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September 20th: Haggai 2 & Matthew 15:1-28

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Alastair Roberts

The Lord's encouragement to the Zerubbabel and the people. What defiles a person?

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Transcript

Haggai chapter 2. In the seventh month, on the twenty-first day of the month, the word of the Lord came by the hand of Haggai the prophet. Speak now to Zerubbabel, the son of Sheol-Tiel, governor of Judah, and to Joshua, the son of Jehozadak, the high priest, and to all the remnant of the people, and say, Who is left among you who saw this house in its former glory? How do you see it now? Is it not as nothing in your eyes? Yet now be strong, O Zerubbabel, declares the Lord. Be strong, O Joshua, son of Jehozadak, the high priest.

Be strong, all you people of the land, declares the Lord. Work, for I am with you, declares the Lord of hosts, according to the covenant that I made with you when you came out of Egypt. My spirit remains in your midst.

Fear not. For thus says the Lord of hosts, Yet once more, in a little while, I will shake the heavens and the earth and the sea and the dry land, and I will shake all nations, so that the treasures of all nations shall come in. And I will fill this house with glory, says the Lord of hosts.

The silver is mine, and the gold is mine, declares the Lord of hosts. The latter glory of this house shall be greater than the former, says the Lord of hosts. And in this place I will give peace, declares the Lord of hosts.

On the twenty-fourth day of the ninth month, in the second year of Darius, the word of the Lord came by Haggai the prophet. Thus says the Lord of hosts, Ask the priests about the law. If someone carries holy meat in the fold of his garment, and touches with his fold bread or stew or wine or oil or any kind of food, does it become holy? The priests answered and said, No.

Then Haggai said, If someone who is unclean by contact with a dead body touches any of these, does it become unclean? The priests answered and said, It does become unclean. Then Haggai answered and said, So is it with this people and with this nation before me, declares the Lord. And so with every work of their hands, and what they offer there is unclean.

Now then, consider from this day onward, before stone was placed upon stone in the temple of the Lord. How did you fare? When one came to a heap of twenty measures, there were but ten. When one came to the wine vat to draw fifty measures, there were but twenty.

I struck you and all the products of your toil with blight and with mildew and with hail, yet you did not turn to me, declares the Lord. Consider from this day onward, from the twenty-fourth day of the ninth month, since the day that the foundation of the Lord's temple was laid, consider, is the seed yet in the barn? Indeed the vine, the fig tree, the pomegranate and the olive tree have yielded nothing, but from this day on I will bless you. The word of the Lord came a second time to Haggai on the twenty-fourth day of the month.

Speak to Zerubbabel, governor of Judah, saying, I am about to shake the heavens and the earth, and to overthrow the throne of kingdoms. I am about to destroy the strength of the kingdoms of the nations, and overthrow the chariots and their riders. And the horses and their riders shall go down, every one by the sword of his brother.

On that day, declares the Lord of hosts, I will take you, O Zerubbabel my servant, the son of Sheol-Tiel, declares the Lord, and make you like a signet ring, for I have chosen you, declares the Lord of hosts. The Lord had rebuked the people through Haggai for their neglect of the rebuilding work on the temple, declaring that they had been suffering the consequences of their failure, in the futility of their efforts in many other areas of their lives. At the end of the sixth month they had committed themselves once more to the task of rebuilding.

The ministry of Haggai and Zechariah would be important throughout the rebuilding project, and in this chapter we find some of the messages of divine encouragement

given to the people as they worked on the temple. The dating of the first verse, presumably still in the second year of Darius, places the prophecy on the seventh day of the feast of tabernacles or booths, on the twenty-first day of the seventh month. The seventh month was, perhaps unsurprisingly, the primary festal month in Israel's religious calendar.

Throughout Israel's festal calendar the number seven was prominent, as we see in Leviticus chapter 23. The two most prominent feasts, unleavened bread and tabernacles, were both seven days in length, with an extra day tagged on. The feast of weeks or Pentecost, the other pilgrimage feast, was dated as seven sevens after the feast of firstfruits.

There were seven festivals and seven days of rest. The seventh month was especially dense with feasts, having the feast of trumpets, the day of atonement, tabernacles and the day after tabernacles. The festal calendar was a reminder and extension of the principle of the Sabbath, which was the key sign of the covenant that was established at Sinai.

The feast of tabernacles, which ended the festal year of Leviticus, mirrored the feast with which the year began, Passover and unleavened bread. Both unleavened bread and tabernacles related to the very first days of Israel's departure from Egypt, the former to the cutting off of the old food of Egypt in the leaven, and leaving behind the former dwellings for temporary dwellings in the wilderness in the case of the latter. It was during the seventh month and the feast of tabernacles that Solomon's temple had been dedicated.

The feast of tabernacles was also significant for Zerubbabel and Joshua. After the initial return to Jerusalem they had re-established the altar and started the rebuilding of the temple, celebrating a joyful feast of tabernacles. In Ezra chapter 3 verses 1 to 8 we read of their earlier efforts.

When the seventh month came and the children of Israel were in the towns, the people gathered as one man to Jerusalem. Then arose Jeshua the son of Josedach with his fellow priests, and Zerubbabel the son of Sheol-teal with his kinsmen, and they built the altar of the God of Israel, to offer burnt offerings on it, as it is written in the law of Moses the man of God. They set the altar in its place, for fear was on them because of the peoples of the lands, and they offered burnt offerings on it to the Lord, burnt offerings morning and evening.

And they kept the feast of booths, as it is written, and offered the daily burnt offerings by number according to the rule, as each day required, and after that the regular burnt offerings, the offerings at the new moon, and at all the appointed feasts of the Lord, and the offerings of everyone who made a freewill offering to the Lord. From the first day of the seventh month they began to offer burnt offerings to the Lord. For the foundation of

the temple of the Lord was not yet laid, so they gave money to the masons and the carpenters, and food, drink, and oil to the Sidonians and the Tyrians, to bring cedar trees from Lebanon to the sea, to Joppa, according to the grant that they had from Cyrus king of Persia.

Now in the second year after their coming to the house of God at Jerusalem, in the second month, Zerubbabel the son of Sheol-teal and Jeshua the son of Josadach made a beginning, together with the rest of their kinsmen, the priests and the Levites, and all who had come to Jerusalem from the captivity. They appointed the Levites from twenty years old and upward, to supervise the work of the house of the Lord. Hearing this account we might be forgiven for thinking that two different events have been conflated together, so similar are the situations.

However this is perhaps the point. The Lord is returning the people to that earlier point, helping them to pick up the dropped threads of the narrative and to continue the abandoned work. After a decade and a half on, the Lord is encouraging Joshua and Zerubbabel with his word through Haggai.

Joshua and Zerubbabel had perhaps become disheartened, disillusioned, and even cynical after the failure of their earlier endeavours, but now they are reinvigorated and recover something of the joy of that first feast of tabernacles. Haggai is instructed to address the company of the people, who would all have gathered together for the feast, asking them some key questions. In Ezra chapter 3 verses 11-13 we read of the people's response to the laying of the foundation of the temple shortly after the first return.

The Solomonic temple had been destroyed in 586 BC and the rebuilding of the temple began about 50 years later. Many of the older generation among the returned exiles, most over 60 years of age, would have remembered the former temple in some way or other and its glories, and seeing the small foundations of the new temple in relation to the greatness of Solomon's temple, it would have been too much for many of them to bear, and so they wept. One can imagine that witnessing such reactions to their efforts would have been initially rather dispiriting for Zerubbabel, Joshua and the people.

However, as troubles and opposition accumulated and the shouts of joy that had accompanied that weeping at first had been silenced, the older generation's sorrow over unrecoverable former glories would have weighed increasingly heavy upon them too. The Lord speaks directly to these sentiments through Haggai. Even at that later time there would have been some among the people who still remembered Solomon's temple, although many of them would have died since the time of the return.

Looking at the new temple taking shape, they would naturally have felt quite keenly how diminished its structure was from the former edifice, and not merely just in idealising its past majesty. So the Lord addresses these perceptions. The Lord begins to address the unfavourable comparison between the past and the present temple by drawing the

people's attention to the continuity of the covenant bond that was first established at Sinai.

However the current temple might compare with Solomon's, the Lord who dwells in their midst is the same God who brought them out of Egypt. His presence remains with them, irrespective of the size and the splendour or lack thereof of the temple. The building never contained him, and its proportions are not the measure of his presence with them.

His covenant commitment is where they should look for assurance, not to a building in Jerusalem. We should also consider some of the other concerns that the people might have had. After the sin with the golden calf at Sinai, Moses had interceded with the Lord so that he would not remove his presence from his people.

One could imagine some of the people wondering whether the presence of the Lord had departed from Israel after the temple was destroyed and Judah exiled. The prophet Ezekiel had described the departure of the Lord's glory from the temple in Jerusalem prior to its destruction and perhaps some might have believed that the Lord's glory had not and would not return, that they were doomed to continued fruitlessness having been abandoned by the Lord. Haggai's message directly challenges this impression.

The spirit of the Lord remains in their midst, much as the spirit had been in their midst in leading them out of Egypt. Indeed, not only does the Lord continue to dwell in their midst, the new temple, despite its far more modest proportions, would be a site of greater works of God and a fuller manifestation of his glory. The temple is a symbol of the Lord's sovereignty in the midst of his people and in the midst of the nations.

The Lord is enthroned above the cherubim and the Ark of the Covenant represents his footstool. The temple building may be greatly diminished, but the Lord's throne will be elevated. The Lord is about to shake the earth and the sea and the dry land.

This theophanic imagery is about unsettling the existing world order and its structures and powers, presumably in order to establish a new one in its place. While the temple had formerly had its riches stripped from it by the nations, the general shaking of the world that the Lord would bring about would have the effect of bringing the riches of the nations to the temple, something that had already occurred to some degree with the return of temple items and other treasures by Cyrus. Similar statements can be found elsewhere in the prophets, for instance in Zechariah chapter 14 verse 14, As Mignon Jacobs mentions, the entry of the riches of the nations into the house of the Lord might represent plunder taken from defeated enemies, or tribute from vassals, or the return of what was once stolen, or perhaps offerings that they are bringing as worshippers.

However, as she notes, the image of filling the house with glory in verse 7 is broader than any of these one and themes by themselves, even though they might be elements of a larger picture. While Christians might be inclined to jump straight to thinking about

Christ when reading about such prophecies, we ought to consider ways in which this was already being fulfilled prior to the arrival of Christ. Solomon's temple had been a glorious building at the heart of the land of Israel, the site where people gathered from all of its corners.

The restoration temple, while initially much less glorious, would represent the Lord's throne as his rule was extended more fully over many other regions, not least as the diaspora of the Jews prospered in many lands beyond Israel, to the extent that there were many more Jews living outside of the land than there were within it by the time of Jesus. The wealth of the temple is not primarily to be measured in gold or silver or other treasures, all of the gold and silver belongs to the Lord already, but in the Lord's presence within it and his rule from it. The Lord's encouragement of his people here is that, regardless of the limits of their capacity to build him a glorious building, their humble efforts would become the stage on which he would display a much more exceeding glory than ever was achieved in the more glorious building that preceded it.

In particular, the temple would be a site from which the Lord will establish peace. There are similar promises in places like Isaiah chapter 60 verses 17 to 18. Instead of bronze I will bring gold, and instead of iron I will bring silver, instead of wood bronze, instead of stones iron.

I will make your overseers peace and your taskmasters righteousness. Violence shall no more be heard in your land, devastation or destruction within your borders. You shall call your walls salvation and your gates praise.

The Lord addresses the people again through Haggai a couple of months later, a month after Zechariah seems to have begun his ministry, as we see in Zechariah chapter 1 verse 1. The Lord instructs Haggai to ask the priests a question. Haggai is not asking the priests the question because he does not know the answer, but because asking the question serves a didactic purpose. It seems that some of the people might have had a notion of sacralisation through association with the priesthood, yet Haggai's questions serve to puncture that notion.

Holiness is not the same contagious principle that uncleanness is. While the people might think that their works become holy by connection with the priesthood, the Lord teaches that it is rather their moral uncleanness that proves contagious, defiling their sacrifices. Rather than their sacrifices being made acceptable to God through some magical sacralising priest craft, it is their impurity that is threatening to invalidate their offerings.

The result of this was the futility of their efforts in so many areas of their life. Verse 17 alludes back to Amos chapter 4 verse 9. I struck you with blight and mildew, your many gardens and your vineyards, your fig trees and your olive trees the locusts devoured, yet you did not return to me, declares the Lord. Now however, as they have turned to do the

work of the Lord in rebuilding the temple with a full heart, they will be blessed in all that they do.

This prophecy would have been delivered around the time of sowing, and considering the problems that they seem to have had with former harvests, this would be a cause of great encouragement. The final word of the chapter and of the book is another prophecy that was delivered on that same day, this time to Zerubbabel. Zerubbabel was the heir of David and also the governor of Judah.

The Lord declares once again that he is about to shake the nations, as he had done in verses 6 and 7. He is going to overthrow the war machines of great powers, their chariots and riders. However, even as the world order is thrown into some degree of tumult, the Lord will establish Zerubbabel as a symbol of his authority, like a signet ring. He has been chosen by the Lord and he will be made strong.

We might perhaps see this as a reaffirmation of the promises of the Davidic covenant. A question to consider, what are some of the ways in which the prophecies of this chapter could be seen as looking forward to the time of Christ? Matthew chapter 15 verses 1 to 28. Then Pharisees and scribes came to Jesus from Jerusalem and said, Why do your disciples break the tradition of the elders? For they do not wash their hands when they eat.

He answered them, And why do you break the commandment of God for the sake of your tradition? For God commanded, Honor your father and your mother, and whoever reviles father or mother must surely die. But you say, If anyone tells his father or his mother, What you would have gained from me is given to God, he need not honor his father. So for the sake of your tradition, you have made void the word of God.

You hypocrites! Well did Isaiah prophesy of you when he said, This people honors me with their lips, but their heart is far from me. In vain do they worship me, teaching as doctrines the commandments of men. And he called the people to him and said to them, Hear and understand.

It is not what goes into the mouth that defiles a person, but what comes out of the mouth, this defiles a person. Then the disciples came and said to him, Do you know that the Pharisees were offended when they heard this saying? He answered, Every plant that my heavenly father has not planted will be rooted up. Let them alone.

They are blind guides. And if the blind lead the blind, both will fall into a pit. But Peter said to him, Explain the parable to us.

And he said, Are you also still without understanding? Do you not see that whatever goes into the mouth passes into the stomach and is expelled? But what comes out of the mouth proceeds from the heart, and this defiles a person. For out of the mouth come evil

thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false witness, slander. These are what defile a person.

But to eat with unwashed hands does not defile anyone. And Jesus went away from there and withdrew to the district of Tyre and Sidon. And behold, a Canaanite woman from that region came out and was crying, Have mercy on me, O Lord, son of David, my daughter is severely oppressed by a demon.

But he did not answer her a word. And his disciples came and begged him, saying, Send her away, for she is crying out after us. He answered, I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.

But she came and knelt before him, saying, Lord, help me. And he answered, It is not right to take the children's bread and throw it to the dogs. She said, Yes, Lord.

Yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their master's table. Then Jesus answered her, O woman, great is your faith. Be it done for you as you desire.

And her daughter was healed instantly. Matthew 15 verses 1 to 20 is an objection story with three scenes. Jesus engages first with the Pharisees and the scribes in verses 1 to 9, then with the people more generally in verses 10 to 11, and then finally with the disciples in verses 13 to 20.

Jesus accuses the Pharisees and scribes when they ask him about his disciples not washing their hands. He accuses them of undermining the commandment of God through their tradition. There's an ongoing theme in the Gospel of Matthew of law keeping and breaking.

Jesus seeks to fulfill the law. And this is not just a focus upon every nitty gritty detail of the law in just the letter. It's about fulfilling the deep intent of the law.

As we've seen just earlier in his teaching on the Sabbath, Jesus is concerned to fulfill the purpose of rest, not just to obey some commandment that's narrowly focused upon external observance. Jesus contrasts fulfilling with making void. The Pharisees make void the law.

They act in a way that undermines the deep intent of the law. Rather than actually serving to honour parents, they seek to find some way to circumvent God's purpose in the commandment. They are not fulfilling the spirit, they're using the letter and a perverse distortion of the letter to undermine the spirit.

This whole section is bookended with statements about cleansing hands when eating. Jesus is dealing with the objection, but within a far more fundamental challenge to the Pharisees and the scribes and their form of religion. Tradition is to be judged, as Jesus teaches here, by scripture.

And the problem for the Pharisees is primarily their hypocrisy, the way that they are focusing upon external observances that hide the impurity of the heart. And the purity of the heart is absolutely integral for Christ. Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.

The point of this passage is not primarily an argument against food laws, but rather against the Pharisaic use of the tradition. Even the Levitical law highlighted that what came out was the real problem. Things were impure because they emerged from flesh, not because they came in and defiled persons who were already pure.

Once again, Jesus is challenged here concerning the behaviour of his disciples, as he was at the beginning of chapter 12 concerning their Sabbath practice. And Jesus answers a question with a question. This is a rhetorical practice that Jesus employs on a number of different occasions.

It's a way of throwing the challenge back to the people who've thrown it at him. And here Jesus is emphasising that the Pharisees and scribes have no basis upon which to make this claim to him. They have no authority from which to make it, as far from being those who are upholding the law and in position to judge others concerning it.

They are those who are concerned with undermining the law, of avoiding rather than observing its intent. Jesus underlines the importance of the commandment to honour parents with the citation of Exodus chapter 21 verse 17, in addition to the citation of the fifth commandment, that those who dishonour father and mother should be put to death. This is the severest penalty.

And yet they're undermining the spirit of that law entirely, trying to find some escape clause, some way to avoid it. And the use of the Corban vow to defraud one's neighbour, in this case parents, from what is due to them, is something that cuts loose love for God from love to neighbour, which should be its necessary corollary. Jesus quotes Isaiah chapter 29 verse 14.

And maybe we should pay attention to the context of that verse here. Because this people draw near with their mouth and honour me with their lips, while their hearts are far from me, and their fear of me is a commandment taught by men. Therefore, behold, I will again do wonderful things with this people, with wonder upon wonder, and the wisdom of their wise men shall perish, and the discernment of their discerning men shall be hidden.

As usual, when we're reading quotes from the Old Testament and the New, we need to consider what comes around the quote that's used, not just the quote itself. And here I think that wider context can maybe be seen as part of the condemnation of them, that Jesus is going to perform all these wonders, all these signs, and rather than actually responding to them, there will be forms of judgement upon them. Jesus does not directly

answer the Pharisees' question at this point.

He simply levels a counter-accusation. He fundamentally challenges the grounds on which they are making the accusation. They are falsely claiming authority as arbiters of proper adherence to God's law, while violating it themselves.

Jesus teaches again here that what comes out of the mouth is what really matters. The importance of the tongue is that it can manifest the heart. Now this is speech, but he also includes other things, but the tongue is symbolic of the place where things emerge from the heart the most.

We should probably beware of seeing this simply as a light dismissal of the food laws, rather than a disclosure of their true rationale. The point here I don't think is that Jesus wants to just abrogate the old food laws. You have that sense in Mark to some degree, but I think there's more going on.

Rather the concern is to understand what they're really about. What really makes the logic of the food laws work? Is it about avoiding external impurity? Or is it about symbolising something more about the pursuit of internal purity? Jesus is fond of highlighting the radical antitheses that one encounters, for instance, in the prophets, pitting the external practice over against its internal rationale and purpose. So mercy versus sacrifice.

The point of such an opposition is not that sacrifice shouldn't be made, or should be negated or abrogated. The tradition isn't being rejected wholesale. Rather Jesus is showing the proper integrity of heart and act that should exist.

He speaks about these people as those who are not the planting of God, that will be uprooted. You can maybe consider this in light of the parable of the wheat and the tares just a few chapters earlier. He presents implicitly the Pharisees as tares here, and as religious authorities they're supposed to be guides to the blind, but they are actually like blind leading the blind.

Peter speaks for the disciples asking for explanation of Jesus' challenge to the authority of the Pharisees. And Jesus then addresses the original point of the confrontation and the challenge. There's a loose relationship of Jesus' list of defiling things that arise from the heart with the sixth to the tenth commandments, the commandments from murder to covetousness.

And there's an emphasis then upon the internal posture that is ultimately foundational to all true law observance. We've seen in Jesus' teaching in many points that he's about the fulfilment of the law and the serving of its true intent. Not to the doing away with the ritual and external observances, but to the fulfilment of the true intent that will make those ritual external observances have their proper place and purpose.

Jesus ends with a reference back to the challenge that was given first in verse two, which has the effect of tying the whole section together. It also provides some sort of rationale that's more explicit within the book of Mark for Gentile inclusion. Even though they may not be observing these symbolic commandments, they are observing the true reality of the heart.

The incident that follows with the Canaanite woman approaching Jesus to heal her child is one that has caused many problems for people who have felt that the character of Jesus as displayed in this incident is uncaring and unloving. I don't think that's actually the case. I think that a careful reading of this particular incident will help us to see what's truly going on.

There are four requests made to Jesus, first of all by the woman, then by the disciples who have been troubled and pestered by the woman, then by the woman again, and then by the woman again. She's rebuffed the first time with silence. Then there's a statement made to the disciples about the lost sheep of the house of Israel and the fact that Christ is sent only to them.

Then there's the statement about the children's food. And this isn't the first time or the last when Jesus presents obstacles to someone so that they can prove their faith. Note that Jesus doesn't send her away at the disciples' request.

What he does is present an obstacle instead. He declares that he's been sent to the lost sheep of the house of Israel. And that's not something that is just dismissive.

It's not just something that is untrue either. He has been sent to them in particular. And there is a sense in which this obstacle is a real obstacle.

It's not just one that's made up for the sake of things. In chapter 10 verses 5 to 6, Jesus says, go nowhere among the Gentiles and enter no town of the Samaritans but go rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel. This is the particular remit of his calling.

This is who he's focusing upon. And he speaks in the harshest terms it might seem of not giving children's bread to the dogs. Now it's quite possible Jesus is quoting a proverb here and that this particular statement should not be seen as Christ's own words but him repeating some statement that might have been current at the time.

And the woman counters in terms of the proverb itself, not treating the proverb as a final rebuff but using it as leverage to gain Christ's action. Some have suggested that we should see behind this incident and the interaction that precedes it some relation to the Gentile mission that comes later on in the book of Acts. Perhaps that's the case.

The gospel will go to those outside of the house of Israel. Perhaps the most instructive parallel for understanding this incident however is found in Matthew chapter 8 where Jesus is approached by the centurion who wants to have his servant healed. Once again

it's a Gentile requesting for the healing of someone else and Jesus in both cases gives a discouraging response.

When he responds to the centurion he says, shall I come and heal him? The point being do you expect me to come and heal him? And the centurion responds, Lord I am not worthy to have you come under my roof but only say the word and my servant will be healed. Once again there's a discouraging response given and a persistent answer to that response from Christ that demonstrates in both cases great faith. In both of these stories the Gentile then goes on to make a statement that is profoundly illuminating.

For the centurion it's a statement about authority and the power of Christ's word and for the Canaanite woman it's a different sort of statement. It's a statement about the extent of God's gifts and that they can overflow beyond their initial intended recipients. And Jesus in response to the faith of the centurion says that he has not found anyone in Israel with such faith and then later on when he's talking to the Canaanite woman he makes a similar sort of statement.

Oh woman, great is your faith. These people are set forth not just as people that Christ grudgingly lets go through but rather as people that Christ presents obstacles to but whose faith perseveres and persists and receives a reward. Jesus presents these then not just as exceptional cases but as examples that are held forth of faith for everyone.

When we read the story of the Canaanite woman this is a story that provides an example for us to follow. Not just someone who slipped through and managed to get something that wasn't intended for her but rather someone who demonstrates the claim that faith has upon God's good gifts and the way in which a persevering faith can receive from God's hand things that might seem initially to be denied. A question to consider, in the Gospel of Mark the woman is described as a Syrophenician whereas here she's described as a Canaanite.

What connotations and significance might there be in describing her as a Canaanite woman? Why do you think that Matthew uses this particular term?