

Sermon for Sunday, November 11, 2012
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Jesus and the Quest for Perfection
Hebrews 10:1-14

¹ For since the law has but a shadow of the good things to come instead of the true form of these realities, it can never, by the same sacrifices that are continually offered every year, make perfect those who draw near. ² Otherwise, would they not have ceased to be offered, since the worshipers, having once been cleansed, would no longer have any consciousness of sins? ³ But in these sacrifices there is a reminder of sins every year. ⁴ For it is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins.

⁵ Consequently, when Christ came into the world, he said,

“Sacrifices and offerings you have not desired,
but a body have you prepared for me;
⁶ in burnt offerings and sin offerings
you have taken no pleasure.
⁷ Then I said, ‘Behold, I have come to do your will, O God,
as it is written of me in the scroll of the book.’”

⁸ When he said above, “You have neither desired nor taken pleasure in sacrifices and offerings and burnt offerings and sin offerings” (these are offered according to the law), ⁹ then he added, “Behold, I have come to do your will.” He does away with the first in order to establish the second. ¹⁰ And by that will we have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all.

¹¹ And every priest stands daily at his service, offering repeatedly the same sacrifices, which can never take away sins. ¹² But when Christ had offered for all time a single sacrifice for sins, he sat down at the right hand of God, ¹³ waiting from that time until his enemies should be made a footstool for his feet. ¹⁴ For by a single offering he has perfected for all time those who are being sanctified.

The tires on my car had lost their tread. I told my mechanic, "My last tires didn't seem to handle so well, and winter's coming so get me the tires that you think best for my car." He listened and chose tires that handle and corner beautifully – and reduced my miles per gallon by five to seven percent. Engineers say, "There is no perfect tire, no perfect computer or sound system. Some are better than others, but we always face tradeoffs." Ah, the elusive quest for perfection.

The quest for moral perfection is *more* elusive. Even in things that seems as simple as telling the truth, there are trade-offs. Give too much detail and you become tedious. Speak too boldly and nuance is lost. Say too much and someone may be hurt. That's when we aim to do what's right – and we don't always do that. Sadly, we lose our temper and let it happen. We get laughs at the expense of others, we fail to stop and help people in need. And how can we make up for past mistakes? Apologize? Reverse our mistake? But some mistakes can't be undone.

1. The portrait of Christ in Hebrews – especially as great high priest

The author of Hebrews knew his people needed to hear about perfection, even if it wasn't first on their minds. They were more intent on survival. Remember, these people suffered persecution fifteen years earlier. They resisted faithfully, even though they faced prison and banishment. But they stagnated since

then (Heb. 5:11-14) and are not prepared for this second round of persecution. Their capacity to endure is in doubt. Some are withdrawing from the fellowship (10:25). Jewish Christians may even renounce Jesus and return to Judaism, since the Romans recognized it as an old respected religion. So Hebrews presents the supremacy of Christ, of the faith:

Jesus is the creator and sustainer of all things, the visible manifestation of the triune God's glory, the prophet who speaks God's final word, the priest who purifies our sins, the King who rules at the right hand of the Majesty on high.

The message is clear: Don't look at your problem, look to Jesus, the champion of the faith. He has fought our great foes, Satan and death, and defeated them. He is our victorious hero, yet he's not so far above us since he shared flesh and blood.

So he understands weakness and temptation. So he is a merciful and faithful high priest (2:17). Jesus never knew sin experientially, by sinning, but he does know the feeling of weakness, the pull of temptation (5:1-3). He prayed and groaned and learned obedience like us (5:7-10). So he is gentle and understanding, especially with those who stray in ignorance.

The middle section of Hebrews, chapters 5-10, especially explores the supremacy of Jesus as priest. Hebrews maintains the supremacy of Jesus, but acknowledges that the temple services and sacrifices were the high point of Judaism. Consider: First, the very atmosphere was festal, people traveled many miles, with family and friends, to enjoy the life of Israel with her Lord. The feasts celebrated the birth of the nation – their escape from Egypt – God's gifts of annual harvests, and, above all, the day of atonement of sin.

The temple offered a feast for the senses. The pilgrim approaching heard the humming of voices, the clatter of hooves, and the beauty of trained choirs. They smelled the incense, the meat on fires. They beheld the polished marble building, sheathed in gold; inside they saw the priests in their holy garb. Beyond all that, there was something for the soul, something we can grasp.

The Day of Atonement gave a singular occasion to remember sin, to confess it, and to trust God's high priest to offer a sacrifice for all sins committed in the past year. Even if an Israelite saw the moment but once, all knew.

In a magnificent setting, the high priest, clothed in resplendent garments, transferred the sins of the people to a goat that was slain. He entered the Holy of Holies with the blood of sacrifice. When he emerged, the crowd cheered! The Day of Atonement offered forgiveness of all sins committed for a year. We see the appeal of a clear, definite opportunity to confess and repent of sins and to know God has forgiven them. The same interest in repentance and forgiveness leads us to confess our sins and hear the assurance of God's pardon in church each week.

Great as all this was, Hebrews insists it's a shadow of a deeper reality. The Hebrews tabernacle worship *represented* the presence of God. The priests entered an impressive shadow of God's presence. But Jesus actually entered the Father's presence (8:5).

Hebrews 10:1 says priests serve a copy and shadow of the heavenly sanctuary; for when Moses was about to erect the tent, he was instructed by God, "See that you make everything according to the pattern which was shown you on the mountain."

Specifically, the old covenant cannot provide three essential things, things that Jesus, the true priest offers: First, atonement for sins. Second, free access to God. Third, the removal of subjective guilt, the guilt that makes us feel we don't belong in God's presence. We need all three to form a right relationship with God.

The tabernacle system offered none of them. First, the temple system restricted access to God as it set up barrier after barrier to God's presence. No Gentile, no woman, no one with a physical defect could enter. None could enter but a priest, a high priest, and he but once a year, with sacrifice in hand. The temple embodied restriction upon restriction and denied free access to God, according to Heb. 9:1-8!

Second, did the sacrifices atone for sin? The system itself seemed to say no. Further, all the sacrifices had to be repeated over and over. If they were truly effective, why was it necessary to offer them again? In fact, the very repetition reminded everyone that the problem remained. So says Hebrews 7:27 and 9:25.

Third, the temple system did not necessarily heal the guilty conscience of worshipers. The system was external. It was possible to travel to the temple and watch the priest perform a ritual and remain detached. An Israelite could say, "The priest offered a sacrifice to remove our sins" without actually confessing his or her sins, without really praying and seeking God (Heb 9:9-14).

I read of a prominent man in a small town who got his son a job at a local bank. Unhappy and foolish, the son embezzled \$7,000 over the span of several months. The auditors caught him. He could have gone to jail, but the bankers didn't want to unnerve their customers. So the bankers went to the man's father and said, "If you repay what he stole and he quietly resigns, we won't press charges."

This removed the *legal problem*. But did the young man change? Something led him to steal, to try to get rich quick. Did the character flaw, the internal defilement remain? The man had opportunity to examine himself, but he could be content to remove the legal danger and move on.

Do you see how this speaks to all of us? We all commit various sins. Some are Las Vegas sins. Some are jay-walking, but we cover them with pride, excuses, denial, self-justification. We can come to prayer, to church, two ways: So I did it! Well, at least I'm forgiven. It's the one thing I get from religion. Or we can drop our heads and cry, "Lord, have mercy on me, the sinner" (Luke 18).

Hebrews says that the temple system sacrifices *might* remove legal guilt and leave the mind or conscience untouched. But Jesus wants to address the legal and personal aspects. He wants to cleanse the conscience too:

The tabernacle sacrifices are offered which *cannot perfect the conscience* of the worshiper, but deal only with food and drink and various washings, *regulations* for the body imposed until the time of reformation. [But Jesus, who] offered himself without blemish to God [shall] *purify your conscience* from dead works to serve the living God (Heb 9:9-14).

Jesus' sacrifice meets our great needs. He atones for sin, with *his* blood (9:12-13). And he gains us access to God's presence (9:11). We have access because we know we belong in God's presence. Not legally guilty, not morally defiled.

When a young pastor I got a message while at the gym: A member of my church was in the emergency room, in great pain. Please go visit him. It was evening and I had no change of clothes, so I had to go to the hospital in dirty, sweaty, slightly ripped gym clothes. I was young and had a pretty big

beard, so I didn't look like a pastor. But I knew I belonged. So I strode into the emergency room till I found my friend and sat with him in his room. I belonged, so I could enter restricted areas. We also know the feeling when we don't belong in a place. We want to get out, as soon as possible. We lumber off a midnight plane, stumble into the ladies room, see the plumbing and hustle out, red-faced.

If we genuinely trust Jesus, he cleanses the conscience, so we can draw near without fear that our mistakes will ruin our efforts (9:14).

Question: Do you have a perfectionist streak? We can drive ourselves half-crazy trying to write the perfect letter, the factually accurate *and* emotionally sensitive e-mail, the perfect lesson or report. What's behind the nonsense?

Perfectionists dream their efforts will prove their worth. We know it's not true, but we act as if *incremental improvement* will grant success or at least give a clean conscience if we falter. Hey, we did our best. Perfectionism is a sign that we hope to justify ourselves, to validate or save ourselves by works. Trust Jesus instead!

2. Jesus offers a perfect sacrifice 10:1-4, cf. 9:23-28

Hebrews says Jesus' sacrifice is better than temple sacrifice in three ways. A better number: Priests offered the same sacrifices year after year (10:1). Jesus offered one sacrifice. A better effect: The constant repetition of sacrifice "is a reminder of sin year after year" (10:3). But Jesus acted once to take away sin (10:10-11). A better sacrifice: Priests enter with animal blood; Jesus offered his own body (10:10). This summarizes points in Hebrews chapters 5-9, comparing Jesus to Priests:

1. Israel's priests all age and die, but Jesus lives forever, intercedes forever (7:23-25). They are weak but he is strong 7:26-28.
2. The priests present a shadow of salvation, but Jesus saves completely (7:25, 8:25).
3. Priests are flawed, even sinful, so they must sacrifice for themselves before they can sacrifice for the people. Jesus is blameless and pure (7:26-27).
4. The priests repeat their sacrifices day after day, but Jesus sacrifices once to take away sin, bringing salvation (7:27, 9:26-28).
5. The priests offered animal sacrifices; Jesus offered himself (9:12-13, 25).
6. The priests serve in a shadow, a copy. Jesus enters heaven, God's true sanctuary (8:2-5, 9:23-28).
7. Jesus mediates a superior covenant, with superior promises (8:6-13).
8. The priests remind us of sin, but Jesus removes guilt, makes us holy (10:2-3, 10-14).

The message is clear. We should trust Jesus to remove our sin and guilt. We should rest in the life-work of Christ, not ourselves. Easier said than done! We live in a performance-based society. The smallest advantage, the extra detail, can seal the deal. And it seems that one mistake is ruin.

But we are a church where broken achievers can find healing and peace. How? Apply the work of Jesus to *all* of life. If you're a Christian, you know the doctrine of Jesus as savior. He pays for our sins and gives us life, by grace, through faith.

But the principle applies elsewhere. We must train our mind, emotions and habits to follow it. We can't earn God's favor or supplement Jesus' work. So let's not live as if we can justify our existence by works. The Bible scorns laziness, but endless toil is just as bad. It's practical atheism to say "Jesus saves," then acts as if we must save ourselves. Let's work through the principle that the finished work of Jesus

delivers us. So don't aim for perfection – perfect grades, perfect reports, sales presentations. Make it good, of course, but don't dream of perfect.

I had a professor who never wanted anyone to get a 100% on a test. He put something impossibly obscure, irrelevant on each test. Studying, I noticed that a monument had two names – one phrase in 500 pages of readings. I thought, “He'll ask for that second name.” He did and I nailed it. 100%. He still marked it wrong. He said, “No one gets 100 on my tests.” And he's right. Who knows everything? Who is perfect? No one but Jesus! So *receive* your perfection from him.

3. Jesus' perfect obedience (10:5-10)

So Jesus offers a perfect sacrifice for sin, but he also plans to make us better people, to give us glory, to stop our sins (2:10-11). Jesus himself is the model. Hebrews 10:5-9 quotes Psalm 40 and says Jesus speaks it most truly.

In Psalm 40, David thanks God for opening his ears, so he wants to do God's will. As a result he doesn't bring a sacrifice for sins he committed, he comes *offering his body* in daily obedience. David learned the lesson Israel missed – perhaps deliberately. It's good to offer a sacrifice when one sins, but it's better to obey in the first place. So the Bible says, “To obey is better than sacrifice.”

The Old Testament says this over and over. Too often Israel sinned, then said “Ah, but I have a sacrifice in my hand.” That's why God says in Hosea 6:6, “I desire steadfast love, not sacrifice, the knowledge of God, rather than burnt offerings.” Isaiah 1:11: “I have had enough of... your sacrifices.” Psalm 51:16-17: God “has no delight in sacrifice. The sacrifice acceptable to God is a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart.” (See also 1 Sam 15:22, Isa 66:2-4, Jer 7:21-23, Amos 5:21-24.)

God rejects the pretense when someone does wrong and says, “Sorry, uh, I have a sacrifice to cover it.” No, when Israel sacrificed for sin yet knowingly continued in sin, God rejected their sacrifices. But if we're broken-hearted over sin, sincerely asking forgiveness, God accepts.

Jesus does everything: he perfectly obeyed the Father *and* offered a sacrifice to cover sins. He came to do God's will. He is a model of obedience and by his obedient sacrifice, he redeemed us (10:6-7). David *wanted* to render obedience, Jesus did.

4. Jesus makes us perfect (10:11-18)

Once more, Hebrews restates his great point. Jesus is supreme because priests stand, offering the same sacrifices over and over, even though they can't purge sin. The sheer repetition suggests it is all for naught. Meanwhile Jesus sits at right hand of God, for his one sacrifice is complete. When we sincerely repent, God forgives.

Imagine that you never again have to wash clothes, dishes, cars, floors. The dirt is removed, once for all. So Jesus has done with our objective guilt, has perfected us and removed the danger of judgment, by his one sacrifice

But Jesus doesn't just atone for sin, removes it. He solves the personal problem, not just the external one. Remember the embezzler. If we embezzle and repent, he promises both to pay the debt and to change our heart. See Hebrews 10:14: He has *perfected, once for all* those who *are being* made holy.

There is a definitive element – we're legally perfect forever – and a progressive moral and spiritual element – he makes us holy. Both are true, both rest in God's grace. Suppose we're perfectionists and it makes us sin. We're neglecting our family, our health. Perfection at work is our idol. We don't just provide for family and serve our neighbors, we seek worth and identity there.

If we repent and believe, Jesus perfects us legally, by his one sacrifice. Yet he also demands and enables change. He breaks the grip of workaholic behavior, so work is no longer slavery. From Jesus' side the work is complete; from our side, the work is progressive.

Progress can be slow, painful. Believers are consecrated and we're *being* consecrated. How does Jesus fulfill his plan in us? How does he reform us?

How we reach for perfection

Above all, internal *change comes through God's Spirit*. He bears witness that we are God's children, gives us new interests, new appetites. The Lord says, "I will put my laws on their hearts, and write them on their minds" (10:16).

We become more mature, more like Jesus, more just and good as God works in us. Hebrews 10:14-16 says that the Holy Spirit testifies that God will fulfill his promise to Israel: "I will put my laws in their hearts, and I will write them on their minds."

He promises to forgive and forget: "Their sins and lawless deeds I shall never remember" because Jesus covered our sin with his sacrifice. By grace, God's future has broken into the present, yet we live between the ages, so we're responsible to progress more and more. Our labor counts, our attention to God's law is essential. Yet the essence of growth is never toil to obey laws. Obedience proceeds naturally from new heart. We desire love, mercy and justice. We are attracted to them, they feel right, we long for them, in self and world.

What does this mean? How do we live out the work of the Spirit? Hebrews 12:14-16 illustrates. First, he says, "*Strive for peace* with everyone." The author knows the faith rouses antagonism, which we must endure, but we *cultivate peace* because Scripture calls our message "the gospel of peace." Indeed the Lord is the God of peace. It is our nature to seek peace, so...

Second, strive for holiness without which no one will see God. This is the personal holiness that shows we are set apart. We try to be loving and just because he is loving and just. Holy means separate – not living apart, but living differently. In the crowd, but not following the crowd. Rather, following God.

Third, be sexually responsible. Literally, *keep the marriage bed undefiled*. Let no one be driven by sensory desires. Esau sold his birthright for a bowl of stew. He enthroned his appetites; the Bible says to "harness them." The godless let their desires drive them. Appetites dictate behavior. But we must channel our appetites.

Benefits of Christ for believers (10:19-25)

So Jesus has made us perfect. There is no more sacrifice for sin! (10:14,18). The only sacrifice needed now is sacrifice of praise (13:15). We remind ourselves to rest in Jesus, his grace and acceptance. *If you don't understand that, please ask!* Jesus' work is effective, yet not consummated. God is sanctifying us.

The challenge isn't receiving forgiveness, it's appropriating the new life. Inconsistency, acts that contradict our new nature, makes us disappointment ourselves.

Jesus grants what the people sought through Old Testament sacrifices: access to God, atonement for sin, clear conscience, fellowship with others. After Hebrews describes all that Jesus has done, it urges us to use it. Therefore let us draw near to God. Let us hold the faith firm. Let us spur one another to love and do good deeds. Let us meet together and encourage one another.

We have access because Jesus sacrifice has torn down the barriers between us and God. He is the new, living way. We can approach God with confidence. Jesus' sacrifice ends the barrier on God's side. A clean conscience ends the barrier on our side. "Therefore, brethren, since we have confidence to enter the sanctuary by the blood of Jesus... Let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience...."

Because Jesus provided atonement and we enjoy fellowship with God, "Let us hold unswervingly to the hope we profess, for he who promised is faithful. That leads to fellowship with each other: "Let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good deeds." To encourage one another, we must meet together. So we must "not neglect to meet together" (10:24-25).

Let's apply this to our recent election. The election results left many euphoric, but many stricken, especially in Missouri, which voted for Romney. We have concerns about the unborn, religious liberty and debts. But let's encourage one another. Whoever holds political power *in America*, God holds sovereign power *everywhere*. He says "By me kings reign and rulers decree what is just."

Solomon says, "The king's heart is in the hand of the LORD; he directs it wherever he pleases" (Prov. 8:15, 21:1). Humans choose leaders and make plans but the Sovereign Lord "does as he pleases with the powers of heaven and the peoples of the earth" (Dan. 4:35). He "works out everything in conformity with the purpose of his will" (Eph. 1:11).

Psalm 146: "Do not put your trust in princes, in mortal men, who cannot save" (146:1-3). We should be involved in the political process, but we don't put our faith in politics or elected officials. The psalm continues, "Blessed is he... whose hope is in the LORD the Maker of heaven and earth." He is faithful and upholds the oppressed." He "lifts up those who are bowed down [and] loves the righteous" (146:1, 3, 5-8).

By meeting together, encouraging each other, approaching the Lord in the confidence he provides, we continue our quest to lay hold of the good life that shows we have received perfection from Jesus by faith.