**November 6, 2022 Haggai 1:2-9**

***First Things***

**Scripture:** Haggai 1:2-9 NRSV

*(2)Thus says the LORD of hosts: These people say the time has not yet come to rebuild the LORD's house. (3)Then the word of the LORD came by the prophet Haggai, saying: (4)Is it a time for you yourselves to live in your paneled houses, while this house lies in ruins? (5)Now therefore thus says the LORD of hosts: Consider how you have fared. (6)You have sown much, and harvested little; you eat, but you never have enough; you drink, but you never have your fill; you clothe yourselves, but no one is warm; and you that earn wages earn wages to put them into a bag with holes. (7)Thus says the LORD of hosts: Consider how you have fared. (8)Go up to the hills and bring wood and build the house, so that I may take pleasure in it and be honored, says the LORD. (9)You have looked for much, and, lo, it came to little; and when you brought it home, I blew it away. Why? says the LORD of hosts. Because my house lies in ruins, while all of you hurry off to your own houses.*

**Notes:**

1. Stop making ***excuses***.
   1. Get up off your knees and get to ***work***.
   2. We make ***excuses*** when we don’t do what God wants.
   3. ***Admit*** what your responsibilities are.
2. Cease being ***selfish***.
   1. The temple lay ***neglected***.
   2. It is wrong to spend your time, talents, and money on ***selfish*** ***pursuits*** while the Lord’s work is left undone.
3. Don’t miss God’s ***blessings***.
   1. What happens in your ***heart***, ***affects*** the rest of your life.
   2. God’s blessings come through ***obedience***.
4. Take time to ***evaluate***.
   1. step out of busy-ness to evaluate your ***spiritual*** ***life***.
   2. ***Evaluate*** how we use our assets.
   3. If God is not first, who ***moved*** Him?
5. How do we know if we are putting ***first*** ***things*** first?
   1. We find ourselves ***active*** in the right things.
   2. God is ***glorified***.
   3. God ***blesses*** us.
6. When God is truly ***first*** in our lives, we do not need to look hard to find his ***hand*** at ***work***.

**Script:**

As a pastor, there are many things that people expect of me. And, many times I do not meet those expectations. I am expected to know when somebody is sick; I am expected to know when somebody is hurt; and I am expected to know when somebody is upset at me or the church. I am expected to know what needs to be done in every situation; and I am expected to be able to know and do all of these things, without anybody telling me. I say this in jest, to some degree, because a lot of these suppositions are placed upon me by my own assumptions and expectations. But many times these are the things I think the people of the congregation expect from me. Many times I worry about my success as pastor, even though I feel inadequate, and overwhelmed.

That is exactly what Albert E. M. Gray spent a significant amount of time researching. What is the one trait all successful people have in common? Not some of the successful people, but each and every one; and what he found and reports may seem so simple and yet surprising. The common characteristic was not hard work, or good luck, or astute human relations; though these are important. He observed in his essay that, “*The successful person has the habit of doing the things failures don't like to do. They don't like doing them either, necessarily. But their disliking is subordinated to the strength of their purpose*.”

In our passage today, Haggai reports a similar if not the same message. Put first things first. Haggai is writing to people just like us; people who think that God must come first. Yet many had drifted away from this truth; they have allowed their walk with the Lord to become complacent. They were living with misplaced priorities; and Haggai was sent to help God’s people, then and today, to get their priorities straight, in line with what they knew the Lord desires. Join me in the reading of our sermon passage found in Haggai 1:2-9.

*(2)Thus says the LORD of hosts: These people say the time has not yet come to rebuild the LORD's house. (3)Then the word of the LORD came by the prophet Haggai, saying: (4)Is it a time for you yourselves to live in your paneled houses, while this house lies in ruins? (5)Now therefore thus says the LORD of hosts: Consider how you have fared. (6)You have sown much, and harvested little; you eat, but you never have enough; you drink, but you never have your fill; you clothe yourselves, but no one is warm; and you that earn wages earn wages to put them into a bag with holes. (7)Thus says the LORD of hosts: Consider how you have fared. (8)Go up to the hills and bring wood and build the house, so that I may take pleasure in it and be honored, says the LORD. (9)You have looked for much, and, lo, it came to little; and when you brought it home, I blew it away. Why? says the LORD of hosts. Because my house lies in ruins, while all of you hurry off to your own houses.* ***Haggai 1:2-9 NRSV***

The book of Haggai is the second shortest book in the Old Testament. His message was sent to the Jewish people who had returned from Babylon, where they had spent close to 70 years in captivity. Babylon had destroyed Jerusalem and the temple of the Lord built by Solomon. It has laid in ruins for the past 70 years. When the Jewish people began to return from the exile, I am sure they felt discouraged, they faced the challenging task of rebuilding. Those who came first worked to clear the debris and begin to set the foundation for a restored temple. Their Samaritan neighbors and cousins offered assistance and offered to join in the work, but they were refused. In return, the Samaritans threatened the workers and sent men to Persia to ask for them to be stopped.

Years would pass, and slowly but surely, Jerusalem would begin to come back to life. Life began to look normal again as homes were built, fields were planted, crops were harvested, stores were opened, and commerce was established. But the people of Israel had gotten used to life without the temple. The foundation stood overgrown with weeds; a mute reminder of the people’s failure to take care of God’s house. After 14 to 16 years, Haggai shows up with one prevailing message, “*It’s time to finish what you started. It's time to finish rebuilding the Temple.*”

Haggai’s message was one of priority, put first things first. The Temple was the center of Jewish worship. It represented the heart and soul of their faith, their belief, and their religion. Although God is everywhere, the Temple was where they believed God dwelled; and for it to lie in ruins was to neglect the worship of God. It was a testimony of misplaced priorities, an embarrassment to God, and a blemish on His reputation.

So what does this have to do with us, right? How do we fit into this story? Where have we fallen into this trap? How can we overcome these things and get back on track? First let me say that when we make other activities more important than the business of the church, we are in danger of this very same thing. When we make other activities of higher priority than we do corporate worship, public testimony, and prayer, then we are saying this is not a priority to us. Haggai’s message was blunt and to the point. He spoke with command and purpose; he pulled no punches and wasted no words; like a foreman on site with his hardhat on and a tool belt around his waist; he bellowed out his orders as he walked around the job site. So what was he telling them to do and what can we take from that?

Stop making excuses. Haggai confronted excuses for the Temple lying in ruins. “*(2)Thus says the LORD of hosts: These people say the time has not yet come to rebuild the LORD's house*.” Their intent was to build God’s house but they have just not gotten around to it yet. If you were to ask them, they would agree that it is something that needs to be done. That it is a great cause and they believe in it; but we need to care for our families first, times are hard, jobs are scarce, or perhaps they just need to pray about it. They made a good case with all of their excuses. Pray all you like; but sooner or later you are the one called to get up off your knees and get to work. The Reverend Billy Sunday defined an excuse as “the skin of reason stuffed with a lie.” Benjamin Franklin wrote, “I never knew a man who was good at making excuses who was good at anything else.” It’s easy to make excuses when you don’t want to do what God is calling you to. We can always find a rational reason to not do God’s work. The first step in putting things first is admitting what our responsibilities are.

Next we must cease being selfish. Closely aligned with making excuses is a selfish behavior. Haggai shared the word of the Lord in verse 4, “*(4)Is it a time for you yourselves to live in your paneled houses, while this house lies in ruins?*” The Lord is referring to extravagant housing; their homes were not under construction; they were finished with fancy décor. There were no weeds around their unfinished foundations. Their homes were complete, while the temple lay neglected, nonexistent. I want you to know that there is nothing wrong with having nice things. This statement is not a condemnation on the things you have, but when we steal from our tithes to make the payment on a vehicle we did not need, or a home renovation that was unnecessary, then we are stealing from God. It is wrong to live in the lap of luxury when the work of the Lord is going unfinished. It is wrong to spend your time, talents, and money on selfish pursuits while the Lord’s work is left undone. We drift from God’s agenda to our own, and it is easy to do, to pursue selfish desires while ignoring God’s. In fact this is the default mode of our lives. If we give no thought to how we are living we will always live bent on living for ourselves. We are naturally inclined to selfishness. This is what happened in Jerusalem and what Haggai is addressing.

Don’t miss God’s blessings. Because of their excuses and selfishness, the people were experiencing hardship; planting large amount of seed but harvesting little. There was drought, they were busy but never felt content, they labored but showed no profit. No matter how hard they tried, they never seemed to get ahead. No matter how much money they made, something was always there to take it away, they could not keep it. Do you know that feeling? Because of their selfishness the people missed out on God’s blessings. Haggai shares a grim reminder; what happens in your heart, affects every other part of your life. Because people had pushed God out of the center of their lives, they suffered in every area of life. What they failed to see, is God’s hand in the midst of all of their struggle. They had not stopped to consider that God was trying to get their attention, God was trying to tell them something. Haggai is screaming: Hey people, It is God who controls the rain and the harvest. He is withholding His blessing because your priorities are not right. Put His house first and he will bless you. Jesus said the same thing in Matthew 6:33, “*But strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well*.” God’s blessings come through obedience to His will and His ways. If we want to experience God’s blessings we must put him first and foremost.

Take time to evaluate. With this indictment and predicament, the people realized the root of their struggle. The people were ready to evaluate their situation. Haggai instructs the people two times to “*consider your ways*.” This means we must give careful thought to what’s going on. It was time for the people to have a serious self-examination before the Lord. They needed to step out of the busy-ness of life to evaluate their life in light of God’s Word your spiritual life. They needed to measure the consequences of their actions. Socrates stated that “the unexamined life is not worth living.” Evaluation is a good thing; that is why teachers give tests and employers give reviews. We need to evaluate how we use our assets; our time, money, and talents. We should examine who our friends are and what influence they have upon our actions. If God is not first, guess who moved Him from His rightful place. The failure to make constant corrections each day is like a pilot who does not make slight course adjustments in flight. The plane ends up off course. Failure to take precautions today, will result in consequences tomorrow.

When we stop making excuses, cease selfish ways, seek God’s blessings, and take time to evaluate, we can see God work in amazing ways. This is what happens when we put first things first; when we put God first in our life and we do His will above our own. How do we know if we are putting first things first? Here are three indications.

We find ourselves active in the right things. “*For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven:* *Ecclesiastes 3:1*” There is a time to talk and a time to act, a time to consider and a time to do. Those who put first things first are up and doing the right things; they are spending time with God, serving people, honoring Him with their time, talents and resources. For the Jews it meant cutting down trees to build God’s house.

God is glorified. Why should the temple be rebuilt? So that God may be glorified. When God is not first, we are indifferent to his glory. But when God is first, revealing his glory is first on our minds. In fact, everything we think, say, and do is done to honor God and bring credit to him. Whatever your occupation, the chief business of every Christian is to bring glory to God.

God blesses us. When the people obeyed, God sent word: "I am with you" (1:13). When God is first, he blesses us. And the sure sign of his blessing was his manifesting presence. If God seems distant in your life, perhaps your priorities have gotten mixed up. When you put God first, you experience a new awareness of his presence. That is a true blessing.

When God is truly first in our lives, we do not need to look hard to find his hand at work. We must always make the big things in serving God first and somehow, he will make a way to fit more of the little things in our lives. When we take the selfish busy-ness out of our lives and fill it with the busy-ness of God there always seems to be a more satisfactory feeling about what we are doing.

Rid yourself of excuses, lay them on the altar today and allow the Lord to take them away. Replace a selfish attitude with a servant’s heart. When you see a need in somebodies’ life, find a way to help meet that need. In blessing others, you will find God blessing you. The more you give away the more room you make for the Lord to bless you; and I believe He will surprise you.

Finally, take time to evaluate your life on a regular basis. How are you using your assets, your time, your talents, and your resources? Remember that the things you have are usually given to you by God in the first place; use them to give glory to God.

When we put these first things first, it is amazing how much room is left to worship the Lord; how much time is left for what is truly important and for him to bless you.