

## **Is THAT in the Bible?**

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According to the August issue of *Harper's Magazine*, "Three quarters of Americans believe the Bible teaches 'God helps those who help themselves.' That is, three out of four Americans believe that this uber-American idea, a notion at the core of our current individualist politics and culture, which was in fact uttered by Ben Franklin, actually appears in Holy Scripture."

In anecdotal corroboration, my wife recalls leading a Bible study in Chicago twenty-something years ago. At the first meeting of the group she asked everyone to introduce himself or herself and recite his or her favorite Bible verse. Marge, one of the participants, quoted Ben Franklin above. When LeeAnn gently suggested that Mr. Franklin's saying was not in the Bible, Marge volunteered her second favorite: "Pull thyself up by thine own bootstraps." Equally extra-Biblical, of course. I don't think there were many bootstraps in Biblical times. Sandal laces, but not bootstraps.

Franklin's wisdom at first may not sound all that counter-Biblical, but in fact it is. God doesn't say, "Put yourself first and I'll make sure you get My help." It's just the opposite. Jesus preached a radical Gospel of love. The mandate of the great commandment is "Love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind... and love your neighbor as yourself." Jesus said we should care for the poor, feed the hungry, clothe the naked, visit those in prison, and when we do it for the least of these, we are doing it for Him.

Which brings us to stewardship. From a purely financial point of view, all that God is asking us to put aside to fulfill the great commandment is 10% of our resources. How we spend the other 90% is up to us (and the government, of course, when it comes to taxes). 90/10 – that's not such a bad deal when you stop and think about it. Yet few United Methodists practice tithing. The average gift to United Methodist churches is about 2.5% of one's income, one-fourth of the Biblical standard.

Since I've been picking on Mr. Franklin, it's only fair to cite another of his sayings: a penny saved is a penny earned. Financial planners routinely recommend that people save a minimum of 10% of their income to prepare for retirement and for other future big-ticket expenses, like college tuition. So you could say we should really be following the 80/10/10 rule: 10% for God's work, 10% for savings, and the remaining 80% for our own current needs.

But the news is not good here either. The U.S. Commerce Department's Bureau of Economic Analysis recently reported that the U.S. personal saving rate dropped to zero in June! That means that many Americans, and many American Christians, are spending more than they make, piling up credit card debt that can take decades to repay.

I believe that it is time for all of us who profess to follow Jesus to re-examine our financial priorities. As followers of Jesus we are called to a radical notion, that loving God and neighbor comes before charging the 50" plasma high-definition television set that I am so fond of talking about on the Visa or MasterCard.

As I read the Gospel, loving God and neighbor isn't optional. It's just what Jesus asks us to do if we dare call ourselves Christians. And deep down, I think Ben Franklin would agree.

As the stewardship voice of the Florida Conference, the Foundation is ready to help you, your family and your church with anything related to comprehensive Christian stewardship. For more information please call, click or write us at 1-800-282-8011, extension 106; [www.fumf.org](http://www.fumf.org); or PO Box 3549, Lakeland, FL 33802.