

Contagious Grace

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 06 December 2020

Preacher: James Ross

[0 : 00] Now we're going to read as we begin from Mark chapter 1 verse 40 to 45 and we'll see how this connects to Haggai in a few minutes.

A man with leprosy came to Jesus and begged him on his knees, if you are willing you can make me clean. Jesus was indignant, he was filled with compassion. He reached out his hand and touched the man.

I am willing, he said, be clean. Immediately the leprosy left him and he was cleansed. Jesus sent him away at once with a strong warning.

See that you don't tell this to anyone but go, show yourself to the priest and offer the sacrifices that Moses commanded for your cleansing as a testimony to them.

Instead he went out and began to talk freely spreading the news. As a result Jesus could no longer enter a town openly but stayed outside in lonely places.

[1 : 08] Yet the people still came to him from everywhere. And then in Haggai chapter 2 verses 10 to 19.

On the 24th day of the ninth month in the second year of Darius, the word of the Lord came to the prophet Haggai. This is what the Lord Almighty says.

Ask the priests what the law says. 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 priest answered no. Then Haggai said if a person defiled by contact with a dead body touches one of these things, does it become defiled? Yes, the priest replied, it becomes defiled.

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. Now give careful thought to this from this day on.

[2 : 11] Consider how things were before one stone was laid on another in the Lord's temple.

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.

I struck all the work of your hands with blight, mildew and hail, yet you did not return to me, declares the Lord. 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. 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. So today, Haggai chapter 2, verses 10 to 19, thinking about the reality that God provides for an unclean people.

I wonder if you've ever had the experience of really wanting something, really needing something, but recognising, I just can't get it. I just can't get there.

[3 : 17] It made me think of a trip that we took years and years ago to Holland. And to get to this region that we were heading for, we were relying on childhood experience, childhood memories of a ferry crossing.

Well, after hours of driving to get to said ferry port we discovered, it had stopped sailing years and years before. And so we had to drive hours to get to the bridge that had now been built.

Got to the town. You can't get there from here. Now, that's frustrating, but it's no big deal. You can drive a few more hours, get to where you want to go. Haggai chapter 2 is a much more serious thing for them and for us.

Their great need, their great want was to enjoy God's presence. And one of the things that Haggai has sent to teach them is that their efforts have been getting them nowhere apart from frustration.

And that brings us, in a sense, to the Emmanuel theme that we were also thinking about in our Advent series, Matthew 1.23. Jesus comes to be Emmanuel, God with us.

[4 : 29] We are no different from the people in Haggai's day. Whoever we are, whatever our circumstances, people that I know, people I don't know, I can confidently say your great need and mine, is that we would know God and that we would enjoy his presence in our lives.

And what we need to understand, same as Haggai's day, is that our efforts, our best efforts without Jesus, they will get us nowhere. Sin is that barrier that separates and we cannot cross that barrier. We cannot remove it. So our need is that God would come. Is that God would come by his grace to be present with us. Now, this week, just thinking about where we are in the world, it might be helpful for us to illustrate from the pandemic.

So I imagine at the start of lockdown, you probably had in your inbox or you chased up videos or studies on the spread of the virus.

Do you remember those videos? Because they would perhaps use infrared or other technology to show that within minutes, as they sort of replicated what happens, due to touch, a room could very quickly become, as it were, unclean or defiled as the virus spread by contact.

[5 : 49] And the impact, of course, as that's become reality, not just simulation, is that we find ourselves still isolated, restricted and missing presence.

We miss being together, don't we? Our current efforts, sort of, as societies, has managed to curb the spread of the virus.

But in a sense, we cannot get to where we want to be from here. We need outside help. We need something more than masks and social distance if we want to enjoy presence again.

And that's where the vaccine has come as such great news, hasn't it? And, of course, the hope and the goal of the vaccine, or at least one intended outcome, one great hope for our hearts, is that we would enjoy presence again.

We get to be with one another. We get to be with those that we love. And so I hope that this can help us, in a sense, understand Haggai 2. That we can see our great problem separated from God and his presence and to see God's gracious response to deal with our great need.

[7 : 05] So the first thing to think about, from verses 10 to verse 14, is that sin is a spreading virus. So there's a case study that Haggai brings.

He speaks to the priests, those experts in the law, and he gives them two scenarios. The first scenario imagines people carrying some holy meat.

That would be meat that would have been offered at the temple. Sacrifice and perhaps a fellowship offering where some of that meat was then to be eaten by the worshipper.

So they're carrying it. No sort of handy-dandy carrier bag. So they would use their clothes to do that. Now, if that holy meat touches another object, Haggai asks, does holiness transfer to the other object?

And the answer? The priest answered, no. Scenario two imagines an unclean person. Somebody who's become defiled by touching a dead body.

[8 : 06] If they touch that other object, the lentils, the stew, whatever it might be, does uncleanness transfer? And the priest say in verse 13, yes, the priest's reply, it becomes defiled.

So uncleanness transfer. So the point, verse 14, 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. God's people, Haggai says through this illustration, are unclean. And therefore, their actions and their worship and their sacrifices are likewise unclean.

Their uncleanness has transferred. And of course, we begin to understand as we read Haggai where their uncleanness is reflected in their selfishness in prioritising themselves and their own houses and their own comfort over the temple and what the temple represents.

So here is Haggai using this case study to give a warning about sin. And what it teaches us is that sin is not some small thing. It's not some superficial external thing.

[9 : 22] Rather, it is something that is deep. It is something that is powerful. It is something that infects everything. You see, the problem wasn't with their sacrifices.

God isn't saying to them, look, you're bringing me animals that are sort of unclean. No, the problem lies with them, with their hearts.

Remember that great truth from the life of David. You know, people look at the outward obedience, but God, God looks at the heart. And the people that are being encouraged to recognise that even

their efforts at rebuilding a temple, simply building a temple by itself, that's not going to deal with their sin either.

Because for them to have a status of holy, to have a status where they can enjoy God's presence, is not dependent on their works. It's not dependent on their religious efforts.

And, you know, that's something that we always need to hear. Perhaps that's still one of the great misunderstandings of the Christian faith, that it's about sort of turning over a new leaf or our efforts at being really religious.

[10 : 33] And Haggai says, no, the problem of sin is far too deep for us to deal with in any way. Haggai is showing that we need a deep cure for the spreading virus of sin.

Perhaps we can think about it this way. Imagine you're driving in a car and the dashboard lights, they start lighting up like a Christmas tree. All kinds of warning signs come up.

Now, what do we do at that point? It's not the time, is it, to turn into the car wash so that we can deal with some of the mud and the spatter. Hey, look, our car's doing well.

I know it's time to pop the bonnet and to deal with the engine. But sometimes our instinct, our temptation is to try moral reform that deals with the externals.

But we need to go deeper. We need to deal with the sin beneath the sin. Paul Tripp, biblical counsellor, says we must learn to deal with the roots of our sin, not simply the fruits, not simply what shows.

[11 : 35] But what is it that leads us to speak and act in certain ways and to recognise that the heart of the problem is the problem of the human heart and our sin nature.

Because recognise this too, that the Bible is saying the logic isn't I sin, so therefore I am a sinner, but rather I am a sinner and therefore I sin.

And Jesus talks about this in his ministry in Mark chapter 7, where the people are horrified that Jesus doesn't and his disciples don't wash their hands in this way for ritual purity.

And Jesus says it's out of the heart that comes evil, out of the overflow of the heart is where we recognise the heart of the problem.

So here is Haggai and he's alerting us to the danger of the virus of sin. This virus that effectively quarantines us, isolates us from enjoying God and his presence and his blessing and his love and his peace and his joy.

[12 : 45] We simply, by ourselves, without Jesus, we cannot go near. And if we do go near to God, without Jesus, we will be consumed and condemned.

And we cannot cure the problem of sin by ourselves. We need God from the outside to forgive us, to make us holy, to make us clean.

And without that, we will never enjoy eternal life. A quality of life knowing friendship with God now, enjoying the presence of God forever.

Rather, we will be eternally separated and judged. We will never enjoy the presence of God without God dealing with our sin. One of the big themes, of course, in Haggai is the theme of the temple.

And God's house, the temple, is holy. Therefore, you need the status of holy if you are to enter in. And again, without trusting in Jesus, you and I cannot pass that test.

[13 : 51] Because we are, because of the spreading virus of sin, unclean, defiled and unholy. But that's not the end of Haggai's message.

Verses 15 to 19. He wants us to see God's grace that makes us clean. From verse 15 onwards, there's an invitation to reflect.

Verse 15 now, give careful thought to this from this day on. Consider how things were. And before, verses 16 and 17, we see that their lives were marked by frustration and futility.

They were expecting good harvest and instead they got very little. Why is that? We're told, God was at work. I struck all the work of your hands with blight mildew and hail, yet you did not return to me.

They were not repenting in their heart. They were unclean. They weren't enjoying God's covenant blessing. Rather, they were under God's covenant curse.

[14 : 57] And one of the ways that that was shown is in their poverty of their harvests. And they are unable to change that circumstances. But here's the good news. God will make them holy.

God himself will come near. Now, how do we see that? We see it in three times, this call to reflection. Or the mention of from this day on.

So verse 15, we just read it. Verse 18. From this day on, give careful thought to the day when the foundation of the Lord's temple was laid. And then verse 19. From this day on, I will bless you.

And the point that Haggai is making is that there is a turning point. There is a transformation in the dealings of God with his people. And that transformation happens because they're rebuilding the temple.

And the temple represents God's presence. So here is the people now saying, we want God in our lives. We want God to be present. We want the nation to appreciate that.

[15:58] We want the nations to know that we are the people of God. They understand that their great need is for God to be with them. And now that the foundation is laid, there's going to be this change.

And blessing will come from this day on. God says, I will bless you. Now, recognise this. It's not because they have a temple in and of itself.

God will bless because God in his grace will be present in that temple. Their hope doesn't lie in the building. It lies in what the building represents.

The presence of God. What does the temple and temple worship represent? Well, here is God's provision. Here is God's way for them to be washed clean from their impurity and their sin.

Here is where sacrifice can be made to make atonement, to cover their sin and their guilt. Here is where they can draw near and enter into the presence of the holy God.

[17:03] Here in the temple is the way back to God as he, God, draws near to them, allowing them to approach, allowing them to know his love and his mercy.

God, by grace, changes the status of his people so they might draw near. To go back to our pandemic illustration, God alone in that sense has the vaccine to deal with the virus of sin.

God alone is able to end our isolation and quarantine so that we might live enjoying the presence of God. And God is pleased to supply that so that we can enjoy Emmanuel, God, with us.

So your hope and mine today is that we can draw near to God through Jesus, the living temple.

And that when we come to Jesus, we discover his holiness is transferable. And it covers our uncleanness and our sin.

[18:19] And with that change of status, we can enter in and enjoy life with our God. That's the beauty of that passage that we read in Mark chapter 1.

We meet there a leper who is unclean, who is untouchable, who's having to live outside of the city or the community where he was.

But he comes to Jesus in his need, in his uncleanness. Jesus, if you're willing, you can make me clean. And the wonderful thing about Jesus is he reached out his hand and touched the man.

I'm willing, he said, be clean. And immediately the leprosy left him and he was cleansed. He's sent off to the temple to demonstrate that he is now clean.

But notice the result of that touch. Scandal. No, you ran from a leper because leprosy was contagious. Uncleanness was contagious.

[19:26] But not when Jesus is around. It's not that uncleanness transfers to Jesus, but holiness and cleanness of Jesus transfers to the man.

The touch of Jesus makes him clean. And in this early introduction to Jesus in Mark chapter 1, we're being prepared, in a sense, for his work on the cross.

Here is Jesus, the Holy One. The perfectly obedient one. The Son of God, revealing the glory of God to us. But what does Jesus, in his love and grace, do for us on the cross?

He takes our uncleanness. He takes our defilement. He takes our sin. It transfers to him.

And he suffers and dies as if he is the very worst of sinners. As if he is unclean. He dies under the curse.

[20:30] So that we might be blessed. His blood, his sacrifice, covers our sin and makes us clean.

So that we can be declared to be righteous and holy and have that change of status so that we might come near in the name of Jesus.

So your great need today, my great need today, is the presence of God. And the gospel is this wonderful news that Jesus and Jesus alone, by grace alone and not by our efforts, through our faith alone, simply by trusting and believing in the willingness of Jesus to take my sin and to give salvation and eternal life, Jesus ends our isolation.

Jesus brings us near. Jesus brings us home to God. And that's the gospel. That's our hope. And that's the state in which we are to live.

There's a Christian devotional classic written by Brother Lawrence called Practicing the Presence of God.

[21 : 48] Call to mind the reality that we live with God with us always. By the Spirit, Jesus comes to live with his people.

And this is what you and I need to live with that conscious awareness of the presence of God. This is what the people around us need. Can you imagine what family life would be like if Christian husbands and wives and brothers and sisters and mums and dads were living, knowing that they were close to Jesus, that Jesus was with them, that they would be growing to be more like Christ. Imagine the peace. Imagine the patience. Imagine the forgiveness and the mercy and the compassion. We need to practice the presence of God in our families.

Imagine the difference in your workplace. If you go to work or if you sit at home on your computer practicing the presence of God, if you know God is with me today in this meeting, in this situation, what a gift you would be to your boss, to your colleagues, to your customers.

As you live with that peace, live out that identity of being a child of God, everyday life spent in worship.

[23 : 15] And what a gift it would be to our church. If as brothers and sisters in Christ, we were living consciously, knowing that God is near to us, that God is with us, that Jesus has come, the true temple, the meeting place of God, and he now dwells in our hearts so that we are a living temple in which God lives by his spirit.

We would be seeing Jesus Christ in one another, in the love that we would share, in the truth that we would bring, in the comfort and the hope that we would give to one another.

It would be a refreshing place. So knowing that Jesus has come to provide for our greatest need, come to him today and come every day because we've got this wonderful privilege of enjoying the presence of God.