

BaptistWay: Rely firmly on Christ

August 29, 2013

- *The BaptistWay lesson for Sept. 15 focuses on Hebrews 4:14-5:10.*

People are needy. No one understands this better than the people who work with them for a living. Teachers can tell stories of countless parents who demand their children be treated special; hospital nurses can recall patients who expected service equal to a five-star hotel; and believe it or not, pastors even can remember a handful of church members who seemed to believe the minister should be at their beck and call.

The author of Hebrews believes the core of neediness comes from humanity's need to be able to approach and have access to God. Hebrews 4:14 picks up after a diatribe that emphasizes the continual failure of God's people to remain in communion with their Maker. They could not be who God wanted them to be, because they did not have access to him.

A great high priest (Hebrews 4:14-16)

In Jesus, the author insists, this problem was remedied. He is referred to as a "great high priest" in this section, and proclaimed to be superior to any of the others throughout history because he has "gone through the heavens" (v. 14). The idea behind this phrase is Jesus has "gone through" or "penetrated" into a place previously unable to be accessed by the people of God. This alone should be reason enough to recognize his superiority to past high priests, but the author continues by noting his ability to sympathize with the human condition, as one who entered into it and faced temptation without sinning (v. 15).

Often, when needy people seem most annoying, it is because they are

disconnected from the great high priest in their life. That does not mean they do not know who Jesus is, have never been to church or haven't read the Bible. It means they either have forgotten or never learned how to rely fully on Christ.

Purposely or not, much of popular Christianity teaches people to rely on themselves. While surfing Facebook this past week, I came across a post from former wrestling superstar, Hulk Hogan. He was one of my childhood heroes, so it pained me when I read these words: "Stay positive. When something happens, and you have negative thoughts, do not speak them into existence. Instead, speak out: 'Something good will come from this.' Speak out what you want in life. 'I am going to get this job.' 'I am in perfect health.' 'I am going to win this race.'"

People are buying into the "prosperity gospel" in mass because it promises great rewards for faith. However, it relies more on what you do, say and think, than it does on what God has already done. It has no room for a "great high priest."

Qualifications for priesthood (Hebrews 5:1-10)

Perhaps more accurately put, it is not that those who have bought into the prosperity gospel do not have room for a "great high priest;" it is that they do not think they need room for one. They are not convinced relying on Christ over themselves really is sufficient and fulfilling. That does not mean they do not like Jesus, or even think he is really special. They would even tell you they worship him as God's Son, but their actions prove otherwise.

These verses are directed to Hebrews who understood Jesus as good, special and unique but might have trouble understanding why he is the "great high priest," and how relying on him can fulfill their deepest needs.

The author begins by telling them what they already know about the office of the priesthood: A priest is a representative of the people to God (v. 1), is

susceptible to temptation and sin like any other person (v. 2), and must be called by God (v. 4). Once this common ground is established, the author recalls psalms (1:5, 13; 110) in verses 5-6 that previously were mentioned to show two things: 1) Jesus meets established criteria for being a priest; and 2) Jesus' priesthood is superior and eternal.

The remaining verses, 7-10, give a brief account from Jesus life, death and resurrection that point to the unique priesthood of Jesus. The language of verse 7 is deliberately strong and leaves no room for a "docetic" Jesus whose humanity is only skin-deep. His real-life experience entailed discovering first-hand that obedience to God requires suffering (v. 8). This experience perfected or "equipped" him to fulfill his saving mission and become "the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him" (v. 9).

We learn to rely on Jesus in a similar way. What we know about him comes from going to church and reading Scripture, but learning about what we need from him often comes from experience. Unfortunately, we often fail to learn to rely fully on Jesus for what we need until after our trust in something else leads to disastrous results.

It is easy for Hulk Hogan to trust his positive thoughts and words for financial provision, dream jobs and competitive success. Those are things he already has. In the real world, we rely on Jesus not because of what we already have or want, but because of what he already has done. As a result, the neediest of us can approach God freely and find true fulfillment in the great high priest.