

Hebrews 5

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We all know how important it is to know people if we want to get ahead in life. This is perhaps most obvious in the world of employment. Once I got past the McDonald's-and-Wal-Mart level of work, every job or position that I've ever had, I got because I knew somebody. I spent the last two years of college working for the University of Missouri College of Agriculture because I went to church with an agronomy professor. After my first year of law school, I interned with a judge who was a friend of my girlfriend's parents. I wound up in the Dowlen Rd. preacher training program because the trainee at the time I applied was an old roommate. Last but not least, I was invited to preach here because David Banning, who had helped train me at Dowlen, was willing to recommend me and go to bat for me.

Although I've never hired anybody, I suspect that knowing somebody who knows somebody is just as important from that perspective too. How can you possibly look at a dozen resumes and tell from the resume who the perfect hire and who the slacker is? My father has always said that some of the worst hires he ever made were the men with the most impressive credentials. However, if you're looking to hire and someone you trust recommends a candidate, that's something you can rely on. That personal knowledge is weightier than all the credentials in the world.

Almost exactly the same thing is true in the spiritual realm. Our goal there isn't to get hired. It's to persuade God to take us to heaven with Him. There's one big problem, though. If we're left to our own resources, we don't know God, and He doesn't know us. Nor are our spiritual resumes likely to help. What we need, then, is help from somebody who knows us. We need a spiritual go-between who can make that connection between us and God. Jesus, of course, is that go-between, and we gain salvation through His high-priestly offices. Let's see how this works in Hebrews 5.

The High-Priestly Chiasm

Before we begin discussing the content of the text, it's important for us to look at its structure. The other day, as I was studying this text in preparation for writing this sermon, I noticed for the first time that Hebrews 5:1-10 is a chiasm. The name comes from the Greek letter chi, which is shaped like an X, and a chiasm basically is an X-shaped logical structure. It narrows down to a single point, then broadens back out. What's more, the top half of the X and the bottom half are mirror images of one another. It's like the author works his way down through some piece of logic, reaches the center, and then backs his way out, discussing the same topics in reverse order. He goes through A, B, and C, reaches the center D, and then goes through C', B', and A'.

In Scripture, chiasms are primarily found in Old Testament poetry.

Although all of this seems very technical and abstract, it's important to us for two main reasons. First, it shows that the author of Hebrews was almost certainly a Jew writing to a Jewish audience. Nobody else would have had a clue what a chiasm was. Second, it helps us grasp how tightly Hebrews is written. The Hebrews writer is following this intricate logical scheme, but he follows it so smoothly that I've read Hebrews 5 dozens of times and never seen it.

Now that we understand the structure, we can turn our attention to what the author is saying. He presents the first half of this chiasm to us in Hebrews 5:1-4. In this portion, he is discussing the attributes of the **EARTHLY HIGH PRIEST**. First, in v. 1 here, he tells us what the **FUNCTION** of the high priest is. Earlier, we were discussing how important it is to know somebody. This passage tells us that the Israelite high priest was somebody. He could act as a go-between between man and God. He was the conduit by which God's people were able to make gifts and sacrifices for sin to their Creator. The people were afraid of God and avoided Him, but the job of the high priest was to approach Him.

The second portion of this chiasm tells us what the **CAPACITY** of the high priest was. It tells us both what he could do and why he could do it. Ideally, the high priest wasn't some arrogant functionary who had no interest in teaching the people about God and had no respect for them when they sinned. Instead, he dealt gently with sinners because of his awareness of his own sin. Although none of us are high priests today, there's still an important lesson for us to learn here. One of the great temptations we face as Christians is the temptation to feel superior to the world, to look at all of the wretched sinners around us and sneer at them because of how little they understand and how much trouble their foolishness gets them into. This has several ill effects. First of all, people know when we hold them in contempt, and when they see contempt in us, they will have no interest in hearing the gospel from our lips and no love for our church. Second, though, this proud, arrogant attitude is precisely the sort of thing that makes God angry.

Instead, the first thing that we must remember when dealing with sinners is our own sin. We must never forget that we are a holy nation only because Christ has cleansed us and made us holy. On our own, we're not different in any significant way from the worst sinner we know. We ought to understand their struggles with sin because of our own struggles with sin, and when we address that sin, we must show them the same mercy we want to receive from God.

Third, the Hebrews writer discusses the **OFFERINGS** of the high priest. Because of his sin, even the high priest wasn't fit at first to draw near to God on behalf of the people. Instead, the first sacrifice that he had to offer was

the sacrifice for his own sin. Only as he was first purified could he perform the rest of his priestly functions. Similarly, whenever we approach God, we must first deal with the sin we have committed before we do anything else.

Finally, the writer explains the **CALLING** of the high priest. The office of the high priest wasn't open to any Israelite who wanted to barbecue bulls and goats for a living. Instead, God called Aaron and his descendants to serve as high priest, and only an Israelite from that lineage was qualified to serve. During the wilderness wandering, a man named Korah and his followers presumptuously insisted that they too had the right to serve as high priests. God dealt with this rebellion in the most dramatic way possible. Most of the followers were consumed by fire from heaven, while the earth opened up and swallowed Korah, the other ringleaders, and their whole families. The message could not have been clearer. There was no such thing as a self-appointed high priest. Only the ones whom God called could serve.

From there, the Hebrews writer shifts to the mirror-image part of the chiasm in Hebrews 5:5-10. The first section was about the Aaronic priesthood; this section is about **CHRIST**. Because this is a chiasm, the first topic under discussion is the **CALLING** of Christ. Just as the sons of Aaron were called to the priesthood through the decree of God, so too was Christ. Quotations from Psalm 2 and Psalm 110 describe God's intended purpose: first, to cause His Son to be born into human form, and second, to consecrate Jesus as a high priest according to the order of Melchizedek. Jesus wasn't some self-appointed high priest like Korah. Instead, He was selected for the office by God.

Next, the Hebrews writer examines the **OFFERINGS** of Christ. As with the calling of Christ, this is similar to the offerings of the earthly high priest, but different. Christ, being sinless, had no need to offer sacrifices for sin. His big concern was not spiritual death, but physical death. He knew that He was going to die, He entreated God to spare His life, and God heard His prayer. This verse puts a whole new spin on Jesus' prayer in the garden of Gethsemane. Obviously, God did not save Jesus from the cross. However, He did save Him from the tomb. The offering of prayer that Jesus made didn't get immediate results, but ultimately, God heard and blessed Him because of His piety.

Third in line, we come to the **CAPACITY** of Christ, in other words, what fitted Him to serve as high priest. The reason why the earthly high priest could serve was because his own sinfulness helped him to sympathize with the sins of others. Once again, Jesus' own sinlessness made this impossible for Him. Instead, He had to learn to sympathize with us in another way, a way we've explored at length in earlier chapters of Hebrews. What perfected Jesus to act as our go-between with God was first of all, the temptation He experienced in His suffering, and second, His perfect obedience despite that temptation. Those two things ensured that Jesus was both willing and able to help us in our sins.

When we take all of this and add it up, it shows how Jesus was able to fulfill the **FUNCTION** of high priest. However, just as the other elements of His high-priestly resume were different, what He stood for as high priest was different. He wasn't merely able to be a spiritual messenger boy, to scamper into the holy place and bring God a gift or a sin offering anytime someone wanted to present one. Instead, Jesus was the source of eternal salvation to all the obedient. The Hebrews writer here puts a lot of weight on the word "eternal". This doesn't mean simply that once we're forgiven of a sin through Jesus, the sin stays forgiven. Instead, it means that Jesus' one sacrifice has an eternal extent, so that everyone through all time who wishes to be purified from their sins may find that purification in Him.

The Problems with Not Growing.

All of this makes for a very interesting explanation of the technical details of our salvation, but apparently, the Jews to whom Hebrews was written weren't ready for this yet, and the Hebrews writer knew they weren't ready. That's why he embarks on an explanation of the problems with not growing. We find the first part of this explanation in Hebrews 5:11-14. One of the first things that we should get out of this, even though it's only implied in the text, is that it's OK to be a new Christian, and it's even OK to not know very much about God's word as a new Christian. People in that situation are expected to be unskilled in the word of righteousness and in need of the pure milk of the word.

However, just as God expects us to be babes in Christ when we first begin, He doesn't expect us to stay that way. Just as growth is the norm in physical development, it's also the norm in spiritual development. We're to move from being milk-drinkers to being meat-eaters. We accomplish this growth in two main ways. First, by actually drinking the milk. Even if we call ourselves Christians, unless we actually spend some time with the word, we won't get the nourishment we need to mature. Second, we have to train ourselves, to put into practice what we have learned from Scripture, so that we become able to tell good and evil apart. Once we've done that, we're ready for the meat.

Finally, if we fail to grow, it's not like that's some acceptable thing. It's not. It displeases God. When a babe in Christ needs to hear the basic gospel truths because he doesn't understand them, that's fine. However, if we've been a Christian for 10 or 20 years, and our grasp of those gospel basics is so poor that we need to hear them again, that's a problem. Likewise, it's a problem if we are either unable or unwilling to teach others. God doesn't send angels to teach others about His word; instead, He relies on ordinary Christians to do the teaching, and if we can't or won't teach, then God isn't able to incorporate us into His work. Certainly, we must be mindful of the stricter judgment that comes upon teachers and be careful with what we say, but every Christian should aspire on some level to teach others.