

Bible Text: Hebrews 4:14-5:10
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Friends, this morning I want to meditate with you at the opening of this semester with the help of the Lord on the epistles of the Hebrews on the portion that we have read together, chapter 4, beginning with verse 14 and ending in chapter 5, verse 10. And the theme for this morning is "Priestly Ministry." Priestly ministry. Two brief main thoughts. What does it mean? What does it mean, priestly ministry? And in the second place, what does it mean for us, for you and for me? Because the opening of chapter 5, the first four verses, offers us, say, a profile of a priest, or more particular as found in our text words, a high priest. So what does it mean to be in priestly ministry as a student for pastoral ministry, as an instructor for students for ministry, as staff serving in training a next generation of pastors and preachers and teachers? Well, I think in our text words we can distinguish or at least three aspects arise from our text words. There's much more to say from these text words, these rich text words, but for this morning I will focus on three aspects, three aspects that I highlight. In the first place, priestly ministry belongs to one who is called; in the second place, one who intercedes; and in the third place, one who has compassion.

So one who is called, verse 1, he is taken from among men, being taken to lay hold of, to be set apart. Verse 4 reminds us, you don't take this honor to yourself but being called of God. That first, when you desire to serve in ministry. And yes, the Lord reminds us through Timothy 1 verse 3, chapter 3, if you desire such an office, you desire a good work, but the question for you and me at the beginning of this semester, are you called of God? And yes, it may begin with an utter impossibility from your sight and there may be many objections when the Lord calls you in his service through his words, through his providence, through his spirits. Objections like Moses who made excuses, "I'm not good enough, I don't have all the answers, people won't believe me, I'm a terrible public speaker, I'm not qualified." Jeremiah feels too young and cannot speak. Jeremiah 1, "Ah, Lord GOD! behold, I cannot speak: for I am a child." Isaiah echoes this sentiment and you may have this at times as well, "I am a man of unclean lips."

Yet despite the impossibility from your side and the objections you may have, you can also not deny by grace this, "Woe is unto me if I preach not the gospel," because, friends, when you are called, the text shows us and reminds us you are then set apart, appointed for men in the things pertaining to God. Ministry is not a private affair but appointed for the common and spiritual good of people. Appointed for those entrusted to you in the things relating to God. That first and foremost. Yes, there must be a biblical balance

giving attention to your spouse or family if you have them, and the people entrusted to you, the seminary community, your fellow students and their families, your congregation now or in the future, but you are called, appointed by God, for men. Thus called from among humanity. Anthropos is the word that is used, for humanity. It is the same word that Christ used calling his disciples. Matthew 4, "Come, follow after me, and I will make you fishers of anthropos, fishers of men."

Called from among men. This reminded us of this morning and remember, you are not better. You're equally as sinner in yourself as those around you. Taken from among men, ordained for men. Or with the words of verse 2, he also himself is compassed with infirmity. This reminder at the beginning of the semester, you are subject to the same weaknesses, clothed in weakness, no strength in yourself.

Friends, do you know your vulnerability? The apostle Paul, he shares his vulnerability, "And I was with you in weakness and in fear and in much trembling." Maybe those times when you have to preach, it's not only the first time when you're going to preach, or when it is practicing preaching, or you preach in a church, but it seems that every time you have to preach is the first time. When you're in prayer before you preach, coming to the pulpit, and you see your weakness, and you deal with fear, and you tremble. Would you not? And yes, I know many times there's more fear of men than a childlike fear of God. Then ask the Lord, also this semester, to deliver you from the fear of men because you are called, appointed in the things pertaining to God, representing them in matters relating to God, and that ought to instill in your life the fear of God rather than the fear of men.

Friends, priestly ministry concerns the matters pertaining the things of God. There's the God himself, God in Christ, a Triune God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. The spiritual things, things which are eternal. As the apostle reminds us in 2 Corinthians 4, for the things which are seen are temporal, but the things which are not seen, that are eternal. That, friends, is the primary and the main and the foremost focus of your ministry, of your studies, being in priestly ministry, that it is in the administration, or in counseling, or in teaching, or in hospitality, or serving in whatever vocation it is unto the Lord. As the Lord instructs Moses in Exodus 28, calling Aaron to be a priest, "And take Aaron, your brother, from among the children of Israel, that he may minister, may serve unto me."

Priestly ministry is directed to God. Remember and remind yourself often of that because you are called by God, and directed to God to represent those who are entrusted to you by him, mediating between the people and the Lord, making sacrifices for the people and yourself. Not like the Old Testament, as the verses 2 and 3 shows us, that he may offer both gifts and sacrifices for sin, and by reason hereof he ought, as for the people so also for himself to offer for sins. But in the New Testament sense, in summary, intercession, mediating prayer.

You are one who has to intercede is an aspect of priestly ministry and is that what characterizes you? As staff serving the seminary community, far and near, as students becoming a pastor, a preacher, a teacher, as faculty, as we teach and mentor, our main

concern should and all must be to the things pertaining to God, spiritual things, dealing with eternity, the weight of eternity, souls that are entrusted to us, that travel to a never-ending eternity. This burden says to the righteous that it shall be well with them, but woe to the wicked, it shall be ill with them. An intimate related to that overarching concern of the things pertaining to God, our lives ought to be characterized by intercession, by prayer, by pleading with God to forgive sins, our own sins and the sins of those we serve. To pray and to supplicate without ceasing. And therefore we have our Tuesday and Thursday fellowship and prayer time. Our prayer time and prayer groups on Wednesday. At the beginning of a meeting, at the close of a meeting, in the morning when we arise and begin the day, in the evening when we lay down and close the day, there is a pattern in our life, a pattern of prayer in our life.

Is that what characterizes our life? A life of prayer, seeking forgiveness, to which particularly the word sacrifices was in point two, seeking reconciliation. The apostle reminds us in Romans 12, rejoice in hope, persevere in tribulation, be constant in prayer. The original point, devoted. There is a pattern dedicated to prayer. And friends, also this semester if you pray only as a crisis enters your life, it will not be a pattern of devotion to prayer. As the apostles remind us in [unintelligible] but we will devote ourselves to prayer and the ministry of the word. Is that what characterizes your studies at Puritan Reformed, our serving at the seminary and beyond? Friends, are we known as Puritan Reformed, as a praying community? It belongs to priestly ministry.

And then the third aspect that can be distinguished in the profile of a priest, that is, one who has compassion. Verse 2, "Who can have compassion on the ignorant, and on them that are out of the way; for that he himself also is compassed with infirmity." May I ask, do you, being called to ministry, do you exercise the original point to forbearance, meaning, do you have patience with those around you? Can you restrain yourself? And particularly with those who are ignorant, verse 2? The original points to agnostic. It can be willful ignorance or those who do not know but do you have patience with those? Remember, they are of humanity, anthropos, like you. They are created by God like you. They have a soul for eternity like you. You are called for them. Friends, don't have the superior feeling or display behavior that you are in graduate school or have a master's degree or a Ph.D. or whatever academic qualification, but can you deal gently with those that are entrusted to you? Or have you forgotten your own weakness and you are also compassed with infirmity? Or do you not have the humility then towards those that are ignorant? On them, as the text says, that are out of the way, those that go astray or going astray, lost their way in life, erring in life and you don't have compassion?

Does it not begin to dawn on you the weight of being called to gospel ministry but also the weight of gospel ministry itself? Priestly ministry, one who's called by God from among men for men but there are times in my life when that calling is so challenged outwardly and inwardly. Priestly ministry, one who has to intercede that I forget so often to pray and to plead with those around me, those without Christ, those that have not a clear understanding of the gospel, ignorant, one who has to intercede for those that go astray, but it seems I don't have the urgency and the patience which the gospel demands to call such ones to Christ, to his word and ways. When I miss the liberty to share the

gospel, miss the right words to speak to that homeless one, or the one begging on the corner of the streets, or to those parents whose baptized child chooses not to follow Christ. Priestly ministry and not having compassion, moved with compassion for those in need, for those with spiritual needs. Remember, first and foremost in your ministry concern the things pertaining to God but be honest this morning, we can be so busy with the here and now, another semester, another round of assignments and papers, and furthermore the things of this world, time spent on YouTube and social media instead of the things pertaining, relating to God.

Friends, there's a doom on you that we, you and I, are the people in need, great needs. When you see your sins and shortcomings, when you experience, maybe with the words of this 16th century Reformed form of the administration of the Lord's Supper, that you acknowledge that you lie in the midst of death, that you feel many infirmities and miseries in ourselves, as namely that we do not have a perfect faith, that we do not give ourselves to serve God with that zeal as we are bound, that we daily strive with the weakness of our faith and strive with the evil lust of the flesh, and yes, since we are by the grace of the Holy Spirit, sorry for those weaknesses and earnestly desire to fight against our unbelief, to live according to all the commandments of God but how? But how? How will you be a priestly servant?

What does that now mean for you and me? Our second thought. "So also Christ," verse 5. Friends, that is your hope, your only comfort in ministry, in your studies. So also Christ. Undeserved, eh? Maybe not expected anymore. When we have read those verses 1 to 4, the profile of priestly ministry, and that in comparison with my life, my calling, my prayer life, my compassion as I ought to have, such shortcomings, so much sin and yet, and yet, the Lord continues his word in verse 5, so in the same way, Christ. And also here we note three aspects in the text: Christ who is called, verse 5 and 6; Christ who intercedes, verse 7; Christ who has compassion, verses 8 and 9.

Appointed, called by the Father. "Thou art my Son," referring to Psalm 2. "Thou art a priest," referring to Psalm 110. Divinely appointed. Verse 10, "Called of God an high priest." But much more, the Son, in union and communion with the Father and the Spirit, did not glorify himself, honored himself to be made an high priest, verse 5. The Son willingly said, Psalm 40, "I come: in the volume of the book it is written of me, I delight to do thy will, O my God." Such a willing Savior, to be made an high priest, the mediator, the sacrifice, for no Old Testament priest, no high priest, no pastor, no preacher, no teacher can and could do to offer himself, sacrificing for the sins and shortcomings of his people. Those who are called for ministry prayed for those and sacrificed for those who see so many sins and shortcomings in their studies and in their ministry, those who lack so often compassion, and those who do not pray as we ought to pray.

But it did not hinder him to suffer, to intercede and to have compassion. Verse 8, who learned obedience by the things which he suffered. And he suffered and he did it for you. Died the death that you and I deserved and should have died. Obtaining obedience for you, lived a life that you should have lived. Oh, see then afresh this morning, friends, he became the author of eternal salvation unto all them that obey him. He is the cause and

the only reason of your salvation, of your calling and should that not give you a life directed to him, to obey him out of gratitude? Oh, see them him in his new, in his willingness.

He learned obedience through what he suffered. Friends, have we learned obedience when you are in or go through suffering? Remember Luther's rule, how to become a pastor, oratio, meditatio, tentatio, prayer, meditation and trials. Is that how you are formed for ministry, priestly ministry? What Christ has obtained being made an high priest, verse 7, in the days of his flesh, and here we have a glimpse of the personal life of Christ in particularly his life of prayer, Christ who intercedes and prays, that high priestly prayer found in John 17, praying to his Father, "I have accomplished the work that you have given me to do and now, Father, glorify me," and that in the view of the cross, the glory of the cross. Who can fathom this? Who can grasp this? Praying for those who follow him and he prays, "I am praying for them." Those that are called for ministry, or struggle with their calling, or are challenged in their prayer life and pray "not only for these only, but also for those who believe in me through their word," through your ministry. Those who are entrusted to you, will they believe in him because your word is his word?

A glimpse into Christ's life of prayer which he offered with strong cries and tears, loud cries and tears, was it not so during his life standing at the grave of his friend Lazarus and Jesus wept? Was it not in particular at the end of his life of his suffering in Gethsemane, being in agony, he prayed more earnestly at Golgotha when Jesus cried with a loud voice? And he prayed and he suffered for each of his children. Christ whose prayer was not heard to evade death so that you may live. Christ whose prayer was heard in that he feared, verse 7, in the sense that the Father would give him ultimate glory over death in the resurrection. And therefore, we have this resurrected and living Christ, as chapter 4 verse 14 said, a great high priest that has passed into the heaven. Jesus the Son of God intercedes for each of his children, even now and he prays that your faith fails not, and he prays that you hold on to your profession.

Then it is Christ who has compassion, moved with compassion, moved as a shepherd, a pastor of the flock entrusted to him. Friends, is such Christ-like compassion seen in your life? Christ's compassion touched, sympathizing with the feeling of our infirmities. Christ's compassion in healing and restoring people, a people in need. And so do you seek, are you instrumental in the healing and restoration of those in need, to be there for them, to listen to them? For the people are and feel unclean. Jesus has moved with compassion, stretched out his hand and touched them and he said, "I am willing." Do you hear? "I am willing. Be cleansed."

People who are going to a funeral, a mother who lost her son, but he sees her and he had compassion on her and he has a word for her, "Do not weep." Friends, do you take notice?

Do you have an eye for those who grieve and in need of encouragement, in need of comfort? And people blind in themselves and Jesus had compassion and touched their

eyes and immediately their eyes received sight and they followed him. Friends, that is your hope for gospel ministry, that Jesus opened their eyes to see him and to follow him.

And then people who are tired, exhausted and weary. He takes notice and he says to his disciples, "I have compassion on the multitudes because they have now continued with me three days and have nothing to eat." And so do you take notice of that fellow student that is maybe so exhausted, so tired, so overwhelmed in life?

Friends, see him for the first time what afresh and anew at the beginning of this semester, Christ in all his willingness, in his mediating intercession, his sacrifice and his compassion and that for such one as you and me, called by God to serve him. Oh yes, in yourself many shortcomings and sins, but to whom else shall you go? Also this semester, Christ. O take refuge in him often and daily. Should he not, and he only, not shape your priestly ministry, your calling, your prayers, your compassion, to live out of him, to imitate him, so that Christ is seen in you, your Savior, your substitute. "Seeing then that we have a great high priest, that is passed into the heavens, let us hold fast to our profession for we do not have an high priest, oh what a comfort, which cannot be touched with the feeling of our infirmities, but was in all points tempted like we are, yet without sin. Let us therefore, and pray often as a seminary community, let us as a seminary community come boldly unto the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy and find grace to help in time of need. Amen.

Let us pray.

Lord, we'll apply your own word in each and every of our hearts and that the fruits are seen in this new semester that lies before us. The calling that you have placed in our life, sometimes so challenged, the prayer life that you ask of us, and the compassion that we need, Lord, that Christ is exalted in us and that this seminary community is known that Christ is seen in our midst. Bless your word. We ask these things with many shortcomings, but for Christ's sake alone. Amen.