

Respectable Sins: Apathy

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[0 : 00] Good morning. We all have a system for ranking sin. There are ones which we think are major sins, ones which we think we're not quite so concerned about because they don't seem so important to us as others.

Over the centuries, Christians have tended to categorise certain sins as being the really bad ones, the ones that are sexual sins, the getting drunk, the swearing, smoking, the ones that happen on Friday night at Lan Kui Fong.

And then there are the other ones, the ones like a little bit of gossip or a little bit of criticalness, those ones which may be not quite so bad.

And so we live our life segregating our lives into the major things and the minor ones. But the commandment that Jesus says is the greatest one is, love the Lord your God with all your heart, all your soul, all your mind and with all your strength.

And it's easy for us as Christians to think that we are good, respectable Christians who have avoided all the major bad sins in our lives, when actually there's this whole other area of sins which we are not concerned about, which we have said, that's okay, and yet maybe we are not loving God with everything that we're called to love him with.

[1 : 38] So today we're going to look at one of those more subtle sins, which is called apathy. Now when Tobin asked me to talk on apathy, I said, I'm afraid I just can't be bothered.

But in fact, this is a topic which really resonates deep with my heart. And so I am speaking as much to me as to anyone else here this morning.

Three years ago, in China, a two-year-old girl was knocked down by a truck. She was left bleeding and dying by the roadside.

Eighteen people walked past her and not one of them stopped. The rest of the world was shocked. China started morally questioning itself. How could we be so callous? How could we be so indifferent to the suffering of someone so small and young?

[2 : 42] One of my ex-students in Hong Kong was going down an escalator in Central, in rush hour. Got halfway down and then tripped and fell down the rest of the escalator, collapsed on the floor, hurt their leg and was lying on the floor.

For 15 minutes during rush hour, not one single person stopped to see if they were okay. Apathy. Nobody really cared. And someone said that out of 20 of the world's major civilizations, 19 of them have collapsed from within side because no one really cared enough to sustain them.

Now the word apathy comes from a Greek word which means without strong passion, indifference or simply who cares.

And we're going to look today specifically at the issue of spiritual apathy today in the book of Haggai. Now Haggai is one of those books in the Old Testament that we rarely read.

[3 : 55] In fact, when my wife told me, asked me, what are you going to be preaching on? And I said Haggai. She thought I said Hangai, which is the Cantonese word for shopping. Now you may prefer that I'm going to be talking about shopping this morning.

But in fact, we're going to be looking at this book of Haggai. And to do so, we need to just do a little bit of background before we really get into the book. Now, in the Old Testament, Israel had kings. Kings who were supposed to lead God's people to follow God. But God's people ended up rebelling and rebelling against God until the point where God sent in the Babylonian army to destroy Jerusalem and to take some of the most influential people off into exile, into Babylon, which is now in modern day Iraq.

And at the same time as they destroyed the city, they also destroyed the temple. Now, in Hong Kong, the shopping mall is at the center of Hong Kong society.

But in Israel's day, the temple was really what defined the people as the people of God. Israel was a nation because God had made them a nation. He was what defined them as a people.

[5 : 15] And the temple represented God being at the center of his community. And without the temple, the people struggled to know who they really were.

Now, for 70 years, this group of exiles in Babylon waited until one day the government changed and they were allowed to go back into their land if they chose to.

And a group of committed Jews went back to Israel in order to rebuild the temple, to restore their nation.

And they come back enthusiastically. And they start rebuilding the temple and they start building the foundations and the altar. And then they get opposition and they're forced to stop.

And 14 years go by and nothing happens to the temple. And then Haggai comes to speak to them.

So this morning we're going to look at three questions.

[6 : 23] What is your passion? Where has your passion got you? And how does God become your greatest passion? Okay, what's your passion? Where's your passion got you?

And how does God become your greatest passion? So what's your passion? It's 29th of August, 520 BC in Jerusalem, right in the middle of the busiest time of year, the harvest.

And we know the date because Haggai tells us the date according to the year of a pagan king. Now, elsewhere in the Old Testament, dates are given by the reign of Israelite kings.

So what you know from this is that Israel is still under foreign domination and the people are still insecure. They're not in their own place, under their own rule.

But what have the people of Jerusalem been doing for the last 14 years? Have they been lazily sitting on their backside doing nothing? No, not at all. These guys have been busy.

[7 : 30] And remember, it's an agricultural society. There's no park and shop or international. You have to grow your own food. If you don't, you're going to die.

And they've been busy trying to make a living, trying to support their families, trying to find accommodation, trying to make a secure, comfortable life for themselves and their kids and their spouses.

And Haggai comes along to them and says, God's got something to say to you. These people say the time has not yet come to rebuild the house of the Lord.

Now, you know, when God starts calling Israel these people and not my people, you know there's a problem in the relationship. The people have not been building the temple.

Every day they've been walking past it, getting on with their own life, looking at it there, lying run down, dilapidated in ruins. And nobody's done anything to change it.

[8 : 33] Now, if you'd have said to one of the Jews at that time, is God important to you? They'd have said, absolutely. If you'd have said, do you want the temple to be rebuilt? They'd have said, absolutely.

That's the reason we came back to this land, was to rebuild the temple. But why weren't they? Well, they got distracted, overwhelmed by life, stressed out by other things.

They were feeling insecure, and they'd taken their focus off of God. They'd forgotten who they were, and they'd forgotten what they were here for.

They'd become apathetic, indifferent. And they kept saying, later, not now, but later. And I don't think if you'd have accused them of being apathetic, they would have said, yes.

No, they would have given you a thousand good reasons why they couldn't have been building the temple. I can imagine them. It's the end of the financial year. It's the busiest time, Haggai.

[9 : 36] Just when I've got some breathing space, then I'll have time to think about the temple. Just not now. Economically, things aren't so great. These are tough times.

How are we going to find the resources to start a building project? Listen, it's all very well to start talking about building. We've got to be practical. We've got mouths to feed. Or maybe, I'd love to help, but the kids are just taking their tomato planting class, and I've got to be there to bring the manure.

Just not now, later. Or maybe, they thought it was somebody else's responsibility. You know, that temple's been looking really bad lately.

It's about time the elders in our community did something about it. You know, that other temple that we had before, that was so much better. But look at this one. I can't believe it.

It's so bad. But Haggai comes to all of those reasons and excuses, and he uses incredible sarcasm. I think he must have been British.

[10:41] He says, verse 4, Is it a time for you yourselves to dwell in your panelled houses, while this house lies in ruins? What he's saying is, yeah, it's interesting, isn't it?

It's not a time for building God's house, but it seems a perfectly great time for you to build your own. In fact, not just building it, but adding extra panelling features on the side.

Renovating the kitchen, adding a jacuzzi in the bathroom, making sure that gold-plated toilet seat, which has fallen off so many times, well, it's going to be fixed again, and you know, I've got to wait for the builder.

I'd love to be helping building the temple, but you know, not now, later. I'm busy. And apathy comes with a whole list of seemingly legitimate excuses.

Not now, later. And I don't think God had anything against panelled houses. Panelled houses weren't on God's top ten list of major sins in the Bible.

[11:44] The issue wasn't either, okay, you've got to stop all your farming, and starve yourself, and prove how much you love God. No, the question that Haggai is bringing is, where's your passion?

What is it that you plan for, that you spend your time thinking about? What is it that you talk about, what you pray for, what is it that you delight in? Because it seems like you've been so busy, that your heart has lost its passion for me.

It's lost its passion for what pleases me. And that can be like so many of us, busy with the day-to-day things of our lives.

Good things, but we forget who we are, and that we're here to glorify God with our lives. And speaking from experience, I'm often the most indifferent to God when I am busiest.

I get distracted by good things. I can become indifferent to my wife's needs, indifferent to other people in the church. I can become indifferent to sharing the gospel with other people, because I've got so many other things going on in my head, even doing lots of Christian activity, that it's not now, but later.

[13:03] Listen, I was even preparing this sermon, and a friend sends me a message asking them to pray for something specific at this time. And I read the message, and you know, you kind of say these things like, oh, praying for you.

And then I just carried on preparing. Completely forgot about praying for the person. I got distracted, and I just carried on preparing until I got to this part of the sermon, and suddenly I remembered.

And now, I thought about it. What happened there? Now, I didn't kill anybody. I didn't abuse her. I didn't send any nasty messages to her.

But did I love her? No. I didn't. Because it didn't seem as important. That important. To what I had to do. I was indifferent.

And over time, that is deadly. In our lives, and in the life of the church. The number of people I've known over the years who are even leaders in the church, active, doing so many things, and then you ask them, how it's going with reading the Bible.

[14:15] How's your relationship with God at the moment? And they say, well, like, yeah, I'm struggling with that. But, you know, I've got so many other things to do, I just don't have the time.

And maybe God is sitting there in central, and we just walk past, and he calls out to you, come and spend time with me. And we say, not now, but later.

Or maybe he's calling to you to text that lady from your CG who you haven't seen in two weeks, and we say, not now, later, I'm busy. Or he says, listen, I want you to go and offer to pray for the cleaner in your office whose husband is leaving her, and you don't know because you haven't taken the time to speak to her.

And we say, yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah, I'll do that, it's great, but it's not time now. I'm in a hurry, I've got to get to the tutoring classes for the kids. Jesus, I'll do it another time.

I'm a little busy right now. Don't you know the new iPhone's coming out? And you know what that means? It means, actually, I don't really care enough about it.

[15:21] It's not that important to me. And we need to strip away some of our excuses and come to the fact that sometimes we are so distracted because other things have become more important to us than God.

We say things like, I know I should be reading my Bible, but I really struggle with self-discipline. And Haggai would say to us, isn't it amazing how disciplined you can be with your investments, with your revision for exams, for your yoga classes, and yet you can't be disciplined for my word?

Strip away those excuses and we need to be honest with ourselves and with God and to say, the reason I don't get into God's word daily is because I'm more passionate about my Facebook profile than about you.

That's scary, but it's honest. And that's the first step to God breaking our apathy. So that's the first thing. Where is your passion?

Next, where has your passion got you? You may be saying, oh, thanks Haggai, you really know how to make me feel good about myself. But here's the next step God takes his people on to move them out of apathy.

[16:46] He says this, consider your ways. In fact, he says it twice in verse 5 and in verse 7 so you know that this is important. Literally, he says, set your heart on your ways.

Bring everything into the open and see your life as it really is. Think about things deep and hard. Be real. Examine yourself and consider where has your ceaseless activity got you?

What is your real passion? Switch off your technology for just five minutes and actually begin to take a real assessment of your life. You know, people often complain about the education system in Hong Kong not producing people who can think critically.

But I think the ultimate lack of critical thinking is our inability to examine our own lives in true perspective. Haggai verse 5 or 6 says this, you've sown much and harvested little.

You eat but you never have enough. You drink but you never have your fill. You clothe yourselves but no one is warm. And he who earns wages does so to put them into a bag with holes.

[18:03] Does that not sound like Hong Kong to you? Look at all your activity where you're focusing on. Where is it actually getting you? You're working yourself to the bone but are you truly satisfied?

You're trying to make yourself secure but are you secure? I mean deep down are you lastingly satisfied? Or are you just saying okay, nearly there but just a little bit more?

We say just a little bit more and then they raise the school fees and we say a little bit more and then the rents are going up and a little bit more and the education is becoming more competitive and a little bit more. The jobs are harder to come by and we've got to work harder.

We've got to be busier. And it's not just the work we're doing but underneath all that activity we're all trying to prove ourselves because we think once we prove that I'm valuable that I'm worth something then I'll be satisfied.

I want to prove I'm a good mother prove that I'm a good student valuable employee. I want to prove I'm smart enough cool enough good looking enough Christian enough prove that I'm worth something.

[19:09] As that great Christian thinker Madonna once said in an interview in Vogue magazine after having achieved some success she said now I've got the verdict that I'm somebody but the next day I realise that unless I keep going I'm not.

My ego cannot be satisfied my sense of self my desire for self worth my need to be somebody it is not fulfilled.

I keep thinking I've won it from what people have said about me and what the magazines and newspapers have written but the next day I have to go back and look somewhere else.

Why? Because my ego is insatiable it's a black hole it doesn't matter how much I throw into it the cupboard is bare I've become somebody but I still need to become somebody I've become somebody but I still need to become somebody and she concludes my struggle has never ended and I guess it never will.

Madonna at least has some more self-awareness than many of us have. I wonder how many of us we're told by society that ceaseless activity is essential where we're pressured by the competitiveness of society where we're pressured by the comparisons with everybody else and we keep going trying to prove ourselves but I wonder if we looked at our life in perspective and on our tombstone was written in a summary of our life what they would write.

[20:55] I wondered if they would write she worked hard or would they write she loved God and the difference is not in the amount of activity you do the difference between working with God as your great passion and working with yourself as your great passion isn't in how much or how little you do.

You see a Christian knows that no matter how many tutorial classes their kids attend or how many exams they pass or how many promotions they get that's not really the ultimate thing.

Achieving success is not ultimately where my worth is found that that's not what is ultimately going to satisfy me. My identity and satisfaction whether I succeed or fail are not at stake because Jesus is the one who died a death to satisfy that thirst which otherwise is unquenchable.

He declares us of infinite value he says we are right in his sight he gives us freedom in a world that is enslaved to this insatiable desire that will never be satisfied except for Christ.

So where's your passion got you? What is your passion? And thirdly how does God become your greatest passion?

[22 : 29] To move out of that apathy we need to look at being honest with what our passions really are. We've got to think about how valuable are those passions where are they getting us?

And then in verse 8 Haggai says go up to the hills and bring wood and build the house that I may take pleasure in it that I may be glorified.

And then in verse 12 it says then the governor the high priest and all the remnant of the people obeyed the voice of the Lord their God and the people feared the Lord and then God spoke and he said I am with you.

How does God revive the hearts of the people of Israel? Because he then stirs the hearts of the people.

He does it in three ways. First God speaks to them. He speaks through Haggai and he speaks through the circumstances that he brings. That's what verse 9 and 11 are all about.

[23 : 34] He says I brought you drought I brought you famine I brought you hard times because I wanted to wake you up to what is really important in your life. American pastor Tim Keller tells of how he made a deal with his wife that he would go around be around less at home for about three years while he planted a church in New York.

And three years go by and he's still working like crazy not listening to his wife's plea for him to engage in the family. And then several months later he arrives at home to hear the sound of smashing crockery on the balcony shaking and trembling he goes over to the balcony to find his neglected wife there smashing some of the best plates and saucers on the floor of the balcony. That got his attention and he told his wife come on we need to talk and he went and sat down and he said I'll listen to whatever you want to say to me. At that point he began to change and reprioritize his life.

And sometimes God does that smashing of the sources in our lives by making us lose our jobs by moving home the things which stress us out the things which cause us fear and panic he smashes those sources down to say wake up see what is really important where your passion for me has gone and come back to me to find satisfaction in me.

because as God speaks then the people respond by obeying God and in the Old Testament this is so rare God's people hardly ever respond but the Israelites here do act and they act because deep down they do love God and they do want to follow his ways but you see sometimes we say oh I've got to wait for this kind of feeling I've got to wait for the passion to stir in me before I can obey God before I can read my Bible I need to really want it but actually now here Haggai is saying no obey me and then I will stir your heart and if you look at the way Jesus when Jesus comes there are so many spiritually apathetic people who respond to him and when they hear a sermon on forgiveness they say things like that was a very inspiring message

[26 : 03] I wish my husband was here to hear that but then they continue to harbour that resentment towards their boss their spouse and the real people in their lives because we say even when you hear this sermon when you go and read your Bible we say oh that's a great message but I won't have to deal with it I don't have to respond now I'll do it later now's not the time and we have a thousand excuses why we just walk past that little girl like all those other Chinese people did but people who listen to God they know that he's telling them something and they respond when he says cut something out of your diary slow down spend time with me prioritize going to CG they say I know that's what I need to do and they act and whenever you come into a circumstance where God is smashing the plates whenever you come to hear

God's word you need to say and I need to say God where do you want me to obey you this week something specific not in just general terms because if you just make it general it's always going to be not now but later but no this week God where how do you want me to obey you and respond because when we do that when God speaks when we respond in obedience God God God God

God God God God God God revive your heart your community group this church with a greater passion for him then we need his word we need to respond step by step with obedience and God says he will be with us but we need to remember this the apostle Paul said that the gospel is Jesus Christ came into the world to save sinners of whom I am the worst there have been few Christians who were as passionate for God as Paul and Paul knew that spiritual apathy is not a one off problem as you walk in obedience to him you will continually struggle in that fight between loving God above all other things and placing other things before him apathy is a continuous fight that we need to do but here's the beautiful thing when God exposes the areas of your life where you need to love him more and where you are loving something else he does it so you can understand the gospel better because though we may be indifferent to God in many areas of our lives walking past like those 18 Chinese people did he is never indifferent to us Jesus passion was shown in dying on a cross for apathetic unloving people like you and me so that our hearts will be changed to have a consuming passion for him to be obeying him to not just walk past to not say not now but later but to say

God now here I am what do you want me to do change my heart I want to be passionate for you let's pray to be what do you have to be an■■■ to be one of four his but he has to be as he said he has one some he and he has clged away and he but I wanted