

## Jesus Is Our Perfect High Priest

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Sermon Text: Hebrews 5:7-9

Tonight we focus on Jesus as our High Priest. But is it possible that he is overqualified for this role? After all, Hebrews chapter 5 begins by saying the high priest was supposed to be able to relate to the people he served. A week ago, we read the opening verses of Hebrews where Jesus is declared to be the Son of God. Jesus is certainly great. But is Jesus too great to relate to the sinners he is supposed to represent? That was a question the first readers of Hebrews would have had on their minds. The writer knew it, and he responded in the verses we just read. He assured his readers that Jesus is not only the Great High Priest, but **he is also the perfect High Priest.**

### I. Jesus was perfect already in the way he prayed.

It seems strange to read this little section of Hebrews 5 and hear the author say that Jesus was “made perfect,” doesn’t it? Was there a time when Jesus was not perfect? Obviously, that is not what the author to the Hebrews is saying. The author begins these verses by talking about Jesus during his time on earth. When he talks about how Jesus “offered up prayers and petitions with fervent cries and tears to the one who could save him from death,” he is taking us back to the incident in the Garden of Gethsemane we heard about in the reading of the Passion History a moment ago. He is overwhelmed with sorrow, he cries human tears. Clearly Jesus is true man with body and soul.

But the writer has not lost sight of what he wrote at the beginning of this book, that Jesus is “the radiance of God’s glory.” Here, the writer proclaims the same truth—that Jesus, true man, is the Son of God.

We see that tonight in the garden, don’t we? Look at the anguish that Jesus was suffering. Jesus knew exactly what lay ahead of him. The hour had come for the Lamb of God to take away the sin of the world. What a burden the Father laid when he laid the guilt of the world’s sin on his Son! Think of the crushing burden of guilt and shame the knowledge of just one sin can lay on our consciences. But the Savior, driven into the dust by the guilt of every sin, the haunting voice of a billion consciences, and above all the horrible prospect of enduring the white hot anger of a holy God while hanging on a shameful cross—he rose from the ground in the garden, carrying that burden, and walked out to meet his betrayer and the mob with him. Truly, Jesus in his human flesh and blood is the Son of God.

So Jesus is the perfect High Priest—the God-man who is perfectly able to represent mankind before God. When the angel Gabriel came to announce to Mary that she would give birth to the Savior, he referred to Jesus as “the holy one.” Jesus was holy already at the time of his birth. At his baptism and at Transfiguration, God the Father said of Jesus, “With him I am well pleased.” Jesus is indeed the perfect High Priest—perfect already in the way he prayed.

But if Jesus is true God in human flesh, how can he not know that there was no other way for a sinful world to be set free from eternity in hell? And how can the writer of Hebrews talk about Jesus as someone who learned obedience? The answer to those questions is that *he humbled himself*. In that humble state, which extended from his conception in Mary’s womb to

his burial, Jesus willingly gave up the full and constant use of his divine power and glory. Jesus, who created angels, humbled himself to the point that he was strengthened by the angels he created. It is this Jesus, God's Son in his humble humanity, who is our perfect High Priest.

Look at him, offering up "prayers and petitions with fervent cries and tears to the one who could save him from death." And yet he never rebelled. Looking into the cup of suffering and woe that was assigned for him to drink, he found its contents revolting, just as a child might recoil from taking some icky-tasting medicine. Though the child may rebel and push the spoon away, spilling its contents and making a mess, Jesus did not rebel; in reverent submission he obeyed his heavenly Father. Not a hint of resistance, not a whisper of complaint—as he prayed, he ended each prayer the same way: "Not my will but yours be done." And so his prayer was heard by God. As we follow the Savior who prayed so fervently and see that the path led to cruel scourging and a cruel cross, we might assume the opposite—that the Savior was not heard. But he was. In reverent submission, he was willing to carry out the will of God to save sinful humankind, and strengthened by angels, he did the Father's will and drank the cruel cup—and three days later, he was saved from death as God raised him back to life in glorious victory over the grave.

Glory be to Jesus for being our perfect High Priest! Why? Because he prayed in reverent submission for us sinners, who do not always live in reverent submission to God's will. We don't always say and pray, "Father, your will be done." Like the sheep the prophet Isaiah talked about, we sinners go astray and we turn to our own way. We do it with our time and money and energy: we spend the blessings God gives us not to serve God and others, but we use our gifts in our own selfish, self-serving way. If things go wrong in life we easily give in to grumbling and complaining. How hard it is even for us to say, "Father, your will be done." Thus our Great High Priest prayed, "Your will be done." Yes, Jesus was our perfect High Priest already when he prayed, but as our reading says,

## **II. Jesus was made perfect by the way he obeyed.**

If it's hard to say to God, "Your will be done," imagine how hard it is to actually do God's will. That's the point the writer is making when he says, "He learned obedience from what he suffered." The writer is pointing us from the Garden of Gethsemane where the Savior says, "Your will be done," to Calvary where God's will was done. There, Jesus was led like a lamb to the slaughter and, as a sheep before the shearers is silent, so he did not open his mouth. In that way, he learned obedience: obedience went from a theoretical thing in Jesus' mind to a very practical thing that involved thorns and scourge; spikes and scorn; crucifixion, death and the grave. Marriage is an example of this. It is one thing to promise on your wedding day to love each other, but it is another thing to do it every day, especially when it involves making sacrifices. That's when you learn what obedience is—through painful self-denial and sacrifice. Sadly and honestly, though, we don't always put our promises into practice—we say "I will," but don't always do God's will—whether it's a promise made to parents, a confirmation vow, or a wedding pledge to love and cherish. Though we often promise to obey God, we don't always do it.

But Christ did. He said, "I will" and he did. He went to the cross and paid for our broken promises to God plus the heartache and tears we've caused those we love by not keeping our promises. He endured the cross, scorning its shame. That's what it means when we read of Jesus, "*And, once made perfect*," he became the source of eternal salvation." The word translated as "perfect" in the phrase "made perfect" comes from the same root in Greek as the word "finished," which Jesus shouted from the cross when he fulfilled his heavenly Father's will and completed his rescue mission. If Jesus had only prayed perfectly in our place but failed to obey perfectly in our place—or to say it another way, if Jesus had lived perfectly but refused to suffer and die for sinners—he would not have been the perfect Savior. His rescue mission would not have been complete—he would not have finished his work. Our sins would still be crying out to the just judge in heaven for punishment. But Jesus finished the work, and our perfected High Priest became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him.

When the author speaks of those who obey Jesus, he is talking about faith. Faith is obedience to God. So earnestly God wants us to be saved that he doesn't only invite us to believe in Jesus—he commands it. St. John writes in 1 John 3: "This is his command, to believe in the name of his Son, Jesus Christ." So our Lord commands us to believe in Jesus, and his words are the Spirit and life that create the faith they command. The result is that we despair of saving ourselves; we quit trying to earn eternal life and cling instead to Jesus by faith for our salvation. He is the perfect Savior; he lived perfectly to provide us with the righteousness we need to withstand the unblinking gaze of God's all-seeing eye. He died in shame to remove every trace of sin and guilt from our souls. With believing hearts we find rest for our souls in Jesus and find the joy and peace of eternal salvation. That is salvation by grace through faith. That is the "obedience" our author is talking about. And his words serve also to remind us that the obedience of faith will show itself in a life of obedience. From the heart filled with joyful faith in Jesus the Savior and God our loving Father will flow a life of love that will show itself in love for God and for other people.

Yes, Jesus is our Great High Priest and he is our perfect High Priest. He was perfect already in the way he prayed. He finished his work and was "made perfect" by the way he obeyed his heavenly Father, even to the point of death. Let's render obedience to our perfect High Priest: the obedience of confident faith, which shows itself in love! Amen.