

Sermon for Sunday, October 15, 2012
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Power and Sympathy, Warning and Comfort
Hebrews 4:12-16

¹² For the word of God is living and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart. ¹³ Nothing in all creation is hidden from God's sight. Everything is uncovered and laid bare before the eyes of him to whom we must give account. ¹⁴ Therefore, since we have a great high priest who has gone through the heavens, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold firmly to the faith we profess. ¹⁵ For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are — yet was without sin. ¹⁶ Let us then approach the throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need.

There is a man who attends Central who grew up in a non-Christian home and never went to church. As a teenager, he asked the ultimate questions: Why am I here? What is purpose of life? He searched but found no answers. He sang in a high school choir and the director invited him to sing in his church choir. He decided to go, even though he didn't seem to fit. Someone gave him a Bible, a paraphrase for beginners. He got nothing from it. Someone gave him a real Bible. He said, "I didn't always understand it, but I knew it was the truth."

That conversation takes us to Hebrews 4:12-13: "For the word of God is living and active" powerful and effective. "Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit... it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart." So God's word isn't true, like a correct forecast. It's truth – for us. His word reveals each thought, intention, and attitude. He knows us better than we know ourselves: "Nothing in all creation is hidden from God's sight" (4:13).

The author of Hebrews has reason to say this now. As you recall, his people faced great danger. As Christians in an often hostile empire, they lost property, lost their security and social ties, and bloodshed loomed. Some decided to hide their faith. Others abandoned the faith to save themselves.

Hebrews warns: If you abandon God, you abandon his rest. You will lose the rest, the peace, he offers for this life and you'll lose his eternal rest, in the new creation, when he restores all things. "Therefore let us make every effort to enter that rest, so that no one will fall by following their example of unbelief" (4:11).

Yet one statement stands over all: The Father appointed Jesus as "a merciful and faithful high priest" in his service. He was faithful to the Father in all things and because he experienced all, he feels what we feel and has mercy for us. This is not a psychological statement. He experienced and therefore feels our sorrows:

- Have you been betrayed? Jesus was betrayed by his friends.
- Have you been misunderstood? Falsely charged? Jesus was.
- Arrested? Condemned? Threatened with bodily harm? Jesus was.
- Tempted so sorely you could hardly resist? Jesus was and always resisted.
- Jesus was faithful, and he shows us how to be faithful.

1. How we stand before the Lord?

Hebrews says we must be faithful and "make every effort to enter" God's rest. We can't fool God with a show or half-effort at faithfulness. We can fool family, friends, we can even fool ourselves. But we can't fool God. His word is "living and active... it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart." So don't rebel, or become unfaithful, because you can't hide it from God.

God's word lays bare our thoughts and our heart

Hebrews says God's word is living, active, penetrating. It's not just a word – sounds in the air, marks on a page. It is an extension of God himself. Read: The word of God is living and active... it judges thoughts and attitudes... Nothing is hidden from God's sight. Everything is uncovered before his eyes.

You see that the word is more than words. By it God himself sees us and speaks to us. Therefore, we must be open, yield to its influence. It judges our thoughts, attitudes, and motives. It shows us who we are, what we're thinking.

The word is sharper than a two-edged sword. God is a warrior and his weapon is his word. In Revelation's first vision of Jesus (Rev. 1:16), he has the seven stars in his right hand and a sharp two-edged sword coming out of his mouth. The stars represent his people, the churches, which are in his hand. The sword is his word. It penetrates and separates things that seem entangled.

We know how things get tangled: Sometimes we can't tell if we want to do something or not. We're unsure of our motives: Why did I agree to do that? We're unsure of our feelings: Do I like my job? Should I look for another? Within my organization? Somewhere else? Is this person truly my friend? A good influence or not? We can't see ourselves clearly. But God sees us. Through his word, if we're open, he will show us what we need to see, so we know ourselves as he knows us.

One time, in a hard season of life, a friend sent me an email. It said "I read this passage of the Bible this morning and I wanted to pass it on to you." It was Psalm 37, which I've read many times, but I read it again and it took on new life:

¹ Do not fret because of evil men, ² for like the grass they will soon wither, like green plants they will soon die away. ³ Trust in the LORD and do good. ⁴ Delight yourself in the LORD and he will give you the desires of your heart. ⁵ Commit your way to the LORD; trust in him and... ⁶ He will make your righteousness shine, the justice of your cause like the noonday sun. ⁷ Be still before the LORD and wait patiently for him; do not fret... ⁸ Refrain from anger and turn from wrath; do not fret — it leads only to evil.

As I read, I thought, "It keeps saying 'Do not fret.' I guess I *am* fretting. It keeps saying: 'Trust the Lord. Delight in Him. Commit your way to Him, Hope in Him.' I guess I'm thinking about problems - *and solutions*. I'm not trusting as I should."

The word *can and should* work good within us. But whatever *our state*, our hearts are like open picture books to him. Nothing is hidden. Everything is revealed. If we try to hide, we are, literally "bare" and "in a neck hold in his eyes." An exposed neck represents vulnerability. Wrestlers used to pin their opponents by seizing their neck. A person or animal in a neck hold is helpless.

The point is not that God is hostile. Rather, we can't hide or block his gaze. We can hide from others. People can sense that something is wrong with a friend or family member, yet we can hide parts of the story. But we can't hide from God. We can't play games with God and win. The word, Hebrews says, is alive, powerful, sharp enough to penetrate soul and spirit.

That is, God can make distinctions that are beyond us. He discerns our thoughts and conceptions. What's the difference between a thought and a concept? He divides soul and spirit. Again we think, what's the difference between soul and spirit? The distinction is very fine. Soul means the inner person; spirit is the person in relation to God and the spiritual realm. Who can distinguish these things? God's word can!

James says the word is like a mirror – it shows us who we are. Hebrews says the word is like a sword, probing our inner life. The point: the word has power to lay our hearts bare. God sees us by it and lets us see ourselves.

Say it another way: wise parents often see exactly what's going on with their kids. A woman told me her daughter walked up to her recently and said, "Mom, are you like *losing weight*?" Without hesitation, she replied, "OK, what do you want?" The mother sees through her child. And she *could* be angry, but it's her child, whom she loves, so she is tender.

It's similar between us and the Lord. He sees through us, but with mercy. Come with me to Revelation 6:12-17. It shows a great earthquake, the *sun* turns black, the *moon* is blood red, the *stars* fall, the sky vanishes and the mountains start to collapse on kings and slaves, rich and poor.

A voice calls, "Hide us from the face of Him who sits on the throne and from the wrath of the Lamb. For the great day of their wrath has come, and who can stand?"

At once there is an answer: "Four angels stand at the four corners of the earth" - protecting the earth. So *angels can stand*. Then a second answer in Rev. 7:9-10:

I looked and there... was a great multitude... from every nation, standing before the throne and... the Lamb. They were wearing white robes... [and said] Salvation belongs to our God, who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb.

Revelation asks *who can stand* before God in his judgment. It answers: Angels can stand, because they are faithful. A vast multitude from every nation can stand because they know that Salvation belongs to our God and to the Lamb.

Hebrews says this in another way. It says God wields a two-edged sword. Nothing is hidden from him. It says that as a warning – as we've said – to fearful Christians who are thinking "I fear for my property, my life. Maybe I'll just slip away from the family of God, the faith."

He says, "God will see." He'll see us better than we see ourselves if we think we might slip away, abandon God's way. That's Hebrews 4:12-13. But there is more. Jesus sees all, yet he empathizes and has mercy. That allows those who trust him to stand, before God's gaze, even his judgment.

2. How we stand with Jesus.

The unique, oft-repeated message of Hebrews is this: Jesus is God's high priest – one word in original, who fulfills all the roles of a priest. He lists the tasks: Taken from among men, to act on behalf of humanity, in matters regarding God. He offers gifts and sacrifices, especially a sacrifice for sins (Heb. 5:1). He did not choose himself, God chose him, as he chose Israel's priests (5:5).

Next, we hear his dispositions: He deals gently with those who are ignorant. He is gentle with those who wander about lost, seeking. Why? Because he shares our weakness, he has been tempted by sin, so knows how we can fall into sin. Someone may say: How could Jesus really be tempted? He's sinless! Yes and his very resistance to sin made the temptation more acute not less, because he kept on resisting and never felt the strange, temporary relief when we give in.

That is why Hebrews says he sympathizes – or empathizes or suffers with us. He is faithful, in that he resisted sin and he is merciful because he understands it, felt it. We read “Because he himself suffered when he was tempted, he is able to help those who are being tempted” (2:18). And he “sympathizes because he has been tempted in every way, as we are — yet he was without sin” (4:15).

Because Jesus is tempted, he empathizes with us

Temptation invites a man or woman to take something that is good, when for some reason the person tempted has no right to it or can't justly use it. Temptation takes something good and perverts it. Satan tempted Jesus with good things by inviting him to take them, even though he had no right at the time. I remind you:

Jesus fasted for forty days to prepare for his ministry. Afterward Jesus surely wanted food. Satan came and said, “Command them to become loaves of bread.” No law forbids this, but it violated a principle. To live a genuine human life – which was the plan – Jesus could not, would not draw on his supernatural powers to make life easier. He had to eat, drink, sleep, travel on foot, use his eyes and ears to learn things, just like anyone else. He had to be like us.

Satan tempted Jesus to selfishness – to take food in a self-interested way. If he changed rocks to food – using divine powers to satisfy his hunger – he would have put self-interest above God's plan.

Satan also tempted Jesus to throw himself, jump off the pinnacle of the temple and let angels feather him to the ground. This would force God to perform a miracle to guarantee his personal security. It would be proof – certainty – that nothing terrible could happen to him.

"Throw yourself down" is the temptation to knowledge. If Jesus floats down to the ground, he will know. What a thing to have in memory's horde, in hard days ahead. What proof of the Father's love! But would he test the Father by forcing him to act to ensure Jesus' safety? If Jesus jumped, he would no longer live by faith. But humans need to live by faith, not sight. Again he would live a real human life. We live with uncertainty, we live by faith in God and he did too.

Satan offered something good: food, knowledge. That's why he offers *tempted* or *tested* Jesus. We can't be tempted to do something that has no appeal. You can't tempt my friend to get on a roller coaster. He says, “I've already been in a car wreck. I don't want another, thank you.” You can't tempt him to eat sushi. He says, “If you want to eat raw fish, go ahead. I'll cook mine.”

Pause for a word about temptations. Satan tempts Jesus to take something good by quick, easy, corrupt path. We face the same thing. We're late for a meeting. It's good to arrive on time, but if we break traffic laws to get there, we take the quick way. Sexual temptation is similar. Physical intimacy is good – at the right place and time, within the love and commitment of marriage. It's designed to seal the love and unity of husband and wife. But we must resist the easy way to intimacy. So let's not be surprised by the lure of sin. Let's be ready to resist, with Jesus.

Notice: Because Jesus was a real man, he was "tempted in all things as we are" (4:15). He felt the pull, the lure of food, security, ease, pleasure, power. But if he had no right to them, he didn't take them – not at that time. Question: Can Jesus really empathize if he never sinned, never formed habits of sin or had a sinful nature.

So he was without sin (4:15). That was essential for his priestly role. A priest had to enter God's presence, the Holy of Holies, in perfect form, and bearing a sacrifice for his sins. Jesus entered God's presence, perfectly pure, needing no sacrifice for himself, but bringing one for us – his very life.

Because Jesus is a merciful high priest, we find grace

But Hebrews doesn't emphasize the way temptation strikes us. It says “Because he himself suffered when he was tempted, he is able to help those who are being tempted” (2:18). It says Jesus empathizes. He suffers with us in our weakness.

Suffering together is the principle behind support groups. Alcoholics, grad students, single mothers, working mothers, business leaders, pastors - we spend time with people like us because we want to be with people who *know our life*.

Earlier, Hebrews warned the sinner who wants to hide. It says, God sees! But now it comforts the broken sinner. Our high priest – one word, one office in the original – empathizes with us, suffers with us. Jesus is a king, but he rules from a throne of grace and offers mercy in times of need.

Hebrews says we can approach Jesus' throne boldly, frankly, openly stating our needs. We will “receive mercy and find grace.” Mercy is kindness, concern, compassion, the *feeling* of love. Grace is then the gift of love. Jesus has both.

Consider that Jesus is both strong (king) and empathetic. How rare this is. In our experience, people are strong or empathetic, rarely both. Suppose you have a computer problem. A co-worker says, "I had a similar problem last week. So frustrating!" That's empathy, mercy.

Someone comes from IT. They take a glance. "Hello. Well you have an elastic cloud, open source, digital text platform, Java API XML problem?" We say, “You lost me at 'Hello.'" They say, "OK, get some coffee, I'll fix this in five minutes." You can't follow and they need to move on.

That's the norm. If someone is top notch at cooking, engineering, any discipline, they easily lose the connection with beginners. Too often, experts despise the wretched serfs. So the strong lack empathy and the empathetic lack strength.

Not so with Jesus. He is strong and empathetic. When his friend Lazarus died, Jesus shed real tears with the family. But Jesus was also strong enough to raise him from the dead. So he is faithful and strong – strong to resist temptation. But he also felt temptation, so he is empathetic. Jesus isn't weak, but he felt the limitations of human life, so he knows our weakness. How comforting, in a dark hour!

Hebrews states the lesson: “Therefore, since we have a great high priest who has gone through the heavens, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold firmly to the faith we profess.” He has "gone through the heavens" means he passed into God's presence bearing the sacrifice that opened heaven. Hebrews later says:

He is able to save completely those who come to God through him, because he always lives to intercede for them. Such a high priest meets our need — one who is holy, blameless, pure, set apart from sinners, exalted above the heavens.

Since we have such a great priest, we hold fast to Him by our faith. You may think “I'd love to hold fast.” That's just what I can't quite do. Listen – you can take that very thought to him: Approach the throne of grace with confidence and receive mercy and find grace in our time of need (4:16).

We've learned to hear the word "throne" and shiver a bit. I think of movie scenes. Kings are robed and crowned, surrounded by armed guards, austere, scowling, tall, craggy, with thundering, angry voices. But this is a throne of grace. Grace is its mark.

I've never been in a functioning throne room; the office of my dissertation advisor was close. It was huge - 700 square feet, located in an ivy tower. He was famous, wealthy, powerful, brilliant. One day I asked him a question. Ah! The answer required a map. He grabbed a huge one, unrolled it on the floor, then crawled on his hands and knees to show me the answer. I was aghast at first, but his room was never as awesome after that. He crawled like a child to answer my question. Jesus did far more. He had a far higher position, but stepped much lower, for us.

Let's summarize what we've learned about Jesus here. First, he is the mighty and merciful king. We can and should boldly seek his aid in the hour of need. Second, Jesus is our high priest and is both strong and empathetic. Third Jesus is faithful and compassionate. He finished his work, so he can hear our prayer and help. Because he was tempted, he is compassionate, so we want to call on him to help us endure.

Jesus invites us to his way of life

Consider that Jesus is both strong and empathetic. So rare. Yet so important. Are you strong? Empathetic? Do you aim for both? If you belong to Christ, his life indwells and changes yours. You can be strong and tender, like him. Make that your goal.

Consider that Jesus sees all our thoughts and motives. It's a sobering thought. Yet the goal isn't to cause fear. Rather it leads us to Jesus, in faith. Jesus was tempted and stood firm. He is sinless, therefore a faithful high priest. Don't be afraid. Jesus reigns from a throne of grace. Come to him boldly, speaking freely, in your hour of need. In the hour of trouble, don't look down to your woe, look up to your Lord.