

Being Better Off by Dr. Sinclair B. Ferguson

Preached March 24, 2013

Text Hebrews 8:1-13

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OPENING PRAYER:

Gracious Father, we thank You that one day Jesus Christ will come again in majesty and power, and end all of our woes. But we praise you that he has already come to deal with the root cause of our woes. To take away our sin. To give us new life. We pray as we live in a world that is full of woe and sorrow, and for so many a vale of tears, that you will so help us to see the grace and glory of Your Son as our Savior and Lord, that we may live lives that speak well of him. And in our hearts, trust Him fully. And in all that we say and do bring glory to His great name. And so we come as children to you, looking for bread to eat this morning. We pray that you would break the bread of life to us, and that you would point us again, to Jesus Christ, our Lord, and this we pray, in his name, Amen. Please be seated.

SCRIPTURE READING:

Now, scripture reading this morning is taken from the ninth chapter of the letter to the Hebrews, where we have been reading recently, I beg your pardon, it's chapter eight, and we're going to read verses, one through 23. You'll find the passage in the pew Bible, page 1005. For our children who have their children's Bible, it's on page 1496. Hebrews, chapter eight, page 1005.

Author of Hebrews has been giving us a number of hints that he wants to speak to us about Jesus as a high priest after the order of Melchizedek. And he has explained that this may be difficult for him to do not because the message is in itself difficult, but because they have become hard of hearing spiritually. And now he has come to explain in chapter seven how Jesus was not a high priest after the order of Aaron and the family of Levi. He was of the tribe of Judah. So how could he be a high priest? Because he was a high priest in a higher order, and a more ancient order, the order of Melchizedek, who we are told in Genesis 14, had blessed Aaron's forefather Abraham. And since it is always, the greater who blesses the lesser, the author of Hebrews has suggested to us that, therefore, the priestly order of Melchizedek must be greater than the priestly order of Aaron and the Mosaic administration. And he goes on — chapter eight, verse one, let us hear God's word.

“Now the point in what we are saying is this: We have such a high priest, one who is seated at the right hand of the throne of the Majesty in heaven, a minister in the holy places, in the true tent, that the Lord set up, not man. For every high priest is appointed to offer gifts and sacrifices; thus it is necessary for this priest also to have something to offer. If he were on earth, he would not be a priest at all, since there are priests who already offered gifts according to the law. But they serve a copy and Shadow of the heavenly things. But, when Moses was about to erect the tent (or tabernacle), he was instructed by God, saying, “See that you make everything according to the pattern that was shown you on the mountain.” But as it is, Christ has obtained a ministry that is much more excellent than the old as the covenant He mediates is better, since it has enacted on better promises. For if that first covenant, (this is the covenant through Moses), if that first covenant had been faultless, there would have been no occasion to look for a second. But God finds fault with them when he says, (This is Jeremiah chapter 31 He is quoting), “Behold, the days are coming, declares the Lord, when I will establish a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah, not like the

covenant that I made with their fathers on the day when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt. For they did not continue in my covenant, and so I showed no concern for them, declares the Lord. For this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, declares the Lord: I will put my laws into their minds and write them on their hearts, and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. And they shall not teach each one his neighbor, and each one is brother, saying, 'Know the Lord,' for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest. For I will be merciful toward their iniquities, and I will remember their sins no more. And speaking of a New Covenant, he makes the first one obsolete. And what is becoming obsolete and growing old is ready to vanish away."

SERMON:

We might well think that there is no obvious connection between Hebrews chapter eight, and Palm Sunday. When we remember the Lord Jesus coming into Jerusalem riding on a donkey. A humble King, being Hosannaed. Hearing people cry out to Him, save us and do it now. And hoping perhaps that he would be the great liberator from foreign oppression under the Roman Empire. But what in fact happens by the end of the coming week is that he is hanging on a cross, humiliated, demeaned, rejected by men, and ultimately crucified. And of course, it's obvious as we read through the gospel stories, that those who shouted Hosanna seemed to have very little clue what Palm Sunday was really all about. And those who crucified Him, could not have understood that this was where Palm Sunday was leading. But amazingly, the teaching in Hebrews chapter seven, and eight, explains it perfectly.

One of the things a king in Israel could never be was a high priest. And one thing a high priest could never be was a king. But the author is teaching us that Jesus belongs to a totally different order of high priests — the order of Melchizedek. And as we're told in Genesis 14, Melchizedek, was the King of Righteousness - his name means. He was the King of Salem, perhaps the very place into which Jesus was riding. And he was also, uniquely, the priest of the Most High God. The one person in the Old Testament scriptures, who combines in himself a divinely given role as King over His people, and as priest who makes sacrifices for their sins. And so right at the very beginning of this chapter, the author of Hebrews who is clearly a marvelous teacher, because he pauses here, he says, just in case any of you have lost the plot, and what I am saying, this is the key point I am making. We have such a high priest, who is seated at the right hand of God, who is at the throne of the Majesty in heaven. He is a king, who has become a sacrificing priest, so that through His sacrifice, he might deliver us from our guilt and from our sin. And as a king, that He might come and gloriously reign over us.

And because he's such a good teacher, he teaches this to these believers who are in danger of drifting, you remember, danger of returning to their old ways. And he teaches them by comparison. We often do that, people say to us, well, what is this like? Sometimes people in Scotland say to me, what are these things called grits like? And if I were a native South Carolinian, I would be tempted to say, well, you know what porridge is like, grits are like porridge, but of course they are so much more tasty than porridge. And we teach people in this way. If someone had said to me when I was a first year student at University, "What is university like" and they were still at high school, I would have said, "It's like high school only, it is so much better". And I would tell them how I'd spent six months, my last year in high school, studying Shakespeare's play Hamlet with my English teacher, and then came to the podium in my first year, the great professor Duffy, to give his first lecture on Hamlet, and I learned more in an hour from Professor Duffy than I've learned in six months from my teacher at school. And so I say, it's like, it's like a new world altogether. Or actually, as the author of Hebrews puts it, it's like the difference between heaven and earth. It's like the difference between heaven and earth,

to live in the days of the old covenant with the old priesthood, and now to live in the day, and in the faith of our Savior, Jesus Christ.

And in these verses, he tells us that is so for two reasons. First of all, because our Lord Jesus exercises a ministry that has greater power than the Old Testament priests. And secondly, because Jesus brings in a new covenant that has richer blessings than the old covenant.

He speaks about the first of these, basically, in verses one through five. And you'll notice that right at the beginning, he tells us, where Jesus exercises his ministry. He is at the right hand of the throne of the Majesty in heaven. He is a minister in the holy places, in, you notice, what he calls the true tent. We do a word association test, and I say true, most of us will likely say false. That's the opposite of true. But it's not the opposite of true in this context. The opposite of true in this context, is imitation. The opposite of true in this context, is shadow. What he's saying here is that Jesus' ministry, at the right hand of the Father, as our Savior, is so far greater than the ministry of the Old Testament priests, because he ministers in the real sanctuary. They ministered in man made copies. And you notice this rather unique emphasis here as he thinks about the tabernacle, and presumably beyond that. Thinks about the holiest place of all in the temple. What was characteristic of these holy places where the high priest would enter once a year, it was that they were manmade. And Moses was told to construct them in terms of the pattern that he saw on the mountain. They were copies, they were imitations of the true. And so the author is saying that the Old Testament high priest, when he went into the tabernacle in the wilderness, or the holiest place of all, in the Jerusalem temple, he was just going into a copy. And when he went into the holiest place of all once a year, to make sacrifice for the sins of the people in the Great Day of Atonement, and as he approached the Ark of the Covenant and the Cherubim, that stood as guards and their wings stretching out so that they touch to one another at the top. He knew he was going into the greatest symbol they had of the presence of God, because, as it were, within the outstretched wings of the cherubim and above the mercy seat, and above the Ark of the Covenant in which the 10 commandments were kept that so condemned men and women from their sin. It was in this little space that they felt that God had come to dwell, and the priest would go in and he would, he would sprinkle incense around the place. He probably could not see very clearly in the holiest place of all. He cleanse it, we are told lest he died there. And you remember these little bells around the edges of his robe so that the people could hear that he was still alive. He sprinkled the blood of sacrifice upon the covering sheet, the mercy seat over the altar. But the author of Hebrews is saying it was just a copy. It was just an imitation. Jesus, by contrast, is the real thing. Jesus is ministering as a High Priest, not in a man made sanctuary that's a copy and mere shadow of the true. Jesus is ministering before the very throne of Almighty God, in the real sanctuary that God has set up and not man.

And so he is saying to these people who are of course tempted to go back to all that pomp and circumstance that they had in the temple. I think he indicates in this chapter that the temple was still standing, it was destroyed in AD 70. He says, you don't want to go back to all of that. You don't want to drift away to that. You would only do that, if you had lost sight of the sheer greatness of the high priestly ministry of our Lord Jesus Christ.

You know, thank God, I don't think it happens very often in our church here. But occasionally, you will see the name of someone on the list of those who want to leave our church and go elsewhere. And you know enough to know that where they are going is not a place where Jesus Christ is preached. And your heart sinks, because you suspect, you know, what is happening. That the rigor and the vigor of knowing Christ and trusting Christ and, and the ministry of the Word of God; and it may be just the length of the sermons or the enthusiasm of the people makes them say, I'd like to go back to the formality of it all. Where worship is done for me, not where worship is the greatest reality in which I engage. And this was the situation

with these people, they, they were suffering persecution, because they were in the New Testament Church. And the Word of God we read earlier on in chapter four was quick and powerful in their lives. But some of them were tempted to drift back, to drift away, to hold all this at arm's length. And he says, you know, the tragedy of your situation is that what is on offer in the gospel is reality. A priest who can really forgive your sins. And of course, he hints at that. The high priest went into the holiest place of all and he stood there. And he was back the next year, and the next year again, and he kept standing there. Why did he keep returning and keep standing? Because these sacrifices could never deal with the guilty consciences of those he represented. It was all simply a picture. And what Jesus Christ has come to do and the reason he is not standing in his priestly ministry, but seated at the right hand of God, as he says here, is because he has finished his work. And in what he has done for us, guilty consciences may be cleansed and sin may be pardoned. And we're all there. We're all there behind the competences of our lives; besides the relationships that we have; we're all exactly there. We are deep dyed with the stain of shame and the guilt of sin. We are rebels by nature against God. Alienated from him. We do not love Him with all our heart and soul and mind and strength or our neighbor as ourselves. Every single one of us in the room, deep seated stains of the shame of sin. And nothing formal can ever remove that from us. But Jesus Christ can. Jesus Christ can calm my guilty conscience with his word, my son, my daughter, because I have ministered in the true tabernacle that God has set up, your sins may be forgiven. That's wonderful, isn't it? Absolutely glorious. Who would want to drift away from that. We would only want to drift away from that if we wanted to keep the Lord Jesus and the power of His Word, the grace of the gospel at arms length. And it may be some of us have actually been doing that all the days of our lives, we have kept Christ at arm's length. And none of it has given our guilty consciences peace with God.

And so it's time to surrender. As Jesus rides into Jerusalem, to be the king, who will become priest, he has finished his priestly work of sacrifice. And now is riding from Jerusalem and the word and power of the gospel into our hearts. And his word is surrender to my grace. That's why he is a far more excellent High Priest than any of the priests of the Old Testament. And as such, the author says in the second half of the chapter, our Lord Jesus Christ brings a covenant that has greater blessings than the Old Testament covenant. And it does so, he says, verse six, because it's rooted in better promises.

Now he tells us what these things are. And you'll notice them in verses 10, and 11 and 12. The greater blessings of the new covenant in Christ are first of all, verse 10, that the law of God that in the Old Covenant was written on tablets of stone, is now written into the hearts of believers, by the Holy Spirit. Now, of course, it's true in the days of the Old Testament there were believers who had the law of the Lord written in their hearts. You cannot read the 119 Psalm, for example, without believing this man had the law of the Lord written in his heart. How do I know that because when I read the 119 Psalm as you do I say, Lord make me like this.

The point the author is making is, there was no promise under the old covenant. The command under the Old Covenant was write this law into your hearts, but there was no power under the Old Covenant to write it into their hearts. So where did they get that power? They got that power from the promises of the gospel that had been embedded into their lives. So that as they went through these rituals, with the promise of the forgiveness of sins, they realized these rituals couldn't possibly forgive their sins. But they began to grasp towards the one who had promised that these were symbols and shadows and pictures of the way he would forgive sins and the way he would transform lives in Jesus Christ. And they grasped on to those promises. But now, you know, if you're of any age, and you have been a serious individual, one of the first thing that happens to you when you become a Christian, is you experience the difference between the law of God being written on tablets of stone, and the law of God being written in your heart. I remember as a young man wanting to be a Christian. Wanting to be obedient to God. Trying to keep the law of God and it was slowly killing me. And the harder I tried, the

more I felt it was killing me. Of course, it will kill you. That's what is there to do. It's to show your your powerlessness to keep it. And in my experience because I was brought up in a Sabbath keeping Scotland the worst day of the week in my life was Sunday. Worst day, by far in the week was Sunday. But the day I trusted in Jesus Christ, it suddenly became the very best day of the week. Why would that be? Because I was no longer trying to keep the law and breaking myself in the effort. But God in His grace had written the law into my heart and the burden of the law of God, in a sense, was like the burden that a bird has with wings that enable him to fly. It's a very good test of where you are spiritually, isn't it? Struggling manfully up to God trying to keep the law and discovering you constantly fall down the ladder. And the more you seriously do it, the more you become conscious of your guilt and failure. But in this New Covenant, Paul says in Romans eight, three and four, "What the law could not do because it was weak through our flesh God has done by sending His Son in the likeness of the flesh of sin and for sin. He has condemned our sin in Christ's flesh, and now through the Holy Spirit enables us to walk according to the ways of the Lord". Do you know that my friend? I think it's a very sure sign that you've become a Christian. That what was a colossal burden to you; yes, for all our ongoing sin and failure, has become the delight of our hearts because the Lord in this New Covenant has written His law into our hearts.

The second thing here you see it in verse 11. They shall not teach each one his neighbor, and each one has brother saying, know the Lord, for they shall all know me. What's the saying here? Do you remember how Amos says, And Amos three, seven, the secrets of the Lord are known only to the prophets. So if this had been a company of synagogue, Gore's in the days of the Old Covenant, none of us would have had immediate access to the promises, and the secrets of the Lord. We would all have been going to find a prophet, and saying, Tell us, tell us the secrets, the mysteries that the Lord has made known to you. But now, you'll see in the New Covenant, the secret is out. It's Jesus. And so you don't need a prophet to get hold of you and say, No, the Lord, you don't need to be in a special category. All of us through the gospel in the Spirit. As John says, in his first letter, you don't need teachers any longer. I say to the seminary students, so if you misunderstand that, then you're not bother being here tomorrow. Doesn't mean we don't need teachers in the church. It means that if we really belong to the Lord, then every single one of us has exactly the same access to the Lord Jesus as every other one, ministers don't have a greater access elders don't have a greater access. Men don't have a greater access. And women don't have a greater access. Old ones don't have a greater access. Young ones don't have a greater access, or a privilege to belong to such a day. And you see speaking to those who are drifting. And in a congregation this size, it's almost inevitable. Some of us are drifting at this very time. And he's really saying to them, who to give this up for anything. And then, of course, the great thing that the knowledge of the Lord brings to us. He tells us in verse 12, but in Jesus Christ, we know, I can know this. But because of what the true priest has done, God will remember my sins no more. And I can enjoy the full forgiveness of my sins and peace with God and access into the presence of God and I can call God my heavenly Father.

So you see what he's saying. He's saying everything you see — these high priests, that ritual, everything they did, marvelous, as it was, was really just a picture of the true and the real ministry of the Lord Jesus Christ. If you had visited my home when I was a little boy and through teenage years and come into what in Scotland, we would call the best room. But usually you weren't allowed into unless there were visitors. You would have seen on the wall, an old sepia picture of a young man in military uniform. And you would probably have asked, Who is that? And even when I was a young boy, I would have said that song called Donnie. And if you had said to me, tell me about Uncle Donnie, I would have said, I never knew uncle Donnie. He's there on the wall. Because he was a brother of my mum. And he died in the Great War. And my mum talks about him. And my mum tells me things about him. And I know things about him. But I never knew uncle Donnie. I think if one day Uncle Donnie had come into the room, after the embrace and the tears, she would have turned to me and said to me, Sinclair,

take that photograph down. Donnie's here. And you see, this is what he's saying. Dear friend, are you still looking at at photographs of Jesus in the Shadow Lands. And you've never really trusted in Jesus. Never really been able to say, as this author says, "we have this priest here among us". And so you see it's a wonderful reassurance of the, of the power of the gospel that, that we may all know the forgiveness of sins, the cleansing of our consciences, and especially this, that Jesus is no longer a figure in the shadows. A man in the history books, a strange person riding into Jerusalem. But we know him who is at the right hand of the Majesty on high. And we, we know He is our Savior. We yield to Him as our Lord. And so there is no more significant cry that our hearts could make on a Palm Sunday than the cry that went up as Jesus rode into Jerusalem. Hosanna. Save me now, Lord Jesus. And when he does we discover he is a glorious Savior. And everything we've known, perhaps even everything we've heard, seems to pale into insignificance by comparison with the reality of knowing Him as our Savior and as our Lord. May that be true for us this Palm Sunday.

CLOSING PRAYER:

Heavenly Father, for all you have given to us in our Savior, Jesus Christ, we give you our thanks. We ask that you would stir up faith in our hearts to trust Him, and great love for him. And this we pray, in Jesus name, Amen.