

Sermon 12: Hebrews 4:14-16: Holding Fast and Drawing Near Because we have a Great High Priest

OUTLINE

Hold fast because we have a high priest who has succeeded and is divine
Draw near because we have a high priest who is sympathetic and sinless

INTRODUCTION

We have no idea how unworthy sinners are of being in the presence of a holy God. We go around with the expectation that God should be grateful if we believe in Him, as if we are doing Him a favour; and that it is His duty to hear and answer our prayers, if we pray. How many have said that they don't believe in God because when times were tough they prayed and got no answer? This is where the OT is so important as it teaches us the holiness of God and how we can enter God's presence. We get a glimpse of how serious our sin is when Adam and Eve who enjoyed fellowship with God are driven from His presence and barred access by a flaming sword. But God's dwelling among Israel and the need for a priesthood, a high priest, sacrifices, a tabernacle, an altar, an ark, incense, proper dress and more all speak of how sinners do not have the right to come into God's presence unless their sins are first dealt with. After the law was given on Mt. Sinai God established all of these types that point forward to the person and work of Christ. If you were not a priest you could not serve in the tabernacle, and only the high priest got to go once a year into the Holy of Holies on the Day of Atonement. And he had to make sure he first offered sacrifices for his own sins, then had to do exactly what God said to obtain a covering for Israel's sin for another year. God did not tolerate those who disregarded these restrictions. Aaron's own sons, Nadab and Abihu were slain for offering strange fire God had not asked for. Uzziah the king of Judah was struck with leprosy for presumptuously going into God's presence. Uzzah, a priest was struck down for touching the ark preventing it from toppling over when it was being wrongly transported by David. You get the point. Sinners don't have the right to go into God's presence. But Jesus has died, He has torn the veil of the temple, He has opened up the way for sinners to go into the presence of God as children, as priests, dressed in the garments of His own priestly perfection. The reality of prayer, of going into the presence of God and being accepted, being encouraged and invited to come, and being offered assurances that we will be answered, this is an immeasurable treasure. The great flaming sword of God's wrath that barred our way to paradise is removed for those who are in Christ.

This is part of what the author lays before us as he continues in Hebrews 4:14-16. We have had a strong section of warning against unbelief and pressing on to our rest in persevering faith. The author returns now to his earlier discussions on Jesus as our high priest. This will now become the longest section in Hebrews with a protracted discussion on the high priesthood of Christ from 4:14-10:39. This section opens by reminding us that 'we have' a high priest in Jesus. Because we have a high priest who is Jesus, let us hold fast. You will notice that this section talks about the accomplishments and qualities of Jesus as our high priest in order to motivate us firstly, to hold fast, and secondly to draw near. The book of Hebrews has been offering us several strategies that will enable us to hold fast. He has called us to consider Christ in His person and work; to encourage one another; to heed the living word of God, well in this section he calls upon us to consider who we have as a high priest that we might hold fast,

and as another way to endure, draw near in prayer. The author draws out a major resource that is ours because we have Jesus as our high priest, the privilege of prayer. We have two points around our two 'let us' exhortations. Hold fast because we have a high priest who has succeeded and is divine. Draw near because we have a high priest who is sympathetic and sinless.

Hold fast because we have a high priest who has succeeded and is divine

V14, 'Since then we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus, the Son of God, let us hold fast our confession.' Our author begins stating two things. Firstly, if you are a believer Jesus is your high priest. We see those words 'we have.' Secondly, he highlights the greatness of Jesus as our high priest, in the words, 'a great high priest.' This description is used only twice in the NT 4:14 and 10:21 meaning greatest high priest. This would impress itself on the Jewish mind who understood what a high priesthood was showing Jesus to be greater than any historic high priest including Aaron. And it would impress itself on the Roman mind because Pontifex Maximus meaning greatest priest was a title sometimes used by the Caesar who held the highest office as part of state worship practices. Incidentally this title was borrowed by the Roman Catholic Church and the Pope is called the Supreme Pontiff. We don't need Aaron; or Caesar; or the Pope because Jesus is our great High priest.

The author goes on then to state two things with regards to Jesus as our great high priest, firstly His work and then secondly His person. Jesus has passed through the heavens. It is clear that the author is tapping into the OT practice of the high priest going into the Holy of Holies on the Day of Atonement. Later on he will show that Jesus is in a better temple, He is literally in the direct presence of God that the temple was made to type, He is in heaven. We know that the high priest of the OT had to cleanse his own sins, offer animal sacrifices, sprinkle animal blood on the ark of the covenant in which were kept the ten commandments as a sign of making propitiation for the sins of the nation. But this had to be repeated every year because it was not God's final solution to our sin problem, but rather an object lesson in the fact that we are continuous sinners who need an effective priest and sacrifice to finally deal with our sins once and for all. This language of passed through the heavens is short hand for that one final effective act by Christ. This is short hand for what he has already mentioned in 1:3-4, 'After making purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high, ⁴ having become as much superior to angels as the name he has inherited is more excellent than theirs.' And of course, this last phase of Christ's work, ascending into heaven, is token for His whole work. His incarnation is implied, His perfect life; His sin paying death; His glorious triumph over death in resurrection; His ascending into heaven; His being coronated as king and having all authority ruling all of history to God's end; and even His present intercession on behalf of His people. It is all summed up in this idea of passing through the heavens. It automatically contrasts His heavenly and better work with the earthly and typological work of the OT high priest; it speaks of a work finished and not a work that has to be repeated year after year. Because He has offered the greater sacrifice, has resurrected overcoming all our enemies; because He has entered into heaven to rule and bring God's plan to its final fulfillment; and because He is there as our representative applying all the benefits of His finished work to us, because He has passed through the heavens, hold fast.

But there is more, there is not only His work, but His person, He is not some nameless generic high priest. Caiaphas the High Priest when Jesus was crucified was the 76th or 77th. No our high priest is 'Jesus, the Son of God.' Here we have the mystery of the two natures of Christ paraded out again. Jesus, which means YHWH our Saviour, the human name of Jesus given to Him not by Mary, but by God through Gabriel. We are reminded of His humanity. He was miraculously conceived in Mary by the power of the Holy Spirit kept from the sin of Adam, 100% perfect. This glorious one was made a little lower than the angels to come and die to save us, He become one with us to identify with us to be our priest and our substitute sacrifice. But more than this He is the Son of God. This title must be informed by all that the author of Hebrews has said so far, the radiance of His glory; the exact imprint of His nature; the Creator and Sustainer, an equal eternal person who is related to the Father as Son and is one with the Father. His qualifications could not be higher. He is greater than angels, greater than Moses, greater than Adam, greater than any human high priest like Aaron. Who else can you turn to for salvation that is better? No one!

So hold fast your confession. The author is likely referring to the confession of Jesus as Lord at one's baptism. With the heart one believes and with the mouth one confesses that Jesus is Lord. This public declaration and identification with Christ and His disciples would have been seen as a watershed moment that nailed one's colors to the mast. To turn back on your confession would mean a public retraction of your previous confession of Christ as Savior. Any Jew returning to Judaism would have to renounce his baptism and Jesus as the Messiah. Confessions are not only public they are also creedal. 'Jesus is Lord' is a doctrinal statement. It assumes the real existence of a human person who is also Lord, the OT way of speaking of God, in other words who is also divine. You would also be confessing what He did, that He died for your sins and rose again according to the Scriptures. To become a Christian was not a cultural move. Today we are seeing people adopt Christianity as a way to resist the rise of Islam, as a cultural force that preserves peace and morality, as a way to reject wokeness. Christianity does have an effect as salt and light and it does offer truth in how to live and can helpfully inform good and moral laws. But we must be careful not to promote the idea that a Christian is someone who adopts a way of life. No a Christian is someone who is born again and who has been taught by the Spirit to believe certain truths about sin and salvation. Given who Jesus is and what He has accomplished, let us hold fast our confession, more than that let us not be ashamed, let us open our mouths because the world needs to hear the good news.

Draw near because we have a high priest who is sympathetic and sinless

V15, 'For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin.' The author has painted a very high picture of Christ. A heavenly ministry and a divine nature, but here he seems to bring it down to earth, to something more relatable as he highlights the qualification of our high priest as human, namely sympathetic and sinless. And how these fit Him to be an ever able helper for us. Notice that again the author emphasizes that 'we have' Christ as our high priest. But notice the double negative which is a way of underlining a positive point, we do not have one who is unable. In other words we have a supremely able high priest. One of the reasons we should feel confident in His high priesthood is because He is fully human and knows our need. He is able to

sympathize, He is touched with the feeling of our infirmities. We have the confidence of knowing that as our high priest as out intercessor He is God and man. Stephen Charnock, a great Puritan preacher and theologian remarks on this fact, 'He was God-man on earth, man to suffer for us, and God to make the suffering valuable; He is God-man in heaven, man to pity us, and God to render that compassion efficacious to us.' For Charnock the nature of Jesus as God and man informs His knowledge of our need. As God He has an infinite knowledge, as well as having a full human knowledge of our human experience. No one is more knowledgeable than Christ. We should not think that He did not know enough as God and so had to fill up some lack by adding a human knowledge of misery. No, rather see His divine knowledge informing and perfecting His human sympathy to the highest degree so that a God-informed perfect human sympathy is ours in the God-man. To put a point on it, let me say this. Think of the person that loves you better than any other in this life, your spouse, your mother, your father, your best friend. Realize that they are not perfect, their sympathy will be controlled in part by their sin, will wane according to their weakness, and does not have the benefit of the hypostatic union. But Christ right now is perfect in His knowledge, in His concern, in His love for us. He has a perfect human compassion greater than Adam's for not only is it sinless, it is as the God-man that He sympathizes with us. He is not cold and detached. The same love that drove Him to lay down His life is the love that fills His heart in His heavenly ministrations. And He is in a position with power to do something about it.

In particular we are told that He knows what it is to be tempted. Now this verse has created no small amount of debate. We know that God cannot be tempted with evil, so then can the Son of God be tempted? Here are some of the conclusions that Christians have reached as they have reflected on this matter. Firstly, the word temptation can refer to a temptation that comes from within because of a sinful nature. An external situation stimulates the sin in our nature and our own hearts tempt us to sin. This is the way James describes sin and temptation, 1:14-15, 'But each person is tempted when he is lured and enticed by his own desire. ¹⁵ Then desire when it has conceived gives birth to sin, and sin when it is fully grown brings forth death.' Jesus, like Adam did not have a sinful nature and did not experience temptation from inward sin. Jesus only suffered from external temptation.

Now some might object and say well this does not seem to fit because the text says that He is a good high priest that can sympathize because he too has been tempted as we are, but without sin. This has led some to wrongly suggest that Jesus had a sinful nature but did not sin, and that He did suffer from internal temptation as we do, yet always resisted. This is wrong. We need to realize that co-vulnerability to sin does not make Him a better Saviour. The church has always approached this question through the union of two natures in one person. It has confessed the impeccability of Christ, that Christ's full human will was in perfect submission to the divine will. That although temptation came to Him, by virtue of His two natures and the interrelation of the human will to the divine, Christ could not sin. And alongside this it is emphasized that the temptations were still real and felt, just not from an inward temptation from a sinful nature. We fail to appreciate that Jesus shared our common experience of living as a human being constantly surrounded by temptation, and how strongly He would have felt these temptations. You are hard where He is soft; you are insensitive where He is sensitive; you grow hard towards sin and it becomes invisible He never grew hard and was always confronted with it. Grudem shares the illustration of an Olympic weight lifter holding the weight of temptation above His

head His whole life and never dropping it. In one sense we do not know what it feels like to be tempted because we always give in, Christ never gave in to sin. Christ's humanity, informed by His divine nature would have suffered from temptation in a peculiar way you and I will never experience.

All of this fits Christ to know what we are going through. You could think that God is too distant and unsympathetic, but given the fact that Jesus has lived in our shoes, this greatly helps us to see that He is familiar with our need. In fact the place we are called to place our feet is in the path of suffering obedience that He has already walked. He is keenly familiar with the route we have to take, the enemies we will meet along the way, the resistance we will encounter, and in the case of these Jewish believers the antagonism of the Jews and the unjust power of Rome. He has been betrayed by friends, suffered injustice from those in power, been lied about, been the victim of crime, been rejected by his family, his countrymen, his religion. Poverty, pain, loneliness, sleeplessness, the agony of soul for those who will not see and are heaping sin and judgement upon themselves. He knows all about it. And right now He loves you with the same love that drove Him to the cross, further armed with what He has experienced. Armed with perfect love and knowledge there is no one more able to help you. And this is where the author takes us next.

V16, 'Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.' The author now turns us to one of our greatest resources, our ability to pray. He has really reminded us of who Christ is and what He has done. He has spoken of Christ's finished work, superior work, greater priesthood, divine personage, and sympathetic concern. All of this should drive us to hold fast, but also to pray. All that prevented us from approaching God in prayer has been removed by Christ. Sin kept us from God, it has been propitiated. God was a judge who was holy and could not abide sinners in His presence, we have been justified. The OT only provided a temporary covering for sin, Christ by a superior priest hood and sacrifice has made a permanent solution. Are you worried that He will reject you when you approach or not care for your tiny problems, He is sympathetic. So then let draw near not stand far off; run to God not from Him when we are tempted and needy. Let us do so with confidence. This does not mean in an irreverent and presumptuous manner but with a faith that fully recognizes the finished work of Christ as sufficient to enable sinners to approach. Like Esther we have been granted to approach the throne of God. And behold it is not merely a throne of authority, or a throne of power, which it is, but it is because of Christ peculiarly characterized as a throne of grace. This is good news for weak sinners. We are unworthy of God's help and yet we need it. God's throne is a throne open and available for sinners to receive grace. Because of Christ we can come into His presence, even the Holy of Holies, because of Christ we do dare to approach His throne, and because of Christ grace is available. Where sin abounds, grace abounds all the more. Where weakness and need abound, God's sufficient grace is ready to be poured out. His mercy is ready to meet our need; His grace ready to meet our sin. We do not have to wait until the Day of Atonement to bring our prayer request, we can come at any time, the way is open, and God is willing to answer when we have need. We have access, we are invited; we have an advocate with the Father who stands in His perfection representing our need with perfect love. We have a willing ear; we have promised supply; we can come anytime; and any sinner in Christ may come and find an all powerful King, on an all powerful throne, with a heart fully of love and mercy, and sympathy and grace and willingness to help. 4:14-16, 'Since then we have a great high priest

who has passed through the heavens, Jesus, the Son of God, let us hold fast our confession. ¹⁵ For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin. ¹⁶ Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.'