

Wheelersburg Baptist Church 8/26/01 Brad Brandt

Haggai 1:1-15 "Mixed Up Priorities"*

Proposition: According to Haggai 1, three things need to happen in our lives if we're living with wrong priorities.

I. Wrong priorities need to be confronted (1-4).

A. Here's what the people said (2).

1. Take care of yourself first.

2. Give God what's left.

B. Here's what God said (3-4).

1. The people didn't have time to do what God wanted.

2. They did have time to do what they wanted.

II. Wrong priorities need to be corrected (5-11).

A. Think about what you've been doing (5-6).

1. When you neglect God, you never have enough.

2. When you put God first, you have all you need.

B. Think about what God wants you to do (7-8).

1. Priority #1: Obey God's will.

2. Priority #2: Live for God's honor.

C. Think about what God is doing to get your attention (9-11).

1. He can make life hard.

2. He does so for His glory and our good.

III. Wrong priorities need to be changed (12-15).

A. Here's what change involves (12).

1. It affects our actions.

2. It affects our hearts.

B. Here's what change requires (13-15).

1. Haggai preached the Word.

2. The Lord convicted their hearts.

Let's Take Inventory: If your priorities are out of whack...

1. Take time to *think*.

▷ Is the Lord first in my life?

▷ Is the Lord's will more important than mine?

2. Take *steps* to change.

A group of friends went deer hunting and paired off in twos for the day. That night one of the hunters returned alone, staggering under an eight-point buck.

"Where's Harry?" he was asked.

"Harry had a stroke of some kind. He's a couple of miles back up the trail."

"You left Harry laying there, and carried the deer back?"

"Well," said the hunter, "I figured no one was going to steal Harry."

It's so easy to see when someone else's priorities are out of order. It's not quite so easy to see it in your own life.

Let's be honest with ourselves. We all struggle with our priorities from time to time. Every day we make decisions, and those decisions flow out of what we consider most important.

"Should I work the overtime, or not?" "Should I watch the TV program, or fix the broken down water spout?" "Should I go to the school function or to the Bible study with the youth group?" "Should I buy the new set of tools I've been wanting, or put the money towards the children's college fund?"

To complicate matters, add to these daily choices the rapid pace of life. Life is like a fast-moving roller coaster. Sometimes we make foolish choices, not so much intentionally, but because we fail to ponder what's really important. We get pulled into what's been called "the tyranny of the urgent."

What needs to happen if our priorities are mixed up? What can we do to develop the kinds of priorities that please God? We need not wonder, for God tells us in His Word.

Know this. We're not the first generation to struggle with our priorities. The people living in Jerusalem in 520 B.C. faced—and failed in—the same problem. And God sent them a message they desperately needed. And so do we who live in the 21st century.

The messenger's name was Haggai. The problem he addressed had to do with mixed up priorities. The solution is contained in the book that bears the prophet's name, a book to which we'll devote our attention for the next month or so.

The Prophet Haggai: Haggai, whose name means "festive" or "festival," was a prophet in the sixth century B.C. He ministered some fifteen years after Daniel, and was a contemporary of Zechariah. We know little of his personal life. He doesn't give us the name of his father, nor the location of his hometown. What he does give is a powerful invitation to do some soul-searching in the area of our priorities.

In fact, he wastes no time in his book getting to the point. The book of Haggai is actually the second shortest book in the Old Testament, only 38 verses. Though short, the book contains four powerful messages that God commissioned Haggai to deliver to the Jews living in Jerusalem in 520 B.C. The first had to do with priorities.

According to Haggai 1, three things need to happen in our lives if we're living with wrong priorities.

I. Wrong priorities need to be confronted (1-4).

Haggai begins, "In the second year of King Darius, on the first day of the sixth month, the word of the LORD came through the prophet Haggai to Zerubbabel son of Shealtiel, governor of Judah, and to Joshua son of Jehozadak, the high priest."

Notice that the book begins with a time indicator. It's actually the first of several time indicators. Haggai delivered his first message on the first day of the sixth month of King Darius' second year as king—in our calendar, that's August 29, 520 B.C.

According to 2:1 he preached his second message about seven weeks later, on the twenty-first day of the seventh month—that would be October 17, 520 B.C. The third message which begins in 2:10 came on the twenty-fourth day of the ninth month—that's December 18, 520 B.C. Haggai announced his fourth and final message later on the same day as the third, as 2:20 indicates—again, that's December 18, 520 B.C.

As I take a glance at Haggai's entire book, it strikes me that all we know of Haggai's ministry is this four month period in 520 B.C. He gave four sermons in four months, from August 29 to December 18. Yet what he did in only four months—rather, what God did through him—is amazing as we'll see in the weeks ahead.

On August 29, 5200 B.C. the Lord's word came to Haggai, the prophet. What did Haggai do with his message? Verse 1 says he delivered it "to Zerubbabel son of Shealtiel, governor of Judah, and to Joshua son of Jehozadak, the high priest."

Notice that Haggai took God's Word to both the political leader and religious leader of his people. He was a minor prophet with a major message. Like the other Old Testament prophets, he was a reformer. He proclaimed God's Word to address the pressing needs of his day.

We're living in an age of tolerance and acceptance. The experts say that "preaching" is out. "Sharing" is in. The fact is we need Haggai to remind us that not all voices are equal. There is one voice in a class all by itself. *Thus says the Lord.*

Here was the message—verse 2, "This is what the LORD Almighty says: "These people say, 'The time has not yet come for the LORD's house to be built.'"

The prophet's job isn't to share his opinions, but to proclaim God's Word. That's what Haggai did. His goal wasn't to be popular, but to please God. And so he confronted the wrong priorities of his people.

A. Here's what the people said (2). "The time has not yet come for the LORD's house to be built." It's not time, yet. What did they mean by that? To understand, we need to sketch the historical backdrop.

When Israel entered the Promised Land, God told them, "You can live here as long as you worship, obey, and live for Me. But if you turn away from Me, I'll send you into captivity." And that's what happened. The people turned, and God judged them. He sent them into exile in three waves, the final wave occurring in 586 B.C. at which time the temple was destroyed by the Babylonians.

Yet in His mercy, after seventy years God began to restore the Jews to the Promised Land. As there were three waves of deportation, there were three waves of return: the first led by Sheshbazzar in 538 B.C. (Ezra 1:1), the second wave led by Ezra in 458 B.C. (Ezra 7:7), and the third wave led by Nehemiah in 445 B.C. (Neh 2:1).

The pagan king who allowed the first wave of Jews to return to their homeland was Cyrus, King of Persia. In the first year of his reign, following the fall of Babylon, this ungodly king issued a very unusual edict. Cyrus gave orders for the rebuilding of the temple in Jerusalem. And not only did he authorize the building project, he funded the expenses for the rebuilding out of his own treasury.

So it happened, the first wave of 42,360 Jews left captivity and headed home. The year, again, was 538 B.C. Once back in Israel, the Jews' first order of business was to rebuild the temple. They got right to the task, according to the record in Ezra 3. In the first year and seventh month, they rebuilt the altar and started offering sacrifices. In the second year and second month, the work on the temple itself began. The Jews laid the foundation quickly, and even had a celebration service to give thanks to God for the good beginning.

But then, trouble began. The Samaritans opposed the building project (in Ezra 4), and the Jews lost heart for the work. Consequently, the Jews shifted their attention from restoring the temple to rebuilding their own homes and farms. It didn't take long until all work stopped on the temple. The people weren't opposed to doing God's work, *just not right now*. "We'll get around to it later," they said.

And so the unfinished temple just sat there as little more than a foundation. For how long? For the next sixteen years! That's when Haggai hit the scene, and confronted the wrong priorities of his people. To put it bluntly, here were their priorities...

1. *Take care of yourself first.* Then...

2. *Give God what's left.* Oh, they didn't deny God. They just trivialized Him. "It's not time yet to rebuild the Lord's house," they said. They were guilty of procrastination. They weren't against serving God. They'd serve God—just not yet. "I'll serve You, God. I'll give you my whole life, just not yet. I need to get some other things in order first." And before they knew it, they'd wasted sixteen years of precious time.

Oh yes, they had good reasons for their actions—we can always find plenty of "valid" reasons to keep us from doing God's work, can't we? "The Samaritans are against us. It's dangerous. We're tired after the long trip. Besides, we've got to live somewhere. We'll get our houses fixed up first, and then we'll feel better about fixing up God's house. That makes sense, doesn't it?" That's what the people said.

B. Here's what God said (3-4). "Then the word of the LORD came through the prophet Haggai: ⁴ "Is it a time for you yourselves to be living in your paneled houses, while this house remains a ruin?"

Remember the excuse the people gave? "The time has not yet come for the LORD's house to be built." In other words...

1. *The people didn't have time to do what God wanted.* But the fact of the matter is this...

2. *They did have time to do what they wanted.* God challenged the people's pretext with this question, "You say it's not the right time to rebuild My house. What makes it the right time for you to be living in your fancy houses?"

He refers to them as "paneled" houses. This indicates luxury, usually associated with royal dwellings (such as the palace built by Solomon in 1 Kings 7:3, 7). Haggai doesn't tell us what kind of paneling they used, but it's interesting that Zerubbabel purchased cedar wood from Lebanon to construct the temple (Ezra 3:7). Could it be that this wood was used to decorate the houses of the wealthy rather than build God's house?

There's nothing wrong with fixing up your house. There is something wrong, however, when we put self-interest above the Lord's will, when we pour our time, money, and energy into our agenda and neglect the Lord's agenda.

The founder of McDonald's, Ray Krock, was asked by a reporter what he believed in. "I believe in God, my family and McDonald's," he said. Then he added, "When I get to the office, I reverse the order."

What are the priorities that govern your life? Please realize, it's not what you say but what you *do* that indicates your priorities. In Haggai's day, the people didn't seem to have time to do what God wanted, but they made time to do what they wanted.

"I don't have time to be in God's Word every day." Do you have time to eat? If we can find time to feed our bodies, surely we can find time to feed our souls.

"I don't have time to come to a Wednesday evening Prayer Service." Do you have time to watch TV, or read the newspaper, or go to a ballgame? You say, "What's wrong with watching TV, reading the paper, or going to a ballgame?" Nothing. But if we can find a few moments for pleasure during the week, surely we can carve out some time for corporate prayer. According to Haggai, wrong priorities need to be confronted.

II. Wrong priorities need to be corrected (5-11).

Notice verse 5, "Now this is what the LORD Almighty says: "Give careful thought to your ways." *Consider your ways*, as the KJV puts it. That's a key phrase for Haggai. It appears four times in his book (1:7; 2:15, 18).

If you're living with wrong priorities, what do you need to do to correct the problem. Here's where we must

start. We need to *think*. Stop coasting along, and start thinking about some things, namely three things.

A. Think about what you've been doing (5-6). "You have planted much, but have harvested little. You eat, but never have enough. You drink, but never have your fill. You put on clothes, but are not warm. You earn wages, only to put them in a purse with holes in it."

Most of us spend very little time *thinking* about our lives. We bounce from paycheck to paycheck. We try to keep our heads above water. According to Haggai, we ought to be asking ourselves, "Why are we up to our necks in the first place?!"

Give careful thought to your ways, Haggai said. Think about what you've been doing, he told his people. You've been planting, eating, and earning money. And what do you have to show for it?

Here's what they had. Their agriculture failed—"you've sown much, but bring in little." The bottom dropped out of their economy—"you eat and drink, but never have enough; you put on clothes, but aren't warm." Inflation spiraled out of sight because of famine and scarcity of goods—"you earn wages, only to put them in a purse with holes in it." It kind of reminds me of the bumper sticker, "My take home pay won't take me home."

And why? Why were the Jews in this predicament? God was chastening them. God is so good. He created us to live for His glory. As His creatures, we won't be content until we do just that. And He knows it. He won't let us be content to put Him on the backburner of our lives. Not only is He passionate about His glory, He loves us too much to let us keep coasting.

So He sends us wakeup calls. He sets off the alarm once in awhile. Our budget won't budge. Or our budget is fat, but there's a leanness in our soul. Know this...

1. *When you neglect God, you never have enough.* Never. It's impossible to fail to give God His rightful place in your life without severe consequences. On the other hand...

2. *When you put God first, you have all you need.* I didn't say all you *want*. God isn't a Genie in a bottle, but He is our Shepherd. As David confessed, "The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want (Ps 23:1)."

Dear friends, here's the first step for correcting wrong priorities. Think about what you've been doing. Take time for some soul-searching reflection.

One of my God-given tasks as a shepherd is to seek to restore wayward sheep. In part that involves contacting church members who've become lax in coming to church. "We've been missing you in church recently," I'll say. It's not uncommon to hear a response like, "No excuses. I've just kind of gotten out of the habit. And to be honest, I didn't realize it had been three months."

Correction starts here. Think about what you've been doing.

B. Think about what God wants you to do (7-8). "This is what the LORD Almighty says: "Give careful thought to your ways. ⁸ Go up into the mountains and bring down timber and build the house, so that I may take pleasure in it and be honored," says the LORD."

What did God want His people to do? The answer—build His House! "Why?" you ask. "Why was it so important for the temple to be rebuilt? Wasn't it just a building?"

One the one hand, yes. It was just a building. You can't contain God in a man-made structure, as Stephen clarified years later in Acts 7.

But the temple was not *just* a building. It was the place God established for *sacrifice* and prayer. Without blood sacrifice, we can't be right with God.

You say, "Well then, why don't we rebuild the temple today?" The answer is, we already have a sanctuary. His name is Jesus Christ. Jesus is the full expression of God's glory, and Jesus is the fulfillment of the sacrificial system. He established a new covenant as Hebrews 9:28 says, "So Christ was sacrificed once to take away the sins of many people."

But the temple wasn't just a place of sacrifice. It was also the place where God demonstrated His *glory*. As Haggai said for God in verse 8, "Build the house, so that I may take pleasure in it and be honored ["glorified" in the KJV]."

That's what was at stake in Haggai's day—*God's honor*. When God's house is neglected, people think poorly of Him. When the Jews had been in captivity, the surrounding people could understand why the Lord's temple was in shambles. But sixteen years after returning home, and after settling into paneled houses? Is that what your God means to you?! The people's mixed up priorities were costing God the honor due to Him.

What priorities does God want us to have? Here are two key ones that must top the list...

1. Priority #1: Obey God's will. For Haggai's people that meant, go get lumber and start building! That was God's will. They knew it, but weren't doing it.

2. Priority #2: Live for God's honor. "Build my house...so I will be honored."

How about in your life? Is there anything God has made clear He wants you to do that you're not doing? When our priorities are right, it will be our delight to obey God's will. And it will be our passion to live for God's honor.

C. Think about what God is doing to get your attention (9-11). In the sixth century B.C., here's what He did: "You expected much, but see, it turned out to be little. What you brought home, I blew away. Why?" declares the LORD Almighty. "Because of my house, which remains a ruin, while each of you is busy with his own house. ¹⁰ Therefore, because of you the heavens have withheld their dew and the earth its crops. ¹¹ I called for a drought on the fields and the mountains, on the grain, the new wine, the oil and whatever the ground produces, on men and cattle, and on the labor of your hands."

It's true. God can do—and does—some powerful things to get our attention. Simply put...

1. He can make life hard. He can send a famine, as He did in Haggai's day. He can also send a pink slip. Or a physical ailment. Or a relationship fallout.

You say, "Are you suggesting that if I'm having problems in my life, it's because my priorities are out of whack?" No, I'm not. I am suggesting that God can do lots of things to get our attention, and if He is, we need to listen. In Israel's case, He held back rain, and gave them poor crops and vineyards. Simply put, He made life hard for them.

But know this. When God makes life hard...

2. He does so for His glory and our good. God doesn't punish His children. But neither will He let us coast along and ignore Him, not if we're His. That wouldn't be in our best interest.

No good parent sees his child heading for disaster, and stands idly by. He takes action. And so does God. He always does what He does for His honor and our good.

Wrong priorities need to be confronted, then corrected. Thirdly...

III. Wrong priorities need to be changed (12-15).

Which is began to happen in verse 12, "Then Zerubbabel son of Shealtiel, Joshua son of Jehozadak, the high priest, and the whole remnant of the people obeyed the voice of the LORD their God and the message of the prophet Haggai, because the LORD their God had sent him. And the people feared the LORD."

A. Here's what change involves (12). It affects two things.

1. *It affects our actions.* We don't change merely by making vague, fuzzy, emotional commitments. We change by taking concrete *action*. Like the Jews did. They "obeyed" the Lord—all of them did. From the governor to the high priest to the common people, they *obeyed* and started building.

Let's put this into perspective. When Solomon built the first temple four and a half centuries earlier, it took him seven years to do it—and he used heavy taxation and forced labor to accomplish it. Haggai's proposal, in essence, was to rebuild the temple with what amounted to voluntary labor.

But the people accepted the challenge. A priority change will affect our actions.

2. *It affects our hearts.* They not only *obeyed*, but they *feared*. The people feared the Lord.

Perhaps you're wondering, "What brought about this change, anyway? How do you get people to change their priorities?" We find the answer in the next three verses.

B. Here's what change requires (13-15). Two ingredients...

1. *Haggai preached the Word.* Verse 13—"Then Haggai, the LORD's messenger, gave this message of the LORD to the people: "I am with you," declares the LORD." So Haggai preached. That's what initiated the change. Then...

2. *The Lord convicted their hearts.* Verses 14-15—"So the LORD stirred up the spirit of Zerubbabel son of Shealtiel, governor of Judah, and the spirit of Joshua son of Jehozadak, the high priest, and the spirit of the whole remnant of the people. They came and began to work on the house of the LORD Almighty, their God, ¹⁵ on the twenty-fourth day of the sixth month in the second year of King Darius."

What produced the change? The ministry of God's Word and the conviction of God's Spirit. Notice the divine-human cooperative. We preach the Word, but only God can stir the heart. And He does when His Word is preached.

Answer this. How long did it take for Haggai's people to get their priorities back in order? Verse 15 says they started building on the twenty-fourth day of the sixth month. That's September 21, 520 B.C. That's 23 days!

The people had been living with wrong priorities for a long time—about sixteen years. But it took only a short period of time to get things straightened out once God's Word pricked their hearts.

No, this was not self-reform that occurred. Only God can change a person's heart. Parents, you can't change your child's heart. Husbands and wives, you can't change your spouse's heart. We're responsible to give the Word, and to pray. But only the Lord can transform a heart. And when change is real, that's what will happen.

Maybe it's happening in your heart right now...

Let's Take Inventory: If your priorities are out of whack...do two things.

1. *Take time to think.* Give careful thought to your ways.

In a Berlin art gallery there's a painting by German painter Adolf Menzel (1815-1905). It's only partially finished. Apparently, Menzel intended to show Fredrick the Great speaking with some of his generals, and so he painted the generals and the background and left king until last. Then he sketched the outline of Fredrick in charcoal. And then he died. He died prior to finishing the painting, leaving behind a picture full of other things, yet with a partially sketched king.

Sadly, that's what a lot of people do, too. They come to end of life without ever having put the King, Jesus Christ, into his proper place, at center stage.

Answer these two questions...

▷ Is the Lord first in my life? Is Jesus Christ your Savior and Lord? Are you sure? Give careful thought.

▷ Is the Lord's will more important than mine? Think. Is it? Was it apparent in the decisions you made at work this past week? How about at school, young people? Have you been doing what the Lord wants you to do with your time, money, and energy? If not, confess it to the Lord. Then...

2. *Take steps to change.* Don't wait. In just three weeks, the Jews reordered their priorities. Granted, it would take them the next three and one-half years to finish the task of rebuilding the temple—which they dedicated on March 12, 516 B.C. But it all started the day they got their priorities back in line. It all started when they took concrete steps to change. We must do the same.