Height of Christian hypocrisy:

“Pray as if everything depended upon God, then act as if everything depended on you.”

Trusting in God vs. trusting in the arm of flesh. 2 Ne 4: 34; 28:31.

“… they draw near me with their lips [praying as if everything depended upon God], but their hearts are far from me [because they act as if everything depended upon them] …” JS–H 1:19.

“Pray as though everything depended on God and act as if everything depended on you.” — St. Augustine (354-430)

“Pray as if everything depended on God and work as if everything depended on you.” — St. Ignatius Loyola, The Jesuits: Their Spiritual Doctrine and Practice, p. 148

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THE PROPAGANDA OF WILLFULNESS
Gerald May

My least favorite saying is “God helps those who help themselves.” It has always given me the creeps, not only because of its bad, dualistic theology, but also because my mother used it on me when she thought I was being lazy. I can’t get away from it: it is likely the best-known adage in the English-speaking world. A poll reports that 82% of Americans believe it comes from the Bible. But the Bible says nothing of the sort. If anything, the Bible maintains that God especially helps those who cannot help themselves.

The saying began in ancient Greece, but Benjamin Franklin popularized it for Americans in his Poor Richard’s Almanack. It was well known in Europe, too. Adolph Hitler used it in speeches to rev up the Nazi war machine. He extolled the philosophy as “both pious and just.” More recently, a professional cult de-programmer was quoted as saying, “I firmly believe that the Lord helps those who help themselves. A few little things like karate, mace, and handcuffs can come in handy from time to time.”

When you think about it, it’s really quite a nasty little saying. An even nastier and more dualistic version of the same philosophy has been infecting spiritual communities for at least four centuries. You may have heard it: “Pray as though everything depended on God and act as though everything depended on you.” This version troubles me even more than the simpler form.

It appears to encourage prayer and intimacy with God, but before you know it, it tells you to act as though God weren’t in the picture at all. Yet people continue to quote it without question, as if Jesus himself had said it. Upon hearing it again recently, I resolved to track down the source. Who, I wondered, had come up with this tripe?

I found the saying quoted in scores of respectable publications. Most didn’t bother to cite a source. Among those that did, I found the following: Saints James, Augustine, Benedict and Ignatius; Cardinals Newman and Spellman; Salvation Army founder William Booth, Vernita Heckel, John Krumm, S. H. Payer, John Wesley, his wife Susanna Wesley, several rabbis and “a Jewish prayer book,” Martin Luther, Lillian Gish, Patricia Levins, Brigham Young and a New England baseball coach. Other-definitely more accurate-citations included “Unknown,” “Anonymous” and “I forget who.”

St. Ignatius is among the most frequently cited sources, and it is likely that he did inspire the saying. What Ignatius said, however, is essentially the opposite of the popular version. According to Jesuit scholar John W. Padberg, the following aphorism is attributed to Ignatius:

Let this be the first rule of your undertakings: confide in God as if the success of those undertakings depended completely upon you and not at all upon God; nonetheless give your whole self to the undertakings as if you yourself would be doing nothing in them but God alone would be doing everything.

Padberg explains that if you can decipher Ignatius’s paradoxical language, the emerging meaning comes close to “Pray as if everything depended upon you; and act as if everything depended upon God.”

This understanding is still too dualistic for my taste, but when I actually try it out, it feels far more comfortable, natural, and right. Try it yourself, and meanwhile, don’t forget that both of the popular adages are bogus, phony, and wrong. They contradict scripture and the whole lineage of contemplative spirituality. They are anti-incarnational,
denying that we live and move and have our being in God. They reject Jesus’s exhortations to trust God completely. They maintain that you can’t expect God to just bless you with gifts; you have to make things happen instead. They would have you believe that Jesus was just exaggerating when he spoke about the lilies of the field, and that he was simply mistaken when he said Mary, not Martha, had chosen the one thing necessary.

Why are such twisted distortions so uncritically accepted? Theologically, one might trace it to a fear of quietism, that centuries-old heresy which devalued human will and intention. Although a number of contemporary theologians still keep a paranoid lookout for anyone using prayer to avoid responsibility, I believe such fears are groundless. How many actual quietists do you know—people who truly pray instead of act? I have to agree with what Thomas Merton wrote in his final book: “Absolute quietism is not exactly an ever-present danger in the world of our time.”

Instead, I think such sayings are popular because they rationalize our mistrust of God and our subsequent desire to master our own destinies. They are propaganda for willfulness. The falsehood of the adages is so acceptable precisely because the Gospel truths they undermine are so radical. The Gospel truths invite a degree of trust in God that seems impossible in the so-called real world. And they require the most awful and awesome spiritual sacrifice: letting-go of control.

These sayings justify our desire to have our spiritual cake and eat it, too. We want to consider ourselves faith-filled, but we are terrified of actually letting go and letting God. We pray about decisions, but we feel we must also have logical justification for everything we do. We seek God’s guidance, but we are also compelled to look like we’re using our heads. We want to give our hearts to God, but never so completely that we might appear foolish.

The Gospel is foolish. It’s downright ridiculous. The Good News is just too good to be true, and it demands nothing less than everything. If we are honest, we don’t need fraudulent aphorisms to rationalize that the Gospel is too much for us. Instead, let us just admit that we cannot accomplish our own faith. We cannot help ourselves, not where it counts the most. We need God’s grace even to trust God’s grace. And much as our willful-ness might want to deny it, God is far too intimate and loving for us to utter a single silly word about how to pray or who God does or doesn’t help.

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Perhaps greater wisdom is found in the words of our liturgy, calling upon us to “pray as if everything depended upon God, but act as if everything depended upon ourselves.” This exhortation is in keeping with a wonderful story told of our sage, Rabbi Levi of Berdichev. Rabbi Levi taught that everything in God’s creation has good in it. A student challenged the Rabbi, asking him what could be good about atheism. Rabbi Levi responded: “The atheist can’t look at a poor person and say, ‘God will help you.’” The atheist knows that we must provide for our fellow human beings in time of need. We who believe in God, on the other hand, pray that God will bring an end to all forms of want and deprivation. We are tempted to let God feed the hungry or clothe the naked. And yet, we must act as if God has absolutely no power in this realm, giving freely of our own resources and time to alleviate poverty and inequality, illness and loneliness.

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We ask God, yet make other provisions. There is something good about the axiom, “Pray as if everything depended on God and work as if everything depended on you.” But, in one sense, it reveals our spirit of independence. It conveys the idea: “I’ll have to do it all myself, anyway!”

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What Would Buffy Do?


Does: Handouts: “Pray-hypocrisy.doc”  Page 2 / 4
One issue that I feel Reiss deals with very well is the general absence of God from the series. I am reminded of the saying ‘pray as if everything depended on God, and live as if everything depended on you’. Any of us can learn from Buffy simply as an example of getting on with life as if it really did all depend on us, and God could not act. Some people would not like that. But there is also an honesty that I find resonates with me: most of the time I do feel as if it is all up to me. I can’t and don’t sit around waiting for God to do things for me. (One of) the difference(s) between me and Buffy would be that I do pray about things. Would that people who want to complain about the absence of God from this series would try ‘saving the world a lot’ just as Buffy Summers does!

College of Saint Benedict, Saint John’s University, “Companions on a Journey” — Service Learning: Reflection on Service, http://www.csbsju.edu/journey/students/service.htm

Pray as if everything depended on God; work as if everything depended on you. — Saint Ignatius of Loyola, 1491-1556


Tension between the worship of the Ba’als and the worship of Yahweh runs all through the Old Testament: planting a field or a vineyard without sacrifice to Baal was about as wise as developing a new product without market research or failing to read the prospectus before sending money. The Jews might worship Yahweh, sure; but especially when times were tough they seemed not particularly inclined to leave practical matters in His hands. Nor are we. When I was a little girl, in an absolutely conventional, respectable church of the 1950s, I was taught to pray as if everything depended upon God but to work as if everything depended on me. What that meant, finally, was to work as if everything depended upon me and then to fall into bed exhausted. To make my own ambitious, highly disciplined, very careful sacrifice to Ba’al. “Depending on God” was nothing more than pious platitude. “Behold the lilies of the field” and all that was fine sentiment—but ultimately only that, only sentiment. Shrewd people, successful people, worked hard and watched out for the deceits of sentimentality.

So whenever you hear about Baal, think about ambition. Think about how much people sacrifice to their own careers: the hours, the travel, the stress, the costs to our families and to the development of our children. There’s a lot there to think about. And there always has been, in every human culture, and that’s why the rivalry between Baal and Yahweh still makes for such a great story. Centuries later, Jesus is still telling that same story, trying, still trying to convince us that trusting God is not utter foolishness but rather the difficult, complicated key to our redemption from anxiety and greed. And millenias later, we are still trapped, still struggling with anxiety and with depression and with greed, still feeling trapped and still trying to prove ourselves, to prove ourselves to Ba’al.

“Have faith that Israel is eternal”
Torah Study
Vayera/Genesis 18:1-22:24

Is faith that profound inner conviction which impels and informs all of our most significant activities? Or as Rashbam teaches, is faith rather to be relegated to the realm of the internal spirit alone, in the sense that one ought to piously pray as if everything depended on God, but humanistically act as if everything depended on us alone?


I did the church thing but everything was rooted in the past or the future. One day god will do this or in the past he did that. When I asked what he was gonna do for me today all I heard was, “pray as if everything depended on god but work as if it depended on you?” Great, I do all the work, god gets all the credit and if I screw up he’s got plausible deniability: I didn’t work hard enough. What a load of religion. So I’ve been reading a lot of George Carlin and I like his idea of praying to Joe Pesci.

“Getting Stuck In – Anabaptist Involvement in Local Politics” by Judith A. Gardiner
Jesus-like leadership emphasises humility that does not parade our achievements, claim authoritative judgement on every issue or indulge in arrogant control freakery. Such humility may inspire us to reconsider our diary – ensuring more time is spent working hard and sacrificially with local people, and rather less with the “movers and shakers. It also calls us to remember that, like the Roman centurion, we serve as “people under authority” and this authority is God’s alone. We will therefore want to be conscientious in our service and hold our commitments, judgements and performance open to dialogue and criticism in the light of Christ. But precisely because we “pray as if everything depended on God” we know that we do not need to act as if everything depended upon us. We could therefore resist, and help others resist, the occupational hazard of the “Messiah complex” that can inflict conscientious politicians, leading them to take on too much and internalise too much responsibility for outcomes. This, in itself, would help humanise the political process! [Emphasis added.]


Nicole writes in a winsome way to make his point. For instance, in the chapter on prayer and revival, he refers to the motto that “You ought to pray like a Calvinist and preach like an Arminian. That is, pray as if everything depended upon God and preach as if everything depended on men. I would like to suggest a change in this formula which will improve it by fifty percent: ‘You ought to pray like a Calvinist and preach like a Calvinist.’ Do not pray as if everything depended on God. Pray because everything depends on God.” [Emphasis added.]