

Is it possible to be too good? Can someone be too great? A while back, the news reported that a girls' basketball team in Minnesota was kicked out of its league because it was too good. The action was taken because the other teams in the league refused to play the team that was deemed "too talented."

What about Jesus? Is it possible that he might be "too great" to be the Great High Priest that the writer of Hebrews proclaims him to be? After all, the high priest was supposed to be able to relate to the people he served. Chapter 5 of Hebrews begins this way: ***"Every high priest is selected from among the people and is appointed to represent the people in matters related to God, to offer gifts and sacrifices for sins. He is able to deal gently with those who are ignorant and are going astray, since he himself is subject to weakness"*** (vs. 1,2).

Is Jesus great? No question about it. But is he too great? Is Jesus too great to relate to the sinners he is supposed to represent? The high priests of Israel were human beings, just like the people they served; as sinners, they were able to sympathize with those who sinned. How could someone as great as God's Son possibly relate to sinners?

The writer to Hebrews responds in the verses today. He assured his readers that Jesus is not only the Great High Priest, but **he is also the perfect High Priest.**

To show that Jesus can relate to us sinners, the writer uses some seemingly unusual language. It seems strange to read this little section of Hebrews 5 and hear the author say that Jesus was ***"made perfect,"*** doesn't it? The phrase conjures up the image of someone who is not perfect to begin with but who gradually progresses—perhaps by trial and error—from imperfection to perfection. That doesn't seem to be the right way to talk about Jesus, does it?

However, that is not what the writer of Hebrews is saying. To see that, let's start at the beginning of our reading. The author begins by talking about Jesus (literally translated) ***"in the days of [Jesus'] flesh."*** He is referring to Jesus as a true human being. Jesus became flesh so that he could take our place. You see because humans sinned, humans needed to pay for their sins. But that is impossible for any human to do for himself let alone for others. So, we needed Jesus to be more than man. He needed to be God. And God he is.

Let's not lose sight of what the author wrote at the beginning of this book. Remember the opening words of Hebrews: ***"In the past God spoke to our ancestors through the prophets at many times and in various ways, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son"*** (1:1). Then the writer goes on to proclaim the greatness of God's Son. Here, the writer proclaims the same truth—that Jesus of Nazareth is the true and eternal Son of God. He writes, ***"Son though he was."*** The true human being Jesus of Nazareth is also the true Son of God. This is how our God can relate with you and me. As man he knows what we are feeling. As God he knows how to defeat and carry our problems.

We see our God-man in action in the garden, don't we? Think of what squeezed from our Lord's lips—the cries we hear in the garden; from his eyes—the tears that stained his cheeks; and from his face—the sweat that dropped like blood into the dirt. Jesus knew exactly what lay ahead of him. There in the garden, the hour had come for the Lamb of God to take away the sin of the world. What a burden the Father laid when he laid the guilt of the world's sin on his Son! The Savior, driven into the dust by the guilt of every sin, the haunting voice of a million consciences, and above all the horrible prospect of enduring the white-hot anger of a holy God while hanging on a shameful cross—he rose from the ground in the garden, carrying that burden, and walked out to meet his betrayer and the mob the betrayer led.

Jesus is the perfect High Priest—the God-man who is perfectly able to represent mankind before God. But if that's true, you may ask—that Jesus is the true God in human flesh—how is it possible for Christ to plead with his heavenly Father, the one who could save him from death, to take from Christ's lips the cup of punishment and suffering that was pressed there so he would not have to drink it? How can the Son of God not know that there was no other way for a sinful world to be set free from a well-deserved eternity in hell? And while we are at it, how can the writer of Hebrews talk about the One who is declared to be the Son of God as someone who learned obedience? How can the One who knows all things possibly learn?

The answer is not simply that the Son of God became the Son of Man. That same Son of Man predicted in advance all that would happen to him and bore the unbearable burden of humanity's sin to

the cross. No, the answer to the question, how could Christ not see the absolute necessity of the cross and learn obedience even though he is the Son of God, is that *he humbled himself*. In that humble state, which extended from his conception in Mary's womb to his burial in Joseph's tomb, Jesus willingly gave up the full and constant use of his divine power and glory. Jesus humbled himself to the point where he—the One who created the angels—is strengthened by them to bear his struggle. It is this Jesus, God's Son in his humble humanity, who is our perfect High Priest.

Look at him, offering up *“prayers and petitions with fervent cries and tears to the one who could save him from death.”* And yet he never rebelled. Looking into the cup of suffering and woe that was assigned for him to drink, he found its contents revolting, Jesus did not rebel; in reverent submission he obeyed his heavenly Father. Not a hint of resistance, not a whisper of complaint—as he prayed, he ended each prayer the same way: *“Not my will but yours be done.”* And so he was heard. As we follow the Savior who prayed so fervently and see that the path led to cruel scourging and a cruel cross, we might assume the opposite—that the Savior was not heard. But he was. In reverent submission, he was willing to carry out the will of God to save sinful humankind, and strengthened by angels, he did the Father's will and drank the cruel cup—and three days later, he was saved from death as God raised him back to life in glorious victory over the grave.

“Father, your will be done.” Like the sheep the prophet Isaiah talked about, we sinners go astray, and we turn to our own way. We do it with our time and money and energy: we spend the blessings God gives us not in God's way to his glory and to serve God and others, but we use our gifts in our own selfish, self-serving way. How hard it is to live in our time in reverent submission to God. If things go wrong in life—if there is pain or loss, sickness or cross—we easily give in to grumbling and complaining. It's easy to say, “Your will be done,” but hard to mean, “Your will be done.” We mean instead, “My will; my way, my body, my business.”

But, if it's hard to say to God, *“Your will be done,”* imagine how hard it is to actually do God's will. That's the point the writer is making when he says, *“He learned obedience from what he suffered.”* The writer is pointing us from the Garden of Gethsemane where the Savior says, “Your will be done,” to Calvary where God's will was done. There, Jesus was led like a lamb to the slaughter and, as a sheep before the shearers is silent, so he did not open his mouth. In that way, he learned obedience: obedience went from a theoretical thing in Jesus' mind to a very practical thing that involved thorns and scourge; spikes and scorn; crucifixion, death and the grave.

That's when you learn what obedience is—through painful self-denial and sacrifice. Sadly, and honestly, though, we don't always put our promises into practice—we say, “I will,” but don't always do God's will—whether it's a promise made to parents, a confirmation vow, or a wedding pledge to love and cherish. Though we often promise to obey God, we don't always do it.

But Christ did. He said, “I will” and he did. He went to the cross and paid for our broken promises to God plus the heartache and tears we've caused those we love by failing to follow the right words with the right works. He endured the cross, scorning its shame. That's what it means when we read of Jesus, *“And, once made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation.”* Or as another translation says more clearly, *“After he had finished his work.”* Does that ring a bell? Think ahead to Jesus' triumphant cry from the cross: *“It is finished.”* The word translated as *“perfect”* in the phrase *“made perfect”* comes from the same root in Greek as the word *“finished,”* which Jesus shouted from the cross when he fulfilled his heavenly Father's will and completed his rescue mission.

If Jesus had only prayed perfectly in our place but failed to obey perfectly in our place, he would not have been the perfect Savior. His rescue mission would not have been complete—he would not have finished his work. But Jesus finished the work, and our perfected High Priest became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him.

Yes, Jesus is our Great High Priest and he is our perfect High Priest. He truly took our place by humbling himself, so we can say he learned obedience and was made perfect because he humbled himself completely to experience the results of sin. He finished his work and was “made perfect” by the way he obeyed his heavenly Father, even to the point of death. He also truly won because he is our perfect God. He defeated sin by never sinning, he defeated death by rising, and he defeated the devil by crushing his head. He was everything we needed him to be and because of that our salvation is truly finished in Jesus our source of eternal life.

May we render to our perfect High Priest the obedience he has earned: the obedience of confident faith, which shows itself in love! Amen.