

Giving to God Does not Make Sense!

Before I get into this sermon, I have a confession to make. I was not excited to preach about stewardship. When I preached on our management of God's gifts to us several years ago, a member called me the next day and asked if I could visit him at his house. When I arrived, he started telling me how bad my sermon was. He told me how much money he gave and why it was wrong for me to tell him to give more. When I returned to my office, I re-read my sermon. I never said that anyone had to give more money. I encouraged people to examine their hearts. But you see, people react quickly when you talk about money. They get very defensive, as if someone poked them with a sharp stick. So, I was not excited to preach about stewardship. But I also realize that you called me to share God's Word with you and God's Word has a lot to say about money. It's not that God needs an extra \$5 or \$10 or \$20 from everyone. He owns the whole world. God's Word has a lot to say about money, because money can cause a lot of problems. In today's gospel lesson, we hear about a guy who was arguing with his brother about an inheritance. I have seen loving families get divided over money. But money can also damage our relationship with God as the devil encourages us to focus on the treasures and pleasures of this world and that is a danger to our salvation. We need to listen to what the Lord says about money.

You have already figured out that a lot of things in life do not make sense. "He was a good kid from a good family. How did he get hooked on heroin?" It just doesn't make any sense. "She took such good care of herself. How could she get cancer?" It just doesn't make any sense. Crooked politicians get elected. Young people die. Honest employees lose their jobs. Etc. There are a lot of things in life that do not make any sense.

The Old Testament Israelites must have been thinking that things did not make sense when the Babylonians conquered their country. They were God's chosen people and they had the temple where God lived among them. How could the Babylonians beat them, burn their houses, kill their loved ones, dismantle the temple, and force the survivors to be their slaves walking hundreds of miles with chains around their ankles to live in Babylon? It did not make sense.

Seventy years later, a handful of Jews returned to Jerusalem, which looked like a ghost town. Walls and gates were broken and crumbling. The temple courts where thousands of people had once worshiped was now strangely quiet. Charred ruins everywhere. The only inhabitants were wild animals.

That handful of Jews rolled up their sleeves and got busy rebuilding their city and nation. It was not easy. They built a new altar and started worshipping. Then they laid the foundation for a new temple. But then their energy and zeal sort of burned out. They were struggling to get enough money and food. Their attention turned to their own homes. It only made sense, you know. Why spend precious time and money on the temple? That project could wait. God wanted them to be safe and comfortable, right? Once they got established in their homes, they would take care of the temple. But they never got around to it. They laid the foundation for the temple, but they did not do any more work on it for nearly 20 years.

This is where the story of Haggai begins. His little book is only two chapters long, hidden as the third last book in the Old Testament, but it has a powerful message which gets to the heart of faith. The Lord sent Haggai to wake up the people. The temple building project did not stall because the surrounding nations were attacking them, or because there was a shortage of building materials, or even a shortage of money. The temple remained unbuilt because of sin, because of their mixed-up priorities. Haggai pointed out (:4) that they had paneled houses (a luxury at that time), while the Lord's house did not even have walls, let alone paneling. They did not give God first place in their hearts and lives.

It's easy to point a finger at those Old Testament Jews and say, "Shame on you." But they could point at us and say the same thing. We have much more material blessings than they ever dreamed of. Sure, they had paneled houses, but we have much larger houses and garages filled with vehicles and other things. They scrambled for food, but we have refrigerators bulging with food and many people say they need to lose weight because they have been eating too much. They had two, maybe three, sets of clothes. We have closets crammed with clothes, not to mention basements bulging with things we do not use anymore. It's not a sin to enjoy such earthly blessings. But it is very easy for those earthly blessings to take over first place in our hearts and leave the Lord with leftovers.

A common phrase throughout Haggai is (:5,7), "**Give careful thought to your ways.**" Literally, that phrase is, "Put your heart over your ways." In other words, "Let your heart of faith guide you, not just your mind." It's easy to say that we love Jesus, but what does that look like? Someone pointed out that you can tell what is most important to people by looking at their check books or bank statements. What would people conclude is most important to us if they analyzed our spending habits? Jesus said (Matthew 22:37), "**Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.**" Is our relationship with Jesus the most important thing in our lives? Is every thought filtered by God's

Word? Is every word spoken in love? Is every action done to God's glory and the good of others? Impossible. We are not completely committed to Christ. It is impossible for us because we are infected with sin. The sinful nature, with which we are born, shows itself in all sorts of mixed up priorities in our lives. We are sinners doomed to eternal death.

Haggai's directions to those Old Testament Jews do not seem to make sense. He told them to start cutting down trees and finish building the temple. It did not make sense because they were struggling for food and finances. How could they afford a building project? But the Lord explained to them that they were struggling for food and finances because he had withheld those blessings. They worked hard on planting, but never seemed to have enough food. They barely had enough to drink. They had clothes, but could not keep warm. They earned some money, but it was never enough. Through Haggai, the Lord told them (:9), "**You expected much, but see, it turned out to be little. What you brought home, I blew away.**" The Lord permitted famine and poverty to afflict them in order to wake them up. He was teaching them that their best efforts would never satisfy them unless they had the Lord's blessing. If we are not satisfied with the blessings we have, if we complain that we do not have enough, if we stress about how we are going to afford everything, if we grumble that life is not fair because other people have more than we do, then maybe it's because our priorities are a bit mixed up. Maybe the Lord is teaching us that without him, we will always be struggling. Maybe the Lord is teaching us to look to him first and foremost.

The Lord explained that he was ordering the Jews to build the temple (:8), "**so that I may take pleasure in it and be honored.**" God did not ask for a temple built to his honor because he needed it, as if he would not be complete without a new temple. In the same way, the Lord did not tell the Old Testament people to bring him the first of their crops and flocks because he needed them to survive. Burning the first 10% of their crops and the firstborn of their flocks on an altar did not make sense. It seemed like a waste. God did not need a new building or 10% of their crops and the firstborn of their flocks, but his people needed to give such gifts to the Lord. The Lord ordered them to give those gifts because he loved them. He was teaching them that he was more important to them than any earthly blessing. He was teaching them to trust him to provide for them. When they gave him the first 10% of their crops and the firstborn of their flocks, they were saying, "Here you go, Lord! We are giving our firstfruits to you because we love you for saving us and we are trusting that you will still give us what we need to live."

Likewise, the Lord does not need our money. He already owns everything in the world. If he wanted, he could make \$1 million appear on this altar every

day like Manna from heaven. But he tells us to place our offerings on his altar because he knows that we need to give him an offering. He knows that we need to look to him as more important than anything else in this world, including our money. By placing an offering to the Lord on his altar, we are telling him how much he is worth to us, how much we trust in him. We usually tip our waiter or waitress in the restaurant over 10% of the bill. How much of a tip should we give to our Lord? If your favorite football team's quarterback came to your house for supper tonight, would you offer him last night's leftover hot dogs? If that's all you had, you would, but I'm guessing that you have more than leftover hot dogs to eat. We trust our money to financial investors who are only taking guesses on what the stock market will do. How much more can we trust God when we give him our offering?

Giving our hard-earned money to a God we can not see may not seem to make sense. But what really does not make sense is God giving us his perfect son to hang on tree for all the world to see. The innocent Jesus died for us, the guilty ones. That might not seem logical, but it is loving. Jesus did not just give 10% of himself to you. He gave 110% for you and your salvation. What dedication to your salvation did it take for Jesus to leave streets of heavenly gold for the dirt floor of Bethlehem's barn? Jesus, who could have enjoyed all of the world's luxuries, did not even have a house to call his own or a pillow to rest his head on. Jesus did not offer the life of a first-born animal. Instead, he offered his own life as a sacrifice for you. He did not swipe a credit card to help you. He spilt his blood to save you. Your sins are gone and your ticket to heaven is paid for.

I know, and so does the Lord, that you are not wealthy in the eyes of the world. I know, and so does the Lord, that most of you struggle to keep ahead of growing expenses and inflation. I know, and so does the Lord, that you are not so important in the eyes of the world. I know, and so does the Lord, that many people take advantage of you, or have hurt you terribly or harmed you physically, emotionally and financially. I know, and so does the Lord, that you are often hurting. That's why the Lord wants me to remind you that he will never leave you or forsake you, that he will provide daily bread for you, that he will work out all things for your eternal good (which won't make sense until you get to heaven), that you are worth dying for, that you are royalty – God's holy sons and daughters, that you are spiritually rich. All the gold and money in the world can not open heaven's gates half an inch. But because of Jesus, heaven's gates are swung wide open for you. Because of Jesus, you have an inheritance waiting for you in heaven. Indeed, from a merely monetary perspective, it does not make sense to give to God. But from the perspective of the empty cross and empty tomb, and with the vision of heaven before us, giving to God is an expression of love and thanks to him who first loved us. Amen.