

## Sermon 27, Your Priestly Task, Pt. 2, Hebrews 5:7-10

**Proposition:** Your Melchizedekian high priest prayed, suffered, and thereby became your eternal Savior — and in Him, you need to pray, suffer, and mature to the point where you are ready to save others.

- I. Priests Mature through Prayer and Suffering, v. 9a
  - A. Jesus Reached Maturity through Prayer & Suffering
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- II. Mature Priests Are a Source of Salvation, v. 9
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  - B. Our Sufferings Are Connected to Jesus' Sufferings, Col. 1:24
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    1. The Wise Christian Wins Souls, Proverbs 11:30
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    1. You May Save Your Spouse, 1 Cor. 7:16
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- III. Priests Are Priests Through Union with the High Priest, v. 10

### Introduction

Dearly beloved congregation of our Lord Jesus Christ, last Sunday we began to apply the great high priesthood of Jesus Christ to the priesthood of all believers. We saw that prayer and suffering are key characteristics of Jesus as our priest, and furthermore that these two things ought to be key characteristics of us, His deputy priests, as well. So far so good. But the text has more to say on this topic — much more, so much that we are going to get into deep theological waters indeed. I can only say that there is no wonder that the writer pauses to rebuke his writers for their listless hearing after he begins to describe how Christ is a high priest after the order of Melchizedek. We are going to see that prayer and suffering are God's path to maturity for all His children (and all His priests). I think we intuitively understand that. But the last thing I'm going to tell you today is supremely counter-intuitive. You see, our text says that Jesus became the source of eternal salvation to all who obey Him. And even that, brothers and sisters, is something we are called to imitate in our own priestly work. Yes, that's right: You and I are called to be the source of salvation too, just as we are called to pray, to suffer, to obey, to learn, and to go on to maturity. It's not that the first five aspects of Jesus' priestly work apply to us, but the last one doesn't. No; all six of them apply to us. We need to mature through prayer and suffering, becoming people who are a source of salvation to others. I don't mean that we replace Jesus, or even exactly that we complement Him. But we do work and suffer alongside Him for others'

salvation. That is part of the priesthood of all believers, and as I'll show, it's all over the New Testament.

### **I. Priests Mature through Prayer and Suffering, v. 9a**

We start by seeing the truth that priests mature through prayer and suffering. As we talked about a few weeks back, "having been made perfect" implies that prayer and suffering are what made Jesus perfect.

#### **A. Jesus Reached Maturity through Prayer & Suffering**

He grew to maturity, defined a few verses later as habitually discerning what's good and what's evil, through prayer and suffering. He cried out in prayer, and He learned obedience through what He suffered. That's what the writer tells us just before he tells us that Jesus was perfected into the perfect source of eternal salvation.

We saw last week that suffering helps you discern the difference between good and evil when you receive it as your Father's love-gift. He puts the suffering into your life so that you can share His holiness and grow the peaceable fruit of righteousness. He put the cross into His Son's life to make Him perfectly mature, able to tell the difference between good and evil, and also to perfect Him with respect to His priestly work. Jesus was not the perfect priest until He had offered the perfect sacrifice, and that perfect sacrifice was Himself.

That said, even the Son of God was not able to offer the perfect sacrifice without prayer. He could never have given His life without prayerfully submitting to the Father's will. He became a perfect priest through interacting with His Father in prayer and then doing what the Spirit gave Him the strength to do. That's just obvious.

#### **B. You Won't Reach Maturity without Prayer & Suffering**

And it is equally obvious that you will not be mature, either as a man or as a priest, without doing your share of praying and suffering. You can't habitually, unerringly discern right from wrong without God's help, both in cleansing your conscience and in enlightening your mind and your moral sense. That sense has to be used constantly or it gets rusty, and it has to be educated and illuminated from outside or it gets off-kilter. Your moral sense has to be calibrated by God's law on a regular basis, and energized by His Spirit daily, or it will go wrong somewhere.

The only way to have God's presence in your life is through prayer. His word will do nothing without His Spirit; the Spirit gives life, but the letter is no help at all. At least, it kills, so presumably it does not give life.

Jesus had to suffer death in order to be the priest we needed who could save us from death. You don't have to physically suffer death in order to be a king and priest to God. But you do have to be united to Jesus in His death. And to do that will require you to believe in Him, trust Him, and suffer with Him. The mature Christian habitually tells the difference between good and evil — and does what's good even if it hurts. That's why the one who swears to his own hurt and does not change is worthy to dwell with God.

## **II. Mature Priests Are a Source of Salvation, v. 9**

Well, you knew that the Christian life was going to involve suffering and persecution. The NT says it many times. But what you may have never thought about is how your suffering might be part of other people's salvation.

### **A. Jesus, Perfected, Is the Only Savior, Acts 4:12**

Now, what do I mean when I say that? Obviously, I believe that Jesus is the only savior and that no one is a co-redeemer with Him — not me, not Mary, not the 12 apostles or the 4 evangelists or anyone else. There is no other name whereby we must be saved. That's what the apostles said at the beginning of their ministry, and it's still true. Nothing I'm saying today is intended to challenge that. At the same time, though Jesus is the only savior, we are called to a priestly task that imitates His. And one aspect of that priestly task is undoubtedly focused outward, on doing priestly work for other Christians and even for non-believers. Let me show you what Scripture has to say about this.

### **B. Our Sufferings Are Connected to Jesus' Sufferings, Col. 1:24**

Turn with me first to Colossians 1:24, "Now I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh I do my share on behalf of His body (which is the church) in filling up that which is lacking in Christ's afflictions." Paul speaks of suffering in his flesh and thereby filling up something missing from the sufferings of Christ. Now, the Bible is clear that Jesus died once for all, that He is able to save to the uttermost those who come to God through Him, and that He does not need us to make Him a better savior than He is. But there it is — somehow, Paul's sufferings are a means of helping the church in a way that Christ's sufferings alone did not accomplish. This does not denigrate Christ's sufferings; Paul would not do that. But he does dare to say that his own suffering parallels Jesus' suffering in an important respect, one that brings benefits to the whole body of Christ.

### **C. You Should Help Others Repair & Maintain their Relationship with God**

Well, Paul's statement about how his suffering works alongside Christ's in building up the church is furthered by some other Biblical statements. The first of these is found back in the book of Proverbs.

#### **1. The Wise Christian Wins Souls, Proverbs 11:30**

The Tree of Life was something whose fruit would give you eternal life in Heaven. And the fruit of the righteous person is like that fruit. The outgrowth of your way of life is something that will give other people eternal life if they eat it — that is, if they take it into themselves and make it part of who they are.

The fruit of the righteous is like the fruit of the tree of life. What your life grows will make other people live.

The righteous grows the same kind of fruit that the tree of life grows — i.e., fruit that gives life. Now, all fruit gives life because it's food. But the message here is not just that the righteous gives natural life, sustained by natural food, but even that the righteous mediates spiritual life sustained by the sacramental food of the Tree of Life. How can that be? Ultimately, I would say, through spreading the good news of Jesus. We give life, not from ourselves, but by

proclaiming the life that was manifested in Christ. Our way of life proclaims the life that is to be found in Christ.

The fruit of the righteous is like the fruit of the tree of life. I think we have a better grasp on what that means. Not everyone will want to eat of the tree of life, though. Not everyone desires life, at least not on God's terms, as Proverbs makes clear. Hence this second half of the verse: The one who is wise takes lives. Now, there is nothing odd about the vocabulary of this clause. "Takes lives" is the normal Hebrew phrase that means exactly what "takes lives" means in English. It refers to killing people, in battle or something like that. Yet though the words all have obvious meanings, the total product is a little strange. The wise are those who preserve life, according to the rest of the book. Even this verse talks about how the righteous give life! So why would we now hear that the righteous take lives? The obvious answer is that "take life" is being used in an ironic sense. Just as Jesus talked about fishing for men, even though real fishing kills fish, so here Solomon talks about taking lives in the sense of capturing them for Christ. To make a disciple is to "take a life" — to capture a living person by the beauty and power of the Son of God.

The KJV, following the Geneva Bible, glossed this phrase as "winneth souls." And from that came the term "soul-winning" into our evangelical vocabulary.

The fruit of the righteous is like the fruit of the tree of life in that it gives eternal life. Another way of saying this is that wise people take lives or win souls — that is, wise people convert unbelievers into believers, pagans into disciples. How?

By their wisdom, and by their righteousness. Remember our extended discussion of what fruit is? How does a fruit tree grow fruit? Naturally. Fruit is simply what grows out of it. A grapevine naturally yields grapes, and a fig tree naturally yields figs. And righteous people and wise people naturally grow the fruit that gives eternal life. It seems to me that I'm not pushing the metaphor too far to say that your neighbor might not want to eat that fruit. You can offer eternal life and have it turned down. But if you don't have any eternal life to offer, then you are neither righteous nor wise.

As a priest to God, you have this ability to win souls through the wisdom you display — wisdom that's like the wise Son's wisdom.

## **2. The Mature Christian Can Restore the Sinner, Gal. 6:1**

But it goes further than that. The mature, spiritual Christian is said to be able to restore the one taken in a sin. "He restores my soul," he wins souls — these phrases sound like what our Savior does. They are what our Savior does. But now both Solomon and Paul ascribe these activities to the ordinary Christian too.

## **3. Restoring Sinners Covers a Multitude of Sins, James 5:19-20**

In fact, James does not hesitate to speak of an ordinary Christian saving a soul from death and covering a multitude of sins. Surely this kind of language should be reserved for Christ's saving work — but it's not! It's right here on the page in black and white.

Hence, at the very least, I trust I've demonstrated to you that Scripture teaches that you and I ought to be involved in repairing and maintaining other people's relationships to God. Isn't

that what winning souls, restoring sinners, saving souls from death refers to? This is something that the priest does. It's something that every believer is called to do. If you are mature enough to habitually distinguish good and evil, you are in a position to do priestly work on others' behalf, not only praying for them but also saving them in a certain sense. Indeed, Scripture speaks of this work repeatedly, not just in terms of evangelism but also in terms of your labor and suffering and prayer making significant enough contributions to others' salvation that you can be said to "save" them.

#### **D. The Mature Christian Suffers for Others' Salvation**

Notice the following texts with me.

##### **1. You May Save Your Spouse, 1 Cor. 7:16**

"For how do you know, O wife, whether you will save your husband? Or how do you know, O husband, whether you will save your wife?" Paul asks this question (1Co 7:16) in the context of divorce. It's not immediately clear what he's saying about divorce and the departing unbeliever. But whatever he's saying about that, he does not hesitate to ascribe salvation to the ordinary believer walking with God. You might save your spouse. Here as everywhere else, the Bible doesn't go out of its way to hedge and qualify and be sure you don't get the wrong impression. If you've read the rest of the Bible with even a little bit of attention, you know that it teaches that Jesus is the only way of salvation. So why does Paul even suggest that you might save your spouse? He is saying that there is a connection, at least a possible connection, between your priestly labor and suffering to repair and maintain your spouse's relationship with God, and his or her eventual salvation.

##### **2. You May Save Your Congregation, 1 Tim. 4:16**

He says the same thing to the minister: "Keep a close watch on yourself and on the teaching. Persist in this, for by so doing you will save both yourself and your hearers" (1Ti 4:16). Wow. Paul is not allergic to this salvation language. He fearlessly says that the minister will save himself and his hearers by carefully watching himself and what he teaches.

How can I have confidence that you are going to heaven? In part, because I watch myself and my teaching. I pray weekly with another pastor in our presbytery and confess my sins to him as part of keeping a close watch on myself. I study theology books, discuss my ideas with men of proven orthodoxy, and ask the elders to pay careful attention to what I teach you, my beloved congregation. And because I do this, I have God's promise that those of you who are listening to me are on your way to heaven.

##### **3. You Must Lay Down your Life Like Jesus, 1 John 3:16**

How does all of this come about? How do you repair and maintain others' relationship with God? In a word, sacrifice. John sums it up this way: "By this we know love, that he laid down his life for us, and we ought to lay down our lives for the brothers" (1Jo 3:16). When you are ready and willing to lay down your life for others, it obviously gives your message credibility. When you very gladly spend and are spent for their sake, they notice. They can tell that you are driven by a love that comes from beyond this world. People don't just do that. They don't love like that. They don't work and suffer in your place like that.

Brothers and sisters, most of us are not going to literally die for our fellow saints. But if you're living like the NT says to live, fulfilling all of the one another commands, you will have as much priestly work as you can do — praying, suffering, and becoming a source of eternal salvation to all those who obey Jesus. You can and will suffer in their place like your great high priest did. I'm not talking about enablement and codependency and all the other twisted psychological manias that imitate true love and true sacrifice. I'm talking about the real deal, the genuine love that lays down its life for the brothers.

Will you do that? Will you be a priest? You can't do it without suffering in another's place. That's what Jesus did; that is the act that perfected Him as our high priest. And if you are willing to suffer for the sake of your fellow believers, to mourn and weep and cry out to God interceding for your unbelieving spouse, to offer your life in place of your child's, then you are in a fair way to save the soul from death and cover a multitude of sins.

What am I talking about? I'm talking about the hard priestly work of shepherding and discipling, of absorbing the pain caused by other people's sin. To confront someone who's in sin will cause you pain, even if they turn and come back. It's easier to not do that work, to not lay down your life for anyone. And if you think you don't need to, it's even easier. But really, it is incredibly important. You become the source of eternal salvation to someone else not by offering the ultimate sacrifice, but by connecting that person to the one who did. You are a source of salvation only insofar as you are plugged into THE source of eternal salvation.

It is not easy to turn back sinners, to win souls, to disciple children and build the church and teach people to obey everything Jesus commanded. But it is necessary. It's all priestly work, all accomplished through suffering, prayer, and obedience, laying down your life and your time and your stuff so others can know Jesus as lord and savior.

So lay down your life to make disciples. If you do so, you are wise — and if you don't, you aren't.

### **III. Priests Are Priests Through Union with the High Priest, v. 10**

Remember, finally, that you are a priest through union with the great high priest who is in the order of Melchizedek. Through Him, you have been designated a priest to God as well. All of your work is valuable and accepted in Him.

You aren't a priest to save yourself; rather, because you are saved, you too, under Christ, have the power to repair and maintain others' relationships with God, in large part by prayerfully connecting them to Christ. Don't lose heart; practice these things, immerse yourself in them, and by so doing you will save yourself and those that hear you.

Amen.