

Pastor Daryl Diddle

Sermon Series: *In Times Like These 1*

Mercy

August 6, 2023

**Hebrews 4:14-16 (NIV)**

*Therefore, since we have a great high priest who has ascended into heaven, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold firmly to the faith we profess. <sup>15</sup> For we do not have a high priest who is unable to empathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are – yet he did not sin. <sup>16</sup> Let us then approach God's throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need.*

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I invite you to turn back to the book of Hebrews, looking at the three verses that were just read for us, before we share the Lord's Table together.

Hebrews, Chapter 4, verses 14 through 16.

In order to fully appreciate these verses, we have to understand a little background for this book, because there are some things about Hebrews that we simply don't know.

However, because there is so much emphasis in the book on things like the Jewish scriptures, the priesthood, blood sacrifices, the tabernacle and the law, and since it is plainly titled, "to the Hebrews," we *do* know that this work was intended for the ears of Jewish Christians, as opposed to most of the Apostle Paul's letters which were intended, primarily, for gentile believers.

This was written for Jewish converts to Christ.

Why was it written?

It seems the main purpose was to try to keep some group of Jewish Christians from reverting back to Judaism, and the writer makes a case here for why they should not do that using seven logical arguments for why Jesus is the fulfillment of the sacrificial process of the Old Covenant.

So, the writer is not just saying here that Jesus is a better alternative to what came before in the Jewish economy, although Jesus undoubtedly is. The writer is saying that *Jesus is the divinely ordered and intended end of all that came before*, such that, once you arrive in Jesus, there's no rational reason to return to the old covenant's way, even if it were equally effective, which it is not.

To leave Jesus for the old sacrificial system would be like going from modern medicine back to blood-letting or using leeches to cure disease.

It would be like wearing animal skins instead of clothing.

It would be hunting with hand-made bows and arrows instead of rifles, or choosing to live in a cave instead of a modern home.

The writer here is literally dumbfounded as to why anyone would ever consider doing such a thing, and I'd like us to look this morning at just one of the reasons for his "dumbfoundedness," if that's even a word.

You see, one reason the writer here can't conceive of anyone withdrawing from Jesus has to do with God's immense mercy and empathy for us that is revealed by Jesus.

Our God, the God who made us and keeps us, the God of the Bible, is understanding and empathetic and gracious and merciful to us.

Now you say, "Yeah, I know that." We who know Jesus today, we rather take that for granted.

But you see, people did not always know that. People in Jesus' day did not know that. William Barclay points out that the idea of God as a loving, compassionate, merciful Heavenly Father was a new, and specifically Christian idea to that world.

You see, to the Jew, God was *only* holy; and the root meaning of the word "holy" is "different" and "other."

So, to the Jew, God was primarily *different*. He belonged to a different sphere of life and being than that to which we belong, and so He did not share anything of our human experience. In fact, in the Jewish mind, God was incapable of sharing in anything we know and understand just because He's God.

To the Jew, God was *different, other* and *holy*.

But you know, there were other conceptions of God in that world too.

In the Greek world and time of this writing, there were also the Stoics.

The Stoics, arguably the highest of the Greek thinkers, taught that the primary attribute of God is *apatheia*, which is where we get our word, "apathy." It means the inability to feel anything at all.

This was their logic: the Stoics argued that if a person can feel sorrow or joy, it means that some other person is able to influence them; that is, another person or being or circumstance can make them happy or sad or scared or angry or whatever. And if that is the case, it would mean that this other person has control over them and is therefore, at least for that moment, greater than them.

And so, since no one could ever be greater than God, then no one must ever be able to affect Him.

Therefore, by their logic, God must be completely insensitive and beyond all capacity to feel.

To the Stoics, God was *absolutely unfeeling*.

And then, there were also the Epicureans, the other major philosophical school of the day.

The Epicureans believed that the gods lived in perfect happiness in the *intermundia*, the space between the worlds, and there, in total detachment, the gods were not even aware of our world.

Utterly unaffected, the gods were completely separated and totally unaware of our concerns here. That was the Epicurean conception of gods.

So, you see, in Jesus' time, the Jews had their God, and He was "different."

The Stoics had their "*unfeeling*" god.

And the Epicureans had their "*detached*" god.

Those were the major spiritual influences of the age and their descriptions of "god" in that time.

So, you see, one can hardly imagine how startling the Christian conception of God was. Into the "thought world" of the time comes this incredible idea of a God Who is unlike any of these: a God, in fact, Who had deliberately undergone every human experience and thus was a God Who has felt all we feel, One Who knows every square inch of the human condition.

It was almost unimaginable!

Plutarch (you've probably heard his name) was a rather famous and a very seriously spiritual person of his day.

His was a combination of Platonism, Aristotelian thought, and a bit of Stoicism. He was a very well-written, well-read, and serious spiritual mongrel. But here's what he said. Plutarch declared it absolutely blasphemous to involve God in the affairs of this world.

You see, that was the spiritual thinking of the day.

And yet here's Christianity with this staggering idea that God has not merely *involved* Himself in our world, but that God has actually, personally and deeply, *identified* Himself with even the greatest suffering of His creation.

Truly, it is nearly impossible for us today to comprehend how revolutionary a thought this was regarding how humans and God relate with one another.

For such a long time, God was considered to be untouchable.

Now, here is the God Who has gone through all that we humans go through, which means that God has this very real quality and characteristic of *mercy*.

Through Jesus' earthly life and death, God understands all that we endure – even the very hardest of things.

Even dishonesty, slander, unfairness, tragedy, suffering and, yes, even death. God understands these things, and actually, He understands as no one else can.

No other human can *understand us individually* as completely as God does.

That's just the reality of life. No one experiences exactly the same things as someone else.

Some people, for good or bad, live largely sheltered lives.

Other people endure quite a lot of tough things.

Some people rarely suffer hardship.

Some people suffer much. But no person suffers every sort of hardship.

No one – except Jesus.

And, you see, that fact is part of what makes Him the "great high priest." Jesus is the One, the only One, Who is firmly in touch with both God, the Father, and with humanity.

Jesus is the only One Who brings the voice and presence of God to man, and Who brings all the reality of

humanity, including our suffering, into the presence of God.

A perfect priest Jesus is, because He understands both God and us as no one else can.

That's the writer's argument here.

No bull, no goat, no dove, could ever begin to do what Jesus does.

And so, why would any thinking person ever even consider walking away from Him?

You see, finally – *finally* – after centuries and centuries of "different," "unfeeling" and "detached," finally, we can know that, through Jesus, God gets us. He really does understand. He really does know our hurts, because He has felt them too.

Verse 15, "*We do not have a high priest who is unable to empathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are – yet he did not sin.*"

And so, what does that mean? It means, in part, that we can (verse 16) "*...approach God's throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need.*"

You see, because of Jesus, we can be in an intimate relationship with God, the God Who understands the weight of temptations, yes. But also, the God Who understands all the difficulties of life in our broken world.

When life has been hard for us, we can go to a God Who has been there – He's been here! He knows our suffering, and through forgiveness and grace and mercy, He helps us.

Our God helps us!

Now, does He do everything we want?

Does He grant our every wish?

No, He does not.

He does us one better: He helps us according to *His* perfect wisdom, because He sees around the corners that we don't see around, and because He understands us even better than we understand ourselves.

He knows our circumstance, because He has been where we are, and He knows the way out.

Everyone knows that the best person to give advice on a journey is one who's been there before.

The best person to help through an illness is one who has come through it before.

And that is Jesus.

Jesus has been there.

Jesus has come through.

And Jesus can bring us through.

In Him, in Jesus, there is *help* and there is *mercy* – because Jesus understands.

What will His help look like in our lives?

We don't know that, precisely. That much is not written for us.

What is written is that He controls all natural forces. He governs all physical laws.

He superintends the universe, and He makes all things work together, somehow – somehow – for good for those who love and trust Him (Romans 8:28).

At times, the details are ours to know.

At times, they're not.

But *always*, God invites us to confidently come to Him for the mercy we need.

Because, you see, it's not just a throne of judgment or legislation or authority upon which God sits.

It's a throne of grace. It's a seat of mercy.

It's a table of mercy, in fact, and through Jesus, it has been opened to us – in times like these.

If you know Jesus (if you've asked Him to forgive you of your sins and if you've received Him as your savior), or if you would like to receive Him even this morning, please know that God's throne of grace is open to you.

He understands, unlike anyone else, the times in which we live and the difficulties we face, and He invites us to Himself – to come and ask and seek. He promises we'll find the mercy we need today.

Prayer

Service of Holy Communion

Closing Song: *Come to the Table*

Benediction:

Our burdens are great. Our need for mercy is great. That's why it's only sensible to hold to Jesus. He knows the burdens of life, and so He is kind to us.

Let us hold to Jesus, and let us be like Jesus and go from this place being kind to one another, because we all have great burdens to bear.