

Sermon 13: Hebrews 5:1-10: Christ's Priesthood Superior to Aaron's

OUTLINE

Common qualifications for Aaron's priesthood
Greater qualifications of Christ's priesthood

INTRODUCTION

The history of the high priesthood in Israel is as mixed as the history of the kings in Israel. The first high priest Aaron also made the golden calf and was not allowed to enter Canaan, losing his earthly reward. But then the 3rd high priest Phinehas is famous for his zeal for the Lord. Eli, is famous for overindulging his immoral sons; Joshua the Post-exile high priest is famous for the vision of Zechariah 3 where he is re-clothed as defended before satan. The highpriesthood then entered into a further state of ambiguity during the intertestamental period as conquering powers would impose their own highpriests to serve in the temple. The role became increasingly political and strategic and during the time of Christ Annas was deposed by Rome and his son-in-law Caiaphas was put in power. Both were corrupt and involved in framing and murdering Jesus putting pressure on Pilate to crucify Him. Another Highpriest Ananias in Acts 23 was the one who had Paul struck while giving testimony and who was party to the men who made a vow to kill Paul. 'Based on the writings of the first-century historian Flavius Josephus, particularly in *Antiquities of the Jews* and *The Jewish War*, the high priesthood in the late Second Temple period was characterized by corruption, political maneuvering, and, in some cases, outright wickedness. Josephus, himself from a priestly family, often portrays the high priests of this era as arrogant, violent, and aligned with Roman interests or local tyrants rather than the religious welfare of the people.' 'Josephus presents Ananias as a prototypical corrupt high priest, notable for his greed and misuse of power. Theft of Tithes: Josephus records that Ananias had servants who would go to the threshing floors and take by force the tithes that belonged to the priests, beating anyone who refused to give them [Antiquities 20.181]. Corruption and Violence: He was notorious for his luxurious lifestyle and for using bribery to get his way with Roman authorities [Antiquities 20.205]. Tyranny: He is described as a "tyrant" who used his wealth to manipulate both the Roman procurator Felix and the Jewish population [Antiquities 20.206].' There was another group in the first century called the Essenes who separated from the religious system in Jerusalem and claimed that the priesthood was invalid. The state of the priesthood and high priesthood during the first century was in a time of crisis and instability. Imagine being a Jew, knowing you are a sinner, knowing that God has appointed that sinners need to approach God through the sacrificial system of the temple, and how reliant you were upon these priests and high priests to represent you to God. The great problem with all religion is that it is administered by sinful men. This temporary institution given by God and now being corrupted by men was crying out for replacement. The author of Hebrews, writing at a time when everyone would be very aware of the inadequacies and compromises of the present religious leaders points us to Christ as the Superior high priest.

Hebrews 4:14-16, our last section emphasized that Jesus is our 'great' high priest, who has passed through the heavens, who is in sympathy with us, and because of who, we can approach God's throne with boldness as we come to Him in prayer to help us in our need. In Hebrews 5:1-10 the AH continues with this

idea. We will see in this section that there is a comparison between the priesthood of Aaron and the priesthood of Christ, this comparison is to further underline the superiority of the priesthood of Christ over Aaron. The author has been making a detailed argument showing the superiority of Christ over all other things that might lead these hesitant and harassed Jews to depart from Christ and go back to Judaism. Christ is greater than Moses, the angels, and now Aaron. Our section falls into two parts, v1-4, the common qualifications for Aaron's priesthood, and v5-10, the greater qualifications of Christ's priesthood.

Common qualifications for Aaron's priesthood

V1-4, 'For every high priest chosen from among men is appointed to act on behalf of men in relation to God, to offer gifts and sacrifices for sins. ² He can deal gently with the ignorant and wayward, since he himself is beset with weakness. ³ Because of this he is obligated to offer sacrifice for his own sins just as he does for those of the people. ⁴ And no one takes this honor for himself, but only when called by God, just as Aaron was.' We see here a list of the general requirements for the Aaronic high priesthood. This is not an exhaustive list but a list suited to highlight Christ's greater qualifications. Several things are listed.

Firstly, the high priest must be 'chosen from among men.' Now this might seem like a redundant emphasis, but because of the incarnation of Christ, a high priest must be human. We must not pass this familiar creed by without notice. God became man; the infinite one stepped into time; the judge drew near to take the criminals condemnation; an impenetrable mystery lies in this point alone, where the second person of the Godhead, who was equal with God veiled His glory by taking upon Himself a full human nature to do what no human being could do, to live and die and resurrect to save us from our sins. It could not be an animal or an angel, but a human being.

Secondly, 'is appointed to act on behalf of men in relation to God.' Here we see that God appoints Him to stand in a particular relation, as a mediator between God and man. God in His wisdom has made it that through representatives, through covenantal arrangements, we have dealings with God. In the OT the high priest was given a peculiar role to represent Israel. His garments spoke of this representation. Remember in Exodus 28 where Moses gives directions for the high priest's garments and how God enabled artisans with spiritual gifts to make them, v3. We see the breastplate of judgement, a plate of gold with 12 stones with the names of the 12 tribes engraved on them. And the two onyx shoulder stones to which the breastplate was chained, each shoulder stone having 6 of the 12 tribes engraved on it. This was a graphic illustration of this principle of representation. When the HP went into the Holy of Holies on the Day of Atonement, he went representing the whole nation. Jesus represents us in the presence of God as the HP did in the OT.

Thirdly, 'to offer gifts and sacrifices for sins.' I agree with those who suggest that these two categories sum up all the various offerings to God. There are two basic types, peace offerings, good will offerings, and fellowship offerings; and then there are sin and guilt offerings. One type would have been for the purpose of worship and thanks, the other was to make atonement for sin. Now technically no sinner can enter the presence of God to worship Him without a sin offering. This is likely part of what explains the difference between Cain and Abel's offerings. Abel came with a blood sacrifice, covering over sin; Cain only came with a thank offering not dealing with his sin first. It is the duty of all

people to worship, but to worship outside of Christ, our sinbearer, is to offer the worship of Cain—it is rejected!

Fourthly, 'He can deal gently with the ignorant and wayward, since he himself is beset with weakness. Because of this he is obligated to offer sacrifice for his own sins just as he does for those of the people.' Any good high priest would know his own weakness and this would make him more sympathetic towards those he was representing. This on the one hand helped him, but we see that it was also a hindrance and being a sinner he had to offer sacrifices for his own sins before he was in a position to serve other sinners. This is one of the points where Jesus is not like us and able to serve better as our high priest because of it.

We should not miss a point that we can apply to ourselves here. It is important that in serving sinners, we too know our own inherent weakness and deal in gentleness with others. Gal. 6:1-2 says as much, 'Brothers, if anyone is caught in any transgression, you who are spiritual should restore him in a spirit of gentleness. Keep watch on yourself, lest you too be tempted. ² Bear one another's burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ.' If we are aware of our own sinfulness when dealing with the sins of others, we will be less quick to rush to judgement; to deal harshly with them and come down heavy on them; to gleefully expose their sins and shame them publicly, gossiping and slandering them. No, if we know what it is like to be sinful, to lose the fight against sin, to know the shame, the difficulty in reclaiming the ground we have lost to sin, of how easy it is to go from absolutely resolved not to sin, to instant fall. Knowing this about ourselves we will be more chastened in our dealings with others. The temptation to a self-righteous anger, or a response that hopes that more pain and anger and volume will somehow sanctify them, will be put away. Seeing the log in our own eye we will come humbly and gently to others. This is one of the key ways the gospel helps us to love and serve other sinners well. This is why the Pharisees who believed they could be sinless were so harsh and demanding in the applying of God's law leading to legalism, pride, hypocrisy and condemnation.

Fifthly, 'And no one takes this honor for himself, but only when called by God, just as Aaron was.' Only those who were called by God could be priests. In the OT it was only those of Aaron's line who could be high priest. So when invading authorities placed their own choice for high priest in the role, this would be against God's will. In the OT when Korah thought that all could be priests, God caused the ground to open and swallow them with their co-conspirators. We dare not appoint ourselves to such a role. This is one of the great sins of the Roman Catholic Church. They have dared to take to themselves the office and function of a priest. They offer the Mass as a bloodless sacrifice set themselves up in a role that God regulates and appoints people to. John Calvin puts a point on it by saying: 'I hence deem it as indisputable, that the Papal priesthood is spurious; for it has been framed in the workshop of men. God nowhere commands a sacrifice to be offered now to him for the expiation of sins; nowhere does he command priests to be appointed for such a purpose. While then the Pope ordains his priests for the purpose of sacrificing, the Apostle denies that they are to be counted lawful priests; they cannot therefore be such, except by some new privilege they exalt themselves above Christ, for he dared not of himself to take upon him this honor, but waited for the command of the Father.'

This can be applied still further when it comes to appointing leaders in the church today. We do not have God appointing people to office and their sons

carrying on the office as with Aaron. But we do still insist that God make the appointment not us. We do this by seeing if a man has a desire to be in office, 1 Tim. 3:1. Then we test to see if he is gifted for the role by the fruit he bears and the opportunities God brings his way. Then finally the congregation has to agree and send the man, setting him aside for such a task. Self-appointed men are a great danger to the church. If a man has been confronted by the church, and is yet insisting on his own office, avoid that man.

Greater qualifications of Christ's priesthood

V5-6, 'So also Christ did not exalt himself to be made a high priest, but was appointed by him who said to him, "You are my Son, today I have begotten you"; as he says also in another place, "You are a priest forever, after the order of Melchizedek." Having laid the foundation of the OT requirements for high priests, the author once again wants to demonstrate the greater priesthood of Christ. Beginning with the last point about needing to be appointed by God the author draws on two OT texts, both of which are messianic, prophetic, and trinitarian. The first is from Ps. 2:7, the focus here surprisingly is not the priesthood of Christ but the title Son alluding to Jesus as king. The second reference is from Ps. 110:4 and it emphasizes an eternal priesthood, a God appointed priesthood, and a priesthood in the order of Melchizedek. The fact that Melchizedek was a priest and a king, and is a priesthood distinct from the Aaronic priesthood is a matter that will be opened up in more detail later on. But for now notice that not only does God through direct Trinitarian discourse personally appoint the Son; the Son is appointed as a king and a priest. As far as being appointed by God none could be as qualified. Aaron was installed by Moses, but Jesus by the Father. These verses from the OT transcend any ordinary ceremony and point to the Covenant of Redemption in eternity past putting Christ's qualifications beyond dispute.

V7-10, 'In the days of his flesh, Jesus offered up prayers and supplications, with loud cries and tears, to him who was able to save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverence. ⁸ Although he was a son, he learned obedience through what he suffered. ⁹ And being made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation to all who obey him, ¹⁰ being designated by God a high priest after the order of Melchizedek.' The last part of Christ's qualifications amplify Christ's sympathy; sinlessness and therefore effectiveness as our Saviour. Not only are Christ's qualifications superior but His ministrations as well.

The representative work of the Son as our High priest far outstrips what human priests can perform. The finished result of Christ's work is that 'he became the source of eternal salvation.' This is something that no OT high priest could ever attain. The OT high priest was only ever a type, pointing forward to the one who alone could save us, Jesus Christ. Any effectiveness of the OT to save by grace through faith was because it was in anticipation of Christ's finished work being described here. In the OT the various sacrifices when performed by faith in God's mercy would distribute God's grace because of the future finished work of Christ. Any effectiveness of the OT types to save were because of Christ's future work not as an alternative to it. From so many different aspects of Christ's work that you could choose to look at. The author, thinking of Christ's human high priesthood zooms in on two key ways Christ's priestly work saved us.

Firstly, in v7 we are told that in the days of His flesh he prayed. The days of his flesh are describing the days of His weakness, where He shared the frailty of our

flesh. He still has a full human nature, but flesh is a way of describing the frailty of our flesh, not our glorified human condition free from suffering and death. The language of offering up prayers and supplications shows the priestly nature of Christ's work. But what priestly praying is the author referring to? Jesus prayed what is called the high priestly prayer in the upper room before He was arrested, John 17. Jesus is recorded as praying for Peter to be restored after sin. Jesus prayed all night before appointing the 12 apostles. But it is not these that are highlighted as Christ's priestly intercessions on our behalf. There can be no doubt that the OT high priest would pray for Israel. That the HP would feel the weight of their role, especially on the day of atonement. If they were not corrupt and genuinely committed to their task giving their heart to it, you can imagine that they would pray with real feeling and serve with real sacrifice. But all of that is nothing next to what the text directs our attention to. The most likely moments we should be thinking about are the Garden of Gethsemane and the cry of dereliction on the cross.

Here we see Christ's sinless perfection; His boundless compassion for sinners; and the depths of His sacrificial suffering all coming together to completely overshadow any human priests efforts. Remember the Garden, what has been called a look into hell, as Jesus having done all else now has to face His final obedience on our behalf. Three time we see Him wrestle His perfect human will to face what no human will can. The determination of His love for us, His desire to do the Father's will, facing up to the cost of suffering God's judgement day wrath upon our sins. He takes the cup of our judgement from the Father's hand and submits to it. Father not my will but yours be done. We are told that being in agony he cried out with tears, the gospels record His bloody sweat as His human frame pushed beyond the bounds of human strength is pressed so that it needs to be strengthened by angels. Not only do we see the lengths to which human nature should spend itself in submitting to the will of God no matter how difficult, not drawing back but offering itself to do His will. We also see the perfection of Christ's priestly ministry in this intercession on our behalf. For God's glory and for our salvation. The cry of dereliction on the cross, My God my God why have you forsaken me? The most heart breaking words a Christian can hear as we realise that it was for us that He suffered. Is. 53:5, 'But he was pierced for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and with his wounds we are healed.' One of the key things a priest does is intercede on our behalf, and Christ's perfect praying as our high priest is perfectly heard by the Father. I could preach a whole sermon listing everything He prayed for us, go and read John 17, but He has been heard, so whether it is our salvation, our preservation, the gift of the Holy Spirit, a deep knowledge of our salvation as being united to God and each other, these benefits are ours because of Christ's perfect priestly prayers. And then add to that the fact that He continues as an ever-living interceder on our behalf and this aspect of His priestly ministry expands beyond what we could have imagined.

But there is more. Not only does a good high priest pray, but he is holy and serves and offers sacrifices. The obedience and sacrifice of Christ meet in a way it never can in an earthly priest, for He is both offering and offerer. V8-9, 'Although he was a son, he learned obedience through what he suffered. ⁹ And being made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation to all who obey him.' The author highlights that we should marvel that the Son, the divine son, who is the promised king is the one who learned obedience. Not because of any disobedience, but through his suffering He was made perfect, or fit for priestly

service, so that by His obedience He might become the source of our salvation. The king becoming a servant and learning obedience; the giver of life and the holy judge enduring suffering that we deserve not Him. This is how we are saved. The author is of course alluding to Jesus being fully human and through His life of obedience and the obedience of what He suffered when He was crucified, that through what theologians call the active and passive obedience of Christ we are saved. By Christ rendering perfect obedience unto death and being perfected through resurrection He is the author of eternal salvation. Where we were condemned through the disobedience of a man, we are saved through the obedience of a man. And notice that we receive an eternal salvation through the finished work of Christ. We do not merely receive a temporary respite for another year, but a permanent solution to all the problems that sin caused.

But let me highlight a key phrase, 'to all who obey him.' Why put this here? Because there were some who were thinking of going back on their pledge of loyalty to Jesus as Lord, who were thinking of apostatizing and denouncing Him, whose lives would no longer be one of an obedient disciple but disloyal and unfaithful. True faith perseveres to the end; we are not saved by perseverance but by a faith that perseveres. True faith obeys. We are not saved by the obedience that faith produces as if it were meritorious, no! but the faith that says it believes and does not persevere is not true faith. The work of Christ is for those who are His not for those who deny Him, disobey Him and abandon Him.

V10 brings in a new topic that Jesus has the high priesthood of Melchizedek. This will be explored later on.

Sinners cannot approach God, they need a mediator. In the OT God provided the office of priest and high priest to prepare us for the work He would do in Christ. Christ has now come. Fully human, appointed by God, sympathetic, serving and sinless. He has served us perfectly in His praying and in His dying and has become the source of an eternal salvation. No other priests are necessary, in fact going back even to the priests of the OT would be sin. He alone is enough, cling to Him.