

Text: Heb. 5:1-4

Title: What priests can teach every believer (because he is a priest)

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Place: NBBC

Introduction: The Protestant Reformation recovered three important New Testament doctrines from the dark ignorance of the Roman Catholic Church: (1) the authority of Scripture alone; (2) justification by faith alone; and (3) the priesthood of every believer. Commenting on this last of the three, church historian Philip Schaff wrote as follows:

“The social or ecclesiastical principle of Protestantism is the general priesthood of believers, in distinction from the special priesthood which stands mediating between Christ and the laity.

“The Roman church is an exclusive hierarchy, and assigns to the laity the position of passive obedience. The bishops are the teaching and ruling church; they alone constitute a council or synod, and have the exclusive power of legislation and administration. Laymen have no voice in spiritual matters, they can not even read the Bible without the permission of the priest, who holds the keys of heaven and hell.

“In the New Testament every believer is called a saint, a priest, and a king. ‘All Christians,’ says Luther, ‘are truly of the spiritual estate, and there is no difference among them, save of office alone. As St. Paul says, we are all one body, though each member does its own work, to serve the others. This is because we have one baptism, one gospel, one faith, and are all Christians alike; for baptism, gospel and faith, these alone make spiritual and Christian people.’

“And again: ‘It is faith that makes men priests, faith that unites them to Christ, and gives them the indwelling of the Holy Spirit, whereby they become filled with all holy grace and heavenly power. The inward anointing – this oil, better than any that ever came from the horn of bishop or pope – gives them not the name only, but the nature, the purity, the power of priests; and this anointing have all they received who are believers in Christ.’

“This principle, consistently carried out, raises the laity to active co-operation in the government and administration of the church; it gives them a voice and vote in the election of the pastor; it makes every member of the congregation useful, according to his peculiar gift, for the general good.

“This principle is the source of religious and civil liberty which flourishes most in Protestant countries. Religious liberty is the mother of civil liberty. The universal priesthood of Christians leads legitimately to the universal kingship of free, self-governing citizens, whether under a monarchy or under a republic” [*History of the Christian Church*, 7:24-25].

This evening from Heb. 5:1-4, I would like us to learn “What priests can teach every believer (because he is also a priest).” Now what I refer to here by *priest* is not the Roman Catholic prelate, but the Old Testament priest that we find in the Bible. We will note three things from such priests.

I. Priests teach us that there is a gulf fixed between God and man (v. 1).

Application: There are two realms mentioned in this verse that intersect only in the person of the priest – the realm “from among men” and the realm “things pertaining to God.” That a priest is needed for these realms to intersect

teaches us that there is a great gulf fixed between men and the things that pertain to their holy God. Men have no part by nature in “things pertaining to God.”

This was not always the case, for it was God’s original design that we enjoy the fellowship of His presence. We lost our standing in that regard due to sin, which has fixed a gulf between man and the Eden of God (Gen. 3:24). Priests teach us that there is a gulf between man and God that has to be crossed, caused by sin, before we can be in the presence of God. It is not true that “there is a little bit of God in each of us.” No – men have been driven out from God.

II. Priests teach us that people need help with their sin (vv. 1, 3).

Illustration: A mechanic works on cars; a tailor works on clothes; a physician works on health care needs; a dentist works on teeth; a teacher works on ignorance. What does a priest work on? A priest works on sin.

Application: Verse two speaks of the way priests help people who are misled, and it uses a word there that is also used in 1 John 1:8. The worst kind of deception is self-deception, and we are most self-deceived when we have the words on our lips, “I have no sin” or “I need no priest because I have no sin.” When we have sin, we know from the previous passage what Priest we have to go to – the Lord our Great High Priest (see Heb. 4:16). He cures us from our sin every time we come boldly before His throne of grace and confess and forsake it there. He is always there with well-timed mercy to meet our need for forgiveness.

Application2: But I want us to remember that while you may see yourself as a mechanic that works on cars, or a tai-

lor that works on clothes, or a physician that works on health care needs, or a dentist that works on teeth, or a teacher that works on the ignorance of students, the doctrine of the priesthood of every believer tells us that God sees each of us as priests in this world of sin, who are called to work on sin. People who depend on their car mechanic to get their car fixed are dependent upon us in a similar sense to get their sin fixed through the good news of the gospel. Have we told ourselves that the sin problem of others is none of our business? Or do we see that we are priests?

How do we function as good priests in a world of sin? Consider again the doctrine of the reformer Luther: "We have one baptism, one gospel, one faith, and are all Christians alike; for baptism, gospel and faith, these alone make spiritual and Christian people.' And again: 'It is faith that makes men priests, faith that unites them to Christ, and gives them the indwelling of the Holy Spirit, whereby they become filled with all holy grace and heavenly power. The inward anointing — this oil, better than any that ever came from the horn of bishop or pope — gives them not the name only, but the nature, the purity, the power of priests; and this anointing have all they received who are believers in Christ."

As priests we work on sin in the lives of others by giving them the oil of God's Spirit. This includes the gospel that they might believe and be saved, and it includes baptism and teaching as mentioned by Luther, that they might become faithful disciples of Christ, taking their place in our holy priesthood. Have we as priests addressed the sin problem in the power of God's Spirit for anyone lately? Priests teach us that people need help with their sin.

III. Priests teach us that we should be gentle (v. 2).

Illustration: Saphir: "And again, blind to the guilt of our own peculiar sins, we are shocked with another's sin, different indeed from ours, but not [more] offensive to God, or pernicious in its tendencies. Again, the purer and higher the character, the quicker its penetration and the livelier its sympathy, discovering and loving any element and tendency heavenward and Godward. Again, the greater the knowledge of divine love and pardon, the stronger faith in the divine mercy and renewing grace, the more hopeful and the more lenient will be our view of sinners. And finally, the more we possess of the spirit and heart of the Shepherd, the Physician, the Father, the Brother, the deeper will be our compassion on the ignorant and wayward."

Application: The word our author uses for this *gentleness* is used only here in the Bible. It is a relative of the word we saw used of Christ in 4:15 [συμπαθέω; the word from which we get our English word *sympathy* – it means *to experience together*]; here the word is μετριοπαθέω; μετριο- refers to *proper measurement*, so *to deal gently* with someone is *to deal with a feeling that is well measured in terms of quality and quantity*; so as we deal with people in need of sin's cure, we are to do so measuring well our feelings toward them, and the standard for this measurement we use is our own sense of weakness, frailty, and sinfulness. We can deal with others who need forgiveness gently because we know how we have needed forgiveness ourselves (see Gal. 6:1).

Application2: The condition that needs to be cured is sinfulness, but the catalyst that activates the condition of sinfulness is ignorance or being deceived. This ignorance is a big problem in the church age and one of the most important dangers to the souls of men, which we as priests must guard against (Matt. 24:4, 11, 24, 2 Tim. 3:13). We must be a church that helps people who are uninformed about the nature of sin become informed and people who have been

misled by sin see where they have been wrong. We should be gentle doing so, but not so gentle that we leave people in ignorance and deception.

IV. Priests teach us that we should be God-called, not self-appointed (v. 4).

Illustration: Let's read a bit more Schaff about one of the downsides of the priesthood of every believer coming out of the Reformation: "But it [the doctrine] was also shamefully perverted and abused by the secular rulers who seized the control of religion, made themselves bishops and popes in their dominion, robbed the churches and convents, and often defied all discipline by their own immoral conduct. Philip of Hesse, and Henry VIII of England, are conspicuous examples of Protestant popes who disgraced the cause of the Reformation. Erastianism [the doctrine that the state is superior to the church in ecclesiastical matters] and Territorialism whose motto is: *cujus region, ejus religio* [your country is your religion] are perversions rather than legitimate developments of lay-priesthood" [HCC, 7:25-26].

Application: So this doctrine of the priesthood of every believer eventually led to King Henry VIII. That is a historical fact that presents a warning to us about this doctrine. Our author certainly could have pointed to this problem in the Judaism of his own day. We must as God's priests see ourselves as God-appointed, not self-appointed. We have to be careful about the point at which the doctrine of the priesthood of every believer becomes the doctrine of the priesthood of me-more-than-you or of my-priesthood-is-more-important-than-your-priesthood. How can we protect ourselves from this danger? Our verse gives us a simple question to ask ourselves:

Am I receiving the honor of service in the church as a God-ordained opportunity, or am I trying to take it for other reasons, some of which may or may not be good reasons?

Remember that Saul had good reasons to suddenly anoint himself to do what Samuel was supposed to do (1 Sam. 13:5-14). He might have claimed the priesthood of every believer, and truly Israel was to be a kingdom of priests in the same sense our church is to be (Exod. 19:6). But God was not in it. Saul was self-called to something not intended for him. Remember how different he was the day he became king?

It worked differently for Aaron too. Aaron never came to Moses and said, "You know, Brother, I think it is high-time I became the high priest of this nation." No, he had to be asked (Leviticus 8-9). At the end of that process of God's providence, which made Aaron the high priest of the nation, we read some glorious words (Lev. 9:21-23).

You see, the self-appointment process is one in which it is very hard for God's people to see the glory of the Lord and one that is seldom a blessing to God's people. When God's providence works out God's call, men and women are thrust forward independent of their own human agency to opportunities to serve that they are willing to fulfill. When they do, all God's people can see His glory in that, and they are all blessed by it.

Conclusion: We have some things to learn from human priests tonight because we are human priests. As God's priests, we are called to help deal with the sin that has dug that ancient gulf between God and man. As God's priests we must be gentle, and we must see our ministries are to be God-called, not self-appointed. Someday, we will stand be-

fore our Great High Priest to give an account. What will he say of our work as the priests of His priesthood on that day?

“A man came – I think it was actually in Philadelphia – on one occasion to the great George Whitefield and asked if he might print his sermons. Whitefield gave this reply; he said, ‘Well, I have no inherent objection, if you like, but you will never be able to put on the printed page the lightning and the thunder.’ That is the distinction – the sermon, and the ‘lightning and the thunder.’ To Whitefield this was of very great importance, and it should be of very great importance to all preachers, as I hope to show. You can put the sermon into print, but not the lightning and the thunder. That comes into the act of preaching and cannot be conveyed by cold print. Indeed it almost baffles the descriptive powers of the best reporters.”

– David Martin Lloyd-Jones,

*Preachers and Preaching*