

The One Thing That Can Ruin Everything.

I saw a post once titled *“Small things that ruin everything.”* The list included seeing a spider in the shower, waving back at someone who wasn’t waving back. Things like that. They really were *small* things. I thought it was trivial to say they ruin everything or even anything. But I thought of the book of **Ecclesiastes 10:1**, which famously says, *As dead flies give perfume a bad smell, so a little folly outweighs wisdom and honor.* You’ve heard the expression *“a fly in the ointment.”* Sometimes there really are small things that ruin everything. I didn’t title this sermon *“the small thing that can ruin everything”* but *“the one thing that can ruin everything”* because it’s not right to call disobedience to God a small thing. However, it is sometimes something that seems small to us and yet can have a destructive power that we do not readily see.

I wonder, what if there is something in your life today that is weakening your family, working mischief in your own heart, holding you back, and you don’t really see it? What if there is something in the church, our life together as Christians, that is holding us back and we aren’t dealing with it? Would you consider that possibility? Let’s come to this passage with an open heart and ask the Lord to teach us. Let’s just come along and allow the prophet to unfold the truth he has been called to share with us in the way he was led to share it long ago. He begins with some strange questions. Beginning in **verse 12**, there are two questions God prompts the prophet to ask of the priests.

1. The first question is in verse 12. *‘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.”* Holy meat was meat that had been dedicated to God. But just because that meat is holy does not mean whatever it touches is somehow made holy or pure.

Illustration: Imagine the holiest artifact imaginable was found, the actual cross on which Christ was crucified for our sins, the crown of thorns. Would you want to run your hand across the wood, and your fingers feel the thorns? I would. And the experience might evoke deep feelings. But touching those things alone would not magically transfer holiness, godliness, and goodness. In the life of Jesus, some people were physically healed by touching him or even the hem of his garment, but no one is made good or holy just by touching him.

2. The second question is in verse 13. *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.”* If you came across a dead body and had to handle it and help bury it, you wouldn't go prepare food without making sure you cleaned up because while holiness and spiritual reality doesn't get passed on by touch, contamination and defilement does.

Illustration: If you were at a picnic and had a cup that you had just filled with pure spring water and a bird flew over and dropped an unwanted deposit of filth in your glass, does the clean water purify the filth or does the filth contaminate the clean water? If you have two people, one healthy and one sick, and they come in contact with each other, does the healthy person make the sick person well, or does the sick person pass on their germs? Wouldn't it be great if hugs from healthy people could heal infections instead of the other way around!

Here is the critical truth that we have to think about because it is easily overlooked ...

I. SIN, LIKE FILTH OR SICKNESS, HAS A POWER TO INFECT AND CONTAMINATE IN A WAY THAT HOLINESS DOESN'T HAVE THE POWER TO PURIFY OR MAKE HEALTHY.

The point that God wants us to *think about this*: If there is an issue of disobedience to God in your life, don't assume coming to church, or giving money, or going on a mission trip or a pilgrimage, or anything else purifies your life and compensates for that disobedience. Look at **verse 14**: *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.

They had been told to build the temple. They had not done that. According to **Ezra 3:1-6** when they first returned to the land, they had rebuilt the altar and reinstated the rhythm of sacrifices offered by the priests. But then, they had disobeyed God's call to rebuild the temple and had focused instead on their own houses. The ruins of the former temple lay like a corpse in the midst of the people contaminating everything else they did. The neglect of their God-given priorities defiled even their outward acts of worship and sacrifice. That one thing they were not addressing or dealing with contaminated everything else. It's helpful to realize the prophet is about to deliver a message of hope. The last words of **verse 19** are *from this day on, I will bless you*. But he doesn't want anyone to miss this truth. There is no substitute or way to compensate for even one significant area of disobedience to God. That one thing they were supposed to do but did not do was ruining everything. The thing they were overlooking needed to be addressed.

II. THIS CONTAMINATING IMPACT OF DISOBEDIENCE TO GOD IS SOMETHING WE NEED TO SERIOUSLY CONSIDER.

*Haggai uses the word "consider" twice in these verses, in **verses 15 and 18**. It literally means to lay something to heart, or we might say, "take it to heart." So consider three things in light of Haggai's message.*

A. First, the teaching often called "the doctrine of total depravity," when rightly understood, makes perfect sense.

When people hear the words "total depravity," it can sound so dramatic and extreme that it seems way too negative an expression. It's actually helpful when you understand what that means historically. It means every part of our humanity is contaminated by sin. The infection runs all through us, impacting every aspect of our lives. This doesn't mean everyone is as bad as they could be. After Mike Tyson bit off part of Evander Holyfield's ear and spit it out during a boxing match, he went to the Nevada State officials to reapply for a boxing license. In arguing for himself, he said, *"I'm not Mother Theresa, but I'm not Charles Manson either."* They denied his request and withheld his license.

The Bible doesn't say we are all as intensely evil as we can be. But it does say that sin is in us. It defiles us, and it affects our whole being. Again, if I take a cup of pure spring water, but this time I just put a few drops of deadly poison in it, it is maybe not as poisonous as it possibly could be, it is not as if it is only 100% pure concentrated poison, but the whole glass is poisoned now. This is why the prophet Isaiah in **Isaiah 64:6** says, *We have all become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous deeds are like a polluted garment. Or like filthy rags. Our inward sin nature contaminates all our outwardly good actions.*

B. Second, this contaminating nature of sin demonstrates the absolute need for salvation by grace alone through faith alone.

When the Bible talks about saving grace, it is talking about a favor or kindness God freely gives you. Grace is not only something that you don't deserve, like receiving an "A" when you should have gotten a "D" or getting paid for a full day's work when you only worked 4 hours. Grace is being given an incongruous gift that is the opposite of what you deserve. It's like being given a million dollars when you deserve life in prison. Grace is like being crowned as royalty when you deserve to be condemned as a criminal.

1. Grace declares, otherwise defiled people righteous in Christ. In **Philippians 3**, the apostle Paul lists many things he could claim as a very accomplished and moral man, humanly speaking, then he sums it all up by saying this, **verses 7-9** *But whatever gain I had, I counted as loss for the sake of Christ. ⁸ Indeed, I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus, my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ ⁹ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God that depends on faith.* The gospel tells us that Christ died for our sins and rose again as our Lord. Because of that, when you trust in Jesus, God is able to do something that otherwise would have been contrary to his own nature. He is able to declare us righteous in his eyes because we

are, to use this language, "in Christ." We are found "in him." His righteousness is credited to us.

2. Grace also brings an inner cleansing and new birth. Titus 3:5-6 says, *he saved us, not because of works done by us in righteousness. But according to his own mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewal of the Holy Spirit, ⁶ whom he poured out on us richly through Jesus Christ our Savior.* Not only does God credit Christ's righteousness to us, but he regenerates and renews us. Apart from God's grace not only is everything we do contaminated by double-mindedness, half measures, mixed and selfish motives, and sin in general but we cannot even take the first step toward God. There is a legend about one of the Roman Catholic Saints, Saint-Denis, that after he was beheaded for his faithful witness to Jesus. He picked up his head and walked several miles carrying it. Some legends say the head kept on preaching repentance! Charles Spurgeon said he could maybe believe it was true if the man could have taken just that *first* step. Of course, his point was dead people can't take any steps. Apart from grace, we are spiritually dead. Grace alone brings renewal.

Ephesians 2 describes the gift of grace bringing a new birth and a new self and calls us to a new life because of it. **Verses 22-24** tell you *to put off your old self, which belongs to your former manner of life and is corrupt through deceitful desires, ²³ and to be renewed in the spirit of your minds, ²⁴ and to put on the new self, created after the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness.* True Christians, not just churchgoers, or interested folks or cultural Christians, are people who have been regenerated, and renewed by the Holy Spirit. They still battle the old self and its downward, defiling pull, but there is a new self created by grace. Unless you have that grace everything you do, even your religious acts, your charity and your attempts to be very good, are defiled and contaminated. You need a Savior in whom you can be declared righteous and through whom you can be born again.

C. Third, the contaminating nature of sin motivates us to take sin seriously and never minimize its harmful impact.

Because of the saving work of Christ *for us* God removes the requirement of *our* obedience as a prerequisite for salvation. At the same time, because of the regenerating and renewing work of the Holy Spirit within us, God calls us to pursue the obedience of new life all the more. Look again at **Ephesians 2:22-24** *put off your old self, which belongs to your former manner of life and is corrupt through deceitful desires, (that echoes Haggai!) ²³ and to be renewed in the spirit of your minds, ²⁴ and to put on the new self, created after the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness. If Jesus is truly your Savior, you have forgiveness and also a new self – a regenerate, born-again self! You don't compensate for your sins by doing good or religious things. That's not how it works. You have to give up any idea of deserving or earning or compensating and admit you need grace. But grace calls you not to live more loosely but more deeply. Obedience to God not only glorifies God, but it is the path of deeper, fuller blessing. There are always consequences to our spiritual disobedience.*

Let me point out another Scripture that aligns with all of this and with all the themes in Haggai, the temple, holiness, all of it. **2 Corinthians 6:16-7:1** *What agreement has the temple of God with idols? For we are the temple of the living God; as God said,*
"I will make my dwelling among them and walk among them, and I will be their God, and they shall be my people.
¹⁷ Therefore go out from their midst, and be separate from them, says the Lord, and touch no unclean thing;
then I will welcome you,
¹⁸, and I will be a father to you,
and you shall be sons and daughters to me, says the Lord Almighty."

7:1 *Since we have these promises, beloved, let us cleanse ourselves from every defilement of body and spirit, bringing holiness to completion in the fear of God.* So we aren't building an external temple now. We *are* the temple, the church, so let's be a holy temple. You can not be right with God and neglect the building up of the church or the holiness of the church. Look at **chapter 7, verse 1.** *Since we have these promises, beloved, let us cleanse ourselves from every defilement of body and spirit, bringing holiness to completion in the fear of God.* We have the promises of grace. God is sovereign, he is

sufficient, and he is our Savior. "Beloved," that is what we are! How should we live? Assuming on God's kindness? No! *Let us cleanse ourselves from every defilement of body and spirit, bringing holiness to completion in the fear of God.* Any study of spiritual revival will show that spiritual awakening begins when Christians, under the influence of the Holy Spirit, see their sins with a new clarity and, as a result, come back to Christ with a new humility and repentance.

Illustration: I have a friend named Steve Reece, and he had a line he used to say whenever he thought someone was making excuses for not obeying God. He would say: *"What is this bleating of the sheep that I hear?"* I think some people might have thought he made it up, but it actually comes from a story in the Bible. It's found in **1 Samuel 15**. In this story, God tells the king, king Saul, to destroy the Amalekites completely, including all the animals. There is a backstory for this, but basically, this is a judgment from God, and Saul is directly told to carry it out by the prophet of God. The command was clear and unmistakable. Destroy everything. Scripture says, *"But Saul and the people spared the best of the sheep and oxen, and all that was good, but everything despised and worthless that they utterly destroyed."* God sent the old prophet Samuel to meet Saul, and Saul greeted him, saying, *"I have carried out the command of the Lord."* Samuel just looked at him and asked one question. **1 Samuel 15:4** *"What is this bleating of the sheep on my ears?"* Saul said, *"I've saved the best lambs to sacrifice to God.* Samuel said: *Stop! God gave you a mission. Why didn't you obey him?* Saul said: *"I did obey! I just let the soldiers take some of the sheep and cattle as plunder, and I saved a few to sacrifice to God."* in **1 Samuel 15:22** Samuel said, *"Has the LORD as great delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices, as in obeying the voice of the LORD? Behold, to obey is better than sacrifice, and to listen than the fat of rams.* The Scripture tells us that as the prophet turned to go, Saul reached out to stop him and grabbed the edge of his robe, and it tore. So Samuel said, *"The Lord has torn the kingdom of Israel from you today and given it to another who is better than you."* No sacrifice, activity or service, reasoning, or anything else can compensate for disobedience or replace simple obedience to God.

Application: When a person who says they believe in God has an issue in life in which they are persistently minimizing their actions and attitudes and, as a result disobeying God, when that is the case, one of two things is true. 1.) Either your faith is not authentic, and you don't really know God you haven't experienced what Scripture calls new birth, spiritual regeneration, or 2.) you *are* a child of God, and you are going to experience the disciplinary correction of God as the people did in Haggai's day- the consequences developed in **verses 15-19**, which we will look at next week. It's enough for this message to consider the contaminating power of sin in our lives so that we don't fool ourselves.

Conclusion

Let's be absolutely clear about our need for saving grace! Let's all be sure that we have received the salvation God offers us in Christ, that we have been born again, that we have placed our faith and trust in Jesus dying and rising again for us, that he is our Lord and Savior.

Are you assured of that? If so, let's be *deeply* thankful for God's grace, for the gift of the Holy Spirit who imparts conviction and then new life, and *for* Jesus, our only Savior, and Lord. Then let's choose to deal with what we might be tempted to think of as small sins, understandable neglected duties in our lives without minimizing them or glossing over them or thinking that it doesn't matter all that much. Our commitment to building the house of the LORD up in strength and holiness is not the only thing but it is one thing that cannot be neglected.

What if there is something in your life today that is weakening your family, working mischief in your own heart, holding you back, and you don't really see it? What if there is something in the church, our life together as Christians, or in your neglect of the church and it's importance to God and for you that is holding us back or undermining our efforts, and we aren't dealing with it? It is the one thing that can ruin everything. So let's deal with it by God's grace for the glory of God, for love's sake, because it is wisdom, and so we will not forfeit God's richest blessings.

Amen.

Psalm 103:8-14

- ⁸ The LORD is merciful and gracious,
slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love.
- ⁹ He will not always chide,
nor will he keep his anger forever.
- ¹⁰ He does not deal with us according to our sins,
nor repay us according to our iniquities.
- ¹¹ For as high as the heavens are above the earth,
so great is his steadfast love toward those who fear him;
- ¹² as far as the east is from the west,
so far does he remove our transgressions from us.
- ¹³ As a father shows compassion to his children,
so the LORD shows compassion to those who fear him.
- ¹⁴ For he knows our frame;
he remembers that we are dust.

A Prayer Expressing Faith in Christ

O Lord, my God, forgive and cleanse me deeply and fully. I confess my sins to you knowing your holy purity and majesty is immeasurable. I deserve judgment but you have offered grace. The sacrificial death of Jesus has opened the way for me to be truly and fully forgiven for my sins and renewed in my spirit. Jesus Christ alone can grant me peace and give me hope I gratefully own him as my Savior and Lord. Amen

A Prayer for Spiritual Renewal

Lord, you are gracious and holy. Search me and show me any neglected minimized aspects of my life that dishonor you or diminish my experience of your presence and enjoyment of your blessings. Enable to see my sins clearly without being crushed by the vision but rather moved to gratitude for your grace and devotion to purposes. Sanctify me fully by your Holy Spirit. In Jesus' name, Amen

