



Better Than the High Priests

Hebrews 5:1-10

1. Taken from Men (verses 1-3, 7-10)

2. Appointed by God (verses 4-6)

In our exposition of the book of Hebrews, we come this morning to chapter 5. As we come to this chapter, we face a bit of a difficulty. It's a difficulty that we always face when digging into the Scriptures. (Though sometimes, it's a greater difficulty than at other times). One of the great challenges of Bible interpretation has to do with the fact that the Scriptures were written in a time different than ours to those who were living in places different than ours. To understand the Scriptures, to some extent, we need to understand first of all what it meant to the original hearers.

As we come to Hebrews, chapter 5 this morning, this difficulty is square in front of us. We are not Jews, living in the first century. We don't live in their culture. We don't have the same heritage. The sights and smells of America today are far different than the sights and smells of Israel shortly after the days of Jesus. We know little of temple life. We have never walked into the outer court with the throngs of people. We have never been stopped before the inner court, not being allowed to enter, as we are not priests. We have never seen a priest dressed in his priestly garments. We have never heard a priest offer up his prayers to God. We have never experienced the drama of the Day of Atonement, when the high priest would enter the holy place and atone for our sins.

We know little of the many sacrifices offered to God. We have never approached a vendor to purchase an animal that would soon be slaughtered for our sins. We have never heard the sounds of the animals being offered as sacrifice. We have never seen the life go out of the lamb, whose throat has just been slit. We haven't seen the blood-stained garments of the priests. We haven't stepped into the puddles of blood left by the animals. We know little of the reality of the Jewish feasts in Jerusalem. We have never walked through the crowded streets on feast day. We have never tasted the traditional foods nor sang the traditional songs.

Now, that's not to say that we haven't read much about them or heard much about them. Nor is it to say that we haven't thought much about them. But, we haven't experienced them like those of the first century. They saw the temple. They saw the priests. They saw the sacrifices. They smelled flesh being burned. They saw the crowds during the days of the festivals. They enjoyed the feasts.

In fact, some of them had an inside track on all of these experiences. In Acts 6:7, we read that "a great many of the priests were becoming obedient to the faith." These priests knew all about their rituals and their customs because they had performed them for many, many years. But, now, they were out of a job, as they had embraced Jesus as the fulfillment of everything that they had known before. We know so little compared with what they knew. We have experienced nothing in comparison with them. And so, this morning, as we think about these things, all we can do is begin to understand.

But, the good news is this: all that we need to know is contained for us in the Scriptures. We don't need to know more than what is written. Our text in Hebrews 5 addresses the qualifications of the high priest. In so doing, it demonstrates that Jesus is better than any of the high priests. The first half of our text speaks about the High Priest (verses 1-4). The last half of our text speaks about Christ (verses 5-10). In the first half of the text, the writer will put forth two qualifications of every high priest. In the last half of the text, the writer will take these qualifications and demonstrate that Jesus has not only fulfilled each of these qualities, but has surpassed every one of the high priests in this task. As is appropriate, my message this morning is entitled "Better Than the High Priests," because this text demonstrates that Jesus truly is "Better Than The High Priests."

Until this point in the book of Hebrews, high priests have been mentioned three times. The first time was in 2:17, "Therefore He had to be made like His brethren in all things, so that He might become a merciful and faithful high priest." The second was in 3:1, "Therefore, holy brethren, partakers of a heavenly calling, consider Jesus, the Apostle and High Priest of our confession." The third was in 4:14, "Therefore, since we have a great high priest who has passed through the heaven, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold fast our confession." Each of these times, it is Jesus who is identified as a high priest. But now, in chapter 5, we delve into what a high priest actually is.

He is ...

1. Taken from Men (verses 1-3, 7-10).

Hebrews 5:1-3

For every high priest taken from among men is appointed on behalf of men in things pertaining to God, in order to offer both gifts and sacrifices for sins; he can deal gently with the ignorant and misguided, since he himself also is beset with weakness; and because of it he is obligated to offer sacrifices for sins, as for the people, so also for himself.

These words paint the picture of what a priest must be. Priests cannot be angels. Priests cannot be special spiritual beings. Priests must be men, because they are man's representatives before God. And as representatives, they must be like those they represent.

We know this from the way our government works. By popular vote, we elect people to represent us in our government. For them to represent us, they need to be like us. They need to be residents in our area. This is true on the state level. This is true on the national level. Most of us live in Illinois' 16th congressional district. Our national representative is Donald Manzullo. He lives in our district (Egan) and represents our cause in Washington, D.C. For most of us, our state representative is either Charles Jefferson (who lives in Rockford), or Ron Wait (who lives in Belvidere), or Dave Winters (who lives in Shirland). They all live here in northern Illinois and represent our cause in Springfield.

In the same way, the role of a high priest is to represent people before God. To represent them, he must be like them. Verse 1 indicates that a priest must be a man, taken from among men. Now, His work of representing people before the Lord consisted of offering "both gifts and sacrifices for sins." I don't believe that there is a discernible difference in these words. Both "gifts" and "sacrifices" represent the various sacrifices offered to God. This is the main role of a priest--to offer sacrifices.

The types of sacrifices were varied. They offered burnt offerings (Leviticus 1). They offered grain offerings (Leviticus 2). They offered peace offerings (Leviticus 3). They offered sin offerings (Leviticus 4). They offered guilt offerings (Leviticus 5).

When people came to confess their sins, they brought a sacrifice for the priest to offer up on their behalf. Depending upon the type of sin committed, and depending upon the financial ability of those committing the sin, the priest would take the bull or the goat or the lamb or the turtledoves or the pigeons and offer them up in smoke before the LORD to atone for the sin. The number of sacrifices offered by the priest was many. Every morning, they offered a lamb as a sacrifice (Numbers 28:4). Every evening, they offered a lamb as a sacrifice (Numbers 28:4). Every Sabbath day, they offered two male lambs as a sacrifice (Numbers 28:9). On the first day of each month, they offered a sacrifice: Two bulls, one ram, seven male lambs, and a tenth of an ephah of fine flour (Numbers 28:11). On the fifteenth day of the first month, they were to offer more sacrifices: Two bulls, one ram, seven male lambs, along with a grain offering (Numbers 28:19). At the beginning of the feast of weeks, they were to offer up the same sacrifice: Two bulls, one ram, seven male lambs, along with a grain offering (Numbers 28:27).

Particularly, on the seventh month, there were many sacrifices to be offered up. Beginning on the first day of the month, there were sacrifices. On the tenth day there were sacrifices. On the fifteenth day there were sacrifices, which continued for another eight days. Such was the life of a priest. Such was the life of a high priest. He offered up "both gifts and sacrifices".

In verse 2, we see one of the reasons why he was taken from among men is so that he can sympathize with us. Verse 2 indicates that a high priest "can deal gently with the ignorant and misguided, since he himself also is beset with weakness" (verse 2). As he offered up these sacrifices, he wasn't to be cold and mechanical, merely going through the motions. No, his heart was to be in his work. He was to have a heart for those who sinned.

I love the word here translated, "deal gently." In your version, it might say, "have compassion" (KJV, NKJV). The word really is the combination of two words, "metrio" meaning "in the middle" and "pathein" meaning "to have passion." Literally, he is to have passions and feelings that come between God and man. He has to walk this line between anger and apathy. He is not to be angry at them for their sin. Neither is he to be to the other extreme and apathetic toward the sin. Rather, he is right in the middle with a healthy, compassionate concern for the guilty party, while keeping in mind God's hatred of sin.

As an aside, such is a quality that must exist among any spiritual leader. On the one hand, spiritual leaders must be able exhort and call people to holiness, knowing of the wrath of God that comes upon those who reject the LORD. Yet, on the other hand, spiritual leaders must be able to sympathize with those in the congregation who are trapped in their sin. This is why Paul said that an overseer in the church must be "gentle" (1 Tim. 3:3).

Now, at the time of Jesus, the high priests weren't this way. When Jesus was being tried before Caiaphas, who was the high priest at the time (John 18:13), He encountered anything but a gentle, compassionate man. He had an agenda to destroy Jesus, regardless of what was true. He believed that "it was expedient for one man to die on behalf of the people" (John 18:14). In other words, to keep the peace, Caiaphas, the high priest, was happy to find a scapegoat, regardless of the cost. He wasn't gentle and compassionate with Jesus. Nor was the high priest that Paul encountered. When Paul began his testimony by asserting his clear conscience before God, "the high priest Ananias commanded those standing beside him to strike him on the mouth" (Acts 23:2). It showed that this Ananias wasn't really intent upon listening to Paul and dealing gently with him. Rather, this high priest had his own agenda that he was going to see happen.

But, such is the key to this text. Hebrews 5 isn't so much describing the high priests that were present in the days of Christ. Rather, they are describing the high priests as the law calls them to be. Hebrews 5 is describing the ideal high priest. But, as we shall see, Jesus is even better than an ideal high priest.

The high priest must be taken from among men, appointed on behalf of men, able to deal gently with wayward sinners, and aware of his own weakness. Look at verse 3, "and because of it he is obligated to offer sacrifices for sins, as for the people, so also for himself." These words have eye to the activities of the high priest during the Day of Atonement (as recorded in Leviticus 16).

Throughout the year, priests offered up many sacrifices for sinners who had come to confess their sins before the LORD. But, all of these sacrifices took place in the outer tabernacle. The priests never went into the holy of holies except on the Day of Atonement. This took place on the seventh month and the tenth day of the month (Lev. 16:29). On that day, God had very specifically described what would take place. First of all, the priest would wash himself with water (Lev. 16:4). Then, he was to put on the holy garments. As he came before the people, he was to take a bull and slaughter it before all the people (Lev. 16:11). I

According to Jewish literature of the 1st century, when he laid his hands upon the head of the bull, he would say, "O God, I have committed iniquity and transgressed and sinned before thee, I and my house and the children of Aaron, thy holy people. O God, forgive, I pray, the iniquities and transgressions and sins which I have committed and transgressed and sinned before thee, I and my house." ^[1] He was to take the blood of the bull (along with a firepan of coals and two handfuls of finely ground sweet incense), and bring it inside the veil (Lev. 16:12).

First of all, he was to make a cloud of incense, which covered the mercy seat (Lev. 16:13). Then, he was to take the blood of the bull and sprinkle the blood with his finger seven times upon the mercy seat (Lev. 16:14). Then, he was to come out of the veil and back to the people. That was for his own sins (Lev. 16:11).

When he came out, he would slaughter a goat in front of all the people (Lev. 16:15). Taking the blood of the goat, he would repeat the process, sprinkling the blood of the goat upon the mercy seat seven times (Lev. 16:19). This was for the sins of the people (Lev. 16:15).

The high priest does this because he's weak, like all of us. The high priest wasn't a super-man. Sure, he played a special role in the life of a nation. Sure, he was very important to the people. But, he was a regular man, taken from among men. As they say, "The best of men are men at best."

Let's look now at the second qualification for a high priest. Not only must he be Taken from Men (verses 1-3, 7-10). But, he also must be ... 2. Appointed by God (verses 4-6).

You see this particularly in verse 4,

Hebrews 5:4

And no one takes the honor to himself, but receives it when he is called by God, even as Aaron was.

The point here is simply this: nobody says, "I want to be a high-priest when I grow up." It's not that way. Rather, you need to be appointed by God to obtain this post. The case in point is Aaron. It wasn't Aaron's idea to become a high priest. The initiative was all of God. God told Moses to take Aaron and appoint him as a high priest. You can read about this in Exodus 28:1.

Down through the history of Israel, those who sought out the priesthood for themselves were quickly done in. When Korah and his gathering of 250 people rose up against Moses, they said, "Why do you exalt yourselves above the assembly of the LORD?" (Num. 16:3). The ground quickly swallowed them up. When Saul took it upon himself to offer the sacrifice, he said, "Bring to me the burnt offering and the peace offering" (1 Sam. 13:9). Upon offering the sacrifice, Samuel came to him and announced "Your kingdom shall not endure" (1 Sam. 13:14). When Uzziah, the king, became strong, he became proud and acted corruptly. "He entered the temple of the LORD to burn incense on the altar of incense" (2 Chron. 26:16). Leprosy broke out on his forehead while he still had the censer in his hand (2 Chron. 26:19). It was not for man to appoint the high priest. He was to be appointed by God.

And now, let's turn the corner. We have seen the qualifications for the human high priest. Now let's look to the qualifications of Christ. As we come to these verses, I feel like a broken record, because so often in my exposition of the book of Hebrews, the message has been the same. You give me something, and I'll top it. I'll show you how Jesus is better. You give me angels, I'll show you how Jesus is better (1:4-2:18). You give me Moses, I'll show you how Jesus is better (3:1-6). You give me Joshua, I'll show you how Jesus is better (4:8). This morning, you have given me Aaron and the long lineage of high priests. And so, I'll show you how Jesus is better! He too was both Taken from Men and Appointed by God. But, in each of these instances, Jesus tops the high priests. His humanity was a perfect humanity. His appointment by God was to a greater priesthood.

Now, the author of Hebrews, in typical Hebrew style, works from backwards to forwards. First of all, he demonstrates that Jesus was appointed by God. Now, before we actually look at the ways that Jesus is better than the high priests, I want to comment on the relationship of Jesus and the Old Testament. When God was thinking about sending Jesus into the world, He didn't say to Himself, "Hmm, how am I going to communicate to the world how great my son is? How are they going to know His role? Ohhh, I've got it! Why didn't I think of it earlier? The Jews know of sacrifices. The Jews know of priests. This is perfect! I'll send Jesus as a sacrifice. I'll tell the Jews that they are to esteem Jesus as a high priest. Yeah, that's what I'll do. It will work perfectly."

No. That's all backwards. When God thought of sending Jesus, He said to Himself, "How will they understand my Son? I know. I will establish a system of sacrifice to put in their minds the idea that Jesus is a sacrifice. I will establish this high priest who comes before me on behalf of the people. And so, when my perfect Son comes, they will understand." And so, God set up this system and waited 1400 years, so that we would understand Jesus when He came. [\[2\]](#)

Look there at verse 5, ...

Hebrews 5:5-6

So also Christ did not glorify Himself so as to become a high priest, but He who said to Him, "You are my son, today I have begotten you"; just as He says also in another passage, "You are a priest forever according to the order of Melchizedek."

Here, we see two Old Testament quotes (you can probably see them there in your Bible). Both of them are prefaced by the statement, "So also Christ did not glorify Himself so as to become a high priest." In this way, Jesus is just like the other high priests of the Old Testament. He didn't appoint Himself to this position. Rather, it was the Lord who appointed him.

Whereas Korah, Saul, and Uzziah had exalted themselves to perform the priestly role, Jesus was exalted by His heavenly Father. And this makes all the difference in the world. Jesus said in John 8:54, "If I glorify Myself, My glory is nothing." But, then, He continues, "It is my Father who glorifies Me!" And as God has glorified Jesus, that means everything! His glory far exceeds that of the high priests. Their appointment came from a line other priests. Their appointment came from other men. But, Jesus was appointed to the high priest by a decree from God Himself. Hebrews 7:28 says that "The Law appoints men as high priests who are weak, but the word of the oath, which came after the Law, appoints a Son, made perfect forever." And that's the point here: the appointment to the role of high priest by the law appoints weak men. But the divine appointment appoints a Son, who is perfect forever.

We see the declaration of sonship coming in verse 5, "You are my son, today I have begotten you." This quote comes from Psalm 2:7, and designates that Jesus isn't merely any other priest. He is the Son of God. He wasn't the son of Levi. He was the Son of God, which actually presents a problem. How could Jesus be a high priest if He wasn't from the tribe of Levi? But, the Old Testament Scriptures are clear. The priesthood of Jesus is a different priesthood. It's not a Levitical priesthood. Look at verse 6, ...

Hebrews 5:6

just as He says also in another passage, "You are a priest forever according to the order of Melchizedek."

The priesthood of Jesus is a forever priesthood. It's based upon a different order. It's based upon the order of Melchizedek, which makes it better. Hebrews 7:11 explains, "Now if perfection was through the Levitical priesthood (for on the basis of it the people received the Law), what further need was there for another priest to arise according to the order of Melchizedek, and not be designated according to the order of Aaron?" The Levitical priesthood was imperfect. That's why there was need for another order of priests. That's why the Old Testament prophesied of another priest coming according to the order of Melchizedek.

Now, I would love to take the time to think about the priesthood of Melchizedek. But, that comes in chapter 7. Suffice it here to say that God's appointment of Jesus to the priesthood was better than that of Aaron or any of the other high priests because it came with an oath.

But, not only was Jesus Appointed by God, He was also Taken from Men (verses 1-3, 7-10). And we see that His humanity was far greater than any of the high priests. Here's why. He suffered greatly (according to verse 7). His suffering brought about a perfect obedience (verses 8). His suffering has given us eternal salvation (verse 9).

Let's look at His suffering.

Hebrews 5:7

In the days of His flesh, He offered up both prayers and supplications with loud crying and tears to the One able to save Him from death, and He was heard because of His piety.

Jesus took on flesh. He was human like all of us. He was every bit a man as much as any high priest that was ever appointed to his post. Verse 7 takes us back to the garden of Gethsemane, when Jesus was facing death. He was facing a dreadful death, a torturous death upon a cross. And though Jesus had separated Himself a good distance from His disciples, they still heard Him pray, "My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from Me; yet not as I will, but as You will" (Matt. 26:39). Perhaps never was there a prayer that was offered with so much passion. Luke tells us that Jesus sweat drops of blood (Luke 22:44).

And now imagine Jesus as our high priest. Not only can He sympathize with us, not only can He deal gently with us, but He also knows how to pray. He prays pleading for the impossible, that there might be some way out of His coming death which had to take place according to the prophecies. He prays to a Father who listens to Him. At the end of verse 7 we read that He was heard because of His piety. His heavenly Father listened to Him and answered His prayer. Oh, He didn't answer the first part of His prayer ("Let this cup pass from Me.") because it was impossible. But, He did answer the second part of the prayer ("Yet not as I will, but as You will.") God sent an angel to strengthen Him (Luke 22:43). God sustained Him upon the cross. God always hears the prayers of Jesus. I'm so thankful that we have such a high priest!

Many people who come to Christ out of Roman Catholicism inevitably have this discussion with their family: "If you turn your back on the church, how will you have access to God? You need a priest!" Often the answer comes, "Oh, I don't need a priest. I can go directly to God through Jesus." Now in some measure this is true! But, the fact that is so often missed is this--we do need a priest! And, we do have a priest! We have a great high priest! We have the greatest high priest in Jesus. Why would we want anything else?

Now, note the reason why Jesus was heard. He was heard "because of His piety" (verse 7). Unlike many high priests down through the ages, Jesus walked in perfect godliness. He was a thoroughly righteous man, who obeyed His Father in all things. We see how righteous Jesus was in verses 8 and 9, ...

Hebrews 5:8-9

Although He was a Son, He learned obedience from the things which He suffered. And having been made perfect, He became to all those who obey Him the source of eternal salvation,

Verse 8 tells us that Jesus "learned obedience" through suffering. We all know that Jesus suffered. But, what we often fail to realize is that Jesus learned obedience through that suffering. It's not that Jesus was disobedient before, and now He learned to obey. But, rather, in eternity past, in heavenly bliss with the Father, there was no suffering, and therefore, little testing for His obedience. But, having suffered, Jesus learned (or experienced) obedience by obeying His heavenly Father.

During the days of His ministry, Jesus said, "My food is to do the will of Him who sent Me and to accomplish His work" (John 4:34). He said, "I have come down from heaven, not to do My own will, but the will of Him who sent Me" (John 6:28). That's why He could pray in the garden, "Not my will, but Thine." Against all his human desire, Jesus subjected Himself to the will of His Father. "Not My will, but Yours be done" (Matt. 26:39). Even when it meant suffering. Even when it meant becoming a sacrifice, Himself.

The priesthood of Jesus is far different than any other priest of the Old Testament. They always took an animal and sacrificed it upon the altar. But, Jesus was different. "He offered up Himself" for our sins (Heb. 7:27). He became the perfect sacrifice for our sins. The animal sacrifices could only cover up our sins. But, Jesus took away our sins (Heb. 10:4). His sacrifice was the last sacrifice that we would ever

need. "We have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all" (Heb. 10:10). Do you believe it? The book of Hebrews comes back to it again and again. Jesus is better!

The result of His suffering is that Jesus was "made perfect" (verse 9). This is what sets Jesus apart from all of the other high priests. This is what makes Him "better." None of them could claim the badge of "perfection." But, Jesus could.

We saw last week how Jesus was "tempted in all things as we are, yet without sin" (Hebrews 4:15). Now, again, it's not that Jesus was somehow flawed before His incarnation, but had His flaws removed through His life on earth. That's not it at all. Rather, the idea here is that Jesus matured into perfection through His life - much like a plant blossoms into its flower in the springtime or a boy comes into maturity. In doing so, God declares him to be "a high priest according to the order of Melchizedek," which is what verse 10 says. Again, we'll hold off on Melchizedek this morning because of chapter 7.

But, as I bring my message to a close this morning, I want to focus our attention upon the end of verse 9. Up until this point, the text has contained no application. It has been attempting to demonstrate how Jesus is "Better Than the High Priests." But, we see a clear point of application here in verse 9, "He became to all those who obey Him the source of eternal salvation." Now, this might strike you a bit strange, because you have heard so often before that salvation is "by grace ... [and] through faith" that you are saved. "Not as a result of works, so that no one may boast" (Eph. 2:8-9). It's "not on the basis of deeds which we have done in righteousness" that we are saved, rather, it's "by His mercy" and by His mercy alone that we are saved (Titus 3:5). So, why do we read here that "He became to all who obey Him the source of eternal salvation"?

Here's the thing: those who know and love His mercy will obey. You don't throw out obedience, merely because we are saved by grace. As Paul says, "How shall we who died to sin still live in it?" (Rom. 6:2). We can't. We are compelled by an inner love to obey the Lord.

Now, this doesn't mean that we obey perfectly. Nor does it mean that we must obey in order to earn His favor. But, the fruit of a life that knows the Lord will be a pattern of obedience. And so, I ask you this morning, how's your life? Are you obeying Jesus? Are you seeking to conform your life to His? Do you count Him as your highest treasure? If so, then you can rejoice in the eternal salvation that God has given to you. Your obedience is a sign of your faith.

One of the things that we can easily miss in our exposition of the book of Hebrews is how these things would have been received by the original hearers. That Jesus was better than the high priests was a big deal for them. For generations, the people of Israel had looked upon the work of the high priest as their biggest hope before the Lord. They knew the significance of the Day of the Atonement. They felt their sin and they knew that they needed redemption. All of their hope was pinned upon him. And now, the message comes that Jesus is better than the high priests? High priests are no longer needed? Is this really the case?

None of us came in this place this morning debating the merits of the high priest against the merits of Jesus Christ. We have never even seen a high priest. The high priest isn't even on our radar screen, like it would have been for those of the first century who not only had seen a high priest, but had placed their hope in him. But here's the point of application for us this morning. We may not place the high priest over here on the right and Jesus over here on the left and think, OK, now, which is greater. But, we may have our high priestly substitutes that we obey instead. Jesus vs. worldly friends. Jesus vs. money. Jesus vs. reputation. Jesus vs. pleasure. Jesus vs. technology. Jesus vs. a big house. (or any number of things in your life).

The question before us this morning is this: Is Jesus your all in all? Are there any rivals? In the days of Jesus, the high priest was a rival to many. The Christian life is all about renouncing everything. Jesus said, "If anyone comes to Me, and does not hate his own father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters, yes, and even his own life, he cannot be My disciple. Whoever does not carry his own cross and come after Me cannot be My disciple" (Luke 14:26-27). Paul said it this way, "I count all things to be loss in view of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them but rubbish so that I may gain Christ, and may be found in Him, not having a righteousness of my own derived from the Law, but that which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness which comes from God on the basis of faith" (Philippians 3:8-9).

When you look at it from any angle and any perspective, Jesus will always be better. Oh, Church family, run to Him!

This sermon was delivered to Rock Valley Bible Church on February 14, 2010 by Steve Brandon.
For more information see www.rvbc.cc.

[1] Expositors Bible Commentary, Volume 12, p. 47 quoting M Yoma 4:2

[2] I'm thankful to John Piper who pointed this out in his message on Hebrews 4:14-5:3 given on September 15, 1996. I found it very helpful.