

## Sermon 24, What Do Priests Do?, Hebrews 5:1-6

**Proposition:** A priest maintains the relationship between God and man, and you should make use of Jesus's priestly work!

- I. Summary: A priest is a man who handles things relating to God on men's behalf, v. 1a
- II. Six Characteristics of a Priest, vv. 1b-4
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### Introduction

Dearly beloved congregation of our Lord Jesus Christ, I mentioned last week that most of us are pretty rusty on the question of what exactly priests do. Well, the Hebrew writer was writing to an audience that probably used the services of priests regularly. But nonetheless, he takes a few verses to explain the duties and characteristics of priests here at the beginning of ch. 5. This is so that we can understand what he's talking about when he says that Jesus is our priest. What we'll see this morning is that a priest repairs and maintains the relationship between God and man, and that you need to take advantage of Jesus' priestly work in order to be connected to God.

#### **I. Summary: A priest is a man who handles things relating to God, v. 1a**

Our text begins with the statement that a high priest deals with the things of God, and that he does it on men's behalf. I don't want to get too crass here, but you have a banker for dealing with money, a lawyer for dealing with laws, a plumber for dealing with pipes, and so on. A priest is one more kind of services professional, only his task is not money, law, or pipes. His task is the things of God. Yet it's important to recognize that he is not hired by God to do God's work with God's things; the priest is hired by men to do what they require with God's things.

In other words, a priest deals with God on your behalf. He handles holy things, not just so that you don't have to, but in a very real sense because you can't. Just as it would be foolish to be your own banker, lawyer, and plumber (you'd be wet, poor, and in jail), so it is even more foolish

to be your own religious services specialist — you'd be under God's wrath and unable to placate Him!

Now, even hearing me put it this way probably rubs you the wrong way. The more articulate among you are saying "This is ignoring the Reformation and the doctrine of the priesthood of all believers! Nelson wants to take us back to Rome!"

Not at all. Hear me out. Brothers and sisters, if you somehow understand the doctrine of the priesthood of all believers in a way that makes Jesus Christ superfluous, you are the one committing a theological error here. Yes, there is a place for the great truth that we have become, *in Christ*, kings and priests to our God. But that truth is not one that this passage emphasizes — and anyway, the magnitude of that truth will be much clearer to you when you understand exactly who priests are and what they do.

The priest deals with the things of God on your behalf. He repairs your broken relationship with the Father. He mollifies God's wrath. He intercedes for you when you mess up, or when you simply need help and discipline in general. He comes from the human race, and he continues to represent us before God.

Let me say it again: Your need for a priest has not gone away in the New Covenant. You need someone to stand between you and God. The book of Hebrews is not about how *priesthood* is obsolescent, but only about how the Aaronic-Levitical priesthood is obsolescent.

## **II. Six Characteristics of a Priest, vv. 1b-4**

That said, let's look at the additional half-dozen characteristics of a priest that our author lists.

### **A. He offers sacrifice for sin, v. 1b**

The first task of the man picked out to repair and maintain everyone's relationship with God is that he has to offer sacrifice. I still remember my fellow student Paul Janzen in our Hebrews course in college finding it extremely significant that the priests offered both gifts *and* sacrifices. What is the difference? The answer is that the two words are interchangeable. You can see this for yourself with a concordance. They are both used to describe all kinds of offerings that a priest might make. In other words, it's just a way of emphasizing that priests give all kinds of sacrifices.

To offer sacrifice is necessary. It is necessary on account of sin, as a way of offering some kind of payment for one's iniquities. It may be necessary even apart from sin, as a way of giving back to God who has given us everything. But that is speculative. What we know for sure is what is in the text here: a priest atones for sin, removing God's wrath by offering a gift.

Again, the point of Hebrews is not that priesthood is now unnecessary, but that we are still living on the perfect priestly work of Jesus, who offered the perfect sacrifice that satisfied God for all sin and for all time.

### **B. He has a measured reaction to the ignorant and wandering, v. 2a**

The second characteristic of a priest is that he deals reasonably with the ignorant and wayward. He does not love our wandering; He does not want us to keep wandering, or to stay ignorant. But that said, His attitude is not one of limitless outrage over our sin.

We all know certain people who just can't handle certain sins. Present them with a sin, and they go nuts. That sin is beyond the pale in their mind.

Jesus isn't like that. He responds to sin reasonably, without getting overly outraged or, conversely, failing to recognize its seriousness. His reaction is measured.

Is this a priest you can trust? Do you love and delight in Him as such a priest? He responds in a measured, reasonable fashion when you bring Him your sin and ask Him to deal with it. Thank God!

### **C. He is surrounded by weakness, v. 2b**

The third characteristic of a priest is that he is surrounded by weakness. The word doesn't necessarily imply that the priest himself is weak, but the next verse makes it clear that the priest too shares in that weakness, typically to the point of needing to offer a sacrifice for his own sin as well as for his neighbor's.

Jesus was surrounded on all sides with weakness, and He was weak too. He lay in the boat and slept. He said "I thirst." He wept. He had the strength of God, but cried the tears of a man. And, of course, weakness was all around. It seems that His earthly father died while Jesus was still young. His brothers did not believe in Him. Peter ran his mouth when he did not know what to say; the apostles all left Him and fled. I could go on. But we all know what it is like to be surrounded by weakness, and to be weak within ourselves. We love the action heroes that our filmmakers and novelists invent, men who never let their attention wander, who never need a bathroom break, who never say the wrong thing or accidentally do the wrong thing, who always pay their bills on time and keep up with the maintenance on their vehicles.

Those heroes are fictional. Underneath the Spandex, Marvel's heroes are surrounded by weakness, are weak themselves. Even Navy SEALs have their weaknesses; the best of men are men at best.

But Jesus is not merely a man at best. At best, He is almighty, infinite, eternal, and unchangeable. With Him there is no variation or shadow of turning. We will get into that more next week. But know that though He was surrounded by weakness on all sides, and even experienced human weakness, He is our strong deliverer, the source of eternal salvation.

### **D. He offers sacrifice for the people and for himself as a sinner, v. 3**

The typical human high priest not only offers sacrifice for the people; he is so weak that he must offer it for himself too. The rest of Hebrews does not address this issue directly, but it is safe to say that in this regard, Christ transcends Aaron. He is morally perfect; He has no need to offer an atoning sacrifice for Himself. He does not need to apologize for His weaknesses.

### **E. He is not self-appointed, v. 4a**

The human high priest is also not self-appointed. A self-appointed priest, for instance the Levite who served Micah in the book of Judges, is not a real priest. God is not going to accept that man's handling of divine things.

#### **F. He is called by God (like Aaron), v. 4b**

A real priest has to be called by God, like Aaron was. Moses conveyed God's call to his brother. That is, a prophet announced "Aaron, you are God's high priest." The Levitical system makes provision for a generational succession in that office, down through the ages.

### **III. Christ the Perfect High Priest, vv. 5-6**

But Jesus is a greater high priest, from a greater order than the Levitical high priests.

#### **A. He is not self-appointed, v. 5a**

The first thing our author points out about Him is that He was not self-appointed. Jesus did not come forward and say "Behold your new high priest!"

#### **B. He is called by His Father, v. 5b**

He was called by His Father. The Father said to Him, "You are my Son." Why does the writer quote this? In part, to remind us that he has already cited Psalm 2 and also to show us that Jesus has a huge qualification for being a priest: He is the Son of God. To be Son of God means that you are uniquely qualified to handle the things pertaining to God.

#### **C. The LORD made Him a priest forever, v. 6**

Not only is He qualified, though. He is actually ordained and installed, actually doing the job of being the great high priest. Psalm 110 reveals the conversation in which the Father appointed His beloved Son to the role of great High Priest. In weeks to come, we will look at this psalm in more depth.

### **IV. Applications**

So what do we do with this text?

#### **A. We have enough priests already**

My first plea is "Stop ordaining priests"! We already have enough priests. By that I mean that we have one. But He is infinite, and infinitely able to repair and maintain every human being's relationship with God.

Your Protestant instincts are correct to tell you that you don't need another priest in addition to Jesus. He is single-handedly, perfectly fitted to do it all.

#### **B. Utilize your high priest**

So make use of Him! Do you relate to God through Jesus? Do you take all your sins and all your problems to Him? Do you find that He is the one who is ready and able to help you in all your times of need?

You don't have to single-handedly bootstrap your relationship with God. There's an infinitely competent, great high priest who has made it His business to take care of that. Make use of Him, brothers and sisters. Seek Him; find Him; talk to Him; worship Him. He is your priest, now and forever. Amen.