

Sermon 39, The Priest We Needed, Hebrews 7:26-28

Proposition: Christ is perfect — the exact high priest we needed.

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 - C. undefiled
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Introduction

Dearly beloved congregation of our Lord Jesus Christ, we have seen in the last few weeks that we have hope through the setting aside of the Mosaic law and the bringing in of a better hope through Jesus. We saw that He is a priest through the Father's oath, and that the salvation He offers is incorruptible, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for us. That theme continues in our text this morning, as we see that Jesus is perfect, that He is the exact high priest we needed.

I. The Priest We Needed, v. 26

As he did in ch. 2, the writer deploys the concept of "fittingness." It is appropriate, he says, that Jesus is this kind of high priest. Before when he said "It was fitting," as we saw, he meant "It was consistent with the character of God as creator, the one for whom all things exist, to use suffering to perfect the Messiah." Now, rather than speaking of what is fitting for God as creator and goal of creation, the writer speaks of what is appropriate for us. What kind of high priest do we need? Well, we need a really amazing one. Our relationship with God has been destroyed by endless sins and corruption on our side, sins and corruption that stink in the sight of a holy God. It takes a pretty amazing high priest to repair and maintain that relationship. Not just any high priest will do. A religious functionary isn't going to succeed in this most challenging sacerdotal role of all time. So when the writer says it is fitting for us to have the high priest we got, he is not saying that we got the priest we deserved, but the priest we needed. That priest is right and fitting and perfect in every way. We could never deserve Him, but we surely did need Him!

The writer lists five characteristics of the Son of God. These are five things that we desperately needed in a priest. One who was to repair and maintain our relationship with God has to have a pretty specialized skill set, or character. Well, Jesus Christ certainly has some unique skills, above all, the uniting of God and Man in His own person. But in addition to that union, or better, because of that union, He is also these five things.

A. Holy

The first of them is “holy.” This means existing for a particular purpose — the purpose of glorifying and enjoying God. We don’t need a profane priest. As I mentioned some weeks ago, that would be a contradiction in terms. One who is profane and unfit himself for the presence of God is not going to be able to get you and me fit for the presence of God. But Jesus is perfectly holy — in fact, He is holy, holy, holy, just like His Father. A holy priest, one who exists for God’s service, is the exact priest we need. Remember how Aaron literally wore a plate that said “Holy to the LORD” on it? Though Jesus doesn’t wear that plate, it’s even more true of Him than it was of Aaron. And part of His ministry of holiness is to make you holy. He has already changed your purpose such that you now exist exclusively for God. Through His priestly work, He is enabling you day by day to live that out and be holy as He is holy.

B. Innocent

Not only is He holy; the writer next tells us that Jesus is innocent. He is utterly free from guilt; He has never done anything wrong in the whole course of His life. Every one of His actions is not just decent, but radiantly pure and right. Every word He’s ever spoken, every deed He’s ever done, is an expression of the purest love and mercy towards others and obedience toward His Father. Jesus is not guilty; Pilate found no fault in Him and you won’t find any fault in Him either.

It takes an innocent priest to stand before God. As the writer will say in the next verse, Jesus didn’t need to be cleansed to come into the Father’s presence. He is always fit for the Father’s presence. He is not guilty, then cleansed, like we are. He is simply and always clean — never has been morally dirty. That’s the kind of priest you want!

C. Unfiled

He is also undefiled. If the previous word tells us that Jesus has never been morally unclean, this one tells us that He has never been ceremonially unclean. He didn’t touch any dead bodies. He didn’t eat any non-Kosher foods. He didn’t have emissions of blood or semen or anything else that defiled. He is completely clean, not just morally but also ceremonially. He kept the law like no one else.

D. Separated from Sinners

That means, of course, that He is separated from sinners. That is, as David described it, Jesus said this: “I do not sit with men of falsehood, nor do I consort with hypocrites. I hate the assembly of evildoers, and I will not sit with the wicked” (Psa 26:4-5 ESV).

These descriptions are not physical but moral. Obviously, the Lord was a friend of sinners. He sat down to dinner in the house of Simon the Pharisee and had His feet bathed by “a woman of the city, who was a sinner.” He sat down at a table with Judas Iscariot himself — the

biggest sinner of them all. So when David says that he won't sit with the wicked, he means that he won't sit with the wicked *as one of them*. Jesus may be in the presence of the wicked, but He is not part of the number of the wicked. He may be talking to a gay man, but He is not a member of the "LGBT community" (to borrow the contemporary cliché). He is in the world, but not of the world; among sinners, but not a sinner and not to be confused with sinners.

You can be a thousand miles from another sinner and be sinning in a completely gross and despicable fashion. Or you can be right next to a sinner and, untouched by his sin, serenely be loving God and neighbor with heart, soul, mind, and strength. Which situation is better? The answer is clear. Jesus is the priest we needed — the one who could walk among us without being contaminated, the one who would lift us up rather than having us pull him down. Surely there has been more than one missionary to sinners who got dragged down and ended up being worse than the people he originally set out to help. But not Jesus!

E. Exalted Above the Heavens

In fact, He is now exalted above the heavens. He is a thousand miles from sinners now, because He is at the right hand of the Father, in the most exalted position in the cosmos. He is higher than the heavens — that is, higher than the atmosphere, higher than the stars, up at the right hand of God. This priest is all-powerful, completely able to meet any and every need we have, including especially our need for moral cleansing and salvation.

There is one who can meet your needs perfectly, one who can make it happen, one who can answer any request and who knows everything so that He knows the best way to use His power. This, brothers and sisters, is the priest we needed. How appropriate that God would give us exactly this priest!

II. The Priests We Didn't Need, v. 27

Of course, part of the glory of Christ that we see is the contrast between His glory and the glory of the Levitical priesthood. The Levitical priests had three characteristics that, quite frankly, we didn't need. Again, remember that this is said comparatively, not absolutely. For the time and purpose for which God set them up, the Levitical priests were very necessary and useful. But since Jesus has come, their service has been rendered unnecessary, obsolete — in short, it's been turned into something we don't need.

A. Made Daily Offerings for Their Own Sins

These priests made daily offerings for their own sins. Jesus didn't have to do this! He had no need to be cleansed by sacrifice. He did not start the day defiled, needing to confess His failures and pay the price for them by offering an animal in His place. He started the day clean, perfect, ready to go, ready to worship and ready to save.

B. Made Daily Offerings for the People's Sins

Now, the high priest did not personally offer the morning and evening sacrifice, yet the Hebrew writer specifically ascribes a daily sin offering to "high priests." The bottom line here is that, so far as we know, Levitical high priests did not personally offer sacrifice every day. They did this priestly task regularly and were required to do it at least annually. Is this an error in Scripture? We know that Scripture does not contain errors. But we also know that the Pentateuch does not

require the high priest to personally make daily offerings. The writer could be referring to a practice from his own time (something he doesn't do elsewhere), or he could be generalizing and including all of the priests' ministry within the work of the one high priest. The Pentateuch certainly seems to imply that the high priest is the one and only real priest, and that the ministry of all the lesser priests is simply derived from the one ministry of the high priest. In that sense, what any priest is doing can be ascribed to the high priest.

Regardless of how we are to understand this point in historical terms, in theological terms it is clear: Jesus made an offering once for all. That offering is never repeated. He didn't have to go to the cross multiple times. He died once, and that death is sufficient to pay for every sin ever committed by His chosen ones, past, present, and future. Thus, Jesus' one-and-done ministry is better than the Levitical priests' ongoing, unceasing, and therefore ineffective ministry.

C. Were Weak, v. 29

Finally, the Levitical priests are described in v. 29 as "weak." I think we can agree that a weak priest is not something we need around here. A weak man, a man who can be pushed around, a man who is distracted from his mission, a man who doesn't have the stamina to carry out his purpose — that man is not the man I want to repair and maintain my relationship with God. Far from it!

Brothers and sisters, these are the priests we didn't need, comparatively speaking. Obviously a weak, sinful priest is much better than no priest at all. But compared to the greatest priest ever, weak, sinful priests don't look so good. Thank God today that you have the best priest the world has ever seen. Most of you are old enough to know how much difference a pastor can make, and how much better for the church a good pastor is than a bad pastor. Well, multiply that times a million, and you have some idea of how much greater Jesus is than Aaron. As good a priest as Aaron was, he was weak, he was sinful, and he had to do his job over and over again because he was never able to just finish it. But Jesus did His job once for all.

III. The Priest We Have, vv. 27c-28

A. Offered Himself Once for All

That, indeed, is the point of v. 26: We have this priest. He is ours. V. 27 adds that He has finished the work of reconciling us to God. He offered Himself once for all. This, by the way, takes the notion of the Mass as a re-sacrificing of Christ out behind the cathedral and shoots it in the head. The sacrifice of Christ is once for all, not hundreds of times a day for all. Nor is there the slightest hint that this one sacrifice must be reenacted, re-presented. What part of "once for all" does a continual reenactment fit under? It doesn't. The death of Jesus Christ paid for your sins completely. There is nothing left over, no remainder, no final fifteen dollar fine needed to square accounts between you and the Almighty. The sacrifice of Jesus is complete, finished, just as He announced from the cross.

So the priest we have is one who did the job. He has left nothing for later, nothing undone that still needs to be done. He doesn't repeatedly sacrifice; rather, He made one sacrifice that is everything we need.

B. Made by Oath, Not by Torah

Another way in which Jesus is greater is something we talked about two weeks ago: He was constituted a priest by God's oath rather than by the Mosaic Law. His calling is a sworn calling. God Almighty swore that Jesus would be a priest forever, not just temporarily. Aaron was a priest . . . until he died. And so for all of his posterity. They were all priests, maybe even priests for life — but that already means that they weren't actually priests for very long. Jesus Christ has been our great high priest now for two thousand years and counting. He is not looking at retirement; He is not weak or old; He has no need to anoint a successor. God promised Him a perpetual priesthood and He is exercising it by the power of the Holy Spirit's indestructible life.

C. Postdates the Torah

The writer also calls out another detail that may not seem so significant as the once-for-all character of Jesus' sacrifice or the fact that He was constituted priest by an oath rather than by the Mosaic law. This detail is that Jesus' call to priesthood postdates the Torah. He was named a priest after Melchizedek's order some four hundred years after Moses brought the law down from Mt. Sinai.

What is significant about that? I think the writer is telling us that Jesus' priesthood supersedes the law. It's not like Jesus was a Melchizedekian priest, and then God decided to make Aaron a priest instead because Jesus was not doing the job well enough. Quite the opposite, actually. Aaron and his line were already serving as priests, and it was then, during their service, that God said "All right; I am going to appoint a perfect priest, one who will do this better than they do." Jesus' appointment comes after Aaron and his sons had a chance. They had done their best, and their best was not enough. We needed to see the Son of God in action.

D. Is a Son

And that, of course, is where the writer takes it. The one appointed by God's oath is not just any man, but the Son of Man and the Son of God. The key characteristic of this priest is His Sonship, His Filiation. What does that mean? It means that He is like His Father in every way, except that instead of being Father, He is Son. He is the express image of the Father, but the one who responds to the Father and is oriented to the Father, the one who does nothing but what He sees the Father do. His priesthood, in other words, is exercised exactly as God would have it because He is the Son of God. He is also the perfect representative for us because He is the Son of Man. What He does is exactly manly as well as godly.

E. Has Been Permanently Perfected

And finally, our priest has been permanently perfected. We saw this several chapters ago: Son though He was, He had to learn. He had to undergo the process of growth, for that is what a perfect man has to do. He had to face down temptation and overcome it. He had to work out to be strong; He had to experience the worst the Tempter could throw at Him before we could say "This one is perfect." But that is all in the past now. He has achieved perfection, flawlessness, and part of that flawlessness is that no flaw can touch Him now. He cannot sin, cannot be wrong, cannot be weak, cannot be defiled. He is perfect and perfect forever, permanently perfected, as our high priest.

That's the priest we have and the priest we needed. Can you worship Him today? Make use of His priestly services. Don't make another priest; all the priestly work that ever needed to be done for you has been done, completed by Jesus Christ and signed off on by His Father. Praise Him, worship Him, go to God through Him. Amen.