

May 17, 2015

Draw Near to the Throne of Grace

Hebrews 4:14 – 5:10

This chapter begins with a strong encouragement to enter God's rest. And we saw last week that the writer was speaking on at least three levels. There's the physical rest we all need and there's the eternal rest we are heading toward. But there is also the great need we have to rest from all our work to make ourselves acceptable to God. And that deeper rest we need we can only get through the gospel. When we embrace the good news of the gospel by faith, we can rest. No more scrambling for fig leaves. The searching, piercing word of God comes to strip us bare, expose us and heal us. Through the gospel we have this deep inner security that our God knows us to the core and loves us anyway. Our identity crisis is solved. Our acceptance dilemma is over. When you know that you are loved, absolutely, unconditionally loved by God, you can rest. You don't have anything to earn and you don't have anything to prove.

And as we saw last week too, we have to keep going back to the gospel to get that rest. The default mode of the human heart is wired to try to earn God's love and approval; and so we drift back into working for it. We haven't entered that ultimate, eternal rest that God has promised yet; and so as we are on this wilderness journey, we have to keep rehearsing the gospel truth to our souls that all the work we need to do to make ourselves acceptable to God has been done in His Son on the cross, a long, long time ago. There is nothing we can add. Jesus did that work perfectly and completely and we need to embrace the fact that God loves us just like He loves His Son. And then the writer tells us we need three things to keep resting in this truth. We need a high priest; we need a high king; and we need to draw near.

Verse 14 says, *Since then we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus, the Son of God, let us hold fast our confession.* First of all he tells us Jesus is our high priest, and because He is our high priest, it is possible to hold fast, to endure, to persevere, all the way to the end. So how is it helpful for us to know that Jesus is our high priest? If you go to the first few verses of chapter 5 you'll see how. *For every high priest chosen from among men is appointed to act on behalf of men in relation to God, to offer gifts and sacrifices for sins. He can deal gently with the ignorant and wayward, since he himself is beset with weakness. Because of this he is obligated to offer sacrifice for his own sins just as he does for those of the people.* According to this, high priests are men appointed to offer gifts and sacrifices on behalf of other men to God for sin.

In other words, there is a judge and there is a problem. There is God and there is sin; and this sin has created a barrier between God and the people. But God has made a provision for being reconciled to His people. He has ordained that there be human priests who would be a go-between; and that these priests would offer sacrifices. There would be the shedding of blood—a kind of animal substitute for the sinner. God would look upon this and turn away His wrath from the people's sins. But as a permanent solution there were problems with this. The appointed high priest was himself a sinner and so the offerings and sacrifices were meant for him as well. His sympathy and compassion were necessarily limited and finite and his access to God was limited. And because he was just a man, his intercession for others was terminal; he would die and another would have to be appointed. In other words his intercession for the people was imperfect, inadequate and incomplete. But it was never meant to be perfect or complete. It was always meant to point ahead to another high priest – someone greater, someone perfect, someone completely adequate. It was meant to point to this high priest, Jesus, the Son of God who has passed through the heavens.

You see a high priest was in the position of mediation. He would represent the people to God; he would mediate. And because we are weak, frail, fallible people, what we need from a mediator are the very qualifications the writer highlights – the ministry of tears and the ministry of truth. Look at verse fifteen: *For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin.* He says Jesus sympathizes with our weaknesses. The word is *sumpatheo* and it means that He is affected with the same feelings we have. He knows our tears, He knows our joys and He has compassion for us. He's been through the valley, and He's been on the mountaintop. He knows. He's been tempted as we are, yet without sin.

But don't say to yourself, 'Well of course, He was the Son of God. Of course He didn't sin. But that's not like us. We're tempted and we sin, so how can He really know what it's like? If Jesus never sinned, then he doesn't know what temptation is like.' I can resist anything but temptation. This objection is dealt with by C.S. Lewis as he encountered people who raised the question. *"A silly idea is current that good people do not know what temptation means. This is an obvious lie. Only those who try to resist temptation know how strong it is . . . A man who gives in to temptation after five minutes simply does not know what it would have been like an hour later. That is why bad people, in one sense know very little about badness. They have lived a sheltered life by always giving in . . . Christ, because He was the only man who never yielded to temptation, is also the only man who knows to the full what temptation means—the only complete realist."*

Jesus can sympathize with us in our suffering and our pain and our dying, because He experienced the kind of pain and suffering we'll never know all the way to His death. And He can sympathize with us in our seduction to sin, because He was tempted to lie to save His life. 'Are You the Christ?' He was tempted to take revenge when He was wrongly accused. He was tempted to fall into self-pity in the garden of Gethsemane when His closest friends fell asleep in His darkest hour. He was tempted to covet fame and glory when He was tempted by the devil in the desert. Jesus knows the battle and He fought it all the way to the end, and He defeated temptation every time. So He was tested like we are and came through. Therefore the Bible says He is a sympathetic High Priest. He knows. He does not sigh with disgust or roll His eyes at your failures to resist temptation or get impatient with your inability to triumph every time. He is *sumpatheo*.

But this high priest does not just sympathize with our weaknesses, He also strengthens us with the truth. We need a high priest that can honestly sympathize with our weaknesses. But we also need a high priest that won't indulge our weaknesses. We need someone who will weep with us when we are hurting, and give us a kick in the rear when we are slacking. The writer of Hebrews understands this. Have you noticed? One of the things commentators have said over the years is that this book seems almost schizophrenic in its approach. On the one hand the word is incredibly sweet and comforting to a suffering, hurting people. In chapter two he talks about a merciful and faithful high priest coming to our aid. And in chapter three he says 'Encourage one another holy brothers, sharers in a heavenly calling – keep looking at Jesus'.

But it is also very stern, very strict. 'How shall we escape if we neglect this great salvation?' Don't turn away. Don't fall away. Don't harden your hearts. Don't give in to unbelief'. At the end of chapter three he leaves them with the word picture of carcasses strewn in the wilderness, and says, 'Let that be a lesson to you.' And then here in chapter four he ends with a wonderfully, sympathetic invitation – 'Draw near to the throne of grace with confidence'. The text swings between incredibly tender invitations and amazingly stern warnings fairly regularly. **And that is because Jesus is not only our high priest, He is our high king.**

Look at what the writer says: *Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.* The writer tells us that we have this great high priest and then he says, 'Go to the throne.' That's odd. Priests are found in temples, not on thrones. In the Old Testament, you never see a priest who is a king, or a king who is also a priest. Those were separate offices. In fact there is a cautionary tale of one king who tried to be a priest and he ended up a leper. Priests were priests and kings were kings. You didn't mix them. But here the author tells us that our high priest is sitting on a throne. That's where the kings sat. So what does this mean?

Down in chapter five, the writer tells us that this high priest is in a certain lineage, a certain priestly order, the order of Melchizedek. *So also Christ did not exalt Himself to be made a high priest, but was appointed by Him who said to Him, "You are My Son, today I have begotten you"; as He says also in another place, "You are a priest forever, after the order of Melchizedek."* So what does that mean? Who is this Melchizedek guy? He shows up way back in Genesis, sticks around for only a few verses and then he's gone. In fact the only other place he is even mentioned is once in the Psalms and here in Hebrews. But the Scriptures tell us that this Melchizedek was the King of Salem, but he's also a priest. *'And Melchizedek king of Salem brought out bread and wine. (He was priest of God Most High.)'* Genesis 14:18 He ministers bread and wine to Abraham after the battle where he rescued his nephew. And the Bible tells us that Jesus is our high priest of the order of Melchizedek. Melchizedek's work was to point ahead to Jesus's work. That means Jesus is not only our high priest, He's our high king. **That is why He can minister with truth and with tears.**

He was tempted as we are. He had the same kinds of desires to surrender and capitulate to the seductive lies of sin. But He battled that desire with the truth. The temptation came in the wilderness to doubt God's provision and He refused. He turned to Deuteronomy 8 and said, '*Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God*'. The temptation came to try and manipulate God by throwing Himself off the temple and He fought it with the truth of Deuteronomy 6: '*You shall not tempt the Lord your God*'. He was tempted to usurp God's throne and He beat it off with the word of God: '*You shall worship the Lord your God and serve Him only*'. You see the job of the priest was to **represent the people to God**. He was a mediator. A go-between. And Jesus does that job perfectly. **But a king represents God to the people**. He gives the law and he enforces the law. He is the truth-giver. The priest was the caregiver, the supporter, the one who sympathizes and deals gently with the people. He has the ministry of tears. But the king represented truth, the law. He **was** the law. He says jump, you say how high. He has the ministry of truth. In this journey through the wilderness you need both.

Pastor Tim Keller describes the encounter Jesus has with Mary and Martha at the tomb of their dead brother in John chapter 11. He points out that when Jesus gets to the tomb, both women, at different times, approach Him with the exact same accusation: '*Lord, if you had been here, our brother would not have died*'. They say the exact same thing to Jesus. But to each of them, Jesus has a remarkably different response. To Martha He says, '*I am the resurrection and the life*'. What was He doing? He was giving her truth. She needed truth. 'Martha, I'm here now. You know who I am. You know what I can do. Stop with the whining'. But then He turns completely around when Mary comes up to Him, falls down weeping and says the exact same thing, '*Lord, if you had been here, our brother would not have died*'. Word for word – exactly the same. What does Jesus do? He doesn't say anything. There's no lecture, no lesson, no words at all. What He does is weep.

What are we to make of this? With one He speaks truth, with the other He simply weeps. What this says is that our high priest-king is equally committed to the ministry of truth and the ministry of tears. And we need both. You see He knows us all the way down. He knows when we need a healthy dose of truth, and He knows when we need a sympathetic shoulder. Sometimes we don't need a single word, just His presence. But sometimes we need a swift kick. We need both and we need them together. ***The ministry of truth without tears is too severe and we won't listen. The ministry of tears without truth is too relaxed and we won't learn.*** We need the ministry of both and that is what we get with Jesus.

In John 8, the Pharisees confront Jesus and throw a woman they caught in the act of adultery at His feet to test Him. 'The Law of Moses commands that we stone this woman. What do you say?' Initially Jesus says nothing, just writes something on the ground. But finally He says, '*Let the one among you who is without sin throw the first stone*' and they all melt away. And only then does Jesus address the woman, '*Woman, where are your accusers. Is there no one who condemns you?*' '***Neither do I condemn you. Go and sin no more.***' There it is, the ministry of truth and the ministry of tears together. He doesn't just say, 'I don't condemn you. I understand the temptation of adultery and I know its hard to resist.' Nor does He just say, 'Go and sin no more. Let this be the last time I catch you at this. Next time you're not getting off so light'.

Notice that He doesn't say, 'If you don't sin anymore, then I won't condemn you'. He doesn't say, 'Clean up your life first then we'll talk about it.' He says, 'Neither do I condemn you. Go and sin no more.' In other words, '***I'm not basing My love for you and My acceptance of you on your behavior. I want you to base your behavior on My love and acceptance of you.***' But the truth tellers will ask, 'How can He do that? It was sin. He said so. She admitted it.' That's the trouble with people who are either all truth and no tears, or those who are all tears and no truth. They'll never understand Jesus. You either say, 'Your guilty and you're going to pay' or you say, 'You're only human and flawed like the rest of us and we can't do anything about that'. But Jesus says, 'I don't condemn you. Go and stop sinning.'

There is this great scene in the movie – The Greatest Story Ever Told – where Jesus is surrounded by these raging Pharisees, bent on stoning this woman and He straightens up from writing on the ground, and holding out a stone, He says, 'Let him who is without sin cast the first stone'. And He goes from person to person asking the question and holding out the stone. And of course nobody takes it, instead they begin to leave. And there Jesus and the woman are left, with Him still holding the stone. And so what does He do? You see if anyone had the right to stone her – He did. He was quite literally without sin.

So where does Jesus throw it? He doesn't throw it at her – He doesn't throw it at the retreating hypocrites – but it has to go somewhere – a debt has to be paid – it doesn't just disappear into thin air. Where does He throw it? **He throws it down at His own feet.** I know this is a fictional depiction – but I also know that by His words, Jesus is telling the woman, 'I don't condemn you – because soon I will be condemned for you. You won't even have a little stone of God's wrath directed at you because I will take your stoning – I'll be crushed under the mountain of all the wrath and justice of God on all human sin'. That's how He could say, 'Neither do I condemn you. Go and sin no more'. You see truth must be honored. The law has to be fulfilled. Justice must be done. But Jesus doesn't just minister truth. He is a high priest who sympathizes with our weaknesses and draws us into His heart. William Cowper put it very well in a hymn: ***To see the law by Christ fulfilled and hear His pardoning voice, changes a slave into a child, and duty into choice.***

Kings are like stern fathers who set the boundaries and let us know when we've crossed the line; priests are like sweet mothers who just love you no matter what you've done. We need both in this wilderness. We need to hear our high priest saying, '***I don't condemn you.***' And we need to hear our high king tell us, '***Go and sin no more.***' If we hear only one, we'll either be insufferable pharisees who are always making longer to-do and not-to-do lists; or we'll be weak and flabby Christians who are ruled by their passions. Jesus is not just a high priest. He's not just a high king. He's a high priest-king, and if we don't have both, we're lost. He is absolutely committed to holiness and to truth. He's absolutely committed to love and acceptance, at the very same time. That is why He can offer this incredible invitation – ***Come boldly to the throne of grace.*** We need a high priest, we need a high king, and we need to come near. ***Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.***

Finally, the text tells us we need two things from this great high priest-king. We need to receive mercy and find grace. Receive mercy – find grace. Notice the distinction – receive mercy, find grace. Mercy is something we simply receive. Grace on the other hand is something we find. Receive, ***lambano***, means to take. We take the mercy that is offered – we receive it. Find, ***heurisko***, means to find by enquiry, thought, examination, scrutiny, observation, to find out by practice and experience. So what's the difference here? How is it that we receive one but we have to find the other? To understand that we need to look at mercy and grace.

First of all we stand in need of mercy. The definition of mercy is the '*forbearance from inflicting harm or punishment when one has the power to inflict it – compassionate treatment of an offender or adversary.*' We deserve justice – but God is merciful. **Mercy is not getting what we deserve.** Like the man who had his portrait done by a very famous artist, and when he saw the finished painting he stormed back to the painter and said: "This picture does not do me justice!" Whereupon the artist replied, "Sir, with a face like yours, you don't need justice, you need mercy!" Mercy is what we need from our God who is a consuming fire. Mercy that we are not consumed by His wrath against sin. Mercy that God does not just say, 'Enough!' and end it all right now. Mercy that He will be longsuffering with us because He knows our frailties and that we are but dust. We need mercy – 'Lord have mercy!' the psalmist cries. And when it comes, all we need to do is receive it.

But grace is different. Mercy is passive in a sense, but grace is active. Hebrews tells us that at the throne of grace, we will find grace ***to help*** in time of need. Help is active, help does something. We will often say, 'Have some grace for me will you?' And we mean, 'Cut me some slack.' Or 'Give me more time.' Or 'Have patience, God is not through with me yet.' And all of these simply mean, 'Have mercy – I don't deserve your consideration – but in view of my frailty – have some compassion, and don't visit me with the consequences of my actions.' And we need mercy, but mercy cannot help us with sin – it can only overlook sin. And we need something that will overcome sin. Grace does not lower the bar with respect to sin – it takes us over the bar. Grace is not a time extension – because time will not solve our sin problem – we need grace to overcome sin.

Romans 5:20 tells us that '***...where sin abounded, grace abounded all the more.***' Grace conquers sin. Is there sin in your life? Do you struggle with temptation? What you need is grace! **Sin-conquering grace.** But you have to go to the **grace place** to get it – the throne of grace. The only place you are going to get help when you need it is on your knees. The reason most of us don't find grace is that we are not willing to come to the place of prayer. Oh, we may pray, but it's a token prayer – it lacks conviction, dedication and endurance. The promise is there – mercy is there – sin-conquering grace is there. The problem is not with God – it is with us. We have not come to the throne of grace – we've approached the throne of self – and there's no help there.

If we see grace as only that quality that somehow gets us out of punishment or consequences we deserve – it robs grace of its power. **Grace is the power of God working in and for and through us what we could never do ourselves.** Grace is God Himself working in us to overcome sin and the destructive tendencies of our self-centered living, to fight and win over temptation. Grace is not a thing – grace is the power of God working in us to change us, and mold us, and make us conformed to the image of Christ. When Paul was struggling with what he called 'a thorn in the flesh' and couldn't take it any more, he asked the Lord repeatedly to remove it. But God replied that *'My grace is sufficient for you. My power is made perfect in weakness.'* 2 Corinthians 12:8-9 **God's grace is God's power** that we only find when we are utterly powerless.

The Bible says that it is by grace we have been saved. When did that happen? When did we find the grace that saved us? We found grace when we realized we were powerless to save ourselves and we came to the throne of grace. You see that's where our high priest and high king went when He was on the earth. Hebrews 5:7 tells us: *In the days of His flesh, Jesus offered up prayers and supplications, with loud cries and tears, to Him who was able to save Him from death, and He was heard because of His reverence.* Where did Jesus go to get the strength to endure the cross? He went to the throne of grace. His prayer was 'Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass! If there is any way around this, let Me do that.'

The gospel record tells us that He was under such strain, such stress, that blood was coming out His pores. He was facing the greatest test any man ever underwent and He didn't have the strength to do it. So He went to the throne of grace. He went to the garden to pray. The temptation in the garden of Gethsemane was to save His life. Sin was knocking at the door and telling Him, 'Time to saddle up and get the heck out of Dodge' and He needed grace to battle that temptation. And He got it. He was heard, the writer says. He trusted that His Father had a plan and even if the worst happened, it would be for the best. That's why He could pray, 'Nevertheless, not My will but Yours be done.'

Some might look at this and conclude, 'Well, God didn't really answer His prayer. He was asking to be delivered from death and, well, He died'. And that is true. But God did answer His prayer, and more besides, just not in the way perhaps that we think He should have done. God answered Jesus prayer and blew a hole through the iron bars of death by raising Jesus from the dead in resurrection power. And in doing that God released all who believe in His Son from the fear of death forever. Death now is powerless for those who believe. Jesus went to the throne of grace where He found grace to walk through the valley of sin and death and come out on the other side victorious.

While we're in this wilderness, sometimes it seems that we are praying and praying and we don't see the answers we anticipate or want and we conclude that God is either not listening or doesn't really answer prayer. And we couldn't be more wrong. Are you in it right now? Do you ever feel like you're asking God for stuff and He doesn't seem to be coming through? Do you ever feel like God is allowing stuff to happen that shouldn't happen? Do you ever feel like you don't understand what's going on? God seems to be asleep. He seems to not care. He seems to be on vacation. Look again to Jesus, to this great high priest-king who sympathizes with your weaknesses, He knows your issues, He's suffered far more and endured far worse than you have or than you can imagine and has become, as verse nine tells us, *'the source of eternal salvation to all who obey Him.'*

Draw near to this throne of grace today. Draw near with confidence. You have a high priest who has the ministry of tears and a high king who has the ministry of truth and He is committed to both. He knows our temptations, He knows our struggles, He knows our weaknesses and He says, 'Neither do I condemn you. Go and sin no more'. This high priest-king is interceding for you. All you need to do is draw near to the throne of grace, and you will receive His mercy and find His grace sufficient in your time of need.

Our gracious God and eternal Father,

Let us never cease to marvel at Your mercy and Your grace. It is Your far-reaching mercy and limitless grace that give us hope when all around our soul gives way. Strengthen our souls this morning by Your eternal word. Pierce through the wall of unbelief that surrounds us. Break through the barriers of self and sin and deliver us into the freedom of the sons of God. In Your mercy, forgive us. By Your grace, strengthen us – and lead us into lasting joy. Help us draw near to the throne of grace this morning. May we not just hear words, but may the Living Word penetrate and change us. Enthrall us with Yourself; and break the power of all lesser pleasures, we pray in the precious and powerful name of Jesus, Amen.