

## Two by Two

### The Helping Paradox

by Pastor Mandy Barkhaus

One of the biggest paradoxes or contradictions of helping is when it comes to asking for help. Now, when I think about over the years, how many times I've preached or talked about how God made us with a purpose, and we are supposed to live into that purpose, or the times that I use the scripture, it's better to give than to receive.

And the times that I've said that that helping is what Jesus was all about. And so, of course, we ourselves are supposed to help. All of those things are very true statements. But when it comes time to the times in our lives when we need to ask for help, this is where we might stumble. There are a lot of reasons why people don't ask for help.

It can make us feel inferior, incompetent, or weak. If we have to ask for help, we might think that people will say no. So we might not ask for help. We may have this unhealthy fear of rejection. Sometimes, we think that if we ask for help, we simply don't have enough faith in Jesus. Recently, I stumbled upon this article titled Stubborn Nation.

Three in four people don't ask for help until they absolutely need it. I want to guess what this stubborn nation they were talking about. Yeah. Yeah. United States. This article talks about the United States and how we struggle with asking others for help. On another website, World Population Review dot com. It ranked the United States as the number one most individualistic society.

Guatemala is at the bottom. Most Western cultures, societies, and countries were near the top, and it seems like in our Western culture, we've lost this sense of community where we value ourselves over the collective group. Now, in contrast to individual individualistic societies that value self over the group, there are these collective societies where they value this cohesiveness of both individuals and the group over the interest of their self.

There is a popular series on Netflix called The Squid Games. Now, in 2021, it was the most popular series on Netflix, and The Squid Games is a show. It's a fictional show set in South Korea. And it's this secret contest where somebody is going to win, like this huge sum of money. And they targeted people who were in deep debt.

So, people who were just drowning in debt were convinced to come to play this game because they might win this really big sum of money and 400, and some people showed up for this game. So, these contestants had no idea what they were about to get into. They arrived at this game, and they played children's games like red light and green light.

But instead of just children's games, these words are deadly children's games, like if you lost, you died. So recently, they have this new show out, and it's called Squid Game The Challenge. And this one is based on squid games, but it's a reality show. They invited 400 contestants to come, and they played the same children's game.

Just these children's games were not deadly. Right. If you lost this game, you were simply out of the competition. Well, there was one group of people on this game show that created this little community among themselves, and they called themselves the Gon Gone Boo Gang. And Gone Boo in Korean means best friends. And so they created this little community of best friends among themselves.

What happened is that as soon as they created this community, they became a threat to the other players because there is power in the collective community. It can be a good power, and it can also be a bad power. But there is power. When we come together now, living in an individualistic society means that we often refuse this kind of collective help.

The church, I believe, has something to do with this. I think that they believe that the church is part of the problem. And I think that because you will find churches that will preach that Jesus is all that you need, and Jesus, if you give Jesus your whole heart, you will be given everything that you need.

There are some churches that will preach that Jesus can fix your addictions, that Jesus will keep you mentally healthy, and that Jesus may even bless you financially if you have enough faith in Jesus. Now, there is some truth to this. I believe that Jesus does give us what we need. I believe

that. But I believe there's also this little asterisk near this.

And I think that's sometimes what Jesus gives us, comes in the form of the church or comes in the form of a community or comes in the form of another person, a community of people that can surround you and offer you support to offering their gifts and their skills when you may not have those gifts or skills, or maybe you don't have those skills or gifts at that moment.

I think society is a problem as well because society, as a society, we are trending toward the opposite of what the first church looked like. In many ways, we have lost the power of the church because of our interest in ourselves over the interest of the collective group. In the Book of Acts, you will find the First Church, and you will find.

And in that first church, what they did was that everyone who was part of that church pooled their money. They put all of their money in so that everyone was well cared for. And their first priority in the church was the church. They wanted to make sure that everyone in the church was taken care of so that the church could go out and share the good news of Jesus.

Invite others into the love and support that the church community offers so that they can be better equipped to feed the hungry, clothe the naked, visit the sick, and all the other commands that Jesus gave us. So this kind of family, the kind of family that is God's people living together here, is what David was talking about in Psalm 133.

David says this: Look at how good and pleasing it is when families live together as one. It is like expensive oil poured over the head, running down onto the beard. Aaron's beard extended over the collars of his robe. It is like the dew on Mount Hermon streaming down onto the mountains of Zion because it is there that the Lord has commanded the blessing, everlasting life, everlasting life.

That is the gift of Jesus. The gift of Jesus now and the gift of Jesus in the world to come. But sometimes, we need a little help in order to live into all that Jesus offers us. Now, you'll probably recognize these song lyrics

From when I was younger, so much younger than today. I never needed anybody's help in any way. And now these days are gone. I'm not so self-assured now I find I've changed my mind. I've opened up the doors. Help me. If you can. I'm feeling down. And I do appreciate you being round. Help me get my feet back on the ground. Won't you please, Please help me.

And of course, that song was sung by the Beatles in a 1971 interview with Rolling Stone.

John Lennon, who wrote this song, said that this was one of his favorite Beatles records. He said, Because I meant it. He said it was real. Then he added, The lyric is as good now as it was then. It is no different. And it makes me feel secure to know that I was that aware of myself then. He said it was just me singing Help, and I meant it.

Now, help isn't just needed for those who have hit rock bottom, like when it's almost too late. That's not when. Help! Help Whose help is four for John Lennon? He wrote this song because of the fast success that the Beatles had, and he was feeling overwhelmed by too much success. From the outside, it looked like John Lennon had everything going for him, but his quote says that he was so self-aware to know that he needed help, even if the others on the outside couldn't see it.

And I think being self-aware helps to understand God's intentions for God's creation. Time after time in scripture, we learn that we were not to mate; we were not made to live isolated from one another like we were made for community. We were made to live with others. Jesus, in his ministry, tells us that we need one another.

In Mark 6, Jesus sends out the 12, and He sends them out in pairs because we're not made to live alone. It says Jesus called for the 12, and he sent them out in pairs. But before Jesus, Mary, Jesus's mother, teaches us about seeking help when we need it. Although Mary had one question after the Angel came and told Mary that she was going to conceive a child who would rule the entire wide world, Mary had one question.

She said, How will this be since I am a virgin? And then that after that one question, then Mary says, We read in Luke chapter one, verse 38, Mary said, I am the Lord's servant. Let it be with me just as you have said. Mary knew her purpose, and she accepted it. But she was young. Now, Mary would have been, I don't know, 12 to 15 years old when this Angel came to visit her.

And when I was young, I can tell you that I probably would have said, well, I can do it on my own, like you and I. And I know I did. As a young mother, I wasn't 12 to 15, but I was a pretty young mother. And I wanted to prove that I could do it on my own.

And I spent my whole life trying to prove that I could do things on my own as the baby of the family. Like, I wanted to be independent. And it worked some of the time for me. But I know that if I had been better at asking for help from others, I could have been a better mother. I could have been a better wife. I could have been a better follower of Jesus.

But Mary was a much wiser young woman than I was, and she just didn't let this happen to her. Instead, she seeks help, and she travels to her cousin Elizabeth's house in Judea. And this is about an 80 to 100-mile journey. It would probably have taken, I don't know, 3 to 10 days to get there. And we don't know if she went alone.

She likely didn't go alone. We don't know if Joseph went with her or not, but we know that she traveled this distance to see her cousin, Elizabeth. After the Angel came to Mary, I can imagine the mix of emotions that Mary had, like being overwhelmed by the weight of the privilege and the responsibility. Right. Like me, I am going to carry this child.

But then also, like on the other side, like this, the weight of the responsibility. Feeling vulnerable, feeling isolated, and certainly apprehensive about what the future might lie ahead. So she had this multitude of feelings surging through her heart. And then it's at this critical moment where God, in God's compassion, threw her a little lifeline. A friend, the Angel, had told her, you know, hey, guess what, Mary, you're not alone.

Elizabeth is pregnant, too. So there's someone out there for you. Not not even. Just not more than a stranger, more than a friend, but a relative. An older, wiser, godly believer who shared a similar journey. So we read and. And Luke Chapter One, starting at verse 39, it says, Mary got up and hurried to a city in the Judean Highlands.

She entered Zacharias' home and greeted Elizabeth. When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the child leaped in her womb, and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit. With a loud voice, Elizabeth blurted out, God has blessed you above all women, and He has blessed the child you carry. Why do I have this honor that the mother of my Lord should come to me?

As soon as I heard your greeting, the baby in my womb jumped for joy. And then Elizabeth says, Happy is she who believed that the Lord would fulfill the promises he made to her. And then Mary replied, With all my heart, I glorify the Lord in the depths of who I am. I rejoice, God my Savior. Then verse 56 says that Mary stayed with Elizabeth for about three months and then returned home.

Now, surely the main reason for Mary to hurry to go with haste, to hurry to this city, was to get the help and support that God had provided her in Elizabeth. Like both were pregnant, both with unusual circumstances, says Elizabeth was unable to have children. She was advanced in age. And then Mary, who was this young virgin girl.

And Mary needed help in that moment. And Elizabeth was there for her. And think about the weight that was lifted off Mary's shoulders when she had simply just heard Elizabeth's greeting for her. I'm sure there was a relief. There were probably tears of joy; overwhelming gratitude must have just flooded over her. Like Mary sought help. And then she was given the help.

And she didn't have to explain. I think Elizabeth just understood, without any sort of explanation, that God provided Elizabeth for Mary. Mary demonstrates the kindness and compassion of God, like God's grace and mercy, shining through in this moment of these two helping one another, providing this exact support that we need precisely when we need it the most.

That is the kind of God that we serve. So, how would this story be different if Mary didn't seek out help? What if Mary, like, heard the Angel and said, like Elizabeth? I mean, like she's so old? Like, what would she know about what I am going through? Like, if she had just, you know, blown off this opportunity, like she would have missed out on, on, on God, providing her with love and comfort and the help that she needed.

I know that I have made that mistake too many times in my life, blowing off help that came my way. This is sad because I believe it is God's desire that we be together and live together with one another in a community where we find love where we can in those whom God has given us.

You could say that during this greeting with Mary and Elizabeth, these were the only two Christians in the whole wide world that day. Mary knew and believed what was happening. And Elizabeth, if that was the very first one to call Jesus her Lord like Jesus is coming. Like they knew what was about to happen, and isn't that the whole reason that God sent his son to be born to Mary in the first place so that we could have access to the same kind of hope and love and help from one another.

But we know that we don't live in a society like that. We're not good at asking for help or accepting help. And so if we are in a place to help others, what we need to do is we need to help others. A couple of weeks ago, Karen Herold, our director of Adult ministries, stood on this stage and told us about the Blue Christmas service that will be on the 21st at 630.

She talked about this service being a service just for anybody who is who needs a little joy this season, who needs a little help, who's grieving or feeling stressed, or whatever it is. Karen said that she invited people on her Facebook page and said, hey, not only are you invited, but come, I will sit with you.

And then, after that, I saw even more people doing that. I think that is an incredible way to invite others, not only just to invite them, but to say, hey, I will sit with you so you are not alone. Now, maybe, maybe you are in a place in your life where you need help. And if you need help, I encourage you to reach out to someone.

Reach out to someone in your life group. Reach out to someone in this church community. Contact one of the staff. Contact me. And if you need immediate help, please remember the number 988. That is the National Crisis and Suicide Hotline. You dial nine, eight, eight. You can call, you can text, You can go online. That is a number that we all need to know.

The fourth week of Advent focuses on love, and God is love. And God so loved the world. That's you and me. That's all of us. God so loved the world that he sent his son in. So if God is love and God loves us, then it's okay for us to ask for help. While Mary Seller celebrated being blessed with this amazing gift, loving the greatest gift of all time, Mary would, later on, have the biggest paradox of all time, where she would also watch this kind of love, this great kind of love hanging on a cross later in life.

Jesus didn't come into an easy life and didn't come into our life just to simply make it simple and perfect. But Jesus came to give us eternal life, and believing in that kind of love is the greatest task in the world. Because when we believe in that kind of love, we are tasked with helping one another. We love God, and we love others with our whole beings.

But also, when we believe in that kind of love, we are able to ask for help from others because God's love for us is so strong that he was willing to have a plan this whole time. The hope, the peace, the joy of this kind of love is that we don't have to do it alone. We have each other.

God says that you are worth it. And instead of saying, I got this. I don't need help. Know that it's okay sometimes to say I need help. Mary was able to receive help and a beautiful gift of community because she chose not to participate in the stubborn world. But instead, she asked for help. We were made to with one another.

As we approach the end of this service, we're going to light the Advent candles and sing one last song, and I invite you to be open. I invite you to open your heart. I invite you to open your hands if that's something you're comfortable with because I know that God has a gift for us to receive through worshipping together in this community and to receive this gift that God gave us in the form of a tiny baby boy, in the church that Jesus built. Would you pray with me?

Holy and loving God? Scripture tells us that when two or more are gathered, you are you are with us. That is a promise that you have for us that you want us to be in community with one another. Today, we ask for courage. For anyone who needs help today, whether they are sitting in this room, whether they're watching online, whether they don't even have a church home, or even know the love of Jesus.

We ask for you to give them the courage to ask for the help that they need. And God, I would ask that we would all be open to help. That comes to us in unlikely ways. Two women going through similar yet very different surface circumstances can teach us that we can learn from one another and that we can help one another. I would ask that you would give us the courage to become the church that you intended. The church gathers together and cares for one another so that we can go out and share this good news of Jesus with others. God, we say all of this in Jesus' name. Amen.

Please stand for the lighting of the Advent candle. We light the fourth Advent candle, symbolizing love beloved. Let us love one another. For love is from God, and everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. The one who does not love does not know God. For God is love. In a world hungry for love, we can do the flame of love, recognizing that God's love is the greatest gift of all. In this season of Advent, we light the candles of eternal hope, just peace, boundless joy, and perfect love, celebrating the unconditional love found in Christ our Savior.