



WEEKLY STUDY

WEEK 3: Counter Culture - Self Help

As we continue in our series, “Counter Culture”, we are exploring some of the values that our culture celebrates while asking ourselves the deeper question - “What does God actually say about these things?” This week Pastor Benson is speaking about the idea of “Self Help”.

MONDAY: Isaiah 53: 5-6

But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was on him, and by his wounds we are healed. We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to our own way; and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all.

As we take a deeper look at the affects of “self help” in our lives, let’s first look at the root cause of why we are seeking help in the first place. In Genesis 1 we see that God created the world to be “very good” with none of the brokenness we have today. Adam & Eve could walk freely with God and they had everything that they needed. Then sin happened, and it all fell apart. In Genesis 3, Adam & Eve made the choice to do the one thing God told them not to do. After this, sin & brokenness entered the world and into all of our lives. Therefore, we are all living in a world filled with struggles because of the sin in our own lives and in those around us. As we read in these verses in Isaiah, we recognize that we have all been like the sheep that wandered away. We have all made mistakes, and we all need a shepherd. In verse 5 Isaiah shares how Jesus gives up His life for our brokenness & sin. The punishment that He took in our place brings us peace. His wounds heal our wounds. As it says in **1 Timothy 2:5-6** - “*For there is one God and one mediator between God and mankind, the man Christ Jesus, who gave himself as a ransom for all people.*” To put it simply - Jesus heals the broken bridge between us & God. It’s not a surprise to God that we are seeking help due to how broken we are, and how broken our world is. He knows that we need a savior, and that we need Him. He knows we can’t do this life on our own, no matter how hard we try. We are stuck in our messes, and there is only one way out. Let’s take a journey this week as we examine our own brokenness & our own need for help.

Take a moment and pray for the Holy Spirit to reveal the areas in your life that are your greatest struggles. Where are you like the sheep going your own way? Where are the areas that you are so stuck that you feel like giving up? Write them down, pray over them, and ask God to show you the pathway towards help during our study this week.

TUESDAY

Psalm 121:1

I lift up my eyes to the mountains-where does my help come from?

Where do we go for help when our daily struggles become too much? Many of us turn to a quick google search, maybe we order a new book to help us with strategies, listen to a few podcasts, download an audio book from the latest “mindset” guru on that topic, maybe take a personality quiz to “diagnose” ourselves, or purchase a new mindful app that promises to help us with all the things we are struggling with. So many times, we look for a DIY, quick-fix, “self help” guide to life.

“Self Help” promises:

1. Secrecy - You won't have to admit or share our struggles with anyone if you tackle this alone. No one has to know.
2. Quick-Fix - You can fix your problem quickly with an easy one-size-fits-all approach by following these simple “steps”. Anyone can do it!
3. Surface Level Change - You don't need to go deeper to find the root cause of your problems, just focus on the symptoms.
4. Positive Mindset - All you need to do is avoid your negative thoughts, have a positive mindset, and all your problems will disappear. (AKA: Toxic Positivity)

It's no wonder that the Self-Help Industry has exploded into a multi-billion dollar marketplace. These Self-Help promises seem to offer us a life free of struggles with a quick easy way out. If we look at the definition of “Self-Help”, it is defined as: The action of solving a problem, stopping a bad habit, or learning a new skill by yourself; or The action or process of bettering oneself or overcoming one's problems without the aid of others. Of course this doesn't sound too bad, surely God would want us to improve ourselves, right? In short, the answer is yes. God absolutely wants us to get help, and to be free from struggle and brokenness. However, God's ways are very different than our ways -

Let's read the rest of Psalm 121:

*I lift up my eyes to the mountains— where does my help come from?
My help comes from the Lord, the Maker of heaven and earth.
He will not let your foot slip—he who watches over you will not slumber;
indeed, he who watches over Israel will neither slumber nor sleep.
The Lord watches over you— the Lord is your shade at your right hand;
the sun will not harm you by day, nor the moon by night.
The Lord will keep you from all harm—he will watch over your life;
the Lord will watch over your coming and going both now and forevermore.*

Take out your journal notes from yesterday with the struggles that you listed. Pray and consider how you are facing those struggles. What are you doing, or have you done to try and get help or “fix” these areas in your life? Do any of your strategies sound like Self-Help: have you kept it a secret, are you trying to do it alone, have you tried a “quick fix”, have you been addressing the surface-level of the problem vs. the root, or are you simply trying to ignore it and just stay positive?

WEDNESDAY: Proverbs 3:5-6

*Trust in the Lord with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding;
in all your ways submit to him, and he will make your paths straight.*

You might be asking yourself...what's so bad about wanting to be better?...why wouldn't God want me to improve myself or work on myself?...what's so wrong with “Self Help”? All of these are great questions. We can read examples throughout the Bible where God calls us to be better people. He calls us to stop sinning, He calls us to be patient and kind, He calls us to love our neighbor, He calls us to be good stewards of what we have, He calls us to treat our bodies as a temple, He calls us to put others ahead of ourselves, and on and on. Throughout the Bible we see God asking us to be good, to take care of ourselves, to rest, and to be healthy. These are some of the very same things that the Self Help industry is preaching, teaching and sometimes even worshipping. Why wouldn't it be great for us to try some of these practical ways to improve ourselves? Of course, there is nothing sinful about reading or listening to Self Help. Sometimes the advice can be helpful. What is important is where your strength, hope, and freedom from your struggles is coming from. As we read in these verses in Proverbs 3, God calls us to trust Him and not to lean on our own knowledge & understanding.

God asks us to fully submit to Him. God cares about where your true help is coming from. If you are reading a Self Help book to improve an area in your life, you may want to pause and ask:

1. Are you depending on the strategies in the book to fix the brokenness in your life before giving it fully to God?
2. Are you placing the advice from a mindset guru above waiting and listening for God's voice?
3. Are you spending more time researching ideas online than you are in His Word?

If the answer is Yes to any of these, you are not alone. Many of us can get mixed up in attempting to seek Godly improvement over the sin in our lives, without first asking God Himself. We can try as hard as we want, but we will never ever be able to free ourselves from our problems, sin and brokenness without Jesus. When we humble ourselves and realize that we truly need a savior, and that savior is not ourselves - there is freedom. When we realize that we can't do this alone - there is true and lasting hope. When we realize that all the Self Help books in the world will never make all the things better again - we can let go of those chains of the "try harder" life. We will never be able to heal ourselves, and no one can heal the brokenness and sin in our lives except for Jesus.

Take a moment to look at the struggles you listed on Monday. Honestly ask yourself how much time you've spent researching, trying harder, reading, and self-diagnosing your struggles? Do you feel exhausted of trying to "fix" things by yourself? Pray and ask God to help you in these areas.

THURSDAY

Matthew 16:25

For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me will find it.

Galatians 2:20

I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I now live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.

Isaiah 40:31

"But those who hope in the Lord will renew their strength. They will soar on wings like eagles; they will run and not grow weary, they will walk and not be faint."

2 Corinthians 12:9-10

*"My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may rest on me. **10** That is why, for Christ's sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong.*

While we can take advice from many sources in our lives, and God can absolutely use anyone and anything to speak truth to us, we need to be sure that we are truly following the one who can actually make us well again. In Matthew, it says that we must lay our lives down to gain it. That's a tough concept for many of us. We have to lay down our striving, our trying harder, AND our goals & plans for our lives. Our plans are often so much smaller than His plans. Many times when we adopt those generic Self Help goals, we seek things that are a conforming one-size-fits-all approach. We are following the crowd, or what someone else is speaking into our lives other than God. Does God want us all to be on a Keto diet, with vigorous exercise plans, an organic garden in our yards, podcasting about gentle parenting, doing our morning

affirmations in the mirror and thinking with an outward positive mindset? Yikes! Maybe God is calling you to be healthier in certain areas, but most likely not quite like this. In Psychology Today they recently did a study that many of these things actually cause more stress in our lives. People that spend time in the Self Help world are less happy, less peaceful in their hearts and suffer from the toxic positivity that exists in these areas. It's a counterfeit version of God, and that never ends well. When you can't admit you are struggling, or that you need help because that would discount this "easy fix" that you have subscribed to, we need to pause and pray. God has the answers to your questions, God has the solution that you are searching for, and He is your savior from all of your problems. Thinking positively as most Self Help guru's peddle, will never get you there. In fact, it ignores the problems, compounds them and can sink you deeper into shame and guilt. You cannot do this alone. You cannot do this without God's strength. As it says in the verses above - His power is made perfect in our weakness. He is the strength that we need to be able to conquer our struggles.

What are the goals and plans you have set for yourself? Are any of these goals manufactured from a one-size-fits-all Self Help approach? Stop and pray and ask God if they are truly from Him, or if they are from some other source? Take some time this week to write new goals, listen to God's voice and no one else's. Your plan, goals and struggles won't look like anyone else's because God made you unique.

FRIDAY

Hebrews 10:24-25

"And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds, not giving up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but encouraging one another—and all the more as you see the Day approaching."

Proverbs 15:22

"Plans fail for lack of counsel, but with many advisers they succeed."

As it's name suggests, Self Help, has a strong emphasis on doing it yourself. A "pull yourself up by your bootstraps" approach to life. God never intended for us to be alone in our struggles. Over and over in the Bible God promises to always be with us, to never leave us and that we are never alone. Even in the garden when Adam & Eve sinned and suddenly knew that they were naked, God made them clothing. In His infinite grace, He helped them even in their brokenness, and He will help you too. You can lay everything at His feet, even the things you know deep down are messes that you made yourself.

God also calls us to be in community with others. We need the church, we need small groups, we need community. Often God speaks to us through His word or in prayer, however, many times He uses our brothers and sisters in Christ to speak truth to us. Whether that is through accountability, an encouraging word, a testament to how God brought them through a similar struggle or just a sounding board for you to name out loud what you are struggling with. We are physiologically and physically designed for safe spaces in community to relieve stress and to help us work through our long term struggles, habits or addictions. We also sometimes need wise counsel to get us the help that we need. This can sometimes be a trusted pastor or ministry leader. There are other times where we may need therapy or counseling to work through trauma, or past mistakes. This is a good reminder that - a good diagnosis is necessary for a good cure. We need strategies that are created specifically for us, uniquely crafted by a loving God and supported in a safe community space.

Now that you have faced and written out your struggles this week, and prayerfully made new Godly goals for your life. Ask yourself where you are in community? Where are your safe spaces to share and be encouraged in God's plan for your life? If this answer is - I don't know, or I don't have one - please reach out. Your church family, your pastors and ministry leaders want to be there for you.

Church Resources: If you need somewhere to turn, we are here to help. If you would like to be connected to a therapist or counselor, if you would like to pray or grab a cup of coffee with someone, or if you would like to join a supportive small group...please reach to our Discipleship Director, Melonie Plotkowski (meloniep@gumchurch.com). She will get you connected with trusted help in our church congregation and community.