

Giving to God Doesn't Make a Bit of Sense!

"It just doesn't make sense...."

The Bible affords many opportunities to think that thought: It just doesn't make sense.

The God of the Bible often refuses to fit nicely into neat boxes created by human logic. He is bigger and better than us and so there are some things that we are going to have to take God's word for – they require faith. For many of us who have been around Christianity for a while, we tend to do this fairly naturally with certain things.

God says he is Triune - three persons, each complete God, but only one God. It just doesn't make sense.

Jesus says he God and man – not God that looks like man or man that acts like God, but at the same time completely God and man. It just doesn't make sense.

The incongruity of our God (where he says things that don't make sense, that don't fit into nice, neat logical boxes, where we have to trust him even though our logic thinks it's wrong) doesn't end with how he describes himself. There are plenty of other things God says that just don't make sense.

Over the next three weeks we are going to take a good hard look at one of those things - this idea of first-fruits giving. When it comes to our money, God wants us to put him first and me second. With every dollar you make God would have you first give some of that back to him before you stop and wonder if you will have enough left over for yourself and everything you want. I'll be real honest, for hearts like ours this is one of those things about God that does not make sense.

Just ask the Old Testament Israelites of Haggai's day.

Gotta set the scene a little bit here:

In 587 BC the Israelites were dragged away into captivity by the local super power, Babylon. Their homes were torched. Their lives went up in smoke. The Lord's temple was a smoldering heap of rubble.

70 years later, a power change meant the Israelites were allowed to return home (as God had promised). But the damage had been done. The Holy City of Jerusalem looked like a ghost town, walls and gates broken and crumbling, the temple courts where generations of Israelites had sung praises to God were a mute heap of rubble overgrown with weeds.

The Israelites of the Prophet Haggai's day decided to roll up their sleeves and put some sense back into life. Jerusalem's walls were rebuilt. A new altar was installed on Temple Mount. Soon, they would dig a little deeper and lay the foundations for a brand-new temple.

But they soon realized that a God-first way of rebuilding their lives didn't make as much sense as a me-first rebuild....

They soon lost interest in rebuilding the temple and began to pay attention to building projects that made a lot more sense: Their own houses. Why should they prioritize precious time and money building God a house when their own houses needed work?

Because, if the Mrs. is happy, then everyone is happy! We'll take care of ourselves right now, so that we'll be in a better position to take care of God's house later. That makes sense. That is a logical way to go about taking care of the possessions and people God had placed in their lives. Yeah, it was technically a me-first, God-second attitude, but that makes sense when you don't even have a roof over your head.

But the "later" never came. After laying the foundations for the temple but then turning to their own homes, almost 15 years went by without any real progress on the temple itself.

That's where the Prophet Haggai comes in. He was sent by God to preach a sermon that, humanly speaking, doesn't seem to make much sense:

"Is it a time for you yourselves to be living in your paneled houses, while this house (the temple) remains a ruin?" Now this is what the LORD Almighty says: **"Give careful thought to your ways.** You have planted much, but have harvested little. You eat, but never have enough. You drink, but never have your fill. You put on clothes, but are not warm. You earn wages, only to put them in a purse with holes in it." This is what the LORD Almighty says: **"Give careful thought to your ways.** Go up into the mountains and bring down timber and build my house, so that I may take pleasure in it and be honored," says the LORD. "You expected much, but see, it turned out to be little. What you brought home, I blew away. Why?" declares the LORD Almighty. "Because of my house, which remains a ruin, while each of you is busy with your own house. Therefore, because of you the heavens have withheld their dew and the earth its crops. I called for a drought on the fields and the mountains, on the grain, the new wine, the oil and whatever the ground produces, on men and cattle, and on the labor of your hands."

The Israelites were living in a way that, humanly speaking, made perfect sense. Me first. God second. *Giving to God first without first taking care of myself and my family doesn't make sense.*

Does that line of thought sound familiar?

Common sense tells me that if I work hard, live within my means, invest my money wisely – that is how I get more money. It's common sense.

But if I give my money away, I have less money – also common sense.

If I prioritize my budget and my life to give money away to God *first* (before I take care of myself), then that means every other area of my life will have less, doesn't it? If I give my time, talents, and treasures away, that means I have less for myself and what I love, right? It's common sense.

But did you catch what God said through Haggai? **"Give careful thought to your ways."**

We call me-first living the good life. God calls it greed. We call it being sensible. God calls it sin. We think it is the road to more. God tells us it is the road to less.

Did you catch that?

“You plant much, and harvest little... eat and drink, but aren’t satisfied... clothed, but not warm... have money in purses with holes in the bottom...”

The Israelites thought a me-first life led to more (more food, more satisfaction, more comfort, more money), God said, “Not so fast. You may think that makes sense, but not in my world.” God promised that no matter how much they got, he could see to it that they were never satisfied.

If the logic behind their choice to build their own homes first makes sense to us (and it does), that means Haggai’s message also applies to us.

Allow me to get very real for you good folks of St. Paul’s.

You guys built a beautiful church for God – so, you got that going for you. This isn’t just a foundation we are worshiping on.

But since I got here 3.5 years ago you have not once fully supported the budget of St. Paul’s. You got really close last year (I think it was \$600 short of the budget, and I thank God for that), but let’s also be very clear about just what budget I’m talking about. It is a budget that is the bare minimum to maintain ministry here at St. Paul’s. It pays the teachers of your children, on average 7% less than the synod says they should be paid. It puts us in a position where every summer we are borrowing money to pay salaries until the first tuition payments come in. It is a budget that has no room for growth in fulfilling the mission statement of St. Paul’s. It is a budget that simply maintains the status quo, and we aren’t even fully supporting that.

Now, I know I’m painting with broad strokes. I know there is a lot more that goes into ministry here at St. Paul’s than just the budget. I also know that last year you guys showed tremendous growth in your support of your congregation, but I also know the human tendency to make excuses – to look at something like Haggai and say, “Well we built a beautiful church for God, so we are at least better off than them.”

For all of us, no matter how far we’ve come, Haggai’s message still speaks to us: **Give careful thought to your ways.** All of us struggle to make sense of a God who says put me first and you will lack nothing.

But here’s the thing: God-first living and giving may not make much human sense, but the Bible is clear that it actually works. It requires trust, but it works.

The people in Haggai’s day responded. They build God’s temple. They gave generously. They put God first. And they found out that what doesn’t make sense to humans actually works in God’s world. They put God first and they lacked nothing. They learned about a God who gives himself completely for us – and if you want to talk about things that don’t make sense, God giving himself completely for us doesn’t make a lick of sense.

That the Holy One of Israel would give himself completely for the sinful ones of America makes no sense whatsoever. Jesus didn’t give 10% of himself for you. He was in it 100% for you and your salvation – everything Jesus gave up, everything he had to go through... his willingness to put us first doesn’t make sense.

The One who willingly made himself nothing for us upon the cross is our everything. The one who said: **“I thirst”** is the one to give you access to endless streams of living water in your Baptism! The one who cries out **“Why have you forsaken me”** is precisely the one who will never leave you or forsake you! The one who prays **“Give us this day our daily bread”** is the same one who opens his hands and satisfies your desires.

So give careful thought to your ways: Is our relationship with the Savior our life’s top priority? Or is it just another one of life’s hobbies? How can you tell?

One very telling way is to go home this week and spend a prayerful 1/2 hour with your last bank statement. Look at the numbers and see if you can spot any priorities they might point out to you.

Where is the Lord and his work on our list of personal priorities? Is he a FIRSTfruit priority? Or is he a leftovers hobby? Will we settle for nice paneled houses? Or will we trust God and put him first?

My prayer this morning is Haggai’s message opens your heart in a major way. You worship the ultimate Giver. God gave you his first—Jesus, the Firstborn over all creation. God gave you his best—his Son, in whom he is well-pleased. In Jesus, God graciously gives you all things. Your God is faithful. Trust him. Bank on his promises. And then get busy putting God first! Amen.