

“The Superior Work of the Superior Priest”

Heb. 10:1-18

- INTRO. - We come back to our study of Hebrews this morning, and in many ways we could say that our text this morning represents the highest peak in the argument of this book.
 - Heb. 10:1-18 concludes the central theological argument of Hebrews, that speaks of the superiority of Christ’s high priesthood and atoning work. This section concludes the authors’ comparison of the two priesthoods. This is the culmination of the discussion of Jesus, the Son of God, as our great High Priest.
 - And, although it may *appear* as if there is a lot of repetition in this section, each layer of the argument has gone deeper and deeper theologically. So this text concludes the section and provides the most profound truth concerning Christ’s superior priesthood and sacrifice.
 - In fact, George Guthrie writes, “Perhaps more than any other place in Hebrews, 10:1-18 presents clearly the Christian gospel...” This will be followed by an exhortation to respond in light of these doctrinal truths – to respond with genuine saving faith to the message of the gospel.
 - Now, we won’t get through this entire passage today (as I’m sure you already guessed), but this
- text reminds me of the fact that we must be like the Apostle Paul and “preach Christ and Him crucified.” It is the ultimate sacrifice of Christ on the cross that makes the eternal difference.
- By the way, that message is *not* being preached today in all parts of the so-called church. ILL. – There is a story that is told of an English village whose chapel had an arch on which was written: “We Preach Christ Crucified.” For years godly men preached there and they presented a crucified Savior as the only means of eternal salvation. But as the generation of godly preachers passed, a generation arose that considered the cross and its message antiquated and repulsive. They began to preach salvation by Christ’s example rather than by His blood. They did *not* see the necessity of His atoning sacrifice. As the story goes, about this time some ivy grew up the side of the arch and covered the word “Crucified.” Soon the only thing that was visible was, “We Preach Christ.” Then the church decided that its message need not even be confined to Christ, so the preachers began to give discourses on social issues, politics, philosophy, moral and psychological encouragement, or anything else that happened to spark the interest of the congregation. The ivy on the arch continued to grow until it covered the word “Christ.” At that point, they were simply left with, “We Preach.”
 - But the Book of Hebrews hammers home the truth that His atoning sacrifice was absolutely necessary,

and that our eternal salvation is based completely upon that. There is no greater message than that of the superior work of the superior Priest, and we must never get away from that message in the church!

- In chapter 9 we saw the *necessity* of His sacrifice, but here in chapter 10 we see the *character* of His sacrifice. We see what His sacrifice *accomplished* – and it is a work that has *eternal* consequences.
- Now, since it has been three months since we have been in this book, I think a quick review is in order. This section began back in 8:1, and there is a vital connection between what has already been covered and this concluding section.
- For example, the reference to Christ at the right hand of the Father (which was introduced by a quotation of Ps. 110:1) is repeated in 10:12-13. Here the emphasis is upon Christ as the exalted High Priest.
- We also see (in this passage) the bringing in of the theme of the new covenant (from Jer. 31:31-34). This was dealt with in chapter 8, but is brought back in here as the other end of the “inclusio.” This is like a “book end” that shows the completed work of the new covenant.
- In all this, we have seen that Jesus Christ is far superior to the Levitical priests, and that His

sacrifice is far superior to the daily sacrifices (or even the annual sacrifices on the Day of Atonement). The inauguration of the new covenant is the fulfillment of old. The shadow has been replaced by the real thing.

- So with that in mind, let’s move into this text, and he begins by (once again) reminding us of:

I. THE INEFFECTIVENESS OF THE SHADOW (vv. 1-4)

- Look with me at v. 1, “For the Law, since it has *only* a shadow of the good things to come *and* not the very form of things, can never by the same sacrifices year by year, which they offer continually, make perfect those who draw near.”
- This is a decisive conclusion: The Law cannot make perfect the sinner. It was never intended to. It was only the shadow of the form of the good things to come (the new covenant).
- We’ve already seen this, but we are reminded of it here. The shadow is *not* the real thing. It is contrasted with the “eikon,” the “image” (or the “very image” as the KJV has it). One commentator wrote that the “eikon” is an exact replica, *not* an imperfect, partial reproduction, but a manifestation [of the] reality itself.”
- And (as we have seen) this word “eikon” is used elsewhere in the NT to refer to Christ as the exact

manifestation of God. Col. 1:15 (for example) declares, "...He is the image [the eikon] of the invisible God, the first-born of all creation." In 2 Cor. 4:3-4 we read, "And even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled to those who are perishing, in whose case the god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelieving, that they might not see the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image [the eikon] of God."

- The problem with the Law (and its Levitical system of continuous sacrifices) was that it was *not* the real thing, and therefore it could never "perfect" sinners. It was only a shadow of the good things to come. It was only a picture of the reality of the new covenant.

- We've seen that the word for "shadow" (there) indicates something that was merely an outline, a silhouette, or a vague symbol, without any real substance. It is something that points to the real thing.

- Under the old covenant, the priests were busy all day every day offering up sacrifices of all kinds. But these sacrifices were *not* able to totally perfect (for all time) those who were trying to approach God.

- The best these continuous sacrifices could accomplish was a temporary covering for sin. They could never provide a full and complete access to God. They could never fully and finally cleanse the conscience of the sinner.

- Even those sacrifices that were made by the high priest on the Day of Atonement could *not* accomplish this – and yet, that is exactly what Christ accomplished in the establishment of the new covenant!

- The old system was never able to save (eternally) the sinner – but the new covenant could. The shadows could only reflect the realities of these good things to come. They could only point ahead to the benefits and privileges of the new covenant.

- As Paul wrote in Col. 2:17, "...[these] things...are a *mere* shadow of what is to come; but the substance belongs to Christ." What are those "good things" that came through the new covenant? Absolute forgiveness, peace with God, full access to God for all eternity, a clear conscience and the removal of the guilt of sin, eternal security based on the grace and power of God, and many more.

- These were spiritual blessings that were only *pictured* in the old covenant. They were never realized until the coming of Christ. The old covenant system was a mere shadow without substance.

- And (as John MacArthur points out) modern Judaism no longer has (even) much of the shadow left. Yes, they celebrate certain feast days, but the Temple is gone, the sacrifices are gone, the priesthood is gone – there is not even a shadow left.

- Yom Kippur is still observed, but without any of the trappings of OT ceremony. And because unbelieving Jews have rejected the New Covenant, even most of the Old has lost most of its significance.

- MacArthur writes, “Most Jews [today] follow neither the Scripture nor the ceremonies...If, during the time when the previous covenant was in force, the old sacrifice could never ‘make perfect’ [the sinner], how much less effective would they be now – even if, somehow, they continued?”

- The word for “make perfect” (in v. 1) is “teleioo.” It means “to bring to completion; to bring to its intended goal.” The intended goal that the Old Covenant pointed to was access to God. But it could never accomplish that. It took the New Covenant to fully accomplish that.

- The author of Hebrews stressed that reality by talking about the futility of sacrifices that were offered “year after year.” The priests (under the Old Covenant system) offered animal sacrifices “continually,” but these could never perfect sinners.

- You can pile shadow upon shadow upon shadow, but it will still *not* result in substance. It’s like multiplying by the number 0. You can multiply over and over again and still not increase the value.

- So why in the world did God go to all the trouble to establish the Old Covenant (with all its shadow ceremonies and shadow rituals and shadow sacrifices)?

Because it had an important purpose in pointing to the real thing. It had an important purpose in clearly showing man his sin and his absolute inability to deal with his own sin and the reality that there is only one remedy for sin – the Lord Jesus Christ.

- The Old Covenant was very valuable in pointing us to the New Covenant. The shadow was needed to help us see the substance. It was needed to show us that there is (now) a way to be made “perfect” (or complete) spiritually. It was needed to show us that there is (now) a way of full access to God through Christ.

- Go on to vv. 2-3, “Otherwise, would they not have ceased to be offered, because the worshipers, having once been cleansed, would no longer have had consciousness of sins? But in those *sacrifices* there is a reminder of sins year by year.”

- Animal sacrifices could temporarily *cover* sin, but they could never *take away* sin (permanently). As a result, they could *not* cleanse the conscience. They could *not* take away the sense of guilt that comes with sin.

- That word for “consciousness” has to do with man’s innate awareness of wrong in his life and of his sense of guilt because of it. God has built that into every human heart. But the Old Covenant system could not cleanse the conscience of men.

- If the old sacrifices (under the old system) had been able to do that, they would have ceased to be offered (because

they would have sufficiently atoned for sin. Once the sin was dealt with, they would no longer be necessary.

- But the fact that they continued to be offered “year by year” just served as a reminder that they were still there – and the guilt was still there.

- In other words, the old sacrifices *not only* did *not* remove sin, but they also served as a constant reminder that they had no ability to remove sin. The covering for sin was only temporary – it only lasted until the next sin. But the sins kept coming, and therefore the sacrifices had to keep coming.

- Old Testament believers were never freed from the presence and awareness of guilt or, consequently, from the anxiety and tension that guilt created. There was no freedom of conscience under the Old Covenant system.

- By the way, (on a technical point), these verses imply that the sacrifices were still going on in the Temple when these words were written. That argues for an early date for this book. It was probably written before 70 A.D. when the Temple was destroyed.

- But the primary weakness of the old sacrificial system was that it could never permanently cleanse the conscience because it could never permanently take away sin. The word for “cleansed” (in v. 2) is in the perfect tense, so this means “to cleanse once and for all.” The Old Covenant could *not* do that – but the New Covenant could.

- The Old Covenant (in fact) created even more sense of guilt because there was this constant visual reminder of the seriousness of sin. There was a river of blood flowing from the Temple every day.

- The very repetition of these sacrifices proved their ineffectiveness in dealing with sin. If they had had the ability to deal with sin and guilt, those sacrifices could have stopped. But they did not have that ability.

- Go on to v. 4, “For it is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins.” The shedding of animals’ blood cannot take away the depravity of the human heart.

- That word for “take away” (there in v. 4) is the Greek word “aphaireo.” It is used only one other place in the NT (in regard to sin) and that is in Rom. 11:26-27. *There* Paul quotes the prophet Isaiah saying, “The Deliverer will come from Zion, He will remove ungodliness from Jacob. And this is My covenant with them, when I take away [there’s your word] their sins.”

- That’s a reference to the New Covenant. With the coming of the New Covenant sins would be completely taken away for good – which is something the Old Covenant could never do.

- The removal of sins (under the New Covenant) is a decisive, perpetual cleansing from sin. It speaks of a full

and final cleansing of the conscience and a full and ultimate access to God.

- And yet, we need to be careful here. There are some interpretive flaws in this passage of Scripture we need to make sure we avoid. One of those comes from the contrast between the Old and New Covenants in regard to the cleansing of the conscience.

- We saw in v. 2 that the author of Hebrews speaks of the old sacrificial system's inability to cleanse a sinner's conscience permanently. His argument (as we saw) is that if the sacrifices of animals could have cleansed the conscience once and for all, then the worshippers "would no longer have felt guilty for their sins."

- Someone might immediately contrast this with the New Covenant and conclude that those under the New Covenant should never feel guilty for sins. But this presents *not only* a theological problem, but also a pastoral one.

- Even Christians (under the New Covenant) sometimes feel guilty for sin. We don't "stop sinning" and become morally perfect the moment we become a Christian. Certainly, the process of sanctification should begin at that point, and we should become progressively less sinful, but Christians still have to deal with guilt at times.

- If we communicate (in any way) that those under the New Covenant "should never feel guilty" we have misinterpreted and mis-applied this text. It is clear, from

numerous passages that call upon Christians to repent of sin and to confess sin, that those under the New Covenant do *not* attain sinless perfection in this life.

- In fact, the Apostle John wrote (to believers), "If we say that we have no sin, we are deceiving ourselves, and the truth is not in us."

- The difference (though) under the New Covenant, is that our sin is ultimately paid for, and even if we feel guilty about it at times, it has no ability to condemn us eternally.

- John MacArthur wrote, "The forgiven sinner is *not* insensitive to sin, but he knows he is forgiven in Christ and is thereby delivered from fear of judgment."

- One of the greatest joys of the Christian life is to know that "There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus." (That's Rom. 8:1) And, as I'm sure you know, in Romans 7 Paul has this long discussion about Christians battling the flesh.

- He talks about the fact that we (as Christians) continue to struggle with sin – but in an ultimate sense it can never condemn us (because it is covered permanently by the atoning blood of Christ).

- So (again) we should be careful (here) that we don't give the false impression that under the New Covenant Christians should never feel guilty for sin. Biblically, that

is *not* true, and it creates pastoral problems in our congregations if we (even) *imply* that.

- Another interpretive pitfall is closely associated with that, and it is connected to the word for “make perfect” in v. 1. It is clear from v. 1 that the Law (and all its continual sacrifices) “can never...make perfect those who draw near...”

- This is contrasted with the New Covenant in v. 14, “For by one offering He [Christ] has perfected for all time those who are sanctified.”

- The problem (though) has been with the way some have interpreted and applied this concept of “perfection.” If we apply a *modern* concept of “perfection” we will likely be, either shocked or confused.

- *Most* Christians are keenly aware that they are *not* “perfect” – meaning “without any sin” (although I *have* talked to one or two who think they are). Most Christians are keenly aware of their sin.

- In fact, if there is *anyone* who is aware of his or her own sin, it should be a Christian. The truth of the matter is, the more faithful and godly a person is, the more keenly aware he is of sin. He has a better knowledge, *not only* of his own sinfulness, but also of the holiness of God.

- But what we must understand, is that the author of Hebrews is using the concept of “perfection” in a

different way. The Greek term that is used (here) means “complete, whole, adequate, or having arrived at a desired end.”

- The “perfection” we experience under the New Covenant is what we would call “positional righteousness.” Or (as Guthrie writes), “We have arrived at the end that God desired to accomplish via his Son’s death on the cross.” Our eternal salvation is secured forever, even though we still may continue to battle sin in this present world.

- Maybe the best way to clarify the reality of the impact of the New Covenant, is to say, “Under the New Covenant we have been freed from the *penalty* of sin, we are (progressively) being freed from the *power* of sin, and we will one day be freed from the *presence* of sin.”

- One day we *will* experience “perfection” (in the modern sense of that word). But it won’t be in this life. It won’t come until we are glorified in the presence of Christ. In the meantime, the “perfection” we experience under the New Covenant (that is different from the Old Covenant) is that we can have assurance of our eternal salvation based on Christ’s finished work on the cross.

- Now, having pointed to those common “interpretive flaws” (in these first 4 verses), before we move on I would like to point out one valid application. I believe it *is* legitimate (here) to point out the fact that religious rituals have no power to deal with sin. That was one of the primary weaknesses of the Old Covenant system. The

rituals were intended to point to the ultimate cleansing of the New Covenant, but they themselves were completely unable to remove the guilt and cleanse the conscience.

- In the same way, even today there are millions of people who are depending on religious rituals to take care of their sin. That never works! The Jews were counting on the blood of all those bulls and goats to take away their sin, but the author of Hebrews declared, "...it is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins." (v. 4)

- Religious rituals can never deal with sin. It doesn't matter if it is lighting candles or going on some sort of pilgrimage or consuming a wafer or anything else – there is only one thing that can deal with our sin, and that is the shed blood of the sinless Son of God.

- That's the message here. It is only the perfect, once for all sacrifice of Christ that can atone for (and permanently remove) our sin.

- Under the Old Covenant those continuous sacrifices served to remind the people constantly of their guilt. But (as we will see) under the New Covenant God promises to "remember our sins no more" (v. 17).

- Unlike the Old Covenant, the New Covenant has nothing at all to do with religious rituals – it has to do with the final and complete work of Christ on our behalf. That alone must be the object of our faith. The rituals are the shadow – He is the reality.

- And my friend listen, if your faith is *in* anything other than the Lord Jesus Christ alone, your faith is in vain. If you are depending on some kind of religious ritual to deal with your sin – that will never happen. Rituals are merely external – they have no power to change the heart. That's why rituals have no power to cleanse a person from sin.

- We *know* that sin is often outwardly manifested, but the root cause is always the heart. Rituals can never deal with the root cause of sin because they only involve externals. No religious ritual can ever bring about spiritual regeneration and heart change.

- And listen, that doesn't have to be just some sort of Catholic ritual – it applies just as equally to any sort of Baptist ritual. Some people think that because they walked an aisle one time, they're good to go. Some people are trusting in water baptism to save them. Some are trusting in church membership. None of those things will ever take away your sin. Only faith in Jesus Christ alone can do that.

- Part of the purpose for God giving the Old Covenant system (with its elaborate rituals and sacrifices) is so we could learn (clearly) that which can never take away our sin. We had to come to realize that our cleansing can never come from the keeping of the Law (because we are incapable of keeping it perfectly).

- We had to learn that it can never come from the sacrificing of animals. We had to learn that it could never

come from an earthly priesthood. We had to learn that it could never come from going to a certain place or doing a certain thing. We had to learn that it only comes through a **Person** – and that is the Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God.

- Well, I intended to get further than this today, but I think we'd better stop here. We only got one point in our outline. We'll come back to the rest of it next time.

- PRAYER