

Made and Tempted like Us  
Hebrews 2-5

Turn to Hebrews 2. I did this sermon about three years ago, and we also talked about these things at the men's retreat in fall. I am also doing some more academic work on this, because I can't quite leave it alone. And in these things you tend to me stuck with me.

God's Priority about High Priests: God insisted on having a High Priest (HP) who was always merciful and faithful, who would never refuse to atone the people's sins. The HP would never delay. The worst possible failure of a HP, in God's mind, was a self-righteous priest who put people off, or delayed. "I will bring you cleansing, but not for a while, you don't deserve it."

No, God's priority is to have a priest nothing like that, but rather one who would always be merciful and faithful when people need atonement, would always be sympathetic and compassionate. That was very important to God.

God's Challenge: how will God arrange this in a HP, and we mean Jesus here, who never sinned? With OT priests this priority was not a problem, because the priests themselves were sinners, they had to offer sacrifice for their own sins as well as for the sins of others.

But Jesus was tempted without sinning. How will God achieve his priority, a merciful faithful priest, in a HP who never sinned?

God's Method: God arranged this HP to be merciful and sympathetic by making him weak like we are weak, and the temptation to sin so strong, so intense, that for Jesus it was a desperate battle not to sin. Jesus came to for sorry for everyone caught in the same fight he was in.

We look at three texts in Hebrews. First, Hebrews 2:17-18 *For this reason [Jesus] had to be made like his brothers and sisters in every way, in order that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest in service to God, to make atonement for the sins of the people.* <sup>18</sup> *Because he himself suffered when he was tempted, he is able to help the tempted [and sinful].*

God was obliged to make Jesus like us *in every way*, not so that he could make atonement, but so that he would be merciful and faithful in atoning for our sins. "Merciful" is the dominant word.

He had to be made like his brothers and sisters in every way so that he would become *merciful*. The next line explains: *He suffered when he was tempted* (v18). That's because he was made like us in every way, and that's how he became merciful.

The only graphic suffering of Jesus is his loud cries and tears in 5:7. And that's in Gethsemane, not on the cross. It is the distress fighting temptation.

In Matthew 26 it says that in Gethsemane, facing execution, Jesus fell on his face and prayed. He was desperate. He wanted to escape, save his life, but that meant rebelling against God; and he wanted also to obey his Father and do his Father's will.

*For this reason, God had to make Jesus like his brothers and sisters in every way, in order that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest.*

It says in a little earlier in Hebrews (2:10) that God perfected Jesus through sufferings. Jesus was sinless, he did not need *that* perfecting, but he did not yet know how difficult temptation was. In order to perfect Jesus through sufferings, God **had to** make him like his brothers and sisters in every way, so that he would mercifully and faithfully atone for our sins.

Jesus would be perfect only when he came to understand how hard it was to resist temptation. Imagine Jesus saying to himself about us: "No wonder they sin. No wonder people who love God often sin. This is fierce. No wonder they sin."

It says in Hebrews 5:7 that Jesus learned about obedience from what he suffered. **Jesus was learning things through his temptations and suffering that he did not know before. And what he learned made him merciful and faithful in atoning for our sins.**

So he says to himself, "No wonder they sin." And he says to the Father, "You have no idea what it is like." And the Father replies, "Perfect! Now you are perfect, it worked, now you are ready to be merciful and sympathetic with sinners. Now you will never refuse to propitiate their sins."

Gethsemane was not the only time Jesus was tempted. He was tempted also at the beginning of his ministry, right after his baptism. We don't get strong language about Jesus' distress in his wilderness temptation, it all seems matter of fact, so we tend to think it was not that intense.

That is almost certainly not true. We should assume a desperate battle on both sides, the devil with all his might trying to steer Jesus off the path, and Jesus equally determined to obey God.

In Matthew and Mark it says that after the devil left him, angels came and ministered to Jesus. Jesus had fought with all his might; he seems to be trashed, totally worn out. He needed angelic first responders.

Did they bring food? Maybe. But Mark says that angels came to help him, and Mark's Gospel says nothing about Jesus going without food. Food is not the main reason why the angels came. I expect he knew giving in would be disastrous, but it was a battle to not give in.

Can you imagine Jesus saying to the angels, "that was so close, I would not have lasted two more days." He suffered when he was tempted. He learned about obedience from his suffering. I have had strong and dark temptations that fortunately ended before I gave in. You? Jesus?

In Luke 4 it says at the end of the wilderness temptation that “*when the devil had finished every temptation, he left him until a good time.*” “Finished every temptation.” It sounds there like there were more temptations than the three that are recorded, and it also sounds like this was sort of a regular event in Jesus’ life, not just the beginning and the end.

Second text: Hebrews 4:15 *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, without sin.*

We **do** have a priest who can sympathize with our weaknesses. What kind of weaknesses are we talking about here? Weakness in temptation, the kind of weakness that leads to people sin.

This means that when Jesus was tempted, he often felt weak. There is no other way to take this. This was God’s priority: the HP must be merciful, he must be sympathetic.

Without sin. We all know what it is like to be tempted and sin. But we also know what it is like to be tempted and **not** sin. We all know about this: we were tempted to do something wrong, but we did not do it. We were tempted to avoid something we knew we ought to do, and we did it. Sometimes it was close, but we have done the right thing at cost to ourselves.

The Gospels and Hebrews both describe Jesus as one tempted as we are, except that he always made the right choice. We **sometimes** make the right choice, but he **always** did what was right.

We say, there must be another explanation for Jesus never sinning, he had some advantage we don’t have, and so we try to find another explanation. Get this, my brothers and sisters: the Gospels and Hebrews always describe Jesus as resisting temptation with the same resources we have to resist temptation. Made just like us in every way, tempted like us in every way.

Could Jesus have sinned? The Bible never answers that directly. But the Gospels and Hebrews always assume that Jesus could have sinned. Every time he obeys it is a real victory.

Isn’t Jesus also fully God? He certainly is. Hebrews 1 is a whole chapter devoted to the eternal glorious deity of the Son of God. In Hebrews, none of what I am saying here contradicts the full deity of Jesus. In the Bible his deity is never the explanation for his holy life. The problem is not that we’re letting go of his deity, it’s that we have not really taken hold of his humanity.

We have not taken seriously enough how completely he became human. We sometimes talk about Jesus being sad, lonely, discouraged, weary, afraid, and so on. But we don’t talk about his temptation. We are queasy about Jesus fighting the pulls of sin that we feel. Not Hebrews.

He was full God. He was fully human. He was one person. He could have sinned, but he never did. Not because it was impossible for him to sin, but because he kept making the right choice. Jesus had a crowd of Galileans that traveled with him. No one ever needed to tell them, “he was made in all ways as we are.” Of course he was. How else could he be made?

No one needed to tell them that he was tempted in all the common ways, just as we are. Of course he was, how else would he be tempted? He was human, just as we all are, nothing else occurred to them. Over time they realized more than just one of them, but he never was any less than one of them.

Here is one of my least favorite verses in the Bible: *No temptation has overtaken you except what is common to mankind. And God is faithful; he will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear. But when you are tempted, he will also provide a way out so that you can endure it.*

Sinning is not automatic for us. Jesus was severely tempted, and he always made the right choice. That is how the NT describes Jesus. We all do right sometimes. We can do right. He did that always. He always took the way on that God provides.

But it was such hard work for him, so distressing and intense, that he became sympathetic. *We DO have a High Priest who can sympathize with our weaknesses, because he was made in every way as we are, because he was tempted in every way, as we are, without sin.*

When you sin in the same way in which you have sinned many times, how does the Lord Jesus feels toward you? Anger? Frustration? Disappointment? Sadness? Do you imagine him turning away from you? Has it ever occurred to you that his strongest feeling toward you might be sympathy? That mostly he feels sorry for you, because he was very close to that himself?

The Bible says we **don't** have a HP who is **unable** to sympathize. Why is it written like that? Because that's exactly what we think: we have a HP who is unable to sympathize with our weakness in temptation.

NO! says the Bible. That is what we do NOT have. He DOES sympathize with our weaknesses as sinners, and that is exactly why God let Jesus have such a hard time with temptations.

Third text: Hebrew 5:1-2 I will skip most of 5:1, because 5:2 is what I'm after. *Every high priest [including Jesus], ... is able to deal gently with the ignorant and wandering, since he himself is subject to [that kind of] weakness.*

This is God's priority: *Every high priest, including Jesus, ... is able to deal gently with the ignorant and wandering, since he himself is subject to [that kind of] weakness.*

Every HP needs to be able to deal gently, every HP must be merciful, every HP must be sympathetic. That's God's priority.

This is the second time we've seen the word "weakness" applied to Jesus (4:15; 5:2), both times specifically the weakness that goes with being tempted to sin. We tend to assume that since Jesus never sinned, he must feel invincible, strong, and confident when tempted.

Hebrews is working very hard to cure us of that, and we need to let it go. Jesus had the same weaknesses as the people who are ignorant and wandering. That's 5:2. Verse 1 and v3 mention sins, so we are talking specifically about that kind of weakness: ignorant and wandering that leads to sin in us.

This means at times Jesus did not know what to do, felt ignorant. Jesus felt lost at times, felt like he was wandering. *Every high priest, including Jesus ... is able to deal gently with those who are ignorant and wandering, since he himself is subject to [that kind of] weakness.*

We might have thought Jesus would be merciful and sympathetic just because he was a loving person. Jesus is a loving person, but Hebrews is doing something else here.

God is telling us about his priority: a HP who would always be merciful with sinners, always sympathetic and compassionate with them, a HP would never delay atoning for our sins, so that no sinner who wants God would be held away or postponed. Immediate merciful help for sinners, that's God's priority in a High Priest. This was part of a priest being "perfect."

God's challenge: How will God get this in a HP who never sinned? How will God make sure this sinless priest is never arrogant or self-righteous, and never fails propitiate their sins?

God's method: have temptation be strong and intense so that Jesus felt desperate and exhausted, weak and torn. God had to perfect Jesus through his sufferings (2:10), he caused Jesus to be tempted so that he suffered when he was tempted (2:18), so that at the end, Jesus would learn about obedience and how hard it, was from what he suffered (5:8).

So that Jesus would say to himself, "No wonder they sin. No wonder people who love God often sin." And Jesus would say to God, "you've no idea what it is like, how hard it is to stay faithful to you."

And God would say, "Perfect. That's exactly how the eternal priest should talk to me. That's why I led you into temptation, now you are the perfect HP. Now you will always be merciful toward sinners, and sympathetic, and you will deal gently with their weakness in temptation."

God says: "Now every sinner who wants to come to me can approach me, they can enter my Holy Presence, they can come right up to my grace throne, because you will always be there to help them by atoning for them."

And that is why God says to us: "So then, you all come boldly to the throne of grace, to receive mercy and gracious help. You will be welcomed and received. Don't delay." Amen.