

Obey And Be Blessed

Haggai 2:10-19 (NIV)

¹⁰ On the twenty-fourth day of the ninth month, in the second year of Darius, the word of the LORD came to the prophet Haggai: ¹¹ “This is what the LORD Almighty says: ‘Ask the priests what the law says: ¹² If someone carries consecrated meat in the fold of their garment, and that fold touches some bread or stew, some wine, olive oil or other food, does it become consecrated?’”

The priests answered, “No.”

¹³ Then Haggai said, “If a person defiled by contact with a dead body touches one of these things, does it become defiled?”

“Yes,” the priests replied, “it becomes defiled.”

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.’”

¹⁵ “‘Now give careful thought to this from this day on^[a]—consider how things were before one stone was laid on another in the LORD’s temple. 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. ¹⁷ I struck all the work of your hands with blight, mildew and hail, yet you did not return to me,’ declares the LORD. ¹⁸ ‘From this day on, from this twenty-fourth day of the ninth month, give careful thought to the day when the foundation of the LORD’s temple was laid. Give careful thought: ¹⁹ Is there yet any seed left in the barn? Until now, the vine and the fig tree, the pomegranate and the olive tree have not borne fruit.’”

“From this day on I will bless you.”

Obey and be blessed Haggai 2:10-19

I was browsing the internet and came across this prayer. It’s one of those things that makes you laugh and then makes you think at the same time:

It goes like this.

Dear Lord,

So far today, God, I’ve done all right. I haven’t gossiped, haven’t lost my temper, haven’t been greedy, grumpy, nasty, selfish, over-indulgent, coveted my neighbour’s spouse or taken your name in vain. I’m very thankful for that. But, in a few minutes God, I’m going to get out of bed. And from then on, everyone that I encounter will probably need a lot of help from you. Amen

I smiled when I read this because it's so typical of most of us. The Christian life wouldn't be very hard if we could stay in bed all day. It's all that stuff that happens **after** we get up that causes our problems.

If Only We Could Stay In Bed ...

I want to talk to you about the blessings of obedience. This is really about all that stuff that happens after we get out of bed and the struggles we have each day to obey God.

I'm going to make two assumptions. First, I'm going to assume that most of us, on one level truly want to obey God. That is, as Christians we **want** to do the right thing and we **want** to please God if we **can**. I'm going to give you the benefit of the doubt. It's always easy to question motives, but this morning I'm going to start with the assumption that in your better moments you truly desire to please God.

My second assumption is that no one obeys God all the time. As James says, "We all stumble in many ways" (James 3:2). There is so much truth in that.

Gossip is no problem until we hear something juicy. We are then very eager to hear more. We never lose our temper, as long as we're not around other people. We're usually not grumpy or nasty... until someone gets under our skin, irritates us or says something we disapprove of, never mind if we are in the wrong. We do OK as long as we're in bed, it's the stuff that happens after we get up that gets us in trouble.

Obedience isn't easy, is it? Or perhaps I should say that it's easy in theory but difficult in practice. Especially all the time. What would you say if I were to ask you, "Do you ever get upset with people for no reason at all?" I'm sure many of you would answer yes. Even though we mean well, we all sometimes growl at perfectly innocent bystanders—like spouses, children, friends, and co-workers, people driving like idiots. There's an example, how do I know he is an idiot? Who am I to think that?

In truth, as much as we'd all like obey God, it's easy to say than it is to do. That's something the Jews of Haggai's day found out rather quickly. To give you a bit of background; after 16 years of delay, the people finally began to rebuild the temple. With great enthusiasm they launched into the project. Within a month they got discouraged and Haggai encouraged them to continue.

Two more months passed and the people were downcast again and felt like quitting. This time their problem was simple. God had told them they were suffering because of their disobedience. So when they started to rebuild the temple, they expected their problems to disappear. Three months passed and nothing had changed. They still had all their old problems and the temple was a long way from being finished.

So the people began to wonder if it was worth obeying God. After all, if there's no reward for obedience you might as well live like the devil. So Haggai delivers his third message to the people. In it God speaks directly to the people who wondered why things weren't getting better faster. It's an important message for anyone who has ever wondered if it's worth it to serve and obey God.

Let's explore what God meant when he told Haggai to ask his priests about what the law says about clean touching unclean and vice versa.

These verses sound rather strange to our ears. But everything Haggai said would have made perfect sense to the Jews. They had hundreds of laws governing all aspects of life. Most of those laws had to do with understanding what was holy and what was not. Holy things were objects that had been set apart for God's use—usually in the temple of worship.

Because God is holy, only holy objects could come into his presence. An unholy object is not necessarily sinful in itself. For instance a pot might be holy because it was dedicated to the Lord's use. But the same pot might be used by a housewife to cook a meal and in that case it would be ordinary or common. In particular dead bodies were defiled or unclean and anyone touching a dead body himself became unclean.

So... with that background these two questions come into focus. **What if something holy touches something unholy, does the unholy thing become holy?** The answer is no, it remains unholy. But what if an unholy thing touches a holy thing? It becomes defiled.

Suppose you wash your hands and then pick up an oily, greasy plate. What happens? Will your clean hand make the dirty plate clean? No! But the grease and oil on the plate rubs off on your hand. Suppose you have a contagious disease and you come into contact with someone who is healthy, will you be healed? The answer is simply no, but the opposite will most probably happen, the healthy person will most probably become ill.

Sin is like dirt and like disease. It spreads so quickly and much easier than holiness. Just as it's hard to keep a house clean, it's hard to keep a life clean because sin stains everything.

Then Haggai says, "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 key is the word here is "**whatever.**" When your heart isn't right with God, **whatever** you do will be wrong. You see, God wanted more than a temple built. He wanted the hearts of the people to be fully devoted to him. God didn't want a big house filled with empty hearts. He didn't want animal sacrifice unless it was accompanied by a living sacrifice of the people.

The fact is you can't fool God. He isn't impressed by religious ritual unless it is accompanied by a humble heart.

We may summarize this truth in saying Holiness is not transferable and Holiness begins in the heart.

That's the whole point. God wants your heart because if he has your heart, he'll soon have every other part of your life. **That's why Proverbs 4:23 says "Above all else, guard your heart, for it is the wellspring of life."**

So how about your heart? Many of us are concerned about heart disease—and rightly so— but what about spiritual heart disease that is just as insidious?

During a heated battle one of Napoleon's soldiers was shot just above a heart. In those days surgery was done without anaesthesia. While the doctor was removing the bullet, the soldier declared, "One inch lower you will find the emperor." What would we find if we opened your heart today? Would we find Jesus Christ enshrined in your heart?

What's the condition of your heart today?

God reminds the people of how things were before they began to rebuild the temple. They were going broke—economically and spiritually. Every time they made money, half of it disappeared. When they invested a certain amount into something, within a week they had lost half. Everything they touched turned sour. Nothing worked right. The entire nation was in an economic decline—all because they had disobeyed God.

But notice the last phrase: **“Yet you did not turn to me.”** That's all God wanted all along. He wanted his people to turn to him with a whole heart and put him in the centre of their life. They had pushed God to the circumference and as a result, God has sent blight to their crops and mildew to their souls.

That leads to an important principle we often misunderstand: God disciplines in order to restore, not to punish. It's true that God was behind their hard times, but he wasn't doing it just to punish them, he wanted to get their attention and turn their hearts back to him.

Many of us waste hours, days, weeks, months, and even years blaming others for our problems. But after you are through blaming the world for the mess you are in, you still have to deal with God. And the quicker you deal with God, the quicker you can get better and move on with your life.

It's a wonderful thing when you approach life with the knowledge that even in the worst moments, God is not out to get you or to hurt you, He simply wants to bring you to a new and deeper relationship with Himself. He is not the great judge sitting up there in the clouds waiting and saying “There goes Sharon, I'm waiting for her to mess up so I can punish her “

In the last section of the passage the phrase **“From this day on.”** is repeated twice: It's as if God is saying, “The past is the past and we can't change that. But things are going to be different from now on.”

Let's examine two simple conclusions from this truth:

1: Blessings begin the moment we obey

After delaying for 16 years the Jews had finally started to rebuild the temple. But they had a long way to go and their fields were still barren. I think some of them were most probably wondering if all this talk about rebuilding the temple was even worth the effort.

Many of us look at our problems the same way. We feel like we're so far away from what we should be that it's easier to say, “What's the use? Why bother trying? Things will never be different.”

Here is something to consider on a more positive note. If you find your life in a bit of a mess today, just remember that you didn't get where you are overnight. You got there by taking thousands of steps in the wrong direction over a long period of time. Therefore, don't be surprised if it takes you 1000's of steps to get your life back in order again.

You normally don't change your thinking overnight and you don't break bad habits in one week. Think of it this way. Every day you make 100's of decisions—most of them very small. But each decision either leads you toward the light or back toward the darkness. If your life is messed up,

you feel like everything around you is in total darkness and you wonder if you'll ever see the light again. The answer is; it depends on you.

When you wake up, ask God to help you walk toward the light. Not just **in** the light but **toward** the light. If you keep taking tiny steps toward the light of God, little by little the shadows will begin to lift and one day you'll wake up to the blazing light of God's presence all around you.

I got called to full time ministry which had me think, "Why would God use me?" I got called to full time ministry in the USA. Crazy as it may sound, I mean, people usually go from the USA to Africa for Ministry, not vice versa, but hey, God had spoken so I obeyed. I had no idea what it meant at first and after putting it to prayer I had my answers. It was my choice...

To obey... or pretend I didn't understand and stay. No one ever said obeying what God says is a walk in the park, no siree. I have always been independent; it was always just my daughter and me in the house. I had lots and lots of friends, church family, my own house, my car, motorbike. Yes, I enjoy riding motorbikes. If I needed something from the store I would hop on my motorbike or in my car and off I would go. When I wanted to see my friends or go places, I would hop in my car and off I would go. I never had to depend on others, apart from during my healing after each of many surgeries.

When I arrived in the USA I had no transport. I made use of my feet. I would always joke when asked how I got to places. The answer is quite simple...I got a lift everywhere; I would lift my feet and walk.

I struggled with this at first and strangely enough, not once did I second guess my decision. I have been truly blessed since being here in Greenwood. The best is, I know God isn't done with me yet.

But you've got to take those little steps every day in the right direction... Baby steps. So be encouraged. God's blessings begin the moment we begin to obey him.

2: The harvest will come eventually

All gardeners understand this principle. You don't plant today and harvest tomorrow. It takes a few weeks for the seed to open up and germinate and then more time for the plant to poke its way through the soil, and even more weeks and months for the fruit to grow and ripen for harvest.

Historically it took the Jews four years to finish rebuilding the temple, after it had sat unfinished for nearly 17 years. No doubt they faced continued opposition and discouragement all the way along. But by starting to rebuild they were planting fresh seeds in the ground. They hadn't come up yet, but God is saying, "Don't worry. You're going to reap an abundant harvest eventually. Just be faithful and I promise the harvest will come in."

This is important for us to remember, especially as Disciples of Christ. Sometimes we grow weary in the service of the Lord and wonder if our efforts are in vain. God says, "**You** plant the seed and let **me** take care of the harvest."

We sow and sow and sow and then wait for the harvest. Sometimes when the harvest is delayed we are tempted to despair and to wonder if our work is in vain. Then out of the blue God gives us a little reminder that the harvest comes in **His** time, not ours, but that nothing we do for the Lord is ever in vain.

Is it worth it to obey God? You bet it is, lots of people here this morning could give testimony to that fact. The moment you begin to obey God, he will begin to bless your life, and the years to come, you will reap a bountiful harvest.

There's a saying that goes "The moment we settle for less than we want is the moment we get more than we bargained for."

This is how it is with disobeying God. Once we settle for not going His way, we get **less** than we imagined and **more** than we ever wanted.

Here are 2 truths about disobedience that I pray will help convince you that God's way is always best.

1) Desperate longings can tempt us to do desperate disobedient things.

One night I dreamt I was being chased down a long narrow maize by 2 giant donuts. As they were chasing me, they were screaming at me "Eat me! Eat me!". Apparently at that point in my life I liked donuts more than I should have, so they became my enemy.

That's the way any great desire can be. If we want something too much it can become enemy number one to a relationship with God and a threat to obedience. Satan can use what we long for most to seduce us into sin. This isn't unusual, I mean, when is the last time you were tempted by something you didn't desire? Our enemy knows what we want and is skilled at creating temptations to match our deepest longings.

An example is a businessman longing for success that he is seduced into a dishonest business deal. He doesn't think about the consequences, all he sees is the supposed fame and fortune.

Desperate longings can tempt us to do desperate, disobedient things. Desire not submitted to Christ can make us lose our sensibility, justify our behaviour and make excuses.

When we give in to temptation, it often means we are not trusting God to provide. As a result, we settle for crumbs when God wants to give us the whole cake.

2) Disobedience can cause us to be partially deaf.

Sometimes we communicate with God in a way that hinders our obedience. We ask Him for guidance and because God is good and faithful He answers. But sometimes we don't like his response, we want God to start over and give us a different response. If we don't like His answer, we may act like we haven't heard Him at all. I call this "selective hearing it"

Men do this when they are watching football and don't want to be interrupted; students do this when they don't want to hear their parents or teacher, wives do this to block out the sounds of husbands crying for food.

Selective hearing causes us to tune out whoever is speaking, so it's like they never said a word to begin with.

Tuning out God will make us act like we haven't heard Him and pretend that we have obeyed Him. Obedience that is partial is not obedience at all.

I once felt the Holy Spirit nudge me towards obedience and let go of some potential opportunities. I wasn't giving them too much importance, and they were edging in on the place reserved for Him on the throne in my heart.

These opportunities were like a full box of chocolates. .To me it was as if God said, "Wait! Don't eat those. I have something better for you!" But because I didn't completely listen, I gave into temptation and "stuck my fingers in all my chocolates of opportunity", by still checking out what could still be, if God didn't show up. I hedged the line without blatantly disobeying.

And because I hadn't completely submitted myself to His authority, panic ruled!

You see, we can sometimes commit the sin of partial obedience. Sure, we haven't completely "eaten the chocolates" that God told us to give up, but we're still holding them in our hand, because we want a backup just in case He doesn't come through.

Whether we are only sinning partially or all the way, we won't experience the peace that is ours in Christ, unless we fully obey.

If God says to wait, or to choose something else, it might not seem like a big deal if we change things just a little, right? We can justify or make excuses for our sin and the next thing you know, we're stuck going down a path without peace we had no intention of walking on.

What is the secret of obedience? Never give up. Those three simple words will give you hope to keep going. **Never give up.** Just keep on doing good; keep on serving the Lord; keep on helping others; keep on living for Christ; and in the end you will reap a bountiful harvest.

In the days to come we'll all stand together before the throne of God and praise our Redeemer for his amazing grace. When that glad day finally comes, no one will have any regrets. When you see Jesus, you'll never regret serving the Lord. You'll only wish you could have done more, sooner.

I want to not allow my desires to rule my relationship with God; I want to listen the first time and completely do what He says. How about you? Will you join me on a journey of going God's way?