

## "The Perfect High Priest" Hebrews 5:1-10

March 25, 2012

5<sup>th</sup> Sunday In Lent

Often, when asking children in Sunday School classes or even in confirmation classes what a priest is and what he does, they answer, "He's like a pastor. He preaches and teaches." Their view is obviously influenced by the modern day image of a Roman Catholic priest. However, this is not the Biblical understanding of a priest. A priest in the Old Testament was an intermediary – a "go-between" – between the people of God and God Himself.

Why is there need for such a "go-between"? If someone is going between two parties, it must be that there is a gap or a separation between them. If they were united, there would be no room or need to go between them.

There is a gap, a separation between people and God. It is not there because God left us. A huge chasm exists because, ever since Adam and Eve's rebellion, people have left God. Sin causes the great gap between us and God. We are born apart from God because we inherit Adam and Eve's rebellion. We increase that gap when we fail to keep the Law of God perfectly – whether it be doing something bad or wrong or failing to do something that is good and right.

Why should this concern us? Many people think they can live just fine apart from God. Sometimes, we live wantonly breaking God's law as if it didn't matter. Left by itself, the gap would continue to grow and grow and eventually would become permanent. That's what hell is: being eternally separated from God. That's what makes it so bad. All the talk about eternal fire, eternal darkness, and weeping and gnashing of teeth are weak ways of describing how horrible it is to be apart from God.

So how can we deal with sin and narrow the gap? What do people do with sin these days? I fear most people simply ignore it and try not to think about it – "out of sight, out of mind". Many try to hide sin by redefining what's right and wrong so there is no sin. For example, many things today in the area of sexual behavior – premarital sex, living together outside of marriage, divorce, and

homosexuality – which, in the past, were universally condemned as wrong, have been redefined as good and right things. That’s an easy way of dealing with sin: make it non-existent. For those people who ignore or hide sin, there is no hope.

Those who feel the effect of sin in their hearts through the God-given gift of guilt deal with sin in a different way. They may hope that God simply ignores or forgets their sin. They may try to “make up” for their sin by avoiding wrong or trying to do more good. Maybe that’s your story. You ignore sin or hope that God simply forgets your sin. Maybe your life is one of bargaining with God, hoping that your religious and moral behavior will somehow offset your sinful behavior.

But I’ve got news for you. A holy and righteous God can not and will not ignore sin or forget sin. A gap between Himself and us will not go away simply because we pretend that gap doesn’t exist. Trying to close the gap between us and God by doing more good works is like a motorcycle rider trying to jump the Grand Canyon on his bike. Whether he has a powerful hog or a moped, he doesn’t have nearly enough power to make it across. In the same way, whether you are a recognized moral person like Mother Theresa or an average Joe trying to do his or her best, you cannot close the gap with God by your actions.

So, God, the offended party in this separation, came up with a solution to close the gap: the priesthood. Our text describes the solution: “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 sin.” God chose men from the line of Aaron to serve as priests. As intermediaries, they (and especially the high priest) would be given the authority by God to act on behalf of the people.

And what would the priest do on behalf of the people? Offer gifts and sacrifices for sins. Spotless, innocent victims - sheep, goats, and oxen – would be put to death and burned on an altar as payment for the offenses against God. The priests would bring the sacrifices into the temple to God. And they would bring the forgiveness of God out of the temple to the people. This would reconcile the people to God and close the gap.

But there are a few weaknesses in this system. First of all, there was a problem with the priest himself. He was not inherently worthy to present such sacrifices for the people because he himself was one of them – a sinner. Our text says, “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.”

Secondly, there was also a problem with the sacrifices themselves. Does anyone seriously think that animal sacrifices have any sort of cosmic significance? How could the blood of animals really and truly forgive sins? And what about now – 2,000 years after the temple was permanently destroyed, putting a halt to all animal sacrifices? Where is forgiveness to be found? And what about us who are not part of the Jewish nation and never were part of the sacrificial system? How are we to be forgiven? If this was God’s plan, then it seems to be flawed and we and everyone else who lives are in trouble.

The Jewish sacrificial system *was* indeed God’s plan. But it was not flawed because it was never intended to be an end in itself. It was a plan intended to point to a final fulfillment with a perfect high priest and a sufficient sacrifice for sin, once and for all.

Our text tells about this perfect high priest. It is Jesus Christ Himself. The Son of God did not choose to be high priest, but He, too, was appointed by His Father. He is not a priest after the order of Aaron who served a short time and died. Christ is a priest forever after the order of Melchizedek. Melchizedek is a shadowy figure from the Old Testament who appears to Abram, blesses him, and then fades from sight as if he had no beginning or no end. Melchizedek is both the king of Salem (the city of Jerusalem before Israel occupied it) and also priest of the Most High God. He is a foreshadowing of Christ because he is both king and priest without beginning or end.

Christ is the perfect high priest because He is like us when it counts. As the author of Hebrews said earlier in his book, “Since the children have flesh and blood, he [Christ] too shared in their humanity.” (Heb. 2:14) He is no frail human being who serves temporarily. He is the eternal

Son of God. This makes Him the perfect intermediary between God and man because He is both God and man.

Christ is also the perfect high priest because He is *not* like us when it counts. As the author of Hebrews says in the chapter before the text, “For we do not have a high priest who is unable to empathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are—yet he did not sin.” (Heb. 4:15) He does not share our sinful nature nor does He have sin for which to account. That makes Him able to offer the perfect sacrifice, untainted by His own sin.

And what would that perfect sacrifice be? What could possibly satisfy God’s judgment against all sin for all people of all time? The victim would have to be human, and not animals like the Old Testament sacrifices, because it was humankind that stood guilty before God. The victim could not be just symbolically innocent as sacrificial animals but truly innocent and perfectly holy. The victim’s worth would have to be sufficient to make payment for all sinners. There is only one victim that fits the bill.

Jesus would be both the high priest offering the sacrifice and the sacrifice that was offered. As one hymn puts it, “Offered was He for greatest and for least, Himself the victim and Himself the priest.” Jesus offered up Himself to die as the perfect sacrifice for all sins.

But this perfect sacrifice was not an easy sacrifice. We think that the scourging, beating, and crucifying of Jesus were the hard parts of the sacrifice. They were relatively easy compared with the chief part of the sacrifice. Jesus would not only have to die, but He would have to be damned – separated from His Father with Whom He had been one from all eternity. Knowing this part of the process, in the Garden of Gethsemane, “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,” our text says. This was going to be excruciatingly difficult with suffering beyond our ability to even comprehend.

Our text goes on, “Although he was a son, he learned obedience through what he suffered.” Jesus’ ultimate request was not to be freed from suffering but, “Not my will, but yours be done.” And

the Father's will was done. Jesus obeyed and suffered. He was separated from His Father and cried out, "My God, my God, why have You forsaken me?" He did everything necessary as the great High Priest and the great sacrifice. He said, "It is finished," and He died.

Jesus beat sin, sin, death and hell that day for you, for me, and for everyone who has lived or ever will live. It was the perfect and all encompassing sacrifice which was ratified by Jesus' resurrection three days later. Our text says, "And being made perfect (the word here is the same one used by Jesus when He said, "It is finished!") he became the source of eternal salvation to all who obey him."

We have a perfect and complete High Priest. We have a perfect and complete Sacrifice for all of our sins. We need no more intermediaries or "go betweens" between us and God. We no longer have to depend upon an imperfect human agent. We never have to wonder if "enough" has been done for the forgiveness of our sins or our salvation. It is finished! The all encompassing sacrifice has been made. The gap has been closed. The chasm has been healed.

The Lutheran church made the conscious decision to not call her clergy "priests." Instead, Lutheran clergy are called pastors. Pastors make no sacrifices for the people. Like shepherds who feed the sheep, pastors delight in feeding their flocks with the benefits of Christ's sacrifice: forgiveness, life, and salvation through Holy Baptism, Holy Absolution, and Holy Communion. We need no more priests. We need no more sacrifices. The perfect priest and the perfect sacrifice have come and they are one and the same: Jesus Christ. Amen.