

A Better Priesthood

Hebrews 7:26-28

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If you have your Bibles, please turn with me to Hebrews 7. Today we'll be looking at verses 26 and 28 specifically. What's beautiful about this passage is it's both a summary and a transition. It summarizes where we have come from all the way back, even at the end of chapter 4 and the beginning of chapter 5. And it's going to serve as a transition going into the next several chapters into chapter 10. There is no other place in the New Testament besides these chapters that give so much space, so much ink, so much paper to explain how our Savior Jesus is a priest. We should pay attention and learn from God's Word of how Jesus functions in that way on our behalf. Hear the Word read as we discuss it together. Hebrews 7:26-28.

For it was indeed fitting that we should have such a high priest, holy, innocent, unstained, separated from sinners, and exalted above the heavens. He has no need, like those high priests, to offer sacrifices daily, first for his own sins and then for those of the people, since he did this once for all when he offered up himself. For the law appoints men in their weakness as high priests, but the word of the oath, which came later than the law, appoints a Son who has been made perfect forever. [ESV]

This is the Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

Thomas Kune was a philosopher and an author. He wrote a book in 1962 called *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*. And in that book, he introduced a phrase which he didn't create, but he certainly introduced it, and it became ubiquitous in kind of everyday language. He used the word *paradigm shift*. Kune, he used a picture in describing what he was talking about. The picture was a sketch of a duck. It was facing to the left. It had a head and a neck. You could see his eye, and then a beak, barely open, just kind of to the left. And you were like, "Oh, it's a duck." If it was alive, and I saw it and heard, I would say it's a duck. However, if you look at it from a different angle, that same picture was also a rabbit looking to the right, with his head and his neck and his eye and his ears pulled back, going to the left.

And I'm sure you've seen pictures like this before. They're optical illusions, such as the woman who is both a young lady and an elderly lady. And there are many others that paint that picture of one single picture that plays tricks, what appears to be tricks, in your mind, but from different vantage points you see two different pictures. And the point Kune was making was how a paradigm shift could cause someone to see the same information in entirely different ways. He stated in his book, "What man sees depends both on what he looks at and also upon what his previous visual conception experience has taught him to see." And then again he goes on to say, "The answers you get depend on the questions you ask."

Of course, this has happened throughout history, and it will continue to happen. For example, Einsteinian physics has given way to the Newtonian physics of the past—even more so, quantum physics. Though the material world remains the same. Various technological innovations, such as horse-drawn carriage to cars, bicycles to airplanes, telegrams to text messages—all of these innovations have been ways that have been paradigm shifts in how we engage our world and how we interact with each other. Our perspectives change. And thus, how we interact in the world adjusts to those new perspectives. The problem is that sometimes we prefer the old paradigms.

Now, people respond differently, of course. Some may be suspicious of anything new. Or they may be unconvinced that the new is indeed warranted. Some people break away from the old as soon as there's something new, thinking new is always better. Some people hold onto the old tighter whenever there is something new, thinking new is usually worse. Some people wait to see which way the wind will blow, so as to go the path of least resistance, regardless of which one is better. Some people will appreciate the old and recognize the new, because they have been convinced the new paradigm is a better representation.

Now, why do I bring this up? The original audience in the Book of Hebrews was tempted in similar ways as we are tempted when we're presented with a new paradigm shift. You see, the preacher is preaching a sermon much longer than I do—but he's preaching a sermon that is making the case that there is a paradigm shift in how God wants us to approach him. The people of God no longer enter into the presence of God through the Levitical priesthood, which the law set up, but now through Jesus Christ, who is a better priest.

So how can this new paradigm be? And that's what the text addresses. Jesus fulfills a better priesthood. And because of that, we have entry into the presence of God. It's because Jesus is the better priesthood that we can enter into the presence of God. It's fundamental to what the author of Hebrews is talking about here. And so we're going to look at briefly how Jesus fulfills this better priesthood. First looking at, in verse 26, how Jesus's character fulfills that function, making him a better priest. Secondly in verse 27, looking at how he is—his sacrifice makes him a better priest. And then thirdly in verse 28, Jesus's appointment makes him a better priest.

So let's dive into verse 26. It's here that Jesus—his character is sinless. And because of that, we have entry. Because of that, he is the better priest. Verse 26 says, "For it was indeed fitting that we should have such a high priest, holy, innocent, unstained, separated from sinners, and exalted above the heavens." Here, we see a picture of, you know, what is fitting is all that the author has talked about so far in beginning to talk about Melchizedek, talking about the Levitical priesthood—all these things building up all the way from chapter 5. But certainly through the beginning of chapter 7 into these verses. We see the author beginning to emphasize the sinless nature of Jesus. He's holy. And the word that's used here is a more rare use of the word in the New Testament. And here, it describes someone or something without fault in the eyes of God. Of course, it's similar to the other use of other words in reference to being set apart or consecrated to God. But it's also distinct in that the word describes holiness in the sense of superior moral qualities and possessing certain essential, divine qualities in contrast to humans. All but two of the uses of this word in the New Testament refer explicitly to God or Jesus. It is something that is innate in his being, in his nature—he is holy.

Secondly, the author talks about Jesus—his innocence. Here, it's just meaning that he is devoid of guile. He is without fault or deception of any kind. Jesus is unstained. He's undefiled and pure. It pertains to not being ritually defiled. And of course, the implications that accompany that with any moral defilement. He is pure and unstained.

Thirdly—I'm sorry, fourthly—Jesus is separated from sinners. Now, when the author is talking about Jesus as separated from sinners, he's still holding in tension the fact that the triune God, the second person of the Trinity, became flesh, became human, and dwelt among us. It's what we celebrate at Christmas, right? And though Jesus clearly lived his life before people in a way that often he was accused of being a drunkard or friends of sinners such as tax collectors or women of the night, he himself was without sin. Though he shared in all our full humanity and experienced temptations completely like us, he still is incapable of sinning. Though he shares temptation, he can sympathize with our weakness, he yet remains distinct and separate from us.

And then likewise, this is confirmed in the last phrase, "exalted above the heavens." This refers to Jesus's heavenly position following his resurrection and his ascension to rule forever at the throne of his

father. All of this together, I could not find an illustration. I kept getting stumped. Because every example that I kept thinking of was one of imperfection, one of falling short, one that didn't meet the mark. It would merely show you how they were not like Jesus. And you see, that's the point. Jesus is the illustration. Paul says that Jesus is the image of the invisible God, where the fullness of God dwells bodily, Colossians 1 and 2. The preacher of Hebrews says back in the very, very beginning—he said of Jesus that he is the radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint of his nature. Jesus is the illustration of what it means to be sinless. Jesus is the illustration of what it means to have integrity of character, perfect worship, perfect love for others, perfect motivations, perfect actions, perfect obedience flowing from perfect love for God, who is perfect. There is no other illustration except Jesus himself, who lived, embodied, and fulfilled this quality that made him holy and distinct. In his sinlessness, he is a better priest.

Of course, there are many ways that this actually adds value and relevance to our day. I'll just mention a few. Jesus's sinless character has implication for who we worship. We worship one God in three persons. Jesus is the second person of the Trinity, fully God and fully man. Because he shares the same substance as the Father and the Holy Spirit, he remains distinct. We praise him for who he is. We cry out saying, "Son of David, have mercy." We confess as Peter did, "You are the Christ." We come to him because he fulfills his calling as Messiah, who is able to save completely, verse 25, just before our passage. He is able to save completely. And he ministers to us as our priest, as he intercedes for us forever. That certainly started in his life. We see a beautiful picture of that in John 17, when he is functioning as a priest, praying for his disciples, and praying for us who have not yet entered the picture. Praying for those who would believe him. Interceding for us on behalf of us to the Father.

Jesus's sinless character has implications for our confidence in the one we worship. Though he is fully human, he was and is distinct from us in that he was without sin. And though he died, he was raised from death, where he lives and reigns exalted on high now and forever. This is the reality that he is. Metaphysically, I don't understand it. But the truth of the matter still stands—Jesus is alive and well and interceding. We can have great confidence in him. All things have been accomplished by him, and he effectively brings about all that he sets out to do. Our confidence rests in his sinlessness. By his nature, he is trustworthy, and therefore we can have our confidence in him being a better priest.

Another implication is that Jesus's sinless character has implications for our perseverance in our daily life as Christians. 1 Peter 2:21-23 says this:

For to this you have been called, because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, so that you might follow in his steps. He committed no sin, neither was deceit found in his mouth. When he was reviled, he did not revile in return; when he suffered, he did not threaten, but continued entrusting himself to him who judges justly.

We can look to Jesus as an example of how to live a life that is pleasing to God. We need to get that order in the right order. We don't live a life seeking to please God. But by our identity in Christ, by him as our priest, as him as our example, we seek to follow in his steps in a life that is pleasing to God. Part of Christian discipleship is imitating Jesus. Following him in his footsteps in how he entrusted his life to the Father. Where are you imitating Jesus? Where are you not imitating Jesus? Now, we can't do that in our own strength. We can't boast in our successes. We can't despair in our failings. Because all of that is in grace. But it is still the invitation to follow Jesus. Let us persevere in our calling, in our identity, as we imitate him. And because again, Jesus is sinless in his identity, then he is much more qualified to serve as a high priest than the Levitical priests. And that's because he's serving a better priesthood. And that is why we can draw near to God through him.

Now, that first part about Jesus's sinlessness certainly goes hand-in-hand with this next point about Jesus's sacrifice. His sinlessness is important in his nature as Messiah, who is fully God and fully

human, as we've discussed. His sinlessness then becomes important regarding his sacrifice. By it, we enter into the Holy of holies. By his sacrifice, our sins are atoned for. By his sacrifice, we are in the presence of God through him. Verse 27 says, "He has no need, like those high priests, to offer sacrifices daily, first for his own sins and then for those of the people, since he did this once for all when he offered up himself." He has no need, because he is unstained. He has no need to offer sacrifice for himself, because he has no sin. He has no need to offer sacrifice for himself, because he has perfectly obeyed his father, accomplishing all that he was sent to do. Every situation, every conversation, he had the right motivations. He had the right actions. For the entirety of his life, that was true of Jesus.

And so the author of Hebrews is comparing by contrast. He is showing the imperfection of the Levitical system, the Levitical priesthood. Now, this is earlier in chapter 7 when he explains this. There's a line of argument that the author is making. It is important to know that he is not saying that the Levitical priesthood was insignificant, or that the Levitical priesthood didn't matter. What he is saying is that it was imperfect. And why is that? Wayne mentioned it earlier. For every sacrifice that was to be fulfilled by the law of God had to be done by a man who was called to execute a function, his duties. And he had to acknowledge with humility that he couldn't do it himself. Because he actually had to make sacrifice for himself first. He had no power to affect the forgiveness of sin on behalf of others. He could only mirror and reflect a type, a prediction, a forethought, a foreshadowing of how God is the one who forgives. It is the God who himself provides to make atonement.

Now, this reference to the daily sacrifices—we've talked about it in the past weeks, that most likely he has the day of atonement in view, which didn't happen daily; it happened annually. However, there were other sacrifices that the priests had to engage in their own sacrifices before engaging in their priestly duties. But whether it's daily or annually, what's at stake is that each time, you know there's going to be another one. There's got to be. However, there is a paradigm shift that's happening, that if a man dies, you would expect the succession of another man to take his place. But that's not what happens. Jesus raises from the dead, and he lives and reigns forever. This is getting into the continued example of Melchizedek, of how Jesus—his sacrifice, his priestly office, is like him.

One of my favorite authors—he is long dead, but a man that I enjoy reading very much. He says this about Jesus's sacrifice: "If the sacrifice on the cross is sufficient, other sacrifices are superfluous; if these other sacrifices are necessary, the former is inadequate and incomplete." [*Reformed Dogmatics: Holy Spirit, Church, and New Creation* by Herman Bavinck, John Bolt, John Vriend]. The sacrifice on the cross that Jesus did is sufficient. There is no need for any more. That means there's no need to look for another. That means there's no need for you to be your own priest or find your own way to approach God. The sacrifice on the cross is sufficient. Other sacrifices are superfluous. But he goes on to say, if the sacrifices are necessary, the former is inadequate and incomplete. But that is not what the author of Hebrews is saying. He's saying that the sacrifice Jesus makes is perfectly adequate and completely perfect.

So the implications are many. But for a few—the sacrifice that Jesus made once and for all for sins has implications for when you are being tempted. You can look back to his sacrifice as sufficiently redeeming you from the power of sin. And with the power of the Holy Spirit enabling you, you are no longer enslaved to your sin, though you might fall to it again and again. The paradigm shift has also shifted your status. You are no longer enslaved, no longer under the dominion of that power. You can look to Jesus and live in accordance with your identity in Christ, not in accordance with your former identity separated from him, but rather, in the presence of God by your union with him.

The implications for Jesus's sacrifice of himself has implications when you do sin. John writes this: "My little children, I am writing these things to you so that you may not sin. But if anyone does sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ, the righteous." The sacrifice once and for all made is once and for all sufficient to atone for all of your sins, past, present, and future. Do you understand the power of the gospel in applying that to your life? The sins you committed years ago have been atoned for. The

sins you have committed yesterday or two minutes ago is atoned for. The sins you will do in fifty years have been atoned for by the once-and-for-all sacrifice of Jesus.

And so if the goal is to not sin, but if we do, we have an advocate, a further implication for that is how we approach God. We do not approach him as if we have lost our status as sons and daughters. We don't have to revert back to an old identity and re-enter into the Holy of holies as if to kind of recrucify Jesus or as a way of purging ourselves from our sins. We do these in all kinds of ways. We play all kinds of mind games. And it's always unique to ourselves. I don't know how you do it, but I know how I do it. Jesus as a better priest invites me to approach God not in my own power, not in my own way, but only by the sufficient sacrifice of Jesus.

Lastly, it's because of Jesus's appointment, we have entry into the presence of God. Verse 28: "For the law appoints men in their weakness as high priests, but the word of the oath, which came later than the law, appoints a Son who has been made perfect forever." Now, here again we have an allusion of the author using Psalm 110:4, which more than any other New Testament writer is using that particular psalm. And so he's again contrasting the law and what has now been divinely appointed by the word of God, the word of his oath, comparing Jesus's priesthood to the Levitical priesthood. It's earlier in chapter 7, verse 20, "And it was not without an oath. For those who formerly became priests were made such without an oath. But this one was made a priest with an oath by the one who said to him, 'The Lord has sworn and will not change his mind. You are a priest forever.'"

It's important to acknowledge that he's again—he's comparing how the Levitical priesthood has imperfections and is completed and fulfilled in Christ. It's not that the Lord has changed his mind and is going against what he set up in his law. But rather, he is showing how the law is being fulfilled by the divine appointment through his own Word, looking to Jesus as his son. This is again why he's comparing this mysterious figure, Melchizedek, this priest king of Salem, this king of righteousness who was king of a town, of a city, state, that could be translated to king of peace. This man that was outside the law, having no genealogy. Not meaning that he was some sort of eternal being—but it's a reference that there was no genealogy that would put him in line of the tribe of Levi. His function as priest was outside of the law. And how God by his Word of his oath has declared Jesus to be in that line.

Yale University's most popular class enrolls a quarter of its student body. The professor, Lori Santos, teaches a class on how to be happy. Technically it's Psych 157, Psychology and the Good Life, which covers positive psychology and behavioral change. One of the students that took the class said this: "A lot of us are anxious, stressed, unhappy, numb," as she told the New York Times, adding that her fellow students are tired of numbing their emotions, both positive and negative, so that they can focus on their work, the next step, the next accomplishment. These have good things to say, so I don't want to—I'm not setting up a strawman to lambast them. But I am just acknowledging how we have our priests, even if it's not Jesus. We seek out our sources that help us to understand this life, help us to understand why we might be addicted, why we might be anxious, why we might be scared. People are craving a declaration of who they are and how they might live a different life.

So this passage is incredibly important to us. Even though maybe our temptation is not to go back to the Levitical system unless, perhaps, you're of Jewish ancestry who have come to faith in Jesus. Most of us may be of some sort of Gentile heritage, right? But in our context, in our place, how do we seek to approach God in other ways than God has lined out? Whether that's psychology or celebrity or our own boasting that we can have the power of habit conquered, that our lives can be disciplined, that we can have effective, productive lives, that we can eat toward a fulfilling life, whether we can have five, ten, or twelve rules for living the good life. We seek out someone or something to usher us into a place of experience that captures all the joys, all the desires, that we hope to get out of this life. What priests are in our culture? What priests are in your life? How are you seeing Jesus as the better priest? Do you see him that way? Do you acknowledge his place in your life?

Futurist and author Joel Barker gives an example of a paradigm shift in the watch industry. For sixty years, the Swiss dominated the watch manufacturing world. At one point, they had more than 65 percent of the world's market. And their watches were reputed to be the finest in the world. But then something happened. A paradigm shifted. Their market share dropped from 65 to 10 percent. Maybe you can guess at what happened. The digital watch was created. Many watchmakers lost their jobs. The nation's economics went into catastrophe. They made the most accurate gears at one point in the world, but now it was irrelevant. They made the best bearings, but who cared? They manufactured the finest mainsprings, but they were unneeded. All the advantages they had accrued in the old paradigm were worthless in the new.

The message of Christianity is that a Jewish rabbi who preached about the kingdom of God was crucified. He was raised from the dead. And that message of his life and his death and his resurrection spread rapidly across the Greco-Roman world. Christianity shifted people's understanding of religious worship by no longer needing to offer animal sacrifices to approach God, no longer needing to offer sacrifices as a way to have an unholy life be cleansed, to be holy in the presence of a holy God. Christianity shifted the way people related together within society. For example, from its earliest days, Christianity included ethnicities without requiring cultural assimilation, treated women, children, and the marginalized with dignity, and offered a vision of hope and renewal in the midst of a very violent world and a very hyper-sexualized world.

The preacher of Hebrews demonstrates in chapter 7 how Jesus functions as a better priest in that context. And he remains a better priest in our context today. The preacher compares Jesus to the greatness of Melchizedek as a priest king. He discusses the imperfections of the Levitical priesthood. And he shows the validity of this better priesthood due to God's very word, his own oath. Jesus's permanence, his sinless character, and sufficient sacrifice are all woven together in what makes him a better priest that brings us into the presence of God. Altogether, this gives you and I the confidence that truly Jesus is able to save completely, thoroughly, fully, for all time. He is able to save completely. And for all time, we can trust that when we enter into the presence of God, it's because Jesus is already in that presence, and we are united with him. And when we are united to him, we go where he goes. So if your faith is in Jesus, you share in his death and in his resurrection, and you share in where he is. He is in the presence of God Almighty. He is our better priest. Let's put our confidence in him. Let's pray.

God, help us. Help us to rely on you. Help us to entrust our very selves to your priesthood in our lives. Help us to not give over to superstition. Help us to not give over to other promises that may sound good, and they may sound that they are of you, but they lack power. They lack meaning of substance that actually connects us in fellowship with you. Help us to see how Jesus is a paradigm shift for how we approach you. We pray this in his holy name, which is unstained, which is undefiled, who he is sinless and can take us there. We pray this in Jesus's name. Amen.