

## Introduction

Check-in & Introductions

## *God Helps Those Who Help Themselves*

## Gospel Lesson

Mark 8:14-26 (NRSV)

<sup>14</sup> Now the disciples had forgotten to bring any bread; and they had only one loaf with them in the boat. <sup>15</sup> And he cautioned them, saying, "Watch out—beware of the yeast of the Pharisees and the yeast of Herod." <sup>16</sup> They said to one another, "It is because we have no bread." <sup>17</sup> And becoming aware of it, Jesus said to them, "Why are you talking about having no bread? Do you still not perceive or understand? Are your hearts hardened? <sup>18</sup> Do you have eyes, and fail to see? Do you have ears, and fail to hear? And do you not remember? <sup>19</sup> When I broke the five loaves for the five thousand, how many baskets full of broken pieces did you collect?" They said to him, "Twelve." <sup>20</sup> "And the seven for the four thousand, how many baskets full of broken pieces did you collect?" And they said to him, "Seven." <sup>21</sup> Then he said to them, "Do you not yet understand?"

<sup>22</sup> They came to Bethsaida. Some people brought a blind man to him and begged him to touch him. <sup>23</sup> He took the blind man by the hand and led him out of the village; and when he had put saliva on his eyes and laid his hands on him, he asked him, "Can you see anything?" <sup>24</sup> And the man looked up and said, "I can see people, but they look like trees, walking." <sup>25</sup> Then Jesus laid his hands on his eyes again; and he looked intently and his sight was restored, and he saw everything clearly. <sup>26</sup> Then he sent him away to his home, saying, "Do not even go into the village."

## Bible/Sermon Focus

82% of Americans believe the statement "God helps those who help themselves" is in the Bible. So do 81% of Christian Americans. In fact, the phrase is considered the number one most well-known biblical phrase, and it ain't even in there! Why? Why do so many Americans and American Christians believe that this phrase is in the Bible?

In the early and mid-modern era this concept was highlighted over and over by political thinkers in the west. The rugged individualism of the liberal political movement inevitably mixed with the religious thought of the day. Many of these political thinkers were not even Christian. The founding fathers, for example, were mostly deists.

The idea of a transactional relationship is not new in religion or even in Christianity. Most polytheistic religions (religions that have many gods) have a transactional element. A person would give an offering to a particular god in exchange for that god's blessing. This transactional idea can be found in the prophetic writings of the Old Testament that are sprinkled with retribution theology throughout them. Retribution theology is the idea that if you do bad things that God will curse you and if you do good things that God will bless you. Retribution theology would say that if a person is financially well off and physically healthy, it's because they are pleasing to God; and that those who are poor or sick are not pleasing to God. It's from this idea that we saw the rise of prosperity gospel in the 1990s and early 2000s.

Transactionally based relationships are all around us. How many of us have heard a friend talking about their spouse, "If he does the dishes, then he can have my attention." How many of us have heard it said of the poor, "If they worked hard, then they would not be strapped for cash."

But over and over again in the Gospels we see that the love of Christ is not a transactional one. Jesus gives and gives not out of the expectation of receiving something, but because it's the right thing to do—it's the kin-dom thing to do. Jesus lives in a way that expresses the reign of God in the world, while dismissing this transactional status quo.

In our Gospel lesson for this week Jesus says to his disciples, "Watch out—beware of the yeast of the Pharisees and the yeast of Herod." The disciples think Jesus is talking about bread. Jesus is actually talking about a spoiled "starter." (Everyone who took up bread making during the pandemic will understand this!) A spoiled bread starter, spoils the whole batch. Jesus is saying that the power dynamics and system of both the religious institution and the government is problematic at its core. Jesus says all of this immediately after the feeding of the 5,000. Again, an act of love and compassion that is not based in transactional relationship or in a hierarchical power structure, but instead in relational acts of mercy and love. People got fed because of the way that Jesus is in relationship with other people and with the world. People get healed because of the way Jesus is in relationship with other people and with the world. Because where Jesus starts relationship is in a space of love and mercy and grace, not a space of transaction.

No person is an island. People need people. We need other people to care for us and to hold us accountable. In order for us to change and become more Christlike, we need the support of others. Paul talks about this in Romans 7:15 "I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate."

Rugged individualism isn't going to cut it. All of us, like Paul, need Christ. And all of us need other believers to help us! The reality is, humans are indeed, well ... human. Our bodily experience is limited, and deserves to be embraced with its finite messiness. Paul knew that. Jesus knew that. We are limited on our own. In Christ and in the body of Christ, we find our help.

Everyone needs help sometimes. And God helps people. God helps the blind man on the road. God helps the sinner. God helps the sick. God helps the outcast. God helps the displaced.

God helps those...who need help. God's grace is never transactional.

## Discussion Questions

1. When was the first time you heard the phrase, "God helps those who help themselves?"
2. When has God helped you? Were you helping yourself?
3. When has God used you to help another person?
4. How does your identity as a Christian mix with your identity as an American?
5. Reflect on the difference and similarities between being a "member" and a "citizen."

## Prayer

God whose love is never transactional; God whose grace is ever present; God who heals, redeems, restores, and forgives, be present with us today. Teach us, as you taught Abraham that you have blessed us so that we can be a blessing to others. Teach us to love freely, to release our transactional tendencies when our neighbors need tenderness. Remind us that your grace entered into our lives not because we were worthy or because we worked for it, but simply because of who you are. Amen.

*God's grace is never transactional.*