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## THE KIND OF PRIEST YOU NEED

Hebrews 5:1-10

By

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Hebrews Lesson 15

## The Kind of Priest You Need Hebrews 5:1-10

We begin here in Hebrews the major section of the book that runs through chapter 10, on Jesus as our high priest. As I pointed out in the introductory message, Hebrews is the only book in the New Testament to teach that Jesus is our high priest.

I would guess that if you were honest, many of you would admit to thinking, "Couldn't we study something more practical? I'm struggling in my marriage! I'm trying to raise kids in this evil world! I'm wrestling with personal problems! And now we're going to plunge into six chapters dealing with Jesus as our high priest? Can't you find something more relevant to preach on?"

On this matter, Donald Hagner (*Encountering the Book of Hebrews* [Baker Academic], p. 82) offers a helpful word:

Until one gains an adequate sense of the overwhelming majesty of the thrice-holy God and simultaneously a true sense of one's sinfulness and unworthiness (as Isaiah did [Isa. 6:1-5]), one is not in a position to understand or appreciate the importance of priests and their work. Our failure on these two points probably is what makes the idea of priesthood unfamiliar and without apparent significance or meaning. One of the reasons that the Old Testament is indispensable to understanding the New Testament is exactly here, since on the one hand, it provides us with a sense of the sovereignty, majesty, and power of God, and on the other hand, it confronts us with the reality of human failures and needs. In the light of these two points, the importance of sacrifices and priests readily emerges.

This is one of the most important spiritual truths that you can learn: *Growth in the Christian life requires gaining a clearer understanding of who God is and who you are, which drives you in desperation to the cross of Jesus Christ.* This is why Paul gloried in the cross (Gal. 6:14): he saw God as the one who dwells in unapproachable light, he saw himself

as the chief of sinners, and he saw the cross as the place where he found mercy (1 Tim. 6:16; 1:14-16).

This is the point that John Calvin makes so eloquently in the opening chapters of *The Institutes of the Christian Religion* (ed. by John McNeill [Westminster Press]). His opening sentence is: "Nearly all the wisdom we possess, that is to say, true and sound wisdom, consists of two parts: the knowledge of God and of ourselves." McNeill comments (1:36, footnote 3), "These decisive words set the limits of Calvin's theology and condition every subsequent statement." Calvin begins by showing that none of us will seek God until we first become displeased with ourselves as sinners. He also argues (1:37) that...

... [M]an never achieves a clear knowledge of himself unless he has first looked upon God's face, and then descends from contemplating him to scrutinize himself. For we always seem to ourselves righteous and upright and wise and holy—this pride in innate in all of us—unless by clear proofs we stand convinced of our own unrighteousness, foulness, folly, and impurity. Moreover, we are not thus convinced if we look merely to ourselves and not also to the Lord, who is the sole standard by which this judgment must be measured.

Thus if you want to know the significance of this central theme of the Book of Hebrews, you must ask God for a clearer understanding of His absolute holiness and majesty, and for a deeper insight into your own sinfulness and uncleanness apart from Christ. This will lead you into a deeper appreciation of what Jesus did for you on the cross as the high priest who entered the holy place, not with the blood of bulls and goats, but with His own blood (9:11-14). And, you will find that a deeper appreciation of God's holiness, your own sinfulness, and the sufficiency of Christ's sacrifice is one of the most practical doctrines in the Bible, because it humbles your pride. Pride is at the root of every relational conflict and just about any sin that you can name.

With that as an introduction, I am again going to follow the Puritan method of first explaining the doctrine and then giving its "use," or application. The theme of our text is:

Jesus Christ perfectly fulfills the qualifications  
for the kind of high priest that we all need.

DOCTRINE:

1. The qualifications for human high priests were to mediate between men and God, to sympathize with his fellow sinners, and to be called by God to the office (5:1-4).

“For” (5:1) points back to 4:14-15 to show that our high priest fulfills the requirements of the priesthood. In 5:1-4, he lists three qualifications for Aaronic priests: their work (5:1); their identification with the people (5:2-3); and, their appointment (5:4). In 5:5-10, he shows in reverse order how Jesus fulfills and exceeds these, as a high priest forever according to the order of Melchizedek.

- A. The work of the high priest: As a mediator, he offers gifts and sacrifices for sins on behalf of men in things pertaining to God (5:1).

If men are not sinners, separated from a holy God, then there is no need for priests. They were appointed (5:4 will show that God appointed them) “on behalf of men in things pertaining to God, in order to offer both gifts and sacrifices for sins.” No Jew was free to enter the Holy of Holies to meet directly with God. Even the high priest could only go in there once a year on the Day of Atonement, and very carefully at that, or God would kill him instantly. Every Jew knew that he desperately needed a mediator between him and God, and the high priest was that God-ordained mediator.

“Gifts and sacrifices” probably here is a general description of all of the designated offerings (Philip Hughes, *A Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews* [Eerdmans], p. 175). The task of making such offerings was reserved for the priests. Israel’s first king, Saul, took it upon himself to offer sacrifices, and for this presumption, God removed the kingdom from Saul’s descendants and gave it to David (1 Sam. 13:1-14). Later, King Uzziah, who was otherwise a godly king, presumed to take incense and offer it before the Lord. As a result, God struck him instantly with leprosy (2 Chron. 26:16-21). The priests alone were designated to make offerings to God on behalf of the people.

Note that these offerings were “for sins.” The entire Jewish sacrificial system, but especially the Day of Atonement, under-

scored the problem of human sinfulness in the presence of the holy God. Without the appropriate sacrifice, sinners could not approach God or be reconciled to Him. God designed all of this to point ahead to the person and work of Jesus Christ, the Lamb of God, who offered Himself as the perfect and final sacrifice for our sins.

This means that you cannot be reconciled to God until you see your great need as a sinner before His holy presence. It is that awareness of your true condition that causes you to cry out, with the publican in Jesus' story, "God, be merciful to me, the sinner" (Luke 18:13). The gospel is not, "If you've got a few problems, try Jesus. He can help you." The gospel has to do with our fundamental alienation from God because of our sins, and the gracious provision that God has made in His Son.

- B. The identification of the high priest with the people: He can sympathize with them, since he is a fellow sinner (5:2-3).

An effective mediator truly understands the condition of those he represents. The Jewish high priests could understand the problem of sinners because, before they could go into the Holy of Holies to atone for the sins of the people, they had to offer a sacrifice for their own sins (Lev. 16:6; Heb. 7:27; 9:7). An awareness of their own weaknesses enabled the Levitical priests to "deal gently with the ignorant and misguided." The Greek word translated "deal gently" meant to take "the middle course between apathy and anger" (Leon Morris, *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, ed. by Frank Gaebelin [Zondervan], 12:47). The priest should not act indifferently toward sin, but neither should he be harsh with repentant sinners, since he knew from personal experience how prone we are to sin.

- C. The appointment of the high priest: He does not take it upon himself, but must be called by God (5:4).

Although in the first century the Jewish high priesthood had degenerated into a political appointment, the author overlooks that and goes back to the original intention. God called Aaron to the office of high priest (Exod. 28:1-3), and he served as the example for all that followed. God's appointment of Aaron to this office was confirmed during the rebellion of Korah, who accused Moses

and Aaron of appointing themselves (Num. 16:1-35). God showed the rebels and all of Israel that He had appointed Moses and Aaron by causing the ground to open up and swallow the rebels and their households. When some in the congregation grumbled at this judgment, a plague broke out and killed over 14,000.

That was a sober lesson that no one may dare to approach God in the way of man's own choosing. The only way to approach God is through the way of God's choosing, through His ordained mediator. In the Old Testament, that mediator was the high priest. But the fact that all of these priests were themselves sinners pointed to the inadequacy of that old covenant and the need for the perfect high priest, the Lord Jesus Christ.

2. Jesus perfectly fulfills and exceeds the qualifications for the high priest (5:5-10).

The author shows here how Jesus not only fulfilled the requirements for the Aaronic priesthood, but superceded them by being a priest forever according to the order of Melchizedek (a theme he will expand on in chapter 7). He presents Jesus' qualifications in reverse order to those of the high priest:

A. The appointment of Jesus as high priest: He did not take it upon Himself, but God appointed Him as a priest according to the order of Melchizedek (5:5-6).

The author cites again (see 1:5) Psalm 2:7 to show that even though the Christ is the Son of God, in a unique relationship with the Father, He did not glorify Himself by taking the office of high priest unto Himself. Rather, God designated Him as such, and not just a priest in the limited human sense of the Aaronic priests, but "a priest forever according to the order of Melchizedek." (Ps. 110:4). Psalm 110:1 shows that the Son's exalted position is to sit at the Father's right hand in the place of sovereign rule. But Psalm 110:4 shows that in this Messiah, the offices of King and Priest will be united, as He is designated a priest forever according to the order of Melchizedek. The point of the two quotations here is to show that Jesus did not presume to take the office of high priest by His own authority, but God appointed Him to this place.

- B. The identification of Jesus, our high priest, with us: He prayed and learned obedience through what He suffered (5:7-8).

These verses elaborate on 4:15, that Jesus can sympathize with our weaknesses because He has been tempted in all things as we are, yet without sin. Similar to the Levitical priests, Jesus could identify with the weaknesses of the people. But, unlike these priests, He had no sin of His own. "In the days of His flesh" refers to Jesus' earthly life, but verse 7 especially points to Jesus' agony in the Garden of Gethsemane as He wrestled with the imminent prospect of taking our sins upon Himself. Jesus' intense struggle in the Garden was not just over the thought of the physical agony of crucifixion. Rather, He was struggling with the thought of being separated from the Father as He bore our sin. This was so intense that He literally sweat blood.

None of the gospel accounts report Jesus' "loud crying and tears," but this information probably came directly from one of the apostles who were present. It shows us that even though Jesus is fully God, and the cross was central to God's predetermined plan (Acts 2:23; 4:27-28), the actual implementation of that plan was not easy. It was not just playacting a role! Jesus' suffering in the Garden and on the cross was more intense than we can ever imagine, because we do not know what it was like to be one with the Father from all eternity until that dreadful hour.

There is debate about the content of Jesus' request. If He was asking to be saved from death, in what sense was His prayer heard, since He was not delivered from that awful death? Probably Jesus was asking to be sustained through the agony of bearing our sins, and to be brought through death into resurrection and complete restoration with the Father. The word "piety" (NASB) is better rendered "reverent submission" (NIV). It refers to His reverential submission to the will of the Father when He prayed, "not My will, but Yours be done" (Luke 22:42).

When it says, "Although He was a Son, He learned obedience from the things which He suffered," it does not mean that He was formerly disobedient. The first phrase is better translated, "Son though He was." It points to His position as God's unique Son (5:5). Jesus "learned obedience" in the sense that He experienced

what obedience means through what He suffered. He was always obedient to the Father's will, but the proof of obedience is revealed in situations where obedience is not pleasant. Suppose that when my children were younger, I told you, "I have obedient kids. Let me prove it to you: Kids, eat your ice cream." You would say, "That's no test of obedience!" The real test would be, "Kids, clean your rooms!" Jesus experienced obedience to the maximum when He went to the cross.

The author's point is that Jesus is our perfect high priest in that His prayers and obedience through His sufferings show that He can sympathize with us in our sufferings. Therefore, we should obediently persevere in trials through prayer.

C. The work of Jesus, the perfect high priest: He is the source of eternal salvation to all who obey Him (5:9-10).

"Having been made perfect" does not imply that Jesus was imperfect previously. Rather, the idea is that His experience of obediently suffering unto death qualified Jesus as the Savior (we saw the same idea in 2:10). "Eternal salvation" is contrasted with the temporary nature of the Old Testament sacrifices, which could never make perfect those who offered them (10:1-4). The word translated "the source" (NASB, NIV; "author," NKJV) of eternal salvation means "the cause." The cause of our salvation is not that God foresaw that we would believe. The cause of our salvation is that the triune God "chose us in Him before the foundation of the world" (Eph. 1:4).

Jesus became the cause of salvation "to all those who obey Him." This is not teaching salvation by works. Rather, to have saving faith is to obey Jesus, who commanded, "Repent and believe in the gospel" (Mark 1:15). Paul refers to "the obedience of faith" (Rom. 1:5; see also 1 Pet. 1:2). You cannot separate saving faith from obedient faith, or unbelief from disobedience (Heb. 4:18-19; 4:6, 11). Those who truly believe in Jesus as Savior live in obedience to Him as Lord. Those who claim to believe but who live in disobedience to Him are not truly saved (Matt. 7:21-23).

Then (5:10) the author comes back to God's designating Jesus as a high priest according to the order of Melchizedek, which places Him in a category by Himself, above the Levitical priests. He

will develop this further in chapter 7, after the extended exhortation of chapter 6. His point, then, in this section is to show that Jesus Christ perfectly fulfills and exceeds the qualifications of the high priest in the Old Testament. To go back to that old system would be to return to a severely inferior system and to abandon the high priest that we desperately need.

#### USE (APPLICATION):

Although there are no commands or direct applications in our text, there are many applications just beneath the surface:

1. If our sin is so hideous that God required nothing less than the death of His perfect, sinless Son as the only solution, then we would be foolish to think that any human solution will suffice.

Any system of salvation by good works trashes Christ's death as unnecessary. Why did He have to offer up loud crying and tears if we're inherently good enough to get into heaven? Why did Jesus have to suffer and die if we can be saved by our own efforts? Anything that adds our works to Christ's sacrifice as the necessary condition for salvation is an affront to His atoning death.

2. If God's wrath against sin is so dreadful, then we need to flee to the cross for refuge and daily live with gratitude that Jesus bore our penalty on the cross.

A. W. Pink wrote (*An Exposition of Hebrews* [electronic ed., Ephesians Four Group: Escondido, CA], p. 247),

Into what infinite depths of humiliation did the Son of God descend! How unspeakably dreadful was His anguish! What a hideous thing sin must be if such a sacrifice was required for its atonement! How real and terrible a thing is the wrath of God! What love moved Him to suffer so on our behalf! What must be the portion of those who despise and reject such a Saviour!

3. Obedient faith is the only kind of faith that saves.

This is not to contradict the first point, but to clarify and complement it. We are saved by faith alone, apart from works, but the kind of faith that saves *necessarily* issues in good works (Eph. 2:8-10). The one who says that he has faith, but has no works, is

deceiving himself (James 2:14-26). We should be as devoted to God and His will, no matter what the cost, as Jesus was.

4. Prayer and obedient faith are inextricably linked.

Jesus prayed in the Garden so that He could obey on the cross. Prayer and obedience are inextricably linked. "Pray that you may not enter into temptation" (Luke 22:40). We must follow Jesus in His prayer life if we wish to follow Him in His obedience to the Father.

5. God's love for us does not preclude His taking us through great trials.

The Father loved the Son, and yet the cross was His destiny. He loves us, and yet brings us to glory through many sufferings. John Piper observes, "No one ever said that they learned their deepest lessons of life, or had their sweetest encounters with God, on the sunny days. People go deep with God when the drought comes" (*Don't Waste Your Life* [Crossway], p. 73). C. H. Mackintosh, commenting on the death of Lazarus (John 11), said, "Never interpret God's love by your circumstances; but always interpret your circumstances by His love" (*Miscellaneous Writings* [Loizeaux Brothers], 6:17-18, "Bethany").

6. Feeling deep emotions during trials is not wrong, but we must submit our emotions to the will of God.

The often-repeated comment, "Emotions aren't right or wrong; emotions just *are*" has a grain of truth in it, but a lot of error. The truth is, don't deny the emotions that you are experiencing. The error is, your emotions may be acceptable in God's sight, or they may be sinful. Grief in a time of loss is acceptable. Railing at God or being bitter towards Him is sinful. Though God strip us of everything, as He did with Job, we should through our tears say with Job, "The Lord gave and the Lord has taken away. Blessed be the name of the Lord" (Job 1:21).

7. Even as God answered Christ's prayers for deliverance through death and resurrection, so He sometimes answers our prayers in ways that seem contradictory to our request.

Some say that we are not praying in faith if we pray, "Lord, Your will be done." They say that we must be bold to ask God for

what we want and claim it by faith. It seems, though, that Jesus didn't understand this principle. He prayed, "Father, if You are willing, remove this cup from Me; yet not My will, but Yours be done" (Luke 22:42). God answered Jesus' prayer by sustaining Him through the cross and into the resurrection and ascension. He may not answer our requests exactly as we pray. Often "we do not know how to pray as we should, but the Spirit Himself intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words" (Rom. 8:26).

You need a high priest because God is infinitely holy and you are a sinner. Jesus Christ is that high priest. Flee to Him for salvation and live daily at the foot of the cross!

### Discussion Questions

1. Why is the prevalent teaching about building your self-esteem opposed to growth in godliness?
2. Can you think of any sin in which pride is not at the root? In light of this, how can we grow in true humility?
3. How can we evaluate whether our emotions in any situation are right or wrong?
4. Is it always right to pray (for ourselves or for others) for deliverance from a trial? How can we know what to pray?

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