

JESUS IS OUR PERFECT HIGH PRIEST
Sermon for the 5th Sunday in Lent, 2021
Hebrews 5:1-10

The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all. Amen.

The text for our sermon today is our Second Reading from before, Hebrews 5:1-10: ¹**Every High Priest is selected from human beings and is appointed to represent human beings in matters that are related to God, that he may offer gifts and sacrifices for sins.** ²**He can be gentle with ignorant and erring people, because he himself is subject to weakness.** ³**For that reason, he is obliged to offer sacrifices for his own sins, just as he does for the sins of the people.** ⁴**No one takes this honour for himself but is called by God, just as Aaron was.** ⁵**So also Christ did not glorify Himself to become a High Priest but was glorified by the One who said to Him: “You are My Son. Today I have begotten You.”** ⁶**As He also says in another place, “You are a Priest for ever, in the order of Melchizedek.”** ⁷**During His days in the human nature, Jesus offered prayers and petitions, with loud cries and tears, to the One who could save Him from death; and, because He feared God, He was heard.** ⁸**Although Jesus is the Son, He learned obedience from the things that He suffered.** ⁹**When He was perfected, He also became the Source of eternal salvation for all who obey Him,** ¹⁰**after He had been proclaimed by God to be the High Priest, “just like Melchizedek.”**

Lord God, heavenly Father, sanctify us through Your truth, Your Word is truth. Amen.

Dear friends in Christ,

Sometimes we say, “He’s too smart for his own good,” or “She’s too good for him.” What do we mean by these words? Is it possible to be too smart, or too good? Maybe it is. What about Jesus? Is it possible that He may be “too great” to be the High Priest that the writer of Hebrews proclaims Him to be? After all, the High Priest was supposed to be able to relate to the people he served. That’s what the writer means when he says, **“Every High Priest is selected from human beings and is appointed to represent human beings in matters that are related to God, that he may offer gifts and sacrifices for sins. ² He can be gentle with ignorant and erring people, because he himself is subject to weakness.”**

The opening verses of Hebrews give a majestic description of Christ. In those verses, He was declared to be the Son of God - Creator, preserver, and heir of all things; *the radiance of God’s glory and the exact representation of His being.*¹ There can be no doubt that Jesus is great, but is He *too great* to relate to the sinners He is supposed to represent? The High Priests of Israel were human beings just like the people they served. As sinners, they were able to sympathise with those who sinned. If Jesus has now been **“proclaimed by God to be the High Priest,”** how could someone as great as God’s Son possibly relate to sinners? That was a question the first readers of Hebrews would have had on their minds. The writer knew it and responded by assuring his readers that Jesus is not only the great High Priest but is also the perfect High Priest.

The writer says that Jesus **“was perfected.”** This phrase immediately leads us to think that Jesus was not perfect to begin with but gradually progressed - perhaps by trial and error - from imperfection to perfection. However, this is not what the writer is saying.

He begins by talking about Jesus **“during His days in the human nature.”** Obviously, he is referring to Jesus as a true human being. When our writer talks about how Jesus **“offered prayers and petitions, with loud 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, where we see Jesus as a true human being - with a body and soul. Jesus had said, *“My soul is very sorrowful, to the point of death”* (Matt. 26:38). With His human voice, He had also instructed His disciples and prayed to His heavenly Father. From His human lips came cries, from His eyes came tears, and from His face sweat fell like drops of blood.² Jesus Christ is *“true man, born of the virgin Mary.”*

But the writer had not lost sight of what he had written at the beginning of this book. Remember the opening words of Hebrews: *“God has long ago spoken at many times and in many ways to our fathers by the prophets, ² but He has in these last days spoken to us by His Son”* (1:1-2). Then the writer went on to proclaim the greatness of God’s Son. Now, from our text, the writer reveals the same truth when he writes, **“...Jesus is the Son.”** Jesus of Nazareth, the true human being, is also the true Son of God.

Jesus is the perfect High Priest - the God-man who is perfectly able to represent mankind before God. We know how that happened from Luke chapter 1, where we are told that a young woman named Mary was informed by an angel of God that she, though a virgin, would be with child and give birth to a Son.³ At His baptism and again on the Mount of Transfiguration, God the Father proclaimed Jesus to be His Son with whom He was *“well pleased”* (Matt. 17:5). St. John also said of God’s Son, *“there is no sin in Him”* (1 John 3:5). Jesus is indeed the perfect High Priest.

¹ Hebrews 1:1-3

² Luke 22:44

³ Luke 1:35

But if that's true - that Jesus is the true God in human flesh - how is it possible for Christ to plead with His heavenly Father, to the **“One who could save Him from death”** to take from Christ's lips the cup of punishment and suffering that was pressed there so He would not have to drink it? How can the Son of God not know that there was no other way for a sinful world to be set free from a well-deserved eternity in hell? How can the writer of Hebrews talk about the One who is declared to be the Son of God as someone who **“learned obedience from the things that He suffered”**? How can the One who knows all things possibly learn?

The answer is not simply that the Son of God *became* the Son of Man. That same Son of Man predicted in advance all that would happen to Him and bore the unbearable burden of humanity's sin to the cross. No, the answer to the question, how could Christ not see the absolute necessity of the cross and learn obedience even though He is the Son of God, is that *He humbled Himself*. In that humble state, which extended from His conception in Mary's womb to His burial in Joseph's new tomb, Jesus willingly gave up the full and constant use of His divine power and glory. Our writer calls the state of Christ's humiliation **“His days in the human nature.”** Truly, Jesus humbled Himself to the point where He - the One who created the angels - is strengthened by one to bear His struggle.⁴ It is this Jesus, God's Son in His humble humanity, who is our perfect High Priest.

We see Him as He **“offered prayers and petitions, with loud cries and tears, to the One who could save Him from death,”** and yet He never rebelled. Instead, in reverent submission, He obeyed His heavenly Father. There was no hint of resistance or whisper of complaint. In reverent submission, He was willing to carry out the will of God to save sinful humankind. He carried out the Father's will and drank the cruel cup - and three days later, was saved from death as the Father 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 the Father's will. We don't always say and pray, *“Father, let not My will, but Yours be done.”* Like the sheep whom the prophet Isaiah once talked about, we sinners go astray, turning to our own way.⁵ We do it with our time and money, and energy. We spend the blessings God gives us not in God's way to His glory and to serve Him and others, but we use our gifts in our own selfish, self-serving way. How hard it is to live in our time in reverent submission to God! If things go wrong in life - if there is pain or loss, sickness or some other cross to bear - we easily give in to grumbling and complaining. It is easy to say, *“let not My will, but Yours be done,”* yet it is difficult to pray the same. All around, we see our Father's will for how we must live being mocked and ignored. His claim on His creatures' time, money, abilities, and bodies are rejected as the world says, *“My will; my way, my body, my business.”*

As sinful creatures, it is hard to say to the Father, *“let not My will, but Yours be done,”* and it is even more difficult to actually *do* His will. That's the point the writer is making when he says that Jesus **“learned obedience from the things that He suffered.”** The writer is pointing us from the Garden of Gethsemane where the Saviour says, *“let not My will, but Yours be done,”* to Calvary where the Father's will *was* done. There, Jesus was led like a lamb to the slaughter and, as a ewe before the shearer is silent, so He did not open His mouth.⁶ In that way, He learned obedience that went from a theoretical thing in Jesus' mind to a very practical thing involving thorns and scourge; spikes and scorn; crucifixion, death and the grave.

Sadly and honestly, it's the opposite for us. We don't always put our promises into practice - we say, *“I will,”* but don't always do the Father's will. Though we often promise to obey Him, 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, plus the heartache and tears we've caused those we love by failing to follow the right words with the right works. He endured the cross, scorning its shame. That's what it means when we read of Jesus, **“When He was perfected, He also became the Source of eternal salvation.”** Or, to say it another way, *“After He had finished His work.”* Does that ring a bell? Think to Jesus' triumphant cry from the cross: *“It is finished.”* The word translated as **“perfected”** in the phrase **“was perfected”** 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 Saviour. 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 has finished the work, and our perfected High Priest has become the source of eternal salvation **“for all who obey Him.”**

That last phrase sort of jumps out at us too. Jesus has become the source of eternal salvation **“for all who obey Him.”** That doesn't sound quite right, does it? Last Sunday, we heard Paul say, *“For by grace you have been saved through faith”* (Eph. 2:8). What happened to being saved by God's grace through faith? When did our obedience become part of the equation when it comes to salvation? Our writer, however, *is* speaking in terms that are entirely consistent with salvation by grace. Here is the thing - *faith is obedience to God*. So earnestly and seriously does the Father want us to be saved that He doesn't only invite us to believe in

⁴ Luke 22:43

⁵ Isaiah 53:6

⁶ Isaiah 53:7

Jesus - He commands it. St. John says, *“This is also His Commandment, that we should believe in the name of His Son, Jesus Christ, and love one another as He has commanded us”* (1 John 3:23).

So, we are commanded 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 through faith for our salvation. He is the perfect Saviour who lived perfectly to provide us with the righteousness we needed to withstand the unblinking gaze of the Father’s all-seeing eye. He died in shame to remove every trace of sin and guilt from our souls. As we hear His kind invitation, *“Come to Me... and I shall give you rest”* (Matt. 11:28), and with believing hearts find rest for our souls in Jesus, we find the joy and peace of eternal salvation. That is salvation by grace through faith. That is the “obedience” the writer to the Hebrews is talking about. His words also serve to remind us that the obedience of faith will show itself in a life of obedience. From hearts that are filled with joyful faith in Jesus the Saviour will flow lives of love that shows 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 **“perfected”** by the way He obeyed His heavenly Father, even to the point of death. May we render to our perfect High Priest the obedience He has earned: the obedience of confident faith, which shows itself in love! Amen.

The peace of God which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.

PRAYER FOR THE FIFTH SUNDAY IN LENT

Almighty and ever-living King of all creation, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, and our Father, whom all the heavenly hosts praise and glorify, hear our prayer.

We thank You, heavenly Father, for Your limitless love in the gift of Christ Your Son, for the sacrifice of His life on the cross for us, for the promise of eternal life through His death and resurrection, and for the cleansing of our consciences from dead works by His obedience.

Increase our joy in Your rich blessings: the forgiveness of our sins, deliverance from death and the power of the devil, and the assurance of everlasting life, which Jesus’ crucifixion have obtained for us.

We thank You that in Christ You have spoken to us the words of life. Inspire us to love and worship Him in spirit and in truth. Give us that faith that sees in Him the eternal Godhead, the everlasting I AM, the one who is the same yesterday, today, and for ever. Grant that we may always trust in His mercy, be faithful to His Word, and obey His commandments, and honour Him by losing our lives for His sake and for the Gospel’s, as He lost His life to gain us.

In mercy, cleanse and strengthen Your Church, that it may be saved from all weakness and failure, and be filled with power for holy service. Govern the nations on earth, that people everywhere may live in harmony with their fellowmen and serve one another’s needs. Pour out Your grace on our homes and on all schools, that the young may be trained for a useful life on earth, and be made ready for the life to come. Bless all who work honestly with mind and hand to provide those things we need for this life. Give all people everywhere joy in doing their daily work, and grant that they may do it as those who are accountable to You. We thank You for the rain You have sent this past week, and pray that You would continue to provide favourable weather conditions for us.

Help us to use our abilities and possessions faithfully, for everything belongs to You. Forgive us for being selfish and for misusing our gifts. Comfort the suffering, the deprived, the burdened, and the aged. Be the help of the needy, the protector of the helpless, and the Saviour of all people. We pray in the name of Jesus Christ our Redeemer. Amen.

FIFTH SUNDAY IN LENT

Jeremiah 31:31-34

³¹ “Look! The days are coming,” declares the LORD, “when I shall make a new Covenant with the family of Israel and with the family of Judah. ³² It will not be like the Covenant that I made with their fathers when I took them by their hands to bring them out of the land of Egypt. They broke My Covenant, although I was a husband to them,” declares the LORD. ³³ “However, this is the Covenant that I shall make with the family of Israel after those days,” declares the LORD: “I shall put My teaching inside them and write it on their hearts. I shall be their God, and they will be My people! ³⁴ Each one will no longer teach his neighbour or his brother, saying, ‘Know the LORD!’ For they will all know Me, from the least among them to the greatest among them,” declares the LORD. “For I shall forgive their wickedness and not remember their sin any longer.”

Hebrews 5:1-10

¹ Every High Priest is selected from human beings and is appointed to represent human beings in matters that are related to God, that he may offer gifts and sacrifices for sins. ² He can be gentle with ignorant and erring people, because he himself is subject to weakness. ³ For that reason, he is obliged to offer sacrifices for his own sins, just as he does for the sins of the people. ⁴ No one takes this honour for himself but is called by God, just as Aaron was. ⁵ So also Christ did not glorify Himself to become a High Priest but was glorified by the One who said to Him: “You are My Son. Today I have begotten You.” ⁶ As He also says in another place, “You are a Priest for ever, in the order of Melchizedek.” ⁷ During His days in the human nature, Jesus offered prayers and petitions, with loud cries and tears, to the One who could save Him from death; and, because He feared God, He was heard. ⁸ Although Jesus is the Son, He learned obedience from the things that He suffered. ⁹ When He was perfected, He also became the Source of eternal salvation for all who obey Him, ¹⁰ after He had been proclaimed by God to be the High Priest, “just like Melchizedek.”

Mark 10:32-45

³² They were on the road, going up to Jerusalem, and Jesus was going ahead of them. The disciples were amazed, and the others who were following Him were afraid. Then He again took the Twelve aside and began to tell them the things that were going to happen to Him: ³³ “Look! We are going up to Jerusalem, and the Son of Man will be betrayed to the Chief Priests and the scribes. They will condemn Him to death and will hand Him over to the Gentiles. ³⁴ They will mock Him and spit on Him, flog Him and kill Him, and after three days He will rise.”

³⁵ James and John, the sons of Zebedee, came to Him. They told Him, “Teacher, we want You to do for us whatever we ask.”

³⁶ He asked them, “What do you want Me to do for you?”

³⁷ They told Him, “Grant that one of us may sit at Your right, and the other at Your left in Your glory!”

³⁸ Jesus told them, “You do not realise what you are requesting. Can you drink the cup that I drink or be baptised with the baptism with which I am baptised?”

³⁹ They said to Him, “We can.”

Jesus told them, “You will drink the cup that I drink and be baptised with the baptism with which I am baptised, ⁴⁰ but sitting at My right or at My left is not Mine to grant but is for those for whom it has been prepared.”

⁴¹ When the other ten heard about it, they began to be angry with James and John. ⁴² Then Jesus summoned them and told them, “You know that those who are regarded as rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great men exercise authority over them. ⁴³ However, it is not like that among you, but whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, ⁴⁴ and whoever wants to be first among you must be the slave of all! ⁴⁵ For even the Son of Man has not come to be served but to serve and to give His life as a ransom for many.”