

Where Are God's Blessings?

Okay, okay. We need to build the Temple. In New Testament terms, we need to get busy about bringing others into the Church. That means we need to support our Presbytery's church planting efforts in Texas and Louisiana. We need to support our missionaries who are spreading the gospel among Syrian refugees. And we need to overcome our Presbyterian reticence about sharing our faith. We need to invite our friends to worship with us, and seek to build up the church where we are. We get the message.

Well, the people of Haggai's day got the message too, after his first sermon. At the end of chapter 1 we learn that, after delaying for some 18 years, they had started work again on the Temple. They were finally doing what God had told them to do.

But this is where the meticulous way that Haggai dates his prophecies becomes important. The people had started work on the Temple in September, and God gave Haggai the prophecy in today's passage in December of the same year. They had been doing what God wanted them to do for several months. So, why hadn't God begun to pour out His blessings on them?

For remember what God said back in chapter 1? He said that He had sent a drought to them, He had withheld the fruitfulness of the land from them because they had been keeping all their blessings for themselves. Okay, so why in verse 19 does God say that He is still withholding their material blessings? They're doing what God told them to do, so why this new word of condemnation?

And maybe you're wondering the same thing today. Maybe you've been busy doing all sorts of good things. Maybe you're trying to build up the community, going to the events to help out the Chamber of Commerce or the Heritage Trust. Maybe you're trying to build up the Church, helping out with funerals and dinners and VBS and contributing to the parking lot fund so that it will be easier for folks to come to worship. Maybe you're even breaking the Presbyterian mold and inviting folks to come to worship with you! And maybe you're tired of waiting for results. Maybe you're wondering where God is and why He isn't blessing your efforts.

We find the devastating answer God gave to the people of Haggai's day in verse 14: God saw His people as sinful, as unclean. That's why He also considered the work of their hands as they labored to build the Temple to be unclean. Somehow their obedience, their efforts just weren't enough to make God bless them. The sin that remained in their lives made everything they did unacceptable to God. The sin in their lives made it impossible for them to earn God's favor, even by obeying His will.

And it's important for us to understand this truth as well, for it reveals an element of pagan thinking that is all too common within Christian communities. Pagans, you may recall, are basically attempting to manipulate their gods. They conduct rituals and offer sacrifices in order that their gods will be obligated to turn around and do something good for them. It's religion as investment strategy: you give up a grain offering so your god will give you more grain. You sacrifice a goat so your god will make the rest of your flock more fertile. That's the way pagans think – they're basically trying to bribe their gods.

And don't we sometimes fall into this sort of thinking? We might say, "God, I've come to church and I've paid my tithes and I've read my Bible, and I've prayed to You." And then we add, "So, why don't you give me what I want?" The problem with that sort of prayer is that it seeks to use God for our purposes. That's a pagan prayer offered to the Christian God.

So, what are we doing wrong? Why do we continue to be unclean in God's eyes, even after we start doing the sorts of things He wants us to do? To explain this, we need to understand that rather strange object lesson we find in the first few verses of today's passage, a lesson drawn from part of the Ceremonial Law that God had given to Moses.

For what did the Law say? If any sort of food offering was given to God, it was holy, so that only the priests could eat it. But this holiness wasn't transferable. If some holy meat, for example, came into contact with an ordinary loaf of bread, that didn't instantly make the bread holy. For how could it? The bread hadn't been offered to God, only the meat had. Holiness was not transferable.

But the opposite was unfortunately true – uncleanness was transferable. Let's say that a priest had become ritually unclean because he touched someone who had died. So, if while he was unclean he touched some of the holy food that had been offered to God, that food didn't purify him. Instead, when the unclean priest touched the holy food, the food instantly became unclean, ritually defiled. Uncleanness was transferable.

And I think we can understand this concept, because we think in the same way about disease and contagion. A well person can't touch a sick person and make him well, right? But we all know that a sick person can touch a well person and make him sick. Or to return to the idea of food: what if while you are chasing a mouse through the kitchen, one pellet of mouse poop falls in your soup? You'll throw out the whole pot, right? We understand that uncleanness is transferable.

And we also understand that the same thing is true of our relationships, a little uncleanness ruins the whole thing, right? I mean, what if your husband or wife said to you, "I'll be faithful to you six days a week, but I want to have one day with my lover?" That wouldn't be okay, would it? Or how about if he or she said, "I just want to have an affair with someone else on just one day a year?" Would that be okay? How about, just one hour a year? It wouldn't matter how little time your husband or wife wanted to spend with someone else – no amount of unfaithfulness would be okay to you, right?

Okay, so why do we think God is any different? For look at what God says the people did not do in verse 17 – they did not turn to Him. Oh, they got busy doing all sorts of church stuff. But they still weren't looking to God Himself. They still hadn't come back to God Himself. They may have given their time, their talents, and their treasure, but they hadn't given themselves to God.

And isn't that what Jesus said was the essence, the summary of the Law of God? We aren't supposed to love God with some of ourselves some of the time, whenever it's convenient for us. We are supposed to love God with the same sort of total, exclusive devotion we expect from our spouses, with the same sort of purity we expect from our food.

But none of us can do that, and the people of Haggai's day couldn't either. Because they weren't totally faithful to God, they were unclean. And because they were unclean, even the actions they tried to accomplish for God were unacceptable in His sight. That's what God wanted them to see. For if God had to show the people of Haggai's time how selfish they were by building their own houses instead of the Temple, He also needed to show them that their efforts at obedience couldn't earn His favor. You see, God didn't want them to stop being selfishly greedy only to become selfishly proud of their accomplishments. If they needed to realize their sin, they also needed to realize their helplessness to do anything about it.

But once they got to this point, they were ready for God's real answer, which we find in verse 19 – an unconditional promise of grace. Even though the people were not as faithful to God as they should have been, even if they were still unclean, and even though the people were helpless to solve either their spiritual or their agricultural problems, God was still determined to bless them. God still promised to love them unconditionally, in spite of their sin.

And God still makes the same promise to us today. For if the bad news is that there's nothing any of us can do in order to earn God's favor, the good news is that there's nothing any of us has to do to earn God's favor. The good news is that the only way for any of us to be saved is by God's grace alone.

Ah, but how would God display this grace? We know it's through faith, and that's the same point He was making to the people of Haggai's time. For did you notice that He didn't promise them rain right away? Instead, at the end of this chapter, He gives another prophecy – this time to Zerubbabel, the governor of Judah. But it's a promise that didn't seem to have anything to do with their current problems.

For what's all this about Zerubbabel being a signet ring? Such a ring was used by kings to stamp documents, to give evidence of their royal authority. But although Zerubbabel was indeed a descendant of David, he never was a king. He was only a governor of the province of Judah because the Persian king said he was. He never had any authority of his own – he never did rule over David's kingdom the way his father David had. How could this prophecy help or encourage the people? How could Zerubbabel be a sign of God's grace?

Well, perhaps the rest of the prophecy helps us to understand what God is saying. For verses 21 and 22 are obviously talking about the great Day of the Lord, the Judgment Day, the day when all those kings and kingdoms who set themselves up against God will finally be thrown down. On that day, God will accomplish His perfect justice. On that day, all of God's people will no longer be unclean in any way, but fully and finally free of the power of sin and death.

But we're still waiting for that day, aren't we? We're still having to trust God to keep His promises to bring justice into our world, aren't we? We're still having to walk by faith, not by sight, trusting God instead of relying on our own reason, our own experience, our own senses.

And the people of Haggai's time were in the same situation. They had to trust that somehow God would grant them His grace through Zerubbabel, even though they never saw it in their lifetimes. And we know that God kept that promise through one of Zerubbabel's descendants, Jesus. Jesus is the One Who has all the authority in Heaven and on Earth – He is the signet ring on God's hand. And we know He has gained all this authority by the blood of His cross. We know that through His sacrifice He has made it possible for sinful, unclean people like us to receive God's grace.

But like those ancient people, we gain access to this grace by faith. But this doesn't mean we're trusting God to give us whatever we want whenever we want it. It doesn't mean we're demanding that God bless us materially in this life. We're not trusting God the way pagans try to manipulate their idols.

No, just as the people of Haggai's time needed to do, we need to confess our sin and our helplessness. For us, that means looking back to the redemption God brought us at the cross through the descendant of Zerubbabel, claiming Christ's sacrifice for ourselves. But at the same time, just as they did, we must

look forward to the coming of Christ – for that’s when our true spiritual blessings will be fully realized. As we live by faith, we trust God’s grace for today, and for tomorrow.

So, are you tired from doing the right thing, and seeing no results? Are you wondering where God’s blessings are? Maybe we need to stop trying to earn God’s favor with our good works, and simply rest in His grace. Then, we’ll be able to keep on doing what God has called us to do, not in pride, but from humble, thankful hearts. By remembering God’s grace, we’ll be able to love and serve Him the way that He deserves.