

A Sermon
Rev. W. Kevin Holder
Grace Baptist Church
Bryans Road, Maryland
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Always Interceding

Hebrews 7:11-25

A pastor tells about visiting a woman who was in the final stages of a battle with lung cancer. As she lay there in the hospital bed, gasping for breath, he could tell that the end of her struggle was near. In her hand she held a crucifix, the body of Christ nailed to the cross. Her grandmother had given it to her when she was a little girl. It had been carved by a monk somewhere in Europe. As she held the crucifix in her hand each day, it was a reminder of her Catholic faith. Wanting to do whatever he could to help her, the pastor said, "Would you like for me to pray with you? Would you like for me to summon a priest for you?" Clutching the crucifix, she replied, "Thank you, but I already have a priest."¹

In today's text from Hebrews, that's what the preacher wants the people in the congregation to know. You have a priest. You have the greatest priest you could possibly have, Jesus Christ. He himself constitutes a new priestly order, accomplishing what the old priestly order couldn't bring about.

In the life and history of God's people Israel, priests were special. They were descended from Moses' brother Aaron and his male children. Priests were born, not made. Priests were anointed with the sprinkling of oil on their vestments. They were supposed to keep themselves from strong drink, from growing long hair, from wearing ragged clothing, and from contact with corpses. They needed to be free of physical defects.

Priests had numerous duties. They prepared and burned incense on the altar. They lit the candelabra. They gave advice and instruction on religious matters. They blessed the nation. They judged certain cases. But the primary duty of the priest was to offer sacrifices for the sins of the people. The high priest, who was the foremost priest, had special responsibilities on the Day of Atonement. As he made his way into the most sacred space within the tabernacle, the high priest wore a gold breastplate on which were written the names of the twelve tribes of Israel. It was as if he carried the entire nation of God's people with him into the Holy of Holies. He entered the presence of God, ministering on behalf of the people.

But now, looking back through the lens of what God has done through Christ, the preacher in today's text emphasizes the imperfection of the old priestly order as well as the mortality of its priests. "Now there have been many of those priests, since death prevented them from continuing in office; but because Jesus lives forever, he has a permanent priesthood" (v. 23). This means that Jesus can save, completely and for all time (v. 25). I like the way that preacher Tom Long captures it: "We do not have a priest who gets sick and dies, or who goes on vacation, or falls down on the job, or grows tired of our need, or compromises his office, or takes advantage of us for his own gain; we have a faithful and steadfast great high priest who can be trusted, who 'always lives to make intercession for us.'"²

What good news, that Christ is continually in God's presence on our behalf. It's one thing to say that Christ has come, and that Christ will come again. Amen to that. But what about

the time in between? What about today? What is the resurrected Jesus doing in the present?

One of the primary things he is doing is interceding for believers. The term translated as "intercede/make intercession" has the sense of pleading or petitioning on behalf of another. So Christ is in the presence of God ministering on our behalf. Paul captures this same assurance when he writes to the Christians in Rome, "Christ Jesus who died—more than that, who was raised to life—is at the right hand of God and is also interceding for us" (Rom. 8:34).

And remember that Jesus doesn't intercede as one who is distant and aloof from our lives and our struggles. On the contrary, he intercedes as one who knows what it's like to go through this life, with all its trials, temptations, hardships, and pain. Earlier in Hebrews, the preacher said, "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" (4:15). You see, Jesus' holiness isn't a matter of detaching himself from our lives and our struggles. He isn't holy because he has removed himself as far as possible from the brokenness of this world. On the contrary, Jesus is holy because of his closeness to us, because of his willingness to identify with us in our weakness and to bear the weight and penalty of our sins. As one preacher has put it, "When Jesus talks to God about you, he knows of what he speaks."³

Jesus talks to God about you. This means that at the heart of Jesus' intercessory work is prayer. Jesus prays for us. Having drawn near to God, as near as anyone can possibly get, Jesus petitions God for you and for me. Jesus' aliveness in the presence of God, his closeness to God, means that we could not have a better priest.

In an article on Fred Rogers, more popularly known as Mister Rogers, Tom Junod wrote about a time when Mister Rogers made a trip to California and visited a teenager with cerebral palsy. According to Junod:

[T]he people entrusted to take care of him [when he was little] took advantage of him and did things to him that made him think he was a very bad boy. ... [H]e would get so mad at himself that he would hit himself hard, with his own fists, and tell his mother on the computer he used for a mouth that he didn't want to live anymore, for he was sure that God didn't like what was inside him anymore than he did."

Even at age 14, the boy was still watching *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood*. "The boy's mother," says Junod, "sometimes thought that Mister Rogers was keeping her son alive." Wendy Zoba summarizes Junod's description of the visit this way:

"At first, the boy was made very nervous by the thought that Mister Rogers was visiting him," Junod writes. "He was so nervous, in fact, that when Mister Rogers did visit, he got mad at himself and began hating himself and hitting himself, and his mother had to take him to another room." Mister Rogers waited patiently and when the boy came back, Mister Rogers said, "I would like you to do something for me. Would you do something for me?" On his computer, the boy answered yes. "I would like you to pray for me. Will you pray for me?"

Tom Junod says that the boy was "thunderstruck" because "nobody had ever *asked* him for something like that, ever. The boy had always been prayed for. The boy had always been the *object* of prayer, and now he was being asked to pray for Mister Rogers, and although at first he didn't know if he could do it, he said he would, he said he'd try, and ever since then he keeps Mister Rogers in his prayers and doesn't talk about wanting to die anymore because he figures Mister Rogers is close to God, and if Mister Rogers likes him, that must mean God likes him, too."

Tom Junod asked Mister Rogers how he knew what to say to make the boy feel better. He responded: "Oh, heavens no, Tom! I didn't ask him for his prayers for *him*; I asked for *me*. I asked him because I think that anyone who has gone through challenges like that must be very close to God. I asked him because I wanted his *intercession*."⁴

It helps to have someone close to God interceding for you. And there's no one closer than Jesus.

In his book *Prayer* Philip Yancey writes:

As Jesus once prayed for Peter, now he prays for us... In fact, the New Testament's only glimpse of what Jesus is doing right now depicts him at the right hand of God "interceding for us." In three years of active ministry, Jesus changed the moral landscape of the planet. For nearly two thousand years since, he has been using another tactic: prayer.⁵

Jesus' ongoing work of prayer is the heart of his priestly ministry. I'm speaking not only about the way that Jesus prays for us but also about the ways that Jesus takes our prayers and carries those prayers to the throne of God. Our prayers for mercy, for help, for deliverance, for forgiveness, for strength, for healing, for peace, for justice. The Son, our Savior, brings these prayers to the Father, giving us assurance that we're not praying on our own, by our own strength and our own power.

Remember that when we pray, we always pray in light of the finished work of Christ, whose death has reconciled us to God and given us access to our Father. The preacher in Hebrews says, "We do have such a high priest, who sat down at the right hand of the throne of the Majesty in heaven..." (8:1). Tom Long tells about a former student who described a summer he spent as a laborer on a construction crew. He said that his foreman was a kind and gracious person. So if a worker got sick on the job, he understood and made arrangements. If a worker had problems at home and was late or absent from work, the foreman would cover for him. But the one thing this foreman would not tolerate was if a worker would sit down on the job before the work was done. To sit down was a sign that the job was done, and to do so beforehand was a violation of a sacred trust.⁶

The preacher in Hebrews says, "But when this priest had offered for all time one sacrifice for sins, he sat down at the right hand of God, and since that time he waits for his enemies to be made his footstool, because by one sacrifice he has made perfect forever those who are being made holy" (10:12-14). So Jesus' ministry of intercession, particularly his praying for us, is part of how he works out and implements his sovereignty in our lives and in the world. Jesus goes to God on our behalf so that his holiness, his perfection, will take fuller shape in us.

Our own Baptist tradition is part of a larger Protestant vision that stresses "the priesthood of all believers." In other words, rather than emphasizing a special category of people who serve as mediators between us and God, we've emphasized how every believer, every person who is united to Christ by faith, shares in Christ's priestly office and work. This plays itself out in our stress on how all believers have the right and authority to read, interpret, and apply the teachings of Scripture. But it also plays itself out in how we think about and practice prayer.

Our own prayerfulness, particularly our work of intercessory prayer, flows out of Christ's mediating work between us and the Father. Though Jesus has accomplished our redemption once and for all, the work of intercession goes on, for one thing through our prayers for others. That's what it means to intercede. It means that we go to the Lord and petition

him on behalf of others. Those others may be folks in your family or household, people in your neighborhood or community, individuals or groups in our nation, or situations and circumstances in the world. As we pray together here in the life of our church, particularly in congregational worship, we turn our hearts and minds outward to both the personal sufferings and the public traumas and tragedies that are all around us. We don't just enter the presence of God carrying petitions for ourselves, though these are certainly important. We especially bring to God the circumstances, needs, and injustices that form and fill the lives of others, locally and globally.

Locally includes one another, in the life of our church. Within the household of faith, we're continually participating in the priestly work of Christ by praying for one another. There's certainly nothing wrong with praying for yourself. Your own circumstances and needs, particularly your relationship with Christ and your growth in his holiness, should be a regular part of how you pray. But you're especially called and commissioned to be praying for one another in the fellowship of our congregation. As we intercede mutually for each other, Christ works out and implements his Lordship in our lives.

So as we've gathered here again today, remember the critical, costly, crucial business of intercession. Renew your devotion to praying for one another, and for the world. Reflect on who the intercessors are in your life, the specific people whom you rely on to be praying for you. Who are they? And think specifically of the individuals and groups of people who count on you to be praying for them. Who are they? You need the prayers of Christ and of his people, and they need Christ's prayers and yours.

Return with me to today's text. "Because Jesus lives forever, he has a permanent priesthood. Therefore he is able to save completely those who come to God through him, because he always lives to intercede for them" (v. 25). Christ himself is always interceding, so let us who are joined to him by faith be constantly and prayerfully interceding, for one another and for the world.

¹ William H. Willimon, "You Need a Good Priest." *Preaching Today*. Audio cassette no. 106.

² Thomas G. Long, *Hebrews*. Interpretation: A Commentary for Preaching and Teaching (Louisville: John Knox, 1997) n.p.

³ Willimon, "You Need a Good Priest."

⁴ Wendy Murray Zoba, "Won't You Be My Neighbor?" *Christianity Today*. March 6, 2000. <https://www.christianitytoday.com/2000/03/wont-you-be-my-neighbor/> (March 5, 2025).

⁵ Philip Yancey, *Prayer* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2006) 88.

⁶ Thomas G. Long, "Imagine There's No Heaven: The Loss of Eschatology in American Preaching," *Journal for Preachers* (Advent 2006) 27.