

**Text: Haggai 2:10-19**

**Title: “God First ... True Holiness”**

Open your Bibles to Haggai 2:10. Before I get started today let me encourage you to be part of our Community Thanksgiving Celebration. We do this every year to bless people in our community. We give away food for their Thanksgiving meal. So if you can help out after the service today they’ll be packing bags. You can also help distribute food tomorrow. Check the worship guide for details.

Today we’re coming to the close of this short series from Haggai, this prophet God raised up to challenge His people about their priorities ... putting God first. Now I’ll just warn you that at first reading this passage in Haggai 2 may seem a little confusing, but as we work our way through it we’ll see that it calls us to keep God first for the right motivation ... out of true holiness. **Read Haggai 2:10-19.**

Now the book of Haggai contains four “sermons” God gave Haggai to proclaim to the Jews who had returned to Jerusalem after they had been in exile. Message #1 was a challenge for them to start rebuilding the Temple that had been neglected for about eighteen years. Put God first. Give your life to what matters most. Message #2 came at a time when the people had been building for about a month but they became discouraged thinking that what they were doing wasn’t very significant. So they need to be strong, keeping working and don’t be afraid. And our text today contains Message #3. They started back to work building God’s Temple, but God sees there’s a flaw in their thinking that He must correct.

So God calls a timeout. The problem is that they are building a holy building, a building that is dedicated to the worship of a holy God. And they think that just because they are working on something that is holy somehow that makes them holy.

**ILLUSTRATION** – It would be like some construction workers building a hospital thinking that just working on that hospital will somehow make them healthy. Or some people building a building at TCU thinking that because their building on a university will make them educated.

Now there’s reference here to things that are “consecrated” or “holy,” as well as things that are “defiled” or “unclean.” Understand that this comes mostly out of the OT book of Leviticus where the people are taught the proper way to worship God according to the covenant He made with Israel. Things that were used to worship a holy God must also be holy. So there were rituals or ceremonies that made them

“consecrated” or “holy” so they could come before God. Nothing that was “defiled” or “unclean” was permitted in the presence of a holy God. The purpose of all of this was for people to understand that you don’t just barge into the presence of a holy God. Only that which is holy is permitted to be associated with God. So the OT priests performed various sacrifices and ceremonies over and over again so the people could be clean and to come before God.

Now in the New Covenant we have through Jesus Christ we are made holy, not through rituals and sacrificing animals but through the atoning sacrifice of Jesus Christ one time for all of us. So when we trust in Christ we can worship God and come into His presence because we are holy through Christ.

But the people in Haggai’s day had developed some unhealthy thinking. They thought that because they were working on a holy building (the Temple) that that made them holy and righteous before God. So God sends Haggai with this message. There’s some bad news and some good news.

## **1. THE BAD NEWS ... WORKS-BASED RIGHTEOUSNESS DOESN’T WORK.**

This is a teachable moment and God has a conversation with His people through Haggai. There’s an issue that goes even deeper than rebuilding the Temple. God wants His people to serve Him and to put Him first, but He wants that in true holiness. So God tells Haggai to...

**Haggai 2:11 - “Ask the priests what the law says...”**

The priests are the spiritual leaders of God’s OT people. They were the ones who were supposed to know the Law of Moses, and to shepherd God’s people in that word so that they would know the right way to live their lives. So what does the Law say about how people are made holy?

**Haggai 2:12 - If a person carries consecrated meat in the fold of his garment, and that fold touches some bread or stew, some wine, oil or other food, does it become consecrated?” The priests answered, “No.”**

This is the first of two rather odd questions. In the Law of Moses the sins of the people were atoned for through the sacrifice of animals. Those sacrifices were made by the priests who had to be like butchers. They cut up animals and parts of those animals were used as various sacrifices. The meat was consecrated or clean

so it would be an acceptable sacrifice and offering to God. The priest would sometimes carry this meat in the “fold of his garment” (like an apron). Suppose that his apron then comes into contact with some other kind of food (bread, wine, oil, etc.) do those items become consecrated or holy? In other words, is holiness contagious? Is it transferable? Does something holy make other stuff holy just by bumping up against it? Even the most novice priest knew the answer to that question: No. It doesn’t work that way.

Now the second question comes at this from the other direction.

**Haggai 2:13 - “If a person defiled by contact with a dead body touches one of these things (from v.12), does it become defiled?” “Yes,” the priests replied, “it becomes defiled.”**

There were certain things defined in the OT law as being defiled ... unfit for association with a holy God. For example the OT taught that if a person somehow came into contact with a dead body ... like roadkill or a body at a funeral, they could not go into the Temple to worship God because they have become “defiled” or “unclean.” So they would have to ceremonially wash themselves with special water before they could enter the Temple to worship.

**ILLUSTRATION** – It’s sort of like eating a bag of Crunchy Cheetos ... not the puffs or the jalapeno flavored ... crunchy. You stick your clean fingers in the bag and what happens? Do your clean fingers rub off on your Cheetos? No, it’s just the opposite. Cheetos rub off on your fingers and your fingers come out orange.

This was all a ceremonial thing for the Jews to remind them that God is holy and only holy people can approach Him. You approach God on His terms, not on your terms. So the point is that you cannot become holy by coming into contact with holy things. And, in fact, the people are all defiled or unclean.

**Haggai 2:14 - Then Haggai said, “‘So it is with this people and this nation in my sight,’ declares the LORD. ‘Whatever they do and whatever they offer there is defiled.’**

The point is that the people don’t really understand how unholy they are and what it takes for them to become holy and have a relationship with a holy God. It doesn’t happen just by being around holy things.

This is what Jesus was talking about when He addressed the issue of the Jews eating something the Law considered to be unclean. He said, “That’s not what defiles you.”

**Matthew 15:11 - What goes into a man’s mouth does not make him ‘unclean,’ but what comes out of his mouth, that is what makes him ‘unclean.’ ”**

And He goes on to explain...

**Matthew 15:18 - But the things that come out of the mouth come from the heart, and these make a man ‘unclean.’**

Just doing religious things around religious people doesn’t make us holy. This is what is called “legalism” ... the notion that I can earn the right to have a relationship with God by being good. And if I’m real good, maybe God will give me a good job and my kids will be healthy and I’ll get to live in a nice neighborhood.

The bad news is that works-based righteousness doesn’t work. You don’t earn access to God by just being in a church building or being baptized or giving money or holding a Bible or being around Christian people. The Gospel of Jesus Christ teaches us that for us to have a relationship with God something has to happen in our hearts that are more sinful than we realize. So the bad news is that works-based righteousness doesn’t work but...

## **2. THE GOOD NEWS ... GRACE-FUELED RIGHTEOUSNESS CHANGES EVERYTHING.**

Hold your place in Haggai and turn to the NT to Titus 2:11. I want to show you how the Gospel of Jesus Christ solves the dilemma we have because we can’t ever be good enough to come before a holy God. **Read Titus 2:11-14.**

**LADDER ILLUSTRATION** – Suppose spatially-thinking God’s holiness is represented by the ceiling of our Sanctuary. So when I realize I need to be holy to get to a holy God I pull out my religious step-ladder. My first step might be to quit cussing, and start going to church, and start giving some money, and whatever the next steps are. Now I may do some really good things, but the fact is that I’m still a long way from the holiness of God. And if I had the tallest ladder you can buy it still would be enough, even if I could climb that high. Now what it does do is that it puts me above you. And that’s what happens with self-righteous religious

people. I may not be all I should be, but at least I'm better than you. That must score a little bit with God. No! Works-based righteousness doesn't work.

But grace-fueled righteousness changes everything. That's why Titus 2:11 says that the grace of God that brings salvation "*appeared* to all men." It came down to us because we couldn't get up to it. Then the miracle comes. When I receive the grace of salvation it fuels a holy life. So as Titus 2 says we can say "no" to ungodliness and worldly passions. We can live self-controlled, upright, godly lives. We can persevere and wait patiently for the coming of Christ. Why? Not out of the pressure to perform so God will be pleased, but because Christ gave Himself for us to redeem us from our sin and to make us into holy people who are actually eager to do what God wants. That's how the Gospel works. The grace of God that brings salvation to us is the grace that also fuels the new holy life we live. It's not obeying *so* I can be pleasing to God; it is obeying *because* I have already been made pleasing to God through Christ.

So flip back to Haggai 2. The Lord is saying, "What makes you clean and holy is not what you do for Me (building the Temple); what makes you holy is what I will do for you." And starting in v.15 the Lord reminds them just how miserable their life has been over the past 18 years or so. Remember how bad things were before you started rebuilding the Lord's Temple. Nothing was ever enough; you were never satisfied.

**Haggai 2:16 - When anyone came to a heap of twenty measures, there were only ten. When anyone went to a wine vat to draw fifty measures, there were only twenty.**

Why is this happening?

**Haggai 2:17 - I struck all the work of your hands with blight, mildew and hail, yet you did not turn to me,' declares the LORD.**

God has orchestrated this. "I struck all the work of your hands..." This is an act of God. It wasn't just bad luck. God loves them so much that He wants to get their attention so they would turn their hearts back to Him.

Now, there's an unexpected change at the end of v.19. Here's the good news in all of this: Grace-fueled righteousness changes everything. Look at what the Lord says to them:

**Haggai 2:19b - “From this day on I will bless you.’ ”**

This changes everything. Now you need to know that when God blesses something or someone in the Bible it's not like we say “bless you” when someone sneezes. When God blesses it's a powerful and supernatural thing where He causes someone or something to supernaturally produce more than would naturally be possible. So the Lord says, “You've been trying to be holy to impress Me, but that has failed. Works-based righteousness doesn't work. Instead your life has been unfruitful and unsatisfying. But I'm going to change all of that. I will bless you ... not because you are holy but so that you will become My people in true holiness.”

Listen, the Gospel tells us that God isn't lowering His standards. In Christ He met all the standards. So when we trust in Him that righteousness is imparted to us so we begin to live and serve God with a new heart.

Now God has one more sermon for Haggai to preach that day and it's a short one directed to one man ... the governor Zerubbabel. He's the one who has been leading the rebuilding. He's been discouraged like everyone else. But God is going to bless Zerubbabel extra good! Look at it.

**Haggai 2:23 - “On that day,’ declares the LORD Almighty, ‘I will take you, my servant Zerubbabel son of Shealtiel,’ declares the LORD, ‘and I will make you like my signet ring, for I have chosen you,’ declares the LORD Almighty.”**

A signet ring was a ring with an emblem on it that would be pressed into soft wax. It was a seal of royal authority. When that stamp was on something it was official. And when that stamp was on something it belonged to the King. “Zerubbabel, I will bless you and I will use you, not because you deserve it, but because I have chosen you. And that's true for all who are in Christ. So the Good News is that you can put away the ladder.