

OUT WITH THE OLD, IN WITH THE NEW

SERIES: CHRIST BEFORE US

Hebrews 7:11-19

18th Message

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We are now in the so-called dog days of summer. Most of the country is sweltering under a heat wave. Here in the Bay Area we are used to living in the Goldilocks zone: not too hot, not too cold, but just right. But even here we have sweltered this past week.

Since it is summer, most teachers are enjoying a well-earned break from school. But I think in a couple of states teachers and administrators are scrambling because of some recent decisions. Two weeks ago the Louisiana Legislature mandated that there be a poster of the Ten Commandments in every public classroom in the state, from kindergarten to university. Ten days ago the Oklahoma State Superintendent of Public Education decreed that the Bible, including the Ten Commandments, be incorporated into school curricula, effective immediately.

Given the separation of church and state, do the Ten Commandments belong on the walls of public classrooms? As on so many matters today, the country is polarized on this.

But why do I bring up this topic in a sermon on Hebrews? What do the Ten Commandments have to do with Hebrews? For the four Sundays of July we return to our series on Hebrews, entitled *Christ Before Us*.

The Book of Hebrews is rarely preached. It is long: 13 chapters. It is complex, especially the central six chapters about Jesus our great high priest (4:14–10:25). The preacher has a daunting task in trying to get his readers to understand this topic that he considers so important. He writes,

We have much to say about this, but it is hard to make it clear to you because you no longer try to understand. (5:11)

Or, as Eugene Peterson puts it in *The Message*, “it is hard to get it across to you since you’ve picked up this bad habit of not listening.”

I face an even more daunting task today. It’s hot. It’s summer. It’s a long holiday weekend. And I’m following on the heels of Eugene and Hae-Rin and their engaging series on *Jonah Beneath the Surface*. So I have my work cut out to try to keep you awake and listening.

We are moving deeper and deeper into the central portion of the book, this exposition of the high-priesthood of Jesus. I have said a number of times that it is best to consider the Book of Hebrews as a written sermon or homily. This is why I keep referring to the author as the Preacher. In particular he shows how the risen, exalted, and enthroned Jesus fulfills this verse from the Psalter, which we heard as part of our Scripture reading:

**“You are a priest forever,
in the order of Melchizedek.” (Ps 110:4)**

The preacher has already cited this verse several times (5:6, 10; 6:20). Jesus “was designated by God to be high priest in the order of Melchizedek” (5:10). “He has become a high priest forever, in the order of Melchizedek” (6:20).

Who is this Melchizedek? In our last passage, 7:1-10 (March 10), the preacher recapped the brief reference to Melchizedek in Genesis

14 (7:1-3), then invited us to consider how much greater Melchizedek was than Levi, from whose line came the priests in Israel (7:4-10).

Now in the rest of chapter 7 he moves on to contrast the two orders of priesthood: the Levitical priesthood in the order of Aaron, and the order of Melchizedek to which Jesus is appointed. What was wrong with the former order? Why did it need replacing with a different order? The preacher’s exposition is so dense that I will cover it in two weeks. Today we will consider the need for a new order (7:11-19). Next Sunday we will see how Jesus completely fulfills this new order (7:20-28).

So, today, why was there a need for a new order of priesthood?

I. Need for Change (7:11-12)

The preacher writes of the need for change:

“If perfection could have been attained through the Levitical priesthood—and indeed the law given to the people established that priesthood—why was there still need for another priest to come, one in the order of Melchizedek, not in the order of Aaron? ¹²For when the priesthood is changed, the law must be changed also. (Heb 7:11-12 NIV)

The preacher begins with an “if...then” question: *If* perfection came through the Levitical priesthood, *then* why is there a need for a different priest from a different order? The “if” clause is posed in such a way that it is clearly an unreal condition, contrary-to-fact. Could perfection be attained through the Levitical priesthood? No, it could not! Hence the need for a new order of priesthood. Not just a new priest born into Aaron’s line, but an entire new order.

But the problem is even more serious. It was not just the priesthood that failed to bring perfection. The preacher adds a parenthetical comment to the *if* clause: the law established the priesthood. The Levitical priesthood and the law were tied together. They depended on each other. By *law* he means the Torah or Mosaic Law, the entire set of instructions that God gave Israel at Mt Sinai.

Therefore, v. 12, since the priesthood has to be changed, the Law has to be changed as well. What was wrong with the Law? Could it not bring perfection either? If not, then why did God give Israel the Law?

God delivered the Hebrews from slavery in Egypt. He saved them through the waters of the Re(e)d Sea, which he simultaneously used in judgment on Pharaoh who had held the Hebrews captive. God brought the people through the wilderness to Mt Sinai to meet with him, because his demand to Pharaoh was “Let my people go, so that they may worship me.” Here at Mt Sinai he entered into covenant with this people: “I will be your God, you will be my people, and I will dwell with you.” He laid out how his people were to live in his presence. He gave them the Ten Commandments and the Book of the Covenant. The people responded, “We will do everything the Lord has said; we will obey” (Exod 24:7). Then the covenant was sealed with blood.

The Ten Commandments themselves are in the form of a covenant treaty document, requiring loyalty to the Lord in response to the grace he had shown in bringing them out of Egypt to be his people. So God's people had the Ten Commandments. What good did that do them? Moses went up Mt Sinai, to receive instructions about how God was going to dwell with his people, and to receive two hard copies of the Ten Commandments. Meanwhile, down below at the foot of the mountain, the people quickly broke the Ten Commandments by worshiping the golden calf. Having the Ten Commandments didn't guarantee that the people were actually going to keep them and be faithful, despite their stated intent. The commandments themselves didn't have that power.

Thanks to intercession by Moses, and God's own character, God forgave the people, for he is

The LORD, the LORD, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, maintaining love to thousands, and forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin. (Exod 34:6b-7a)

It was precisely this character of God that made Jonah so upset in Nineveh, as we saw last week. Jonah preached a minimalist message of judgment: "You're all going to burn!" The people of Nineveh repented, God changed his mind and forgave, and Jonah found this highly offensive. But this character of God is a bedrock truth, repeated again and again in Israel's Scriptures.

At Sinai God graciously made a new set of tablets, and he allowed the tabernacle to be constructed. Moses then assembled all the pieces of the tabernacle, in language reminiscent of Genesis 1. It was a new creation, an intrusion of heaven onto earth. God filled the tabernacle with his presence, dwelling in the midst of his people.

But how could a holy God dwell in the midst of his people who had shown themselves unable to keep his commandments? Who were unable to remain loyal to him? God provided a means. He set aside the tribe of Levi to minister in the tabernacle. Within the tribe of Levi, he set aside Aaron and his descendants as priests to mediate a sacrificial system to purify and cleanse the camp from sin.

The Law and the Levitical priesthood were a great gift from God. The Law was the gift of order, showing Israel how to live in God's presence. The priesthood kept open the way to God in the midst of his people. No other nation had these gifts.

The tabernacle expressed both exclusion and embrace. By putting his presence in the midst of his people, God embraced them. But that tabernacle included a set of barriers that excluded, that limited access. The curtain at the entrance to the courtyard excluded those not from the tribe of Levi. The curtain at the entrance to the tent excluded all except priests on duty inside. The veil within the tent excluded everyone except the high priest, once a year on the Day of Atonement. God was in the midst of his people, but his people could only draw so near to him, largely dependent upon their genealogy. The Levitical priesthood could not perfect access to God. And the Law could not perfect God's people to be faithful and obedient.

Nevertheless, this was all a great gift. Some in Israel were able to recognize this, notably the psalmists. Psalms 19 and 119 extol the beauty of God's law. Psalm 84 proclaims, "How lovely is your dwelling place, LORD Almighty!" Even the birds draw near, nesting in the temple courtyard.

The Law and the priesthood were clearly a package together. But the Protestant reformers divided the Law into three separate packages: moral, civil, and ceremonial. The latter two no longer apply.

But the former does: the moral law, as summarized in the Ten Commandments. This is God's eternal moral law. This is natural law incumbent not just on Israelites or on Christians, but on all humanity. This is the thinking behind putting the Ten Commandments in court rooms and classrooms.

I realize that this is a highly controversial point in evangelical circles. Many Christians hold that the moral law, as encapsulated in the Ten Commandments, still applies to Christians, indeed to all people. Hence it belongs on classroom walls.

This three-fold division of the Law would have made no sense to an ancient Israelite or a first-century Jew. The Levitical priesthood and the Law were inextricably bound together as a package.

At the time of Jesus certain Jewish groups were trying to attain perfection. They were trying to live in such a way that God would see a people prepared, ready for him to send the Messiah. The Pharisees, most of whom were not Levitical priests, sought to live at the same purity level as the priests all the time. Furthermore they added another layer of commandments around the Law to protect them from breaking the Law. The Essenes went further: they retreated to the wilderness down by the Dead Sea, there to live very strict lives far from contamination.

But perfection did not come through the Levitical priesthood nor through the associated Law. Though a great gift, they were lacking. There was indeed a need for a different priest to arise, not from the order of Aaron, but from a different order, the order of Melchizedek.

Because of the tight connection between priesthood and Law, a change in one requires a change in the other: when the priesthood is changed, the law must be changed also. You can't separate them as the Reformers did.

2. Jesus Unqualified for Old Order (7:13-14)

A change is required also because Jesus is not from the tribe of Levi. He is not qualified to serve as a priest.

¹³ **He of whom these things are said belonged to a different tribe, and no one from that tribe has ever served at the altar.** ¹⁴ **For it is clear that our Lord descended from Judah, and in regard to that tribe Moses said nothing about priests. (7:13-14)**

Jesus, the different priest, whom God has appointed to a different order, is from a different tribe. Everyone knows that our Lord arose in the tribe of Judah. As Matthew opens his gospel—indeed, the very first verse of the NT:

This is the genealogy of Jesus the Messiah the son of David, the son of Abraham. (Matt 1:1)

As son of David Jesus was born into the tribe of Judah. There is nothing in the Mosaic Law about anyone from the tribe of Judah serving as a priest. How then can Jesus be a priest?

3. A Different Qualification (7:15-17)

Jesus has a different qualification for priesthood:

¹⁵ **And what we have said is even more clear if another priest like Melchizedek appears,** ¹⁶ **one who has become a priest not on the basis of a regulation as to his ancestry but on the basis of the power of an indestructible life.** ¹⁷ **For it is declared:**

**"You are a priest forever,
in the order of Melchizedek." (7:15-17)**

It was already abundantly clear that Jesus arose in the non-priestly

tribe of Judah and therefore cannot serve as a Levitical priest. But it is still even more abundantly obvious that he can be a different sort of priest if he meets the qualifications of being in the likeness of Melchizedek, and, therefore, not dependent on the tribal structure of Israel, not dependent on genealogy.

The Levitical priest took office “on the basis of a regulation as to his ancestry.” They took office according to genealogy. They were born into office through their direct descent from Aaron.

But the different priest arises and takes office in a different way. What qualifies him for office is “the power of an indestructible life.” Now when did our Lord acquire this indestructible life? Did he already have it when he died on the cross?

The eternal Son, who has indestructible life, took on our humanity, being made for a little while lower than the angels. He shared in our humanity; he was made like us, fully human in every way (2:14, 17). He was “tempted in every way, just as we are—yet he did not sin” (4:15). He “suffered death, so that by the grace of God he might taste death for everyone” (2:9). Some argue that Jesus already had indestructible life when he died on the cross. That makes him like a wobble toy: push him over and he pops right back up again. It reduces the agony in the garden where Jesus faced the reality of the death that soon awaited him.

But Jesus really died. Yes, he was in full control of the situation. He gave up his spirit, breathing his last. He committed himself into the hands of his Father. He knew that he had been faithfully obedient to his Father to the very end, to death itself. He would have known that Death had no claim on him. But he entered Death. There he remained, dead, through the rest of Friday, all day Saturday, and into Sunday morning. This can make us uncomfortable. So much so that many give Jesus a busy day on Holy Saturday. But his death is part of the scandal of the incarnation: that the eternal Son should so humble himself and become like us, even unto death. It is part of the scandal of the cross: that the eternal Son, incarnate as a human being like us, should be put to death in the most shameful, violent, humiliating, degrading manner possible.

As I consider Jesus dead in the grave, an image I have in mind is of a massive Burmese python in the Florida Everglades that has swallowed a large alligator. It has got the big prize. It is going to feast for a month or more! But can the python hold on to the alligator it has swallowed? No: the python bursts. It cannot contain the alligator. It has swallowed too much.

Death had swallowed too much. On the third day Death burst asunder. As Peter said in his Pentecost Day sermon,

God raised him from the dead, freeing him from the agony of death, because it was impossible for death to keep its hold on him. (Acts 2:24)

Death had him but could not hold him. God re clothed the risen Lord in a resurrection body that is the archetype for all future resurrection bodies of those who faithfully follow Jesus. Jesus had passed through Death, out the other side, never to face Death again.

Risen, he now in his ongoing humanity has the power of an indestructible life. It is this that qualifies him to be a different priest in the likeness of Melchizedek. This is testified in the Scriptures, which continue to speak:

**“You are a priest forever,
in the order of Melchizedek.” (7:17)**

Yet again the preacher quotes Ps 110:4, the verse that lies behind

so much of his exposition of Jesus as high priest. Jesus is qualified to be a priest, even high priest.

4. Summary (7:18-19)

The final two verses summarize the argument of the section:

¹⁸The former regulation is set aside because it was weak and useless ¹⁹(for the law made nothing perfect), and a better hope is introduced, by which we draw near to God. (7:18-19)

The preacher summarizes the old and the new with parallel and contrasting statements. On the one hand (v. 18) is the setting aside of the former commandment because it was weak and useless. The preacher adds another parenthetical comment by way of explanation: the law made nothing perfect. The reference to law and perfection echoes v. 11, perfection could not come through the Levitical priesthood and its associated Law.

The Law could not make perfect because it could not supply the engine to generate obedience. It could not provide deliverance from sin and death. Nor could the Levitical priesthood with its sacrifices provide perfection in terms of full and complete access to God. The Levitical priesthood did provide a way for managing sin and impurity, but this was temporary. The priests themselves were subject to sin and death. They kept having to offer sacrifices: the daily burnt offering morning and evening every single day, and the blood brought into the Holy of Holies on the Day of Atonement every single year. And both the priests and the high priest kept dying, generation after generation after generation. Nevertheless, let me emphasize again that both the Law and the priesthood were a gracious gift from God to his people.

On the other hand (v. 19b), the setting aside of the former commandment enables the introduction of a better hope. Not a better commandment: the Law perfects nothing. But Hope. This hope isn't just a wishful feeling that it will all work out in the end. It is a concrete, objective fact. Through this hope we draw near to God. This hope is Jesus himself who has entered into the very presence of God in the heavenly tabernacle, of which the earthly one was a copy.

In his wonderful opening sentence the preacher states,

After he had provided purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty in heaven. (1:3)

He sat down: one aspect of his ministry was complete. But Jesus also has an ongoing ministry. There, seated at the Father's right hand, he intercedes for us as our faithful and merciful high priest, through whom we draw near to God. Drawing near to God. This is what it is all about. God has made us for himself. He has made us for his Presence. He enters into covenant with us: I will be your God, you will be my people, and I will dwell with you.

These central six chapters about Jesus our great high priest are bracketed, beginning and end, by an invitation to draw near to God:

Therefore, since we have a great high priest... Let us then approach God's throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need. (4:14-16)

Therefore, brothers and sisters, since we have confidence to enter the Most Holy Place by the blood of Jesus...and since we have a great priest over the house of God, let us draw near to God (10:19-22)

Here in the middle, with the putting aside of the old, and the entrance of the new, we have “a better hope...through which we

draw near to God” (7:19).

Dare we draw near to God? Is this our heart’s desire? Or do we want to keep our distance? Perhaps we doubt that God would really want us in his presence. Perhaps the thought of drawing near to him is terrifying. Perhaps we don’t see his face as a friendly face that invites us to draw near. Perhaps we see someone else’s face imposed on his. Now we have “a better hope...through which we draw near to God.” God bids us come.

The preacher mentioned this hope at the end of the previous chapter:

we who have fled to take hold of the hope set before us...have this hope as an anchor for the soul, firm and secure. It enters the inner sanctuary behind the curtain, where our forerunner, Jesus, has entered on our behalf. He has become a high priest forever, in the order of Melchizedek. (6:18-20)

Jesus is our hope. He is our anchor, firmly set in God’s presence. We are attached to that anchor, as by a rope. We encourage one another to hold on to that rope, to hold on to Jesus, who has gone before us. In every high and stormy gale, our anchor holds within the veil.

Eight weeks ago, 39 of us were on the island of Malta, at the statue of Paul commemorating the traditional site of his shipwreck. Luke gives a detailed account of the shipwreck (Acts 27). After being driven by a violent storm across the open sea for two weeks, the ship was rapidly approaching land in the middle of the night. The crew dropped four anchors from the stern, hoping they would hold till morning in the high and stormy gale. These were emergency anchors. They would have been massive lead anchors, each weighing a ton or more. Several of these large Roman lead anchor stocks have been found on the nearby sea floor.

There at St Paul’s statue we gathered for a group photo, and then we sang *On Christ the Solid Rock I Stand*: “In every high and stormy gale, my anchor holds within the veil...When all around my soul gives way, he then is all my hope and stay.” Jesus is our better hope, through whom we approach God.

God has made us for his presence. In the beginning, in an act of generosity and love, he created a world beyond himself. Into this world he put a human being to represent himself. And he ordered this human being, as male and female, to fill the world with people, all in God’s image. Because of disobedience God expelled the first

humans from his presence. But he restored his presence, in a limited manner, to his people Israel. He put his presence in their midst, that they might draw near, but only so near. This limited access was possible because of a system of sin management, both the Law and the Levitical priesthood.

But God has so much higher aspirations for us than that we be a people of law-keepers, with a human priesthood for managing our law-breaking. Perfection could not be attained that way by the Law and the Levitical priesthood.

The Law could not transform the human heart. In the Sermon on the Mount Jesus declared that a change of heart was what was really required. Six times he quoted a commandment, then intensified it to the heart level. For example,

“You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall not commit adultery.’ But I tell you that anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart.” (Matt 5:27-28)

Transformation of our heart requires a new covenant, a better covenant. A covenant whereby God puts his laws not on stone tablets, not on a poster on the wall, but in our minds and writes them on our hearts. A covenant in which he forgives our wickedness and remembers our sins no more.

So if states are going to put up the Ten Commandments on classroom walls, then perhaps they should also put up a poster of Jesus’s six statements, “You have heard that it was said, but I say unto you.” This condemns us all; none of us can attain perfection. The Ten Commandments cannot perfect our hearts. But then there needs to be one more poster, a poster with the good news:

if anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come: The old has gone, the new is here! (2 Cor 5:17)

If we are in Christ, participating in his death and resurrection, then we are part of the new creation. God has put his Spirit in us to completely renovate our hearts and minds. God has great aspirations for us: that we become like Jesus, his Beloved Son. That together we form the Beloved Community as a transformed humanity, becoming like Jesus, and thus being made ready for God’s presence. We have a better hope, by which we draw near to God.

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