

Sinless and Sympathetic

14 Seeing then that we have a great High Priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold fast *our* confession. 15 For we do not have a High Priest who cannot sympathize with our weaknesses, but was in all *points* tempted as *we are*, yet without sin. 16 Let us therefore come boldly to the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy and find grace to help in time of need.

I received my driver's license at the notorious examining school of Langlaagte. I won't tell you how many times I failed, because you probably won't trust me to drive you anywhere. But in those days, there were two kinds of examiners. There was the strict kind, who showed you no sympathy. He marked down the slightest mistake, and looked for ways to fail you. Then there was the other kind. He was, shall we say, nice, but for all the wrong reasons. I heard plenty of stories about people who passed by simply placing nice smelling food on the backseat, or some money in a visible place. Those men were happy to be sympathetic, but for all the wrong reasons. It was an evil choice: unfairly strict, or unfairly sympathetic.

If you were an honest person, you wanted your examiner to be both strict and sympathetic. Strict, so that you were actually safe enough to be on the roads, and sympathetic to how stressful a driving test can be.

Actually, when you think about it, we want that in all kinds of people: judges, police, advocates, auditors, invigilators, teachers. We want them to uphold a standard, but then we also want them to know that we are humans, frail and weak.

And depending on the situation, we wish the person to be more strict than sympathetic, such as when we stand in court, having been victimised by a criminal, and await the sentencing, or when a child feels wronged by her brother or sister, she wants her parents to be especially strict. But in others, we want the person to be more sympathetic than strict. If we are the person being prosecuted in court, we hope the judge is sympathetic to the reasons that led to our crime, and if that same child who wanted strictness on her sibling yesterday is guilty of the same action, she now wants sympathy.

That's most pronounced when it comes to religion, God, and the things of faith. Here we are not just dealing with strictness or standards, but with sinlessness. Almost every religion sees God as sinless. But since we are not sinless, the only way we could ever approach a sinless God would be if God was also sympathetic.

And in popular religion, one of the two is compromised or given up. You either have people who tell you God is so sinless that you can never really know Him, nor should you try, or you have others who tell you that God is tolerant of sin, understands and winks at a bit of sin.

In fact, dealing with sin is the whole business of priests in the Bible. When God called Israel, He set up an elaborate system of worship that involved priests and sacrifices, which communicated to the average Israelite: your sins have separated you from God. You have a disqualifying trait that prevents your communion with God: sin. Sacrifices dealt with the penalty of sin, while the priests were the mediators, the go-betweens. They had ties to God and man. They were called by God, and so faithful to him. But they had their own sin problems, and had to present sacrifices for themselves, and that made them merciful. The priests were meant to be without sin (at least in the moments when presenting sacrifices), and also sympathetic.

If the man is supposedly sinless and has no sympathy for sinners, he is not merciful. On the other hand, if he is sympathetic by way of tolerating sin, he is not faithful. From our point of view, sinlessness seems to destroy sympathy, and sympathy seems to destroy sinlessness. In fact, the first High Priest, Aaron, was too sympathetic. But to be a faithful and merciful High Priest, Jesus needs

to be both sinless and sympathetic. And this passage shows us that He is both.

And flowing out from that truth are two exhortations in this passage, and they are the two exhortations scattered throughout the book: hold fast the confession of the faith, and draw near. We could say, have faith, and be faithful. Approach God in Christ in faith, and endure to the end. Why? Because Jesus is a Priest Superior to Aaron, the finisher of the Faith. Before we see those exhortations, let's see how the passage paints a picture of Jesus, our High Priest, who is sinless and sympathetic.

I. We Have a High Priest Who Is Sinless

Seeing then that we have a great High Priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus the Son of God,

This is the third time in Hebrews that Jesus is called a high priest, but the real beginning of a full section on Jesus as the Great, and really Greatest High priest.

This High Priest did not simply pass through the outer court of the Temple, and then pass through the entrance of the Temple, and then, once a year, pass through the veil into the Holy Place. That's what Aaron and his descendants did. No, this High Priest passed through realms and veils that no mortal and sinful man could do. When Jesus ascended in front of His disciples, He passed through the first heaven of sky and earthly atmosphere, through the second heaven of the cosmos, and in and through the third heaven of the presence of God. Several times in Hebrews we read of the high and glorious place that our High Priest passed to.

Heb 8:1 Now this is the main point of the things we are saying: We have such a High Priest, who is seated at the right hand of the throne of the Majesty in the heavens,

Heb 9:12 Not with the blood of goats and calves, but with His own blood He entered the Most Holy Place once for all, having obtained eternal redemption.

Heb 9:24 For Christ has not entered the holy places made with hands, which are copies of the true, but into heaven itself, now to appear in the presence of God for us;

Heb 10:12 But this Man, after He had offered one sacrifice for sins forever, sat down at the right hand of God,

What does this mean? It means that He is Jesus the Son of God. Son of God means He is holy, sinless, without spot. And if He was Son of God at His ascension, at His departure from this world, then it means He lived His life without sin. This is repeated by several other authors of Scripture.

Peter says **1 Peter 2:22** "Who committed no sin, Nor was deceit found in His mouth"

John says **1 John 3:5** And you know that He was manifested to take away our sins, and in Him there is no sin.

Paul says **2 Corinthians 5:21** For He made Him who knew no sin *to be* sin for us, that we might become the righteousness of God in Him.

Jesus Himself was able to look at His enemies in John 8:46 "'Which of you convicts Me of sin?'"

Jesus, all through His life, kept God's commandments flawlessly. His enemies could not find two witnesses in the same room to agree on something He had done wrong.

In Jesus, we have a High Priest who is fully God, and therefore 100% holy. He did not sin, and in fact, He could not sin.

Theologians call this the impeccability of Christ. Impeccability means unable to sin.

Remember, Jesus is not 50% God and 50% man. Nor was He a man possessed by God. There was a full union of two natures, which did not result in the mixing, diluting or modifying of either nature. Now God cannot sin. God cannot lie, Titus 1:2 says. God cannot sin, because sin is everything other than God. God cannot be other than Himself. To speak of God sinning is to speak nonsense. So was

it possible for the Person who was Christ, who is fully God, and fully man, to sin?

To say that Jesus could have sinned is to say either that God can sin, or it is to say that the union of divine and human natures in Jesus was a breakable union, that somehow, there could be a human Jesus that could split off from the divine Jesus. But this is exactly the kind of heresy which the early church condemned. “two natures, without confusion, without change, without division, without separation;... not as parted or separated into two persons, but one and the same Son and Only-begotten God the Word, Lord Jesus Christ”.

Now if we left it there, it might sound like bad news. To have a High Priest who never once sinned, who could not have sinned, seems to mean we will have someone so strict, so unyielding, so unsympathetic to us that we have no hope. But the writer of Hebrews now moves to the other pole of Christ's priesthood.

II. We Have a High Priest Who is Sympathetic

5 For we do not have a High Priest who cannot sympathize with our weaknesses, but was in all *points* tempted as *we are*, yet without sin.

Jesus is not a High Priest so exalted and sinless that He cannot sympathise with our weaknesses. This is a word found only here in the NT. It means to have the ability to internally share a troublesome experience. Our English word sympathy is a compound word made up of *sym* (together), and *pathos*, feeling. To feel together, to indwell and experience what another is experiencing.

What is it that Jesus can experience? Our weaknesses. This means our limitations, our frailties, the struggles and weaknesses of the human condition in a fallen world. He is not unsympathetic, untouched, unmoved by our weakness. Not merely bodily weakness, but the mental, spiritual, moral weakness of being human.

Why is He sympathetic? Because he was tempted or tested in all points as we are. This literally means, he experienced all things we do in the same fashion. The same areas of trial, in the same fashion we experience them.

Heb 2:17 Therefore, in all things He had to be made like His brethren, that He might be a merciful and faithful High Priest in things pertaining to God, to make propitiation for the sins of the people. **Heb 2:18** For in that He Himself has suffered, being tempted, He is able to aid those who are tempted.

The Puritan David Clarkson wrote, “He does not only know what it is to be poor, in want and necessities, as one who having always lived in plenty himself, has an account of the poor and needy condition of others, but he himself was poor (II Cor. 8:9). . . . He knows what it is to be in pain, not only as one who having been at ease all his days, hears but others complain of it, but as one who himself has felt it, and that in extremity. . . . He knows what it is to be despised and set at nought, to be abused and reproached, to be hated, and persecuted, and despitefully used. He knows the sorrows of life, and the pangs of death; not as the angels know them, by sufferings of others, but by his own experience, as one that has suffered all these himself. . . . He knows what it is to be tempted to sin, troubled with horrid suggestions from Satan; what it is to be deserted of friends, of all men.”

Now Jesus can be sympathetic, not because He sinned, but because He struggled. His sympathy comes from the inner knowledge of what it is like to be a man among men, with all the limitations, frustrations, pains, disappointments, provocations, and trials of human life.

Once there was a boy who was in a terrible car accident, and his right arm had to be amputated. His

teacher at school was concerned about how the other children would treat him when he returned. So, on the day of his return, she told every child in the class to put one hand behind his or her back. Then she went to each child, and using some soft rope, tied that arm to the waist, so that it couldn't be used. All that day, those children began to understand what that boy would have to go through, when writing, turning pages, sharpening pencils, erasing, eating, playing. By the end of the day, those children had learned compassion.

But then our text tells us that He was “in all points tempted as we are, *yet without sin*”. He faced every challenge and trial of human life in a cursed world, but He did not succumb to sin.

Now there are some people who think that the fact that Jesus did not sin means He didn't really feel what we feel, because we do sin. They think that you only know the full force of temptation if you've given in to it. But the opposite is true. In fact, the person who gives in to sin has never felt its full force. He may have felt 80% of its force, or 90% of its force, but he gave in, and yielded, so he never experienced temptation to the full. The only one who has experienced it to the full is the one who does not give in, who experiences 100% of the temptation, and still says no.

How intense were those temptations? Well, consider that when Satan came to Him, He threw at Jesus quite simply the hardest things to resist: world control, instant acclamation as Messiah. And the Bible tells us that Satan left him for a while. In the Garden, at the Cross, and all through his ministry, Satan was tempting him to give in, to respond with revenge, to give up early, to respond sinfully internally or externally. To say nothing of the temptations to anger and hatred from those who lied about Him, attacked Him, falsely accused Him, or the temptations to despair and frustration with a fickle audience, dull disciples, and all denying or forsaking Him at the last.

And then think of how He needed a perfect record. Jesus could not sin and then confess His sin. Every single victory over temptation was only one more victory, and one less battle. Right after one exhausting struggle with temptation, there would be another one, and only 100% sinlessness would suffice. How would it feel to know that even if you had won ten thousand victories over sin, this very next temptation could ruin it all? When He sweated drops of blood in Gethsemane, some of that was surely His straining to obey and not disobey, to stay the path to the end, even though it was going to cost Him fellowship with the Father.

But perhaps someone has another objection to Jesus being sympathetic. Fine, maybe He did experience far more and far worse temptation than we do, but we just saw that He could not sin as God. If He couldn't sin, then that doesn't seem like someone who can sympathise with our condition.

But here's what you have to understand. There is an important difference between why Jesus could not sin, and why Jesus did not sin. They are not the same thing, nor the same reason. It is true that Jesus could not sin, anymore than God could lie or steal. But when we read the book of Hebrews, we read that the reason Jesus did not sin was by faith and obedience. In fact, it comes up in the passage we'll study next week, in verses 7 and 8 7 who, in the days of His flesh, when He had offered up prayers and supplications, with vehement cries and tears to Him who was able to save Him from death, and was heard because of His godly fear, 8 though He was a Son, *yet He learned obedience by the things which He suffered.* (Heb. 5:7-8)

Why He did not sin is not the same as why He could not sin.

I've told you before that I once met a swimmer who does the swimming race from Robben Island to the Cape mainland. Depending on what route you take, it's a swim of about 7,5 and 11 kilometres. The water temperature is more challenging than the distance, averaging 12 degrees Celsius. I asked that swimmer about the dangers, the possibilities of sharks, the possibilities of cramping. He told

me that each swimmer has a boat that trails a little behind the swimmer, in case of any emergency. Now because of those boats, it's safe to say that no swimmer will drown because of cramping or fatigue. It is impossible for them to drown with that support. You can say the boats mean that no swimmer *can* drown.

But while the boats make drowning an ultimate impossibility, the boats are not what keep the swimmers from drowning. The reason those swimmers do not drown is that they keep swimming! How many of us could swim across from Robben Island to the mainland simply because there was a support boat nearby? No, the swimmers cannot drown because of the boat, but they do not drown because of their own swimming. The boat is why they cannot drown; the swimming is why they do not drown. So in the same way, Jesus could not sin because of His divine nature. But He did not sin because He chose to keep fighting temptation, and kept on obeying.

Instead, we read that Jesus lived a life among us as a true man. And His resources were our resources. The Holy Spirit. Prayer. The Word of God. Discipline. He gave himself wholly to trusting, obeying, struggling, fighting, fleeing, and so said no to sin, and yes to God, 100% of the time. As many Scriptures testify, the life that Jesus lived amongst us was not a fake human life, where underneath the Clark Kent disguise of humanity lay the Superman of deity. No, Jesus was fully human, which meant facing a human life with what is available to humans.

So if you are tempted to say, Jesus didn't know how hard it is to say no to sin, because He never sinned, the answer is, actually, He knows it better than you do, because He saw every temptation through to the end. If you are tempted to say, Jesus doesn't know how hard it is to say no to sin, because He was God and couldn't sin, the answer is, He faced those intense temptations in the same way you do: with prayer, faith, and Scripture. Jesus has experienced every thing we experience except an internal disposition to sin.

That makes Him sympathetic. Often people who have lived relatively sheltered and comfortable lives are the least compassionate people. Life has been fairly smooth and straightforward for them, so they can't really understand why other battle or struggle. They can't really believe others are suffering when they say they are: it's probably just weak and lazy people faking it. But people who have suffered, along with the Spirit of God, can be among the most compassionate. They know the pain and hopelessness of poverty. They know what it is to have a body racked with pain. They know the awful shame of a besetting sin, the pain of perpetual guilt. They know the pains of rejection, loneliness, abuse. When redeemed, those are often the most patient and tender people, because they've been through it.

Michael Bruce wrote these words in 1764:

Though now ascended up on high,
He bends on earth a brother's eye;
Partaker of the human name,
He knows the frailty of our frame.

Our fellow sufferer yet retains
A fellow feeling of our pains:
And still remembers in the skies
His tears, His agonies, and cries.

In every pang that rends the heart,
The Man of Sorrows had a part,
He sympathizes with our grief,
And to the sufferer sends relief.

So what should we then do with the knowledge that we have a Perfectly Sinless and yet Patiently Sympathetic High Priest?

III. We Must Approach And Endure

14 Seeing then that we have a great High Priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold fast *our* confession.

Let us therefore come boldly to the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy and find grace to help in time of need

Back in verse 14, the implication of having this High Priest is to hold fast the confession. Three times in Hebrews we have this command, "hold fast". Be faithful to the finished faith. Don't turn away from the ultimate High Priest, because to whom else can you go?

But then the twin to this command is the command to draw near. And here we have it in this form: let us come boldly to the throne of grace.

Stop and think what a lovely phrase that is: throne of grace. It is a throne, a king's seat, a place of regal authority. But this throne is a throne of grace. Flowing out from it is both mercy and grace. Mercy: pardon from what you do deserve. Grace: gifts that you don't deserve.

When Esther approached King Ahasuerus, she risked her life, for no one could approach that throne uninvited. Only the king's favour, extending the sceptre, spared her life. But this is not a dangerous throne to those in Christ. **Eph 3:12** in whom we have boldness and access with confidence through faith in Him.

Here you can receive mercy and find grace. When? In time of need. G Campbell Morgan said of this verse, "I am never tired of pointing out that the Greek phrase translated, 'in time of need,' is a colloquialism, of which the 'nick of time' is the exact equivalent. 'That ye may have grace to help in the nick of time. Grace just when and where I need it. You are attacked by temptation, and at the moment of assault you look to Him, and the grace is there to help in 'the nick of time.' "No postponement of your petition until the evening hour of prayer; but there... in the city street with the flaming temptation in front of you, turn to Christ within you, with a cry for help, and the grace will be there in the 'nick of time.'"

What kind of approach do we make? He tells us to come boldly. Not cockily, not arrogantly, as if it is not a throne, and as if He is not sinless. No, boldly, precisely because we should fear His glorious holiness. But also confidently, because this is a sympathetic Saviour, who understands.

Someone here has been infected by a sentimental Christianity that thinks approaching God is like visiting a friend, not a king. God is naturally approachable, and we are naturally welcome. You need to be afflicted with a vision of holiness, and understand that your natural state makes you an enemy in God's land, a traitor, who should be shot on sight. What you think is boldness is actually cockiness, presumption. It is arrogant wishful thinking, a blissful ignorance of what you carry with you and dare approach holy ground. Your god is too small, and so the approach is very easy. You need to see Jesus passing through the Heavens, Jesus the Son of God, Jesus on His throne, high and lifted, with His train filling the temple, and the seraphim crying out, "Holy Holy Holy"

Some here have been infected with a high and harsh religion that has God as impersonal and cold, unknowable and unhappy. You dislike the sentimental Christianity around you because you're aware that holiness should not be trifled with. God has become aloof, dangerous, and disdainful. You need to be confronted with the truth that contained within that holiness and moral purity is not coldness but warmth, not misery but joy. In the burning centre of God's holiness, the Trinity of God,

we find three persons delighting in one another, enjoying, adoring and giving to one another. And the bridge from you to God is the God-Man, who while remaining sinless, is deeply sympathetic to your plight. You need to see that the throne is one of grace. There is a kindness that wishes to bless the humble. A goodness that wants to welcome the trembling sinner. A heart that yearns to heal and help and strengthen.

With joy we meditate the grace
Of our High Priest above;
His heart is made of tenderness,
His bowels melt with love.

Touch'd with a sympathy within,
He knows our feeble frame;
He knows what sore temptations mean,
For he has felt the same.

But spotless, innocent, and pure,
The great Redeemer stood,
With Satan's fiery darts he bore,
And did resist to blood.

He in the days of feeble flesh
Pour'd out his cries and tears,
And in his measure feels afresh
What every member bears.

Then let our humble faith address
His mercy and his power;
He shall obtain deliv'ring grace
In the distressing hour.