

Main Idea: According to the message God gave and Haggai delivered in Haggai 2:10-19, being right with God involves two vital activities.

- I. Being right with God involves repentance (10-14).
 - A. Understand how holiness is obtained (10-13).
 1. Godliness isn't caught.
 2. Ungodliness is—we inherited it.
 - B. Understand what holiness demands (14).
 1. Good deeds can't clean up a corrupt heart.
 2. Only atonement can do that.
- II. Being right with God involves reflection (15-19).
 - A. Think about the consequences of disobedience (15-17).
 1. When we ignore God, life is hard.
 2. In some cases, God touches us where it hurts most.
 - B. Think about the blessing of obedience (18-19).
 1. When we obey God, life is fruitful.
 2. But remember, fruit doesn't grow over night.

Make It Personal: Let's take to heart Haggai's message...

1. We don't have to wait to change.
2. God is interested in heart change, not mere ritual.
3. No matter what we've done in the past, we can experience God's blessing in the present.
4. There is no substitute for atonement.

Scripture Reading: Hebrews 7:23-28

Listen carefully to the following words: “We have been the recipients of the choicest bounties of heaven. We have been preserved, the many years, in peace and prosperity. We have grown in numbers, wealth and power, as no other nation has ever grown. But we have forgotten God. We have forgotten the gracious hand which preserved us in peace and multiplied and enriched and strengthened us; and we have vainly imagined, in the deceitfulness of our hearts that all these blessings were produced by some superior wisdom and virtue of our own. Intoxicated with unbroken success, we have become too self-sufficient to feel the necessity of redeeming and preserving grace, too proud to pray to God that made us. It behooves us, then to humble ourselves before the offended Power, to confess our national sins, and to pray for clemency and forgiveness.”

Who said that? Our country's president did. Which one? Let me give you a clue. The date was April 30, 1863. The statement was part of a proclamation for a national day of fasting, humiliation, and prayer. The man calling for the national day of prayer was Abraham Lincoln.

It's no secret that as a nation we've turned away from the Lord and His authority in recent years. And we've seen the effects of it in the increasing deterioration of morality in the past decades.

This Friday at President Trump's inauguration there will be more people praying in the ceremony since President Reagan's inauguration. *Six* clergy.

I'm grateful that people are praying for our country, but know this. Prayer is just the beginning of the kind of national change that God deserves and desires. He made that clear through the Old Testament prophet Haggai.

I've entitled today's sermon, “A Message *from* God about Being Right *with* God.”

^{**}Note: This is an unedited manuscript of a message preached at Wheelersburg Baptist Church. It is provided to prompt your continued reflection on the practical truths of the Word of God.

¹ Adapted from a series preached at WBC in 2001.

We are not the first nation to face the need for a spiritual transformation. Israel was in the same predicament five hundred years before Christ. God got their attention, and we can learn much from how He did it, and how they responded to it.

The problem was pretty basic. It had to do with *priorities*. In the sixth century BC, the Lord brought a remnant of Jews back to the promised land and gave them an assignment. Rebuild the temple, which had been destroyed decades earlier.

So they started building. And then stopped. Instead of working on God's house, the people rebuilt their own houses and said, "We'll get around to fixing up the temple one of these days." And before long, sixteen years had passed.

God sent His people some wake up calls—like a drought and an economic recession. But the people didn't get it. They kept His temple on the back-burner.

So in 520 BC the Lord sent one of His prophets to give His people what alone has the power to transform people inside out. The Word of God. Haggai delivered four pointed messages in a four month period to help his people get right with God.

We see the first message in chapter one, which came on August 29, and in it Haggai exposed the problem head-on. Listen to Haggai 1:2-3, "This is what the LORD Almighty says: 'These people say, 'The time has not yet come for the LORD's house to be built.'" ³ 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?"

The Spirit of God took that message and pricked the peoples' hearts. After sixteen years of excuses, the Jews started rebuilding God's house.

About two months passed, and the people faced another problem. *Discouragement*. As they began to rebuild the temple, it quickly became apparent that this temple would pale in comparison with the former temple built by Solomon with all its gold and beauty.

And so Haggai delivered his second message on October 17, as recorded in Haggai 2:1-9. It was a message of encouragement in which Haggai said, in essence, "Be strong! Don't focus on the past. Just do what God has asked you to do in the present, because He's not interested in gold, but in His *glory*, and that's exactly what He will receive from this place. So keep building!"

And so the people kept building. Two more months passed. December came, and with it came more discouragement. The people struggled to get over the hump of their past failures. A question apparently haunted them, as it does many people today.

"Can you really experience God's blessing after you've blown it?"

Have you ever blown it? I have good news for you. Haggai addressed that very issue in his third message which we find in Haggai 2:10-19. We could well entitle this sermon, "How to Experience God's Blessing *After You've Blown It*."

Prayer is good. But getting right with God involves more than praying a prayer. The Jews recommitted themselves to God, but the stark reality of their past sins still plagued them. They needed help on what to do next.

We need this message, as individuals, and as a nation. In recent days there've been prayer services across the country. That's great. *But now what?*

According to the message that God gave and Haggai delivered on December 18, 520 BC, which we see in Haggai 2:10-19, being right with God involves two vital activities.

I. Being right with God involves repentance (10-14).

Repentance. There will be no lasting change and no blessing of God apart from genuine repentance. Repentance is more than shedding a few tears. It goes beyond

feeling sorrow and regret for past actions. It even requires more than admitting we've got a problem.

Fundamentally, true repentance involves change—a change of heart and life. When a person repents, he turns from going his own way and begins to live God's way.

But how does that happen? The Bible teaches that we are incapable of changing on our own. We don't want to change. We resist change. Quite frankly, we may know that we *need* to change, yet refuse to do so.

Oh, we'll respond with a deficient sort of repentance. In 2 Corinthians 7:10 Paul calls it a "worldly sorrow," an initial willingness to change, yes, but only because we dislike the consequences of our sin. But we don't hate the sin itself, and we refuse to address our real problem, that *God* hates our sin and must punish it.

A while back a man came to my study and said, "I want to get saved." His marriage was shot and in the divorce court at the time. He insisted that he pray a prayer that day saying that He wanted Jesus to be his Savior and Lord.

But he refused to change. Granted, I don't know his heart, but the fruit of his life indicated that what he wanted to get rid of was the *consequence* of his sin, and not the sin itself. That's not true repentance.

If we're going to exhibit true repentance, according to Haggai, there's something absolutely essential. We must grasp the *holiness of God*. Specifically, two things about holiness.

A. We must understand how holiness is obtained (10-13). Let's listen to Haggai in verses 11-12: "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."

Notice that Haggai didn't initiate this message. It came from God. God revealed His Word to the prophet. The prophet's job was merely to proclaim it.

Verse 11, "This is what the LORD Almighty says: 'Ask the priests what the law says.'" God told Haggai to ask the priests for their expert advice on the issue of ceremonial cleansing. Keep in mind, when God asks a question, it's not because He needs information. He's teaching something.

Here's the first of the two questions. Verse 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?"

In temple worship, a priest would often carry part of the sacrificed animal in the fold of his robe. The KJV refers to this as "holy flesh," that is, meat set aside for sacrifice to the Lord. In so doing, the priest's garment became holy, according to Leviticus 6:27.

But would the holiness be transferred to the other food items as well? For instance, if the robe containing the sacrificed meat touched some bread or stew in the temple, would those items become holy by contact? That was Haggai's question.

To which the priests answered (12), "No." And why not? Because holiness cannot be transferred by secondary contact. More about that in a moment, but for now, notice Haggai's second question.

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

According to the Torah, if a person touched something dead he became ceremonially unclean or defiled (Num 19:11). So Haggai asks, "If a person who is unclean because of touching a dead body then touches a food item, does the food item also become defiled?"

And the priests replied, "Yes, it becomes defiled." The case law of Numbers 19:22 made that clear.

Now, what's the point? By asking these two questions, Haggai is making a couple of things clear about holiness, and more specifically godliness.

1. *Godliness isn't caught.* You don't get it simply by going to church, or picking up a Bible, or listening to a Christian podcast. All are good things to do, for sure, but they're insufficient. You can't catch godliness by second hand contact.

The people to whom Haggai spoke were engaged in a "holy" task. They were rebuilding the temple of God. But though the job was sacred, it couldn't make them holy because the holiness of the building couldn't rub off on them.

But apparently, some thought it would. It's no different today.

Some people light candles and put religious relics in their homes. In their zeal, they believe these "holy" objects will contribute to their favor with God. Other people go on a retreat to so called "holy" places (monasteries) thinking that there they will find holiness.

Know this. We can be involved in good, even "holy" tasks, but that doesn't make us holy. We can teach Sunday School lessons, participate in church work days, sing gospel songs, and give lots of money to missions—all good things. But none has the power to transmit holiness.

The reason? Godliness isn't caught. On the other hand, something *is* caught.

2. *Ungodliness is—we inherited it.* From whom? From Adam.

I don't know if you've ever thought about this or not, but it's true. You can catch a cold from somebody else, but it's impossible to catch his health.

"The power of defilement is far easier to communicate than holiness," as Herbert Wolf observes. "Scripture teaches that the sin of Adam has contaminated the entire human race, but believing parents cannot transmit their saved condition directly to their children."²

Don't miss this point. Holiness is not contagious. You don't obtain it by sitting around godly people in a church or reading about them in a Bible.

"Well then, how do we experience it?" you ask. Haggai tells us how...

B. We must understand what holiness demands (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.'"

Haggai applies the priests' answers to the situation facing his people. As a nation, there was a time when Israel was holy, because the Lord had rescued them and set them apart for His use.

But something happened. In verse 14, Haggai says their deeds and offerings were *defiled*. Everything they touched became unclean. Why? Because they had slighted God. For sixteen years, they'd failed to do God's will in completing the temple. And the unfinished temple stood like a corpse in their midst, a witness to their sin of negligence.

You say, "But the people weren't being negligent anymore, were they? They were now doing the right thing, weren't they?"

Yes, in response to Haggai's first message four months earlier, the people started rebuilding God's house. But getting right with God involves more than external action.

A lot of people have the notion, "If you just do your best, God will be satisfied." But is that true? Is a holy God satisfied with our best?

Not according to His Word. Haggai says that people can do something for God—even rebuild His temple—yet remained defiled. What's the problem? It's this.

² H. Wolf, *Haggai and Malachi*, p. 43.

1. *Good deeds can't clean up a corrupt heart.* What does God think of people who do humanitarian things, yet refuse to humbly accept the Lord Jesus Christ as their Savior? Many today say it doesn't matter what road you take to God as long as you're sincere. Mohammad is one way. Buddha is another. Jesus is yet another. They are all great "men" who show us the way to God.

But that misses one critical factor, namely, what the holiness of God demands. "Be holy, because I am holy," says the Lord in Leviticus 11:44. "Be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect," says the Lord Jesus in Matthew 5:48.

The truth is, I need more than a great religious leader to show me the way to God. I need to be holy, even perfect. Which means I'm in a situation I can't fix.

God doesn't grade on the curve. He is holy, and He demands holiness. You cannot enter His presence if you have sin contaminating your life. The religions of the world teach that you can offset sin by doing good things. But a sinner who does good is still what? He's still a *sinner*, and he still has a fundamental problem that his good works can't change.

He has inherited a sin nature and therefore has a *corrupt heart* which produces corrupt *living*.

You say, "That's just the Old Testament. The God of the New Testament is loving, and as long as you do your best, He'll take you to heaven some day."

While it's true that He's loving, He never demonstrates His love at the expense of His holiness. He says in James 2:10 (a New Testament text), "For whoever keeps the whole law and yet stumbles at just one point is guilty of breaking it all."

So no, good deeds cannot clean up a corrupt heart.

2. *Only atonement can do that.* Atonement comes from the English "at one ment." It speaks of unity and reconciliation.

Which is something sinners do not have with God—unity. And something they need to experience with God—reconciliation.

That's why rebuilding the temple was so vital in Haggai's day. The only way to be made right with God is through atonement, through a blood sacrifice that provides a covering for sin. After Adam and Eve sinned, God killed animals to provide a covering for them. In the Torah, God instructed His people to offer animal sacrifices to cover their sins. That's why the temple was needed in Haggai's day. You can't approach a holy God without an atoning sacrifice that He accepts, a covering for your sin.

You say, "If we need an atoning sacrifice, why don't we offer lambs today?"

The answer is, God already provided one for us. His own Son who became a man. John the Baptist said of Jesus, "Behold the Lamb of God that takes away the sin of the world (John 1:29)."

When Jesus Christ came into this world, He came to give His life as an atoning sacrifice. He died for the sins of all who would believe in Him. He paid sin's penalty, broke its chains, and sets free all who call upon Him.

The moment a person repents and accepts Jesus as Savior, trusting wholly in His atoning work, God takes away the person's sin and gives him a new heart.

But until that happens, a thousand—even a million—good deeds won't change the condition of the sinner's corrupt heart. Holiness demands an atonement.

So how does a person (or even a nation) get right with God? It starts right here with *repentance*. But repentance isn't a matter of cleaning up our own lives. It's involves coming to grips with God's holiness, a desire to be changed, and the willingness to accept

His provision of atonement. If you want to be right with God, you can be through the way He has graciously provided for you.

It also involves a second activity that Haggai addressed in verses 15-19.

II. Being right with God involves reflection (15-19).

Three times in this section Haggai says, “Give careful thought (once in verse 15, twice in verse 18; he already used it twice times in chapter one).” It says this, “It’s time to do some hard thinking, some soul-searching evaluation.”

It’s been rightly said, “The unexamined life is not worth living.” So true. In the second portion of Haggai’s third message he urged his people—and us—to engage in some honest reflection regarding two subjects.

A. Think about the consequences of disobedience (15-17). “Now give careful thought to this from this day on—consider how things were before one stone was laid on another in the LORD’s temple. ¹⁶When 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. ¹⁷I struck all the work of your hands with blight, mildew and hail, yet you did not turn to me,’ declares the LORD.”

Things had been going poorly for the Jews. Here Haggai explains why. He invites his people to remember how things were *before* they started rebuilding the temple.

In a word, things had been *bleak*. And we’re talking bleak for a decade and a half.

The farm market had plummeted. Cash crops were down fifty percent. The wheat that should have produced twenty measures produced only ten. Grape production was even worse, dropping to forty percent, with vineyards that typically produced fifty vats of wine yielding only twenty.

And what was the cause of this economic downturn? Bad luck? No. Speaking for God, Haggai says these were the consequences of the people’s disobedience. Their priorities were upside down. They’d been building their own houses and neglecting God’s.

We see a couple of things here that deserve our attention.

1. *When we ignore God, life is hard.* God will not play second fiddle in our lives. He’s passionate about putting His glory on display, and He saves us so we can live for His glory. But when we start putting something ahead of Him, He does things to get our attention.

2. *In some cases, God touches us where it hurts most.* Verse 17 makes it clear that *God Himself* brought these hardships on His people. “*I struck* all the work of your hands with blight, mildew, and hail.”

God says He did it. He is sovereign. He says in Isaiah 45:7, “I form the light and create darkness, I bring prosperity and create disaster; I, the LORD, do all these things.” Lamentation 3:38 elaborates, “Is it not from the mouth of the Most High that both calamities and good things come?”

So yes, sometimes the Lord touches us where it hurts most. Why? Because He’s cruel? How could we ever call the One who sent His own dear Son to the cross to rescue us from eternal torment in hell *cruel*?

Indeed, His love is unfailing (Exodus 15:13), and He works all things together for good for those who love Him who have been called according to His purpose (Romans 8:28). He’s always working for our good. But He knows that what’s good for us is to put Him first, to “seek first the kingdom of God, and all these things shall be added to you,” as Jesus said in Matthew 6:33.

And when we don't seek Him first, that is not good for us. That's why He sends wake-up calls our way.

Do His wake-up calls always get our attention? To answer that, notice what God said to His people in verse 17, "I struck all the work of your hands with blight, mildew and hail, *yet you did not turn to me,*" declares the LORD."

So no, hardship alone doesn't turn people to God. For years the Lord had been making life difficult for the Jews, ever since they stopped His rebuilding His temple. He sent what we would call natural disasters to limit their crop production.

But they didn't get the message. They just kept living the same way, failing to see that their loving Redeemer was sending them a message about their priorities.

Amos addressed the same problem two hundred years prior. Speaking for God he said in Amos 4:9, "'Many times I struck your gardens and vineyards, I struck them with blight and mildew. Locusts devoured your fig and olive trees, yet you have not returned to me,'" declares the LORD."

So just because things get tough doesn't mean people will get right with God. What's missing? Ultimately spiritual transformation is the result of God's sovereign and gracious work. No question. But on the human side, the Spirit gets people's attention when they get off the treadmill, look in the mirror, and take time for some serious reflection.

Sad to say but a lot of people won't stop and think about God until He touches them where it hurts the most. For some, it's their pocketbook. For others, it's their health. For still others, it takes a shattered relationship to cause them to admit their need to get right with God.

Haggai's message hit home. Four months earlier his people had repented. But when they started rebuilding the temple, they quickly became discouraged.

The first thing God did was tell them that He was going to put His glory on display in this temple. That's was Haggai's second message in 2:1-9. And while that must have encouraged the people to know what was going to happen in the distant future, it didn't put food on their tables.

That's what message #3 is all about. Not just future glory in the temple, but present day glory in the provision of food.

This is the second thing God wants His people to think about. First, why they're in the condition they're in, the consequences of disobedience. Think about that. If you've been disobedient, think about that, and think about what life has become.

But don't stop there. Think about this too.

B. Think about the blessing of obedience (18-19). The Lord gives His people an incredible promise in verses 18-19, and He urges them to take it to heart.

"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: ¹⁹Is 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.'"

There's the promise. From this day on, from the day you started putting Me first, *I will bless you.*

In this section Haggai urges his people to think about the blessing of obedience. It's true, as we've just seen, that when we ignore God, life gets hard. On the other hand, this also is true.

1. *When we obey God, life is fruitful.* Life was hard before, but that was because of disobedience. From *this day on*, things will change, says the Lord. Why? Because now you're building My House and putting My reputation first.

Know this about God. He loves to bless His people when they put Him first! He's so generous. If you obey Me, I will bless you. And life will be fruitful. This is His promise.

2. *But remember, fruit doesn't grow over night.* Haggai asks an intriguing question in verse 19, "Is there yet any seed left in the barn?"

The answer was *no*. Why was the seed not in the barn? What time of year was it? It was the *ninth* month on the Jewish calendar—December on ours. And in December in Israel, the seed would not be in the barn because they'd just planted it in the field.

Yet on that December day, speaking for God, Haggai made a prediction. In verse 19, he announced that a bumper crop was coming!

That's quite a prediction, isn't it? It's the middle of winter. No sensible farmer would dare predict the quality of next year's harvest in the middle of winter, especially when the yields in the previous decade had been down fifty to sixty percent!

But that's exactly what Haggai said. He received God's promise, and He passed it on to his people. He predicted a bountiful harvest, not because he had inside information on future weather conditions. He predicted it because he saw the repentant and revived condition of his people. They were doing what God wanted them to be doing with their lives. They were now *right with God*.

And since they were, they were ready to experience God's blessing.

Granted, it hadn't come yet, but that's because fruit doesn't grow overnight. The seed was still in the soil. It takes time to see fruit. And patience. And faith. But the fruit will come. We have God's Word.

From this day on I will bless you.

Perhaps you're in a waiting time right now. You've repented, put your total trust in the Lord Jesus, and have been trying to put Him first in your life. And now you're wondering if it's worth it. The seed is in the ground, but you don't see much happening.

Dear brother and sister, the harvest will come. We have His promise.

You say, "But this is an Old Testament promise." Okay, listen to this, Galatians 6:9, "Let us not become weary in doing good, for at the proper time we will reap a harvest if we do not give up."

And this, Philippians 4:29, "My God will meet all your needs according to his glorious riches in Christ Jesus."

And this, Revelation 2:10, "Be faithful, even to the point of death, and I will give you the crown of life."

This is as certain as the character of God Himself.

"God is not unjust; he will not forget your work and the love you have shown him as you have helped his people and continue to help them. ¹¹ We want each of you to show this same diligence to the very end, so that what you hope for may be fully realized.

¹² We do not want you to become lazy, but to imitate those who through faith and patience inherit what has been promised (Hebrews 6:10-12)."

In 1831 after visiting America, French writer Alexis de Tocqueville said, "I sought for the greatness of the United States in her commodious harbors, her ample rivers, her fertile fields, and boundless forests--and it was not there. I sought for it in her rich mines, her vast world commerce, her public school system, and in her institutions of higher learning--and it was not there. I looked for it in her democratic Congress and her

matchless Constitution--and it was not there. Not until I went into the churches of America and heard her pulpits flame with righteousness did I understand the secret of her genius and power. America is great because America is good, and if America ever ceases to be good, America will cease to be great!"

What must a person, or a nation, do to get right with God and experience His blessing? According to Haggai's message, getting right with God involves *repentance*. We must come to grips with how holiness is obtained and what it demands.

And *reflection*. We need to think carefully about the promises of God. And then believe them, and live in light of them.

Make It Personal: Let's take to heart Haggai's message...

There are many lessons for us. I'll mention four.

1. *We don't have to wait to change.* I find it interesting that in verse 18, Haggai repeats the date he already recorded in verse 10, the *twenty-fourth day of the ninth month*. Why the repetition?

I think it's because he's saying to his people, this is the day. *This is the day when things change.*

Sometimes I put a date in my Bible next to a passage or verse that God encourages or challenges me with. It's a future reminder to me that a step of change took place that day.

Friends, we don't have to wait to change.

2. *God is interested in heart change, not mere ritual.* Back to the illustration, holiness isn't "caught." It's not enough merely to go through the motions. If holiness is real, there's a heart change, produced by Christ, that leads to life change.

Maybe you've been attending church for awhile. Perhaps you've even been reading your Bible and praying. That's good.

Now answer this. Has the Lord changed your *heart*? He's not interested just in external actions, but internal repentance.

Sadly, Jesus said there will be religious people in hell, a lot of them, (Matt 7:23).

3. *No matter what we've done in the past, we can experience God's blessing in the present.* No one is too far gone for God. No one. Jesus said, "Come to me, *all* you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest (Matt 11:28)."

Do you want to be right with God today? You may come to Him, and He will save you. His Word is clear. No matter how ashamed you are of your past, you may come to Him through His Son, and He will not cast you away.

And to those who are impressed with what you have done for God, you *must* come. The reason?

4. *There is no substitute for atonement.* Mere good people don't go to heaven. Only those who are perfect, or have been saved by the One who is perfect, may enter God's heaven.

"Just as man is destined to die once, and after that to face judgment, ²⁸ so Christ was sacrificed once to take away the sins of many people; and he will appear a second time, not to bear sin, but to bring salvation to those who are waiting for him (Hebrews 9:27-28)."

A nation gets right with God as its people get right with God. May God help us.