

“Self-Examination”

Haggai 1:1-11

December 30, 2018

The Rev. Dr. Robert S. Rayburn

I thought, on this last Lord’s Day of the year I would consider with you some teaching of the Word of God apropos the New Year. I believe it was Charles Lamb who once said that no one views January 1st with indifference. Our lives are marked by the passage of years and, as it happens, we mark the beginning of another year on the 1st of January. It is a time to think about our lives, what they have become and what they might and should become, and, very often, at this time of year we do think about such things. I chose for my text the opening paragraph of the prophecy of Haggai, one of the post-exilic prophets, because it is one of the principal texts in the Bible on the subject of self-examination, or, as the prophet puts it, on the subject of “considering our ways” or “paying attention to our ways.” By “way” in the Bible, as you know, is meant our way of life, our behavior.

Text Comment

- v.1 The second year of Darius was 520 B.C. Remember now the historical situation. Cyrus had been killed in battle on the Persian Empire’s eastern frontier in 530 B.C. It was Cyrus, remember, who had permitted the Jews to return to the Promised Land after their years of exile in Babylon, actually fewer years than the 70 years that had been prophesied by Jeremiah. Babylon had fallen to Persia and the new government had a different and more tolerant and generous policy toward captive peoples. The Persians even funded the rebuilding of sanctuaries that had been destroyed by the Babylonians. As we read in Ezra, some Jews had returned to Judea immediately and the foundation of the temple was soon rebuilt. But there was opposition from the peoples surrounding Judea and work on the temple ground to a halt, as we also read in Ezra.

Darius was a Persian general who had assumed the position of emperor when the rightful emperor, Cambyses, died. Having restored peace in the empire after a period of instability, the program of restoring the national sanctuaries that had been destroyed by the Babylonians was recommenced. Haggai describes events that occurred between 520 and 515 B.C. It was during these years that the temple was rebuilt not only with the permission of Darius but with the promise of funding from the imperial treasury, the work performed under the leadership of the governor, Zerubbabel, the high priest Joshua, and the prophets Haggai and Zechariah. But the prophecy begins, as will be made clear in the following verses, before that rebuilding had begun. As Haggai begins the temple remained nothing but a foundation. Eighteen years had passed since the Jews first returned to Judea from Babylon and their situation was hardly encouraging. They were eking out an existence, hardly thriving. And certainly, there didn’t seem to be any indication that Yahweh, the God of Moses, David, and Elijah was astir on their behalf.

The sixth month would be August/September, the time for the harvest of the trees and the vines; three months after the harvest of the grain. So, the people would be very aware of how the harvest went.

Zerubbabel (which is a Babylonian name) was the civil governor, so an appointee of the Persian authorities. But he was a Jew, a descendant of David, and a godly man. Joshua had also returned from Babylon.

- v.2 No one was saying that the temple shouldn't be rebuilt. They simply thought that now was not the time. Everyone was busy with his own life and there wasn't the money to fund such a major project. Imperial monies that had been hoped for were instead being diverted to fund a major military campaign against Egypt, a campaign that would put an end to the greatness of Egypt for all the years then and now. What is more, the people were discouraged. Since their return from exile, nothing had gone as well as they had hoped.
- v.4 The people apparently had found time, money, and energy to build their own homes. It is time to make a similar investment in the house of God.
- v.11 The Lord comes to the point. The reason their harvests had been poor, the reason they had not prospered once back in the Holy Land, was because they had not been faithful to the covenant God had made with them. The unfinished temple was the proof that their priorities were misplaced. The Lord of hosts was certainly capable of giving them his blessing, but he had not done so. Why? They had put their own interests before the Lord's. They had sought first not the kingdom of God but their own food, clothing, and shelter. If you remember, this failure of harvest, this futility of effort was precisely the curse the Lord had promised would befall his people when they broke his covenant. You can read that in Leviticus 26 and Deuteronomy 28. So far, the Word of God.

Twice in these verses, first in v. 5 and then in v. 7 the Lord calls upon his people to "consider your ways." This consideration of one's ways, this paying attention to one's life, ordinarily is called "self-examination." The need for it is obvious, so obvious that the duty of self-examination is taught by non-Christians as well. Here is an English translation of a verse written by Pythagoras in Greek in the 6th century B.C.

Let not sleep come upon thy languid eyes,
 Before each daily action thou hast scanned.
 What done; what left undone; what done amiss.
 From first to last examine all; and then
 Blame what is wrong, in what is right rejoice.
 [Cited in Whyte, *With Mercy and with Judgement*, 76]

And here is Seneca, the first century Roman moralist, a contemporary of the Apostle Paul.

"I shall keep watching myself continually, and – a most useful habit – shall review each day. For this is what makes us wicked: that no one of us looks back over his own life. Our thoughts are devoted only to what we are about to do. And yet our plans for the future always depend on the past." (Letter 83.1)

But, more important to us, the Bible lays this duty upon us in many places. Paul famously told the Corinthians in 2 Cor. 13:5, “Examine yourselves, to see whether you are in the faith. Test yourselves.” And Paul spoke similarly to the Galatians.

“For if anyone thinks he is something, when he is nothing, he deceives himself. But let each one test his own work...” [6:3-5]

John urges us to “Watch yourselves, so that you may not lose what we have worked for but may win a full reward.” [2 John 8]

The reason why we must consider our ways, pay attention to our lives is because it is usually not obvious to us what is actually happening in our hearts or what we are actually doing with our lives. We tend to think the best of ourselves, of our motives and actions, and often deceive ourselves about ourselves, perhaps most profoundly in respect to our sins of omission, all the things we might have done and never did. So, we read, for example, in Proverbs 20:5:

“The purpose in a man’s heart is like deep water, but a man of understanding will draw it out.”

What is actually in your heart? That will take some effort to learn. And similarly in Rev. 3:17:

“For you say, ‘I am rich, I have prospered, and I need nothing, not realizing that you are wretched, pitiable, poor, blind, and naked.’”

You can understand what the Lord is saying to the folks in Laodicea. “A little bit of self-examination would have taught you the truth about yourselves.

One of the greatest of all books ever written on sin in a believer’s life is John Owen’s masterpiece, *Indwelling Sin in Believers*, published in 1668. The full title of the book is: *The Nature, Power, Deceit, and Prevalency of the Remainders of Indwelling Sin in Believers*. It is that word “deceit,” that explains the need for self-examination, the need for believers to consider their ways. It is so easy to ignore the unhappy truth about oneself, to fail to notice one’s hypocrisy, one’s failures of omission as well as commission, one’s lack of progress in the Christian life. It is so easy to become satisfied with your Christian life that, upon honest inspection, would appear far less faithful than you take it to be. Indeed, we find it easy to grow content with a Christian life almost any other serious Christian inspecting it from outside would judge to be less faithful than you take it to be. After all, these Jews were praying and gathering for worship on the Sabbath day. They believed, and, in certain ways, they were faithfully practicing their faith. But it was not obvious to them what they *were not doing*. They were self-deceived and self-satisfied, and only self-examination would reveal that to them.

The masters of the Christian life used to talk a great deal about the need for self-examination, the whys of it and the methods to be used. In his *Holy War*, John Bunyan has a character whose name was Mr. Prywell. Bunyan describes Mr. Prywell as a lover of Mansoul who loved to look into the very bottom of matters. He was, Bunyan says, jealous, that is vigilant in seeking after the truth. He would ask the hard questions and keep asking until he had the answers. He wanted to

know the truth about Mansoul, the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth. What about the secret's sins of his heart; what about his prayer life – what does he really pray for and how often – and what about his besetting sin – has he grown tired of it and indifferent toward it or is he still doing battle against it – what about his love of money or praise or comfort or food and drink? Who am I really, what kind of life am I actually living? How do others see me; more than that how does God sees me? To ask and answer this sort of question was Mr. Prywell's concern. And this was Bunyan's brilliant way to teach his readers the importance and the nature of self-examination.

But self-examination has fallen on hard times in our day and that for a variety of reasons. There has been a class of Christian writers who have argued that self-examination is both unnecessary and actually harmful. Their argument is that concentration on yourself interferes with the concentration you should be directing to Christ. Self-examination, in their view, tends to distract a believer, even can tend to foster works-righteousness, the idea that your salvation and your peace with God depend on what you do and how you live, not on what Christ has done for you. In most higher life versions of Christian spirituality – from Hannah Whithall Smith, to Keswick, even to the recent emphases of the Sonship movement – the practice of self-examination is not only not encouraged, it is positively frowned upon.

I actually think that there is something to be said for that viewpoint, for that concern about self-examination. There are certainly people, perhaps all of us to a degree, who focus too much on themselves, who think too much about themselves, and are too preoccupied with how their lives are going. After all, who of us would disagree with C.S. Lewis' observation in *The Screwtape Letters*, that the very characteristic of hell is a “ruthless, sleepless, unsmiling concentration on the self?” In *Surprised by Joy*, C.S. Lewis, for example, reports that after his conversion he found himself liberated from “that fussy attentiveness which I had so long paid to the progress of my own opinions and the states of my own mind.” In a healthy way he began to forget himself. He didn't deny the need for self-examination but thought of it more as a discipline to be employed at specific times for specific purposes. [Downing, *The Most Reluctant Convert*, 160]

Still, the problem with any denial of the obligation of self-examination is two-fold. First and obviously the Bible teaches us quite explicitly to examine the lives we live, our thoughts, words, and deeds. Second, our salvation and our peace with God *do depend* in an important way on what we do and how we live. Who can read the Bible and think otherwise? And so, it is that John Macleod, the Scottish theologian, remarked, “Our sturdy fathers would not be put off the scent by the suggestion that in examining themselves they were pulling up the roots of their faith to see if it was growing.” [*Some Favorite Books*, 9] Self-examination is more a necessity than it is a danger. What is more, it can be done in a way that is entirely positive and useful and not harmful.

Perhaps the greater reason for a declining interest in the practice of self-examination, especially among serious Christians, is that an over-emphasis on it in some circles, including some of our own Reformed circles, seemed to make of the practice one that only super-Christians could manage. The way self-examination was described actually discouraged believers from the practice. John Fletcher of Madeley, the 18th century Great Awakening theologian, preacher, and pastor – one of the first important Wesleyan theologians – was an Arminian in theology but his character and ministry were such that he was universally admired even by the Calvinistic side of

the Great Awakening. He composed a list of “self-examination questions for spiritual people” to put to themselves every night at the end of the day. Here it is:

1. Did I awake spiritual, and was I watchful in keeping my mind from wandering this morning when I was rising?
2. Have I this day got nearer to God in times of prayer, or have I given way to a lazy, idle spirit?
3. Has my faith been weakened by unwatchfulness, or quickened by diligence this day?
4. Have I this day walked by faith and eyed God in all things?
5. Have I denied myself in all unkind words and thoughts? Have I delighted in seeing others preferred before me?
6. Have I made the most of my precious time, as far as I had light, strength, and opportunity?
7. Have I kept the issues of my heart in the means of grace, so as to profit by them?
8. What have I done this day for the souls and bodies of God’s dear saints?
9. Have I laid out anything to please myself, when I might have saved the money for the cause of God?
10. Have I governed well my tongue this day, remembering that in a multitude of words there wanteth not sin?
11. In how many instances have I denied myself?
12. Do my life and conversation (that is my behavior) adorn the gospel of Jesus Christ?

Just to read that list makes me tired. My first thought is that if I conducted that exercise every day I would go to bed every night discouraged and defeated, because, of course, and in the nature of the case, the answer to most of those questions would always be either “No!” or “Not nearly enough.” I can see asking myself *one of these questions* at the end of each day, perhaps covering them all every 12th day. But I admit that putting those questions to oneself every night, at the end of every day, would be wearying and discouraging work. One must live the Christian life as well as examine how one is living it! And, so far as I can see, that sort of constant, elaborate, time-consuming, daily, and inevitably discouraging self-examination is nowhere taught to be what God requires of his children. There can be, at least in this case, too much of a good thing!

But a third reason why self-examination has fallen on hard times in our day is the same simple reason it has never been carefully and faithfully done by the majority of believers: it is hard work, often unhappy work, and we resist the idea that salvation – however the gift of God’s grace – is and must be hard work for us; something that requires a great deal of us.

The fact is, and this fact lies on the face of our text this evening, we do need – if not every moment of every day at least from time to time – *we do need to consider our ways*. These folk were religious people like you and me. To some degree they were committed to doing the right thing. They intended for the temple to be built and, so far as we can tell and certainly so far as they would have said, when they felt the time had come, they would make the sacrifices necessary to restore the temple to its rightful place as the center of Jewish worship. These were people who prayed in their homes, who observed God’s law. At least Haggai does not accuse them of having forsaken the law of God. Indeed, what deserves to be noticed in the book is, as you would read in chapter 1, verses 12 and following, upon hearing the word of God through

Haggai, Zerubbabel, and Joshua, the people repented of their delay and got right to work. We even read in v. 12 that the people “feared the Lord.” All it took for them to turn and do what was right, was to be shown how they had allowed themselves to slip into a condition of spiritual lethargy, indolence, and indifference.

Well, we’ve all been there, haven’t we? I certainly have. We’ve all grown spiritually sleepy, inactive, dull, cold, and thoughtless. Every Christian has, and every master of the Christian life warns us against this inevitable slippage. Indeed, can any of us deny that he or she has wasted far too much of our lives in such states, in which we are, as one put it, laboriously doing not much of anything. Certainly not much to the real benefit to our souls or the souls around us. We have stood still rather than advanced in obedience, in service, in devotion, in prayer, in the Word of God, in the love of others, and everything else that ought to be of immense interest and importance to a Christian. We can see ourselves far too easily in these folk whom Haggai ordered to “consider their ways.” In how many ways and for how long a time have we, in one way or another, have we busied ourselves with our own houses and ignored the condition of the Lord’s house, whether the church herself or his house in our hearts? After all, paying proper attention to the latter will always mean more attention to the former.

I must admit that one of the great regrets of my life is to be found here. Thankfully I can say that I have had times in my life when I was eagerly seeking the Lord and greater and higher things through faith in him. I was taking stock of how and for how long I prayed, of my reading of the Word of God; I was hard at work to kill some of my sins or to bring more and more to expression features of my life in Christ. But there have been other times when I was practicing my faith more out of habit than out of eager interest in spiritual advancement, more by rote than by a heartfelt seeking after Christ, keeping in step with the Holy Spirit, and walking with God. Don’t misunderstand me. I’m not saying that I wasn’t living the Christian life; only that I wasn’t living it with the enthusiasm and determination and intention that it deserves and requires. I was standing still when I should have been moving forward. I was waiting for heaven to come to me rather than, as the Puritan Thomas Watson put it, taking heaven by storm.

I sometimes wonder what I might have become, how far I might have traveled in the life of faith if I had always pressed forward as I sometimes have pressed forward. Since the Bible describes this as a feature of the spiritual history of God’s people and since virtually every Christian I have ever read or have ever talked to about such things admits it to be the case in his or her life, I have no doubt that Haggai’s exhortation “Consider your ways” is addressed to and of vital importance to every Christian. Malcolm Muggeridge entitled his autobiography, *Chronicles of Wasted Time*. More than once I have thought that a perfectly apt title for the story of my life. And I feel free to admit that to you in part because I suspect every serious Christian in this sanctuary thinks about his or her life as I do about mine. We have wasted too much time. We have sat still for months, even years, when we might have been all the while growing in the grace and the knowledge of the Lord. *Why does the Lord send as much suffering into our lives as he does? Is it not at least in part because there isn’t enough self-examination being done by us, and he will shove us forward if we will not take steps ourselves.* Why did we find it so easy to become habitual and less-intentional about our life of faith? Because we did not consider our ways.

So, what does it mean to consider our ways? How is that to be done? Well, what Haggai teaches us is that self-examination ought to be and will be in a thoughtful and committed Christian life primarily occasional and circumstantial. In this case, the people were not doing well. They were not enjoying the blessings of God's favor. They could not see in their circumstances the evidence that the Lord was rewarding their faithfulness as he promises to do. It is precisely *that fact* that Haggai goes on to emphasize in the rest of this little book. They ought to be enjoying the Lord's provision and they are not. That is why they should consider their ways: there is something amiss, something that should prompt them to wonder why their circumstances are what they are.

Now, to be sure, even the most godly and the most intentional believers can suffer want and deprivation. We know that. Poverty and hardship are hardly always proof that God is judging his people for their want of faith and faithful service. Job is one of but many examples furnished in the Bible of faithful saints suffering the sort of difficulties these folk were suffering in Haggai's day *but not because of unfaithfulness on their part*. But in this case, it was poor harvests that should have prompted these folk at least to consider whether they were neglecting their duties before God and were missing his blessing for that reason. In other cases, it may be other things. In the church in Corinth it was a variety of misbehavior that had come to characterize their life together, disunity, a lack of repentance, and a failure of sincerity in seeking the Lord. That is what prompted Paul to urge them to examine themselves. I suppose we could be prompted to consider our ways by any number of things that in one way or another raise the question whether the Lord is pleased or unhappy with us: a dull heart toward God, a lack of prayer or interest in reading the Word, sins that seem to be renewing their strength, trouble in our relationships, indifference toward others, and on and on.

And how is self-examination done once we realize that it needs to be done? Well, here Haggai brings the Word of God to bear on the circumstances of the Jews. Not simply the Word of God as it was delivered to them by Haggai and Zechariah, but as well the Word of God that long before had promised poor harvests if God's people were not faithful to his covenant with them. To say that poor harvests are not *always* the result of unfaithfulness to God is certainly not to say that they are *never* such a result. Holy Scripture addresses us in regard to virtually every conceivable aspect of our lives. There will always be scripture to ponder, to pray over, to compare to our ways of thought and life. With the Bible in our hands, we will always find a clear standard by which to consider our ways, to evaluate our conduct, to examine our hearts if only we will demand of ourselves an honest reckoning. And, of course, the more we employ the Word of God in the examination of ourselves, the better we will become at maintaining a realistic, an honest, a searching assessment of ourselves, the less we will indulge the wishful thinking that now too often masquerades as self-knowledge. The fact is there are some Christians whose knowledge of themselves is vastly inferior to the knowledge that other believers have of them. That is, there are Christians of whom it must be said that others know them better than they know themselves. That should not be true of us, brothers and sisters! We should know ourselves better than anyone save God himself. And if we do and have Christian blood in our veins, we will continue to grow in the grace and knowledge of God.

Take your example from Augustine. More than any man before him and more than most who came after him, Augustine left us a record of his self-examination. If you are keeping a journal, you too will have written *Confessions*, as Augustine did, evaluating your life in keeping with the

profile of true godliness given us in the Word of God. If you do not keep a journal, at least do not let the year begin without considering your ways, at least in some significant dimensions: what needs to change, what aims and goals you ought to set for yourself in the New Year as a Christian and for Christ's sake. And then test yourself from time to time. The New Year is upon us, brothers and sisters. Time's a-wasting. There is much yet to do and to become and to enjoy. Consider your ways!