

## INTRO

The “self-help” industry is huge. As one of our Homework sources indicates, it’s big enough that it warrants observation as an area of industry. And why not? Who doesn’t want to improve themselves somehow? Increasing our physical, mental, or emotional fitness or prowess (if not the act of actually work involved...) is appealing. Isn’t it? So, what about faith?

Christianity (and religion, broadly) has its own niche in this realm, after all. Stop by a bookstore, and you might find covers with smiling authors or serene scenes promising the best several steps to wholeness, happiness, groundedness, or spirituality-ness. You might find a whole *section* of books in a store, or online. But what are they promising? And what can they *do* for us? What can *we* do?

Scripture offers some mixed messages regarding human beings’ capacity for improvement or change. On one hand, humans seem determined to break things. Part of the Creation story is “the fall” describing humans’ propensity to reject God’s good order (Genesis 3), a sentiment the Apostle Paul reiterates in (Romans 7) when he confesses his consistent inability to do as he desire, but rather the opposite. We call this “sin.” It’s pervasive.

But on the other hand, the Bible is full of calls to reform, renew, repent, and retry life anew, even after exhibiting destructive behavior. Prophets and apostles alike declare what better living looks like. And generations later, our church theologies and denominations have tried to work out what people can (and can’t), should (and shouldn’t) do. Like we’re going to do in this conversation.

In this Brewed Theology, we’re going to discuss scripture’s sense of what human beings can and cannot do for themselves. We’re going to take a look at the self-help industry and its origins – paying attention to the influence of a “protestant work ethic.” Then we’ll glance at some main streams of Christian thought regarding freedom, choice, and grace. Lastly, we’ll consider spiritual disciplines, how they relate to self improvement, and what we can and cannot do to help ourselves.

# The Myth(?) of Christian Self-Help

a Brewed Theology  
conversation starter

## QUESTIONS TO PONDER

What is your biggest achievement? How did you arrive at that? Have you ever had to prove or justify yourself to others? Why, and how? Are you a New Year’s Resolution person? Why, or why not? How do you “work on” skills, positive habits, or self-improvement? How do you “work” on your faith? What are your feelings on “spiritual disciplines” like prayer, fasting, devotional reading? Can you learn, grow, improve in faith? How? How *not*?

## BIBLE BASICS

- **Exodus 20** – The Ten Commandments. Who are the commamdnts *for*?
- **Ephesians 2:8-10** and **Romans 10:12-14** – Two passages, two different takes on human agency.
- **Mark 10:17-27** – A rich young ruler wants to justify himself. What does Jesus say he needs to do?
- **Galatians 5:16-26** – The works of the flesh, and fruits of spirit. Is this a self-improvement plan?
- **Matthew 16:24-26** – Deny yourself. Take up your cross. Find your life by losing it. (Love, Jesus)

## ESSENTIAL READINGS and LISTENINGS

### Why You're Addicted to Self-Improvement (at least you, Millennials)

This 2018 article by Jules Schroeder at *Forbes* explores why the Millennial generation is so hooked on self-improvement. Read about the consequences of helping ourselves too much to self-help. (Note: limited free articles, possible paywall afterwards.)

### New Year's Resolutions – and Why we Give Up (see links below)

Do you make New Year's resolutions? Do you keep them? If not, you're not alone. These two pieces explore resolutions, and why we fail at them: [First, a brief piece by Taylor Barnes for the Baylor College of Medicine](#). And [second, some analysis by Amy Morin of Psychology Today](#). Both describe the commality of bailing on resolutions, and offer some tips on how to better follow through and effect change.

### The Self-Improvement Market (is booming)

MarketResearch.com describes the scope and scale of the United States self-improvement market. This 2023 piece by John LaRosa pegs its worth at \$13.7 billion, and a whole lot of places it shows up. Which of the areas it describes (if any) have you heard of, or participated in?

### C.S. Lewis on “The Lie of Self Help” (~6 min video)

In this recording of the Christian author and thinker C.S. Lewis (1898-1963), he discusses what happens theologically to individual personality when it encounters Jesus. Listen to the recording, and follow along with the transcript (click or tap the comments, or “...more”). Read a couple times.

### Origins of the Self-Improvement Industry: Protestantism?

Ever heard of the “Protestant work ethic?” Coach and writer Rimante Eneva partially blames that (and capitalism) for the “pyramid scheme” of self development. Posted on hackernoon.com.

## BONUS READINGS (for the nerds...)

### Luther's Counsel for the Worried and Anxious (spoiler: it's not self-help)

Martin Luther experienced deep anxiety and worry in his life, and he had some words for those experiencing the same: find people, solace, and scripture from outside yourself, not just within. Written in 2019 for 1517.org by Kelsi Klembara.

### Resting as Helping our Selves

Read this 2021 article by Erin Strybis for *Living Lutheran*. What does *rest* have to do with self-help and such? How does it run counter to narratives of improving ourselves

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