while? “How do I know I am good?”

The trouble is that most of us spend a lot of energy answering that question without asking it. Putting in long hours, working through dinner, dwelling too long on our mistakes, focusing on our shortcomings, obsessing over the things about ourselves that we cannot change...

“How do I know that I am good?”

Some of you, without thinking, have spent your life subconsciously answering that question, and it’s turned you into a perfectionist. And here’s the thing about being a perfectionist: it’s not just that you want everything you do to be perfect—that’s just a symptom. The real problem with being a perfectionist is that deep down, you believe that the world is judging you just as harshly as you judge yourself. *And*, the way you tend to answer the question “How do I know that I am good?” is through what others think of you.

Lily was a successful high school student. She came from a good family, and was successful in sports and in her classes at school where she was on the high honor role. She was one of those “super-kids” who did it all and did it all very well.

Lily didn’t just play flute in the band—she took her flute to local, regional, and state competitions where she won awards for her musicianship.

Lily didn’t just get good grades—she excelled in her advanced placement courses and started earning college credit as a junior in high school.

Lily wasn’t just a good athlete—she dominated the field, breaking school records as she led the track and field team to state.

One day, Lily told me she was a perfectionist. She said it somewhat flippantly. And so I said to her, “You know, Lily, the trouble with being a perfectionist is that deep down, you believe that the world is judging you just as harshly as you judge yourself.” And she burst into tears.

And here’s the really sad part. Some of us are perfectionists and some aren’t, but all of us are subject to the culture of perfectionism around us—the culture that bombards us with the message, “Your goodness is something you must earn.”

And that message is just a tiny step away from “God is good to those who earn it. God loves those who prove themselves worthy of that love. God helps those who help themselves.”

It’s no wonder that 75% of Americans believe that message to be biblical.

But here’s the gospel truth: God helps those who can’t help themselves. God loves the helpless! And here’s the even better gospel truth. You and I—we’re helpless. Just accept it. You’re helpless. Nothing you can do or say is going to make you worthy of God’s love. You just are. You are worthy of God’s love—worthy of love—and you can’t help yourself.

Paul reminds the church in Rome of Christ's command, "Love your neighbor as yourself."

I've often thought we might rearrange that commandment to look like this:

Love yourself. Love yourself with a love that you don't have to earn. Love yourself with a love to which you don't have to prove yourself. Love yourself with a love that doesn't judge you as harshly as you think the world might. Love yourself with a love that says to you again and again, "You are good. You are worthy. You are loveable!"

Love yourself helplessly. *And then*, with that love, go and love your neighbor. Amen.