

Apathy

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Belinda, a woman married for a number of years, confided that she was leaving her marriage to Howard because she felt no commitment. Her husband was a nice man and denied her little, but at the same time, he was apathetic and indifferent. He seemed to avoid feeling passionate about anything, even his wife, and thus a chasm of emptiness and silence grew between them over the years. Belinda, hopeless for quite sometime that things would change, had finally given up completely. Apathy and indifference, not caring one way or the other, lacking passion, an unwillingness to invest in relationships, self-absorption, and disaffection are the guarantors of a lonely, uninspiring even hopeless existence.

Extreme apathy and hopelessness lead many to suicide. One every 16.7 minutes, one old person every one hour forty minutes, one young person every two hours eleven minutes, and if those under fifteen are included, one every two hours and four minutes. Suicide is the eleventh ranking cause of death in the U.S. – third for the young. Most people consider suicide when they feel they have no options left, and intense emotions of despair overwhelm them. They take action because they see no way out of their misery. Why am I talking about suicide? Because my subject is apathy, which might correctly be termed SPIRITUAL SUICIDE.

I will be so bold as to declare we are part of an *apathetic brotherhood*. Witness the fact that growth of all Churches of Christ is not keeping pace with the rest of Christianity or with the world's population. According to the February 2009 Christian Chronicle, "21st Century Christian identifies 12,629 a cappella Churches of Christ with 1,578,281 adherents nationwide. Those figures represent 526 fewer churches and 78,436 fewer people in the pews than just six years ago."¹ While there may be several reasons for the decline, David Duncan, minister of the Memorial church in Houston, made this comment, "Assuming the numbers are right, our lack of evangelism and the departure of many of our children are finally being revealed," Duncan said. "This should be a wakeup call ... to share our faith more actively."² We all need reminding of the devastation caused by spiritual apathy. We need a spiritual awakening!

We require reminding of God's word in Haggai's time; it applies to us today. Haggai delivered four messages in his short book (third from the end of the Old Testament) stating twenty-six times that his messages were from God. His first message was dated the second year of King Darius, the Mede, or 520 BC. A remnant of Jews had return from Babylonian captivity in 536 BC, after King Cyrus of Persia had conquered the Babylonians. Ezra 3:8 tells us they immediately laid the foundation for rebuilding Solomon's temple, but then ceased the work (Ezra 4:24). They had been back sixteen years, but the rebuilding lay languishing in apathy.

Haggai's first message was to the leaders, Zerrubbabel, the governor, and Joshua, the high priest, who should have led the people to complete the work. God's message through Haggai is to leaders first, but then he wrote to all of the people, and now the message applies to all of us.

Procrastination was the problem of the people. They said, "The time has not come, the time that the Lord's house should be built." (Haggai 1:2) It is interesting to note that you don't have to be a chronic procrastinator to procrastinate. Apparently these people were not lazy, but they put off God's work. Upon returning they had immediately laid the foundation, but then stopped. Oh, how this describes some of our projects for the Lord's cause. We can get excited in a meeting while talking about what we can do, but then action fails.

Selfishness was the reason for their procrastination. And, perhaps it is ours as well. God said to them: "Is it time for you yourselves to dwell in your paneled houses, and this temple to lie in ruins?" (Haggai 1:4) Selfishness! Or, maybe it was more a problem of misplaced priorities than procrastination. They found time to build their own ceiled/paneled houses, but not the Lord's. They worked for much, but it came to naught. Procrastination was not because of laziness, rather because of faulty faith. Haggai 1:9 says, "*You looked for much, but indeed it came to little; and when you brought it home, I blew it away.*" They had left God out. Where are we putting our energies? In what is your faith? How firm is it?

Faulty faith leading to misplaced hope and improperly arranged priorities. Faith is the substance of things hoped for... (Hebrews 11:1) In what is your hope? Knowing that will tell you in what you have placed faith. If your priorities are misplaced, doesn't that mean your faith is faulty?

God was displeased with them. He said "this people" rather than "My people." (1:2) The people in Haggai's time were defiled. (2:10-14) "So is this people and this nation in My sight." We read in Jeremiah 6:20 the same thing was true in his time: "What do I care about incense from Sheba or sweet calamus from distant lands. Your burnt offerings are not acceptable, your sacrifices do not please me." There is no inherent efficacy in the ordinances of religion. Some may think that it does them some spiritual good and enhances their relationship with God to come to and participate in worship, even though they are unwilling to repent of some known sin. The fact of the matter is the spiritual pollution of their heart which has not been cleansed is transmitted to the very worship in which they are engaging and causes God to reject their worship.

In Psalm 51 David said "*you do not delight in sacrifice or I would bring it; you do not take pleasure in burnt offerings.*" Religious ritualism is worthless it does not and cannot make us right with God. David goes on to say, "*the sacrifices of God are a broken spirit, a broken and a contrite heart, O God, you will not despise.*" A heart that is broken and contrite on account of its sin - that is what God is looking for. Such a heart will cry out to God as David did "*cleanse me...wash me and I shall be whiter than the snow...create in me a pure heart O God...blot out my transgression, wash away all my iniquity and cleanse me from my sin.*" Oh, that such might be our heart's prayer today.

The solution is really quite simple: Put God first in your life (Colossians 3:1-5, Matthew 6:21).

God said through Haggai, "Consider your ways!" (Haggai 1:5) "*From this day on, from this twenty-fourth day of the ninth month, give careful thought to the day when the foundation of the Lord's temple was laid. Give careful thought.*" (2:18) That is, look back on that whole period from the day the foundation of the temple was built over sixteen years ago to the present day. Think about all that happened and learn lessons from it.

God told them to realize their misfortune was not just bad luck; it was because of disobedience. God chastened them as He does us (Hebrews 12:5-11).

So, how can we overcome apathy today? The answer, though challenging to live, is really rather simple. It is a spiritual awakening rule we can live by: O B E Y

1. OPEN yourself daily to God. *“And you will seek Me and find Me, when you search for Me with all your heart.”* (Jeremiah 29:13)
2. BACK yourself with God – trust in Him and His Word.
3. EVANGELIZE – Everyday do something to spread the message of salvation.
4. YIELD your will to His – When your will and God’s do not match, give way!

This is a simple plan that every one of us can follow. Why not make a commitment to it today?

¹ Ross, Bobby, Jr., *Church in America Marked by Decline* (Feb, 2009), Christian Chronicle, The Christian Chronicle, Inc., Oklahoma City, OK.

² Ibid.