

Humility and Action

Recently, as I was getting ready for the day, *Leave It to Beaver*¹ came on the television. *Leave It to Beaver* aired in the late 1950's and early 1960's. It was one of the first sitcoms written from a child's point of view. The action centered on Theodore "The Beaver" Cleaver and his adventures at home, school, and around the neighborhood. His family included his older brother, Wally, and his parents, Ward and June.

The episode I watched, titled "Beaver's Prize" originally aired in the fall of 1959, so a few of you might not remember it. The story begins with Beaver leaving the cap off the ink bottle on his father's desk, causing Ward to spill ink all over his papers. He's been warned before to leave the desk and the things on it alone. His punishment is that he must stay at home all day on Saturday.

After his parents and brother leave the house, Beaver's friend Larry Mondello comes over and talks Beaver into sneaking off to the movies. When the movie ends, a drawing is held for a brand new bicycle. Of course, out of all the children there, it's Beaver's ticket that is drawn. Now he has a dilemma. He can't take the bicycle home without because then it would be evident that he had disobeyed his father's order to stay home all day. So Beaver and Larry decide that Larry will take it home until they decide what to do.

But Larry's explanations to his mother about the origin of the bicycle are too fantastic to be believed. Eventually he tells her the truth and Mrs. Mondello calls Ward to say that it's just not right for Larry to keep the bicycle Beaver won at the movies. Beaver's father decides not to confront him right away. He waits to see what Beaver will do next.

The following Saturday, Beaver goes to the movies, intending to say that he won the bicycle that day, but he comes home without it. When Ward questions him about what's going on, Beaver spills the whole story saying that he just couldn't keep the bike. He left it at a church so it could be given to someone else.

Later, when he talks to his friend, Larry, about it, Beaver says he thinks that winning the bicycle was God's way of making children do everything they're told. Larry doesn't think that's right because kids are told to do so much. This TV episode reminds me of Haggai, who talks about choices and consequences, listening to God and doing what is right.

This is the third Sunday we've read one of the short, prophetic books found in the Old Testament. We began with Amos, who traveled from the southern kingdom of Judah to the northern kingdom of Israel to preach about justice, righteousness, and loving their neighbor. Last week was Habakkuk, who lived after the northern kingdom had been overtaken by Assyria, and was dismayed by state of affairs within Judah as well as the impending threat of the current superpower, Babylon. Today we've come to Haggai.

The people of Israel, technically the people of the southern kingdom of Judah, were conquered by Babylon and carried off to exile in Babylon.² According to several prophets, this

¹ *Leave It to Beaver*, Episode 82 (Season 3, Episode 4), "Beaver's Prize," Original air date 10/24/1959, summary accessed at [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Leave_It_to_Beaver_\(season_3\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Leave_It_to_Beaver_(season_3))

² What follows is adapter from The Bible Project accessed at <https://thebibleproject.com/explore/haggai/>

happened because they broke their covenant with God through idolatry and injustice. The book of Haggai was written 70 years after this exile. It recounts the experience of a small group of Israelites, led by Joshua and Zerubbabel who had returned to rebuild Jerusalem.

The book begins with Haggai questioning the priorities of the Israelites. He sees them rebuilding their houses, while ignoring the temple that lies in ruins. “Are your houses more important than your allegiance to God?” he asks.

The people say it’s not time to rebuild the Temple because they aren’t ready. They’ve been struggling with learning how to thrive again, so they’ve put off rebuilding the Temple.

Haggai reminds the exiled rebuilders of Jerusalem to give God their primary allegiance and not rebel against the covenant like their ancestors. For him, the temple’s reconstruction was the key to restoring the community’s well-being.”

What might Haggai say to us? What part of God’s work are we ignoring? What is more important than allegiance to God? The purpose of our day of visioning a few weeks ago was to work on answering those questions. It’s important to take care of ourselves and fulfill our obligations to home, family, and work, but we must be careful to examine our priorities and not ignore God’s voice. Our allegiance to God should inform the decisions we make in all areas of our lives.

In the next section of the book, Haggai addresses the people’s shattered expectations. The people felt discouraged because their temple looked unimpressive. Those who remembered or had been told about the magnificence of the temple Solomon built, knew that the temple they were building paled in comparison. Was it worth it to keep going in the midst of this great disappointment? But Haggai reminded them to keep working and hope in God’s promise of a New Jerusalem.

What might Haggai say to us? What visions of the past are we holding on to that prevent us from working in the present? When have we said, “This isn’t as good as I remembered it to be” or “This isn’t as good as I thought it would be” and decided to quit trying? When have we said, “I know this project won’t turn out to be what I’m envisioning” and decided not to even try?

Nostalgia can be a toxic impulse. Haggai would say, “Stop pining for the Glory Days. Take courage, and get the work done now.” Haggai would encourage us to work in hope even in the midst of disappointing circumstances. It’s important for us as individuals and as a congregation to remember it isn’t all up to us. We do the best we can with what we have and trust that our part will contribute to the greater good.

In the third section of the book, Haggai addresses the people’s faithfulness, and states that a lack of faithfulness on the part of the workers will affect the temple itself. Following the example of ritual purity in Leviticus, the current Jerusalem inhabitants must humble themselves and reject injustice and apathy or their building efforts will be impure too. Haggai challenges the exiled generation as Moses challenged the wilderness generation. They could choose their future. Only true repentance and faithfulness bring God’s kingdom and blessing. Obedience leads to success and God’s blessing. Unfaithfulness leads to ruin.

Does Haggai have something to say to us here? Most of the writers of the Old Testament believed in a direct cause and effect between faithfulness and blessing and unfaithfulness and ruin. If something bad happened, it must be because someone sinned. If something good happened, it must be because someone was following God’s rules. Jesus and the New Testament writers were more nuanced than that. Good and bad happen to both the just and unjust. Sometimes bad things happen because someone is following God’s ways.

It's important to make following God's ways a priority in our lives. To admit the mistakes we make and accept the consequences. To ask for and to offer forgiveness. To receive forgiveness from God and each other. And to try again to be faithful and obedient.

Haggai ends with a message of hope. God will fulfill the promise to establish a New Jerusalem, the center of God's international kingdom. God will defeat evil from among the nations.

Haggai's message of hope is important to us too. Without hope, it's practically impossible to move forward. We need to believe that the world is not the way God created it to be. We need to believe that we play a part in God's plan it. And that ultimately God will defeat evil. Will we be faithful?

The writers of The Bible Project present the challenge of Haggai in three sentences. First, our choices matter. And choices bring consequences. Sometimes even seemingly small choices lead to major and long-lasting consequences. For example, choosing to text and drive or drink and drive often makes no difference in a person's trip but can also result in an accident, permanent injury, or even death and legal action. We can't let the possible consequences of every choice paralyze us into inaction, but we can realize that our choices matter and let our faith and our understanding of God's desires for us to inform the choices we make.

Second, the obedience of God's people is part of how God works in the world. It's not all up to us, but we are part of God's mission in this time and in this place. We can't keep putting God off and expect things to go well. Following God's ways must be our first priority, the basis and starting point for all that we do.

Third, this surprising truth should motivate humility and action. Humility reminds us that we are fallible, that we make mistakes and need forgiveness and redemption. But if we wait until we're perfect, or even if we wait until we think we're completely prepared and adequate for the task, we'll be waiting for the rest of our lives. Our convictions about what is right in God's eyes must motivate our actions. At the same time, we must retain the humility to admit that we might not have all the answers nor the right to impose all our beliefs on someone else.

This is a daunting task, one that's impossible to without the help from God, from each other, and from the wider community of faith. I trust that this short story from Haggai will continue to challenge and encourage us.

The story of Haggai invites us to pray. May the presence of the eternal, almighty and trustworthy God always be welcome here among and within us. May we always be open to the movement of the Spirit. May God always guide our thoughts and actions. May what we say and do be acceptable to God, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.