

Hebrews

Drawing Near to God

Hebrews 7:11-19

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INTRODUCTION:

As I told you last week, this sermon is rated **MC** for Mature Christians.

Traditions are hard to change! Religious traditions are especially hard to change, because people insist that God ordained them. The Jews rightly believed that God had ordained the traditions and practices of the Mosaic Law almost 15 centuries before the time of Christ. The Law was the very center of the Jewish culture. They ordered their lives around the Sabbath worship and the yearly feasts. The priests and Levites oversaw and regulated the worship at the temple. The sacrifices and rules for ceremonial cleansing were all spelled out in the Law. These laws and traditions were deeply entrenched!

To challenge the validity of these practices was to risk your life! The opponents of Stephen, the first Christian martyr, was charged with the following...

Acts 6:13b-14 (NASB95)

...“This man incessantly speaks against this holy place and the Law; ¹⁴ for we have heard him say that this Nazarene, Jesus, will destroy this place and alter the customs which Moses handed down to us.”

The opponents of Paul shouted...

Acts 21:28b (NASB95)

...“Men of Israel, come to our aid! This is the man who preaches to all men everywhere against our people and the Law and this place; and besides he has even brought Greeks into the temple and has defiled this holy place.”

Even many Jews who had professed faith in Christ were still wanting to hold on to the law. Let me read from the 15th chapter of Acts to give you a sense of their mindset.

Acts 15:1-10 (NASB95)

¹⁵ Some men came down from Judea and *began* teaching the brethren, “Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved.” ² And when Paul and Barnabas had great dissension and debate with them, *the brethren* determined that Paul and Barnabas and some others of them should go up to Jerusalem to the apostles and elders concerning this issue. ³ Therefore, being sent on their way by the church, they were passing through both Phoenicia and Samaria, describing in detail the conversion of the Gentiles, and were bringing great joy to all the brethren. ⁴ When they arrived at Jerusalem, they were received by the church and the apostles and the elders, and they reported all

that God had done with them. ⁵ But some of the sect of the Pharisees **who had believed** stood up, saying, “It is necessary to circumcise them and to direct them to observe the Law of Moses.”

⁶ The apostles and the elders came together to look into this matter. ⁷ After there had been much debate, Peter stood up and said to them, “Brethren, you know that in the early days God made a choice among you, that by my mouth the Gentiles would hear the word of the gospel and believe. ⁸ And God, who knows the heart, testified to them giving them the Holy Spirit, just as He also did to us; ⁹ and He made no distinction between us and them, cleansing their hearts by faith. ¹⁰ Now therefore why do you put God to the test by placing upon the neck of the disciples a yoke which neither our fathers nor we have been able to bear?”

So the author of Hebrews had a formidable task in trying to convince his Jewish Christian readers that the Law and the Levitical priesthood, that was tied directly to the Mosaic covenant, were now obsolete and set aside because of the far better New Covenant and priesthood of Jesus. That is why he has made such an effort to show the supremacy of Christ over everyone and everything in the Old Testament including all of the high priests and Melchizedek.

In our scripture passage this morning, He makes some radical statements about the Law:

1. It was weak and useless and made nothing perfect.
2. Because of these problems, it has been changed and set aside. He is drawing a distinct dividing line between Judaism and Christianity. You cannot blend the two into an integrated hybrid. He does not want his readers to go back to the old Jewish way, as if it were good enough.
3. Even if they suffer persecution for their faith, they must persevere, because Jesus has provided “**a better hope, through which we draw near to God**”.

That statement was radical, too. As I said last week, every Jew knew that you could not just stroll into the Holy of Holies to have a little chat with God! The Levitical system was designed to keep the worshipers at a distance from God, lest He destroy them. Only the high priest could enter the Holy of Holies, and that only once a year, on the Day of Atonement.

Hebrews 7:11-19 (NASB95)

¹¹ Now if perfection was through the Levitical priesthood (for on the basis of it the people received the Law), what further need *was there* for another priest to **arise** according to the order of Melchizedek, and not be designated according to the order of Aaron? ¹² For when the priesthood is changed, of necessity there takes place a change of law also. ¹³ For the one concerning whom these things are spoken belongs to another tribe, from which no one has officiated at the altar. ¹⁴ For it is evident that our Lord was descended from Judah, a tribe with reference to which Moses spoke **nothing** concerning priests. ¹⁵ And this is clearer still, if another priest **arises** according to the likeness of Melchizedek, ¹⁶ who has become *such* not on the basis of a law of physical requirement, but according to the power of an indestructible life. ¹⁷ For it is attested *of Him*,

“You are a priest forever
According to the order of Melchizedek.”

¹⁸ For, on the one hand, there is a setting aside of a former commandment because of its weakness and uselessness ¹⁹ (for the Law made nothing perfect), and on the other hand there is a bringing in of a **better hope**, through which we **draw near to God**.

This passage of scripture falls into two sections: The first is...

I. **The Inferiority of the Law and the Levitical priesthood.**

The author emphasizes throughout Hebrews the concept of **perfection** or being made perfect. It does not mean being without any flaw or defect, but rather it refers to the righteousness that is imputed within us when we our sins are wiped away by the sacrificial blood of Christ Jesus on the cross. This allows us to stand before God on judgment day with Christ's righteousness within us.

The author repeatedly states that the Law was unable to accomplish this. But what the Law could **not** do, **Christ did!**

Hebrews 10:14 (NASB95)

¹⁴ For by one offering He has perfected for all time those who are sanctified.

His argument about the inferiority of the Law and the Levitical priesthood has three points:

A. The inferiority of the priesthood.

Hebrews 7:11 (NASB95)

¹¹ Now if perfection was through the Levitical priesthood (for on the basis of it the people received the Law), what further need *was there* for another priest to arise according to the order of Melchizedek, and not be designated according to the order of Aaron?

Keep in mind that the Jews regarded the Law of Moses and the system of sacrifices that it prescribed as sacred and virtually untouchable! The priesthood was the basis of the Law, in that the sacrificial system, which was the heart of the Law, could not function apart from the priests. A critic could have said to our author, "The Law of Moses and the Levitical priesthood came 500 years *after* Melchizedek met Abraham. It has functioned for centuries, not just one time, as Melchizedek's priesthood with Abraham did. How then can you say that the priesthood of Melchizedek is greater than the Levitical priesthood?"

To answer this objection, the author cites **Psalm 110**, which David wrote at the height of the Levitical priesthood. In that Psalm, which is clearly Messianic, David predicts that one who will sit at God's right hand as king will also be a priest according to the order of Melchizedek. So the author's argument is, if the Levitical priesthood and the Law were good enough, why did God foretell of this new priest according to the order of Melchizedek?

Many of the Jews looked for the appearance of **two** messianic figures, one priestly, "the messiah of Aaron" and the other kingly, "the messiah of Israel". The priestly messiah would be the head of the nation, with the kingly messiah, from the line of David, serving with him. So if the original readers of Hebrews had been influenced by this or a similar teaching, then the author's point that Jesus fulfills both roles in the same person, according to the superior order of Melchizedek, is quite relevant to this audience.

Secondly, the inferiority of the Law and priesthood required a change.

B. The Law had to change.

Hebrews 7:12 (NASB95)

¹² For when the priesthood is changed, of necessity there takes place a change of law also.

In order to understand this we must keep in mind that for a conscientious Jew, this was unthinkable! The Law of Moses was the bedrock of the Jewish religion and culture. How could you even **talk** about changing the Law? But the author is arguing that the Law and the Levitical priesthood were so closely linked that you could not change the priesthood without changing the Law.

This plunges us into one of the thorniest theological matters in all of Scripture, the question of how are we, as New Covenant believers, to relate to the Old Covenant Law? Do we have to obey the commandments in the Old Testament?

Many theologians have divided the Law of Moses into the civil law, the ceremonial law, and the moral law. They say that we are not under the first two aspects of the law, but that God's moral law stems from His holy nature, and thus is always in effect. The Ten Commandments are viewed as a summary of the moral Law, spelling out the ramifications of the two Great Commandments: "Love God" (Commandments 1-4); and, "Love your neighbor" (Commandments 5-10).

There is a debate on how to apply the fourth commandment ("keep the Sabbath day holy"). Commandments 1-3 and 5-10 are repeated in the New Testament epistles, but the Sabbath command is omitted. I believe that the fourth commandment was spiritually fulfilled in Christ. You would need to read the entire chapter of Hebrews 4 to get the complete picture. But here are a few verses that help us to understand the spiritual fulfillment of the Sabbath by Christ.

Hebrews 4:8-11 (NASB95)

⁸ For if Joshua had given them rest, He would not have spoken of another day after that. ⁹ So there remains a Sabbath rest for the people of God. ¹⁰ For the one who has entered His rest has himself also rested from his works, as God did from His. ¹¹ Therefore let us be diligent to enter that rest, so that no one will fall, through *following* the same example of disobedience.

It is no longer our works that save us. So when Christ died on the cross, He perfectly finished His works that He was sent to do and when we "**enter into His rest**" we can rest from trying to earn salvation by our works as the Jews in the Old Covenant attempted to do, but failed.

Listen to what Paul told the Colossians...

Colossians 2:16-17 (NASB95)

¹⁶ Therefore no one is to act as your judge in regard to food or drink or in respect to a festival or a new moon or a Sabbath day— ¹⁷ things which are a *mere* shadow of what is to come; but the substance belongs to Christ.

Thus the argument set forth by the Holy Spirit is that if the Levitical priesthood had been perfect, God would **not** have predicted a new order of priesthood according to Melchizedek. Nor would there have been the necessity of abolishing the way they approached God

through priests and sacrifices. So when the priesthood changed, the Law changed also. Jesus Christ has become our new eternal high priest.

Thirdly, because of the inferiority of the Law and priesthood there is a new priesthood.

C. There is a new order of priesthood.

Hebrews 7:13-14 (NASB95)

¹³ For the one concerning whom these things are spoken belongs to another tribe, from which no one has officiated at the altar. ¹⁴ For it is evident that our Lord was descended from Judah, a tribe with reference to which Moses spoke nothing concerning priests.

The author states what everyone knew, that Jesus was **not** from the tribe of **Levi**, but rather from the tribe of **Judah**. He wants us to recognize that Jesus is not just another human priest, but that He is “our Lord,” God in human flesh. The word translated “**was descended**” literally means “**has arisen from**”. Verses 11 and 15 speak of a Messianic priest who “**arises**”, and the Greek word means “**another of a different kind.**” Jesus is the **only** priest who personifies the order of Melchizedek.

So if the author is countering the false teaching that there would be two messiahs, one from the priestly tribe of Levi, and another from the kingly tribe of Judah. He corrects that error by revealing that Jesus is **both** our king and our high priest **in one person** according to the order of Melchizedek. The old Levitical order has been set aside.

So his overall point in verses 11-14 is that the Law and the Levitical priesthood were inferior because they could not make anyone perfect. His readers must not go back to Judaism! Then the Holy Spirit goes on to show,

II. The Superiority of the New Covenant.

The Holy Spirit presents us with three ways in which the priesthood of Jesus is superior.

A. It is based on the power of an indestructible life.

Hebrews 7:15-17 (NASB95)

¹⁵ And this is clearer still, if another priest arises according to the likeness of Melchizedek, ¹⁶ who has become *such* not on the basis of a law of physical requirement, but according to the **power of an indestructible life**. ¹⁷ For it is attested *of Him*, “You are a priest forever According to the order of Melchizedek.”

The qualifications for being a Levitical priest were all external. They were chosen strictly by their physical lineage along with being free from a number of physical defects. The ceremony for ordaining them was also external, involving clothing them with the priestly garments, purifying them with water and with offerings, etc.

But Jesus has become a priest, like Melchizedek, based on something internal, namely, “**the power of an indestructible life**”. The mysterious silence of the Genesis record seemed to indicate that Melchizedek had “**neither beginning of days nor end of life**” in verse 7:3. But he only foreshadowed Jesus, who truly is eternal. Although He died for our sins, the grave could not hold Him. He is risen and lives as our high priest forever! Nothing can remove Him from that office. Through Him we have eternal access to God!

Secondly, the new covenant of Jesus is superior because it is no longer weak and useless.

B. It is no longer weak and useless.

Hebrews 7:18-19a (NASB95)

¹⁸ For, on the one hand, there is a setting aside of a former commandment because of its weakness and uselessness ¹⁹ (for the Law made nothing perfect),

The old covenant was replaced because of its weakness and uselessness. It was not the law that was the problem. As Paul explains...

Romans 7:12-14 (NASB95)

¹² So then, the Law is holy, and the commandment is holy and righteous and good.

¹³ Therefore did that which is good become *a cause of death* for me? May it never be! Rather it was sin, in order that it might be shown to be sin by effecting my death through that which is good, so that through the commandment sin would become utterly sinful.

¹⁴ For we know that the Law is spiritual, but I am of flesh, sold into bondage to sin.

So the problem was **not** that Law was unholy, **the problem was in the weakness of sinful flesh** that could not keep the Law. One reason that God instituted the Law was to show us the utter sinfulness of our hearts. As such, it was never designed to bring sinners near to God. This is what the author means by, “**for the Law made nothing perfect**”. Sinners were prevented from entering the Holy of Holies. And the sacrifices prescribed by the Law could never completely cleanse the sinner’s conscience or take away his sins.

And finally, the priesthood of Jesus is superior because it provides a better hope through which we draw near to God.

C. It provides a better hope through which we draw near to God.

Hebrews 7:19b (NASB95)

...and on the other hand there is a bringing in of a better hope, through which we draw near to God.

The “**better hope**” refers to Jesus, “**the guarantee of a better covenant**” as verse 22 tells us. The Holy Spirit will explain the theme of drawing near in more detail in...

Hebrews 10:19-22 (NASB95)

¹⁹ Therefore, brethren, since we have confidence to enter the holy place by the blood of Jesus, ²⁰ by a new and living way which He inaugurated for us through the veil, that is, His flesh, ²¹ and since *we have* a great priest over the house of God, ²² let us draw near with a sincere heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled *clean* from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water.

The author’s point is, if you have got something better, why go back to something worse?

Maybe they were nostalgically thinking of “the good old days,” but they were losing sight of the fact that what they presently have in Christ is far better than anything that they had under Judaism. What the Old Testament saints looked forward to, we have received! We

have full forgiveness of sins through Christ's better sacrifice. We don't have to stand out in the courtyard while a priest represents us in the Holy of Holies. We have a high priest within the veil, and He invites us to draw near to the very throne of God, which is a throne of grace, to receive grace to help in our times of need!

CONCLUSION:

You may be thinking, "This is great stuff for the Jews who were tempted to go back to Judaism. But I have never dreamed of doing such a thing. How does this relate to me?"

First, make sure that you understand that you have been made acceptable to God totally through what Jesus has done for you and not at all through anything you have done. Every religion in the world, except biblical Christianity, teaches that you must do something to gain acceptance with God.

But Paul is abundantly clear that we are saved by God's grace (the things we receive that we do not deserve) totally apart from any works that we do:

Romans 4:4-5 (NASB95)

⁴ Now to the one who works, his wage is **not** credited as a favor, **but as what is due.** ⁵ But to the one who does not work, but believes in Him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is credited as righteousness,

Paul anticipated what our reaction might be to this **grace** by "**faith**" alone.

Romans 6:1-2 (NASB95)

⁶ What shall we say then? Are we to continue in sin so that grace may increase? ² May it never be! How shall we who died to sin still live in it?

If you are seeking to draw near to God through anything that you do, you do not understand the gospel. Listen again to verse 4. **(reread above).**

So if our works are the results of our gratitude for what Christ has done for us it will be credited to us. But if our works disregard what Christ has done for us and we are seeking salvation through our works, we will be extremely disappointed on judgment day.

So, **secondly**, make sure that you are utilizing and enjoying the great privilege of drawing near to God through the blood of Jesus Christ. If your faith is based upon what Jesus has done for you, then you have "**a better hope**".

I would like to finish with just one more verse.

Romans 15:13 (NASB95)

¹³ Now may the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that you will abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.

Whatever daily problems you face, whether trivial or major, you have access to the presence of God through the blood of Jesus Christ, our eternal king and high priest.

Seek to draw near to God!

What A Day That Will Be.