

"God helps those" helps Obama

By [Steve Thorngate](#)

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I'm all for biblical literacy. I think it's embarrassing when the White House press secretary [publicly misattributes](#) a proverb to the Bible, especially when it's such a classic of the Bible-misattribution genre: "God helps those who help themselves."

Still, it's annoying to see the president's fascinating [invocation of God](#) on the stump overshadowed by another story about biblical illiteracy in high places. Sure, saying that "God wants to see us help ourselves by putting people back to work" takes Obama uncomfortably close to "Jesus told me to tell you he'd vote for this bill if he could!" territory. But whatever else this moment was, it was an impressive bit of rhetoric.

While "God helps those who help themselves" is grammatically plural, it's [typically invoked](#) as implicitly singular: God helps each person who helps his or herself. In other words, it's part of the whole bootstraps tradition of American individualism. Using this line says nothing explicit about government programs or collective action--remember, [pith matters](#)--but the implication is usually pretty clear: your options include (a) prayer, (b) going out and making something happen for yourself and (c) both. As a Christian and an American, you're advised to try (c).

Obama, however, exploited the fact that the actual saying is plural. God wants *us* (all Americans, including their government) to help *ourselves* (the jobless and struggling, whether or not that includes you personally). Thus the most notorious groaner of baptized bootstraps-ism is repurposed in support of the common good.

Not bad for a guy with biblically illiterate senior staffers.