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The Real Reason I Follow Jesus Christ

A Sermon

Text: Hebrews 4:14-5:10

Larry James

Here is a truism of real value: you cannot talk yourself out of a problem you have behaved yourself into. Don't you just hate that? I do because I try often and intensely to talk my way out of problems created by failures in my behavior. Blame, shame, and guilt can become extremely negative forces in our lives, can't they?

Anyone who visits with a competent therapist or counselor about a personal or family problem long enough will eventually hear something like this, "Now please understand: blame is not the issue here. We are just trying to understand what is going on." Of course the need for the apology betrays the fact that "blame," shame, and guilt are precisely the problem, at least in the mind and soul of the patient involved in the therapeutic process! On the one hand, I will do almost anything to avoid accepting blame or responsibility for failures and foul-ups in my personal life. Genetics, environment, circumstances, other people, even God bear the brunt of my blame games. On the other hand, I know I am the one with the problem. And even though looking at the role of all of these factors in my life may be very helpful, I still know in my heart that ultimately I am to blame for most of what I do or don't do!

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So I am left with guilt—rational and irrational; shame—as I face who I am in light of a standard that I know instinctively is true even apart from reading the Bible; and eventually, if I receive no relief, despair—I can neither talk nor walk my way out of the "blame trap"!

So how on earth do I ever get "unstuck"? Where do I look for relief, for escape, for resolution to my unrelenting problem with blame, shame, guilt and my nagging awareness of failure? The answer to this question is the real reason why I follow Jesus Christ. I follow Jesus because he has been where I am and he knows from firsthand experience what I am going through. Our text describes Jesus as a "great High Priest," certainly an important personality to most Jewish people of this writer's day. The High Priest in Israel was the one man who represented people before God, especially on the great Day of Atonement (Lev. 16), that day when all of Israel stood before the Lord to receive the cleansing made possible by the sacrifice of a bull for the High Priest and his family, and of a goat for the people. Quite a strange sounding ceremony to modern ears. The linking factor for us in all of this is the blame-shame-guilt problem we understand all too well.

Jesus is the Christian's High Priest. He is a High Priest who understands me completely. Amazingly, Jesus is "one who in every respect has been tested (tempted) as we are" (Hebrews 4:15b). Of course, this was true of every High Priest since all were

men, and thus knew what it meant to live as human beings (5:2). But the power is found in the fact that through Jesus God came this close to us: close enough to understand (5:7-8)!

Jesus understands my life! He knows by experience human fear, suffering, pain, the rigors of obedience, and the trial of being abandoned by others, even by close friends. He knows the heartache of illness, the pain of death, the sorrow of loss. He knows the full extent of temptation in a way I can only imagine. When I resist temptation, my resistance is typically only to a point, and then I break. He resisted all the way to the end, never breaking, thus bearing the full extent of the assault (4:15).

Few things are as important or as powerful as understanding in life. Some of my worst mistakes with people occur when I say to someone trapped in real pain, "I understand," when actually I do not. Once several years ago I spoke that helpless cliché to a woman passing through the anger and the agony of a divorce. She glared at me through her tears, exclaiming angrily, "Oh no you don't understand! You have no idea! The truth of her judgment paralyzed me.

Yet, nothing is more healing, more renewing than when wounded or tempted or failing in some way to find another person who has been through what I am facing. I follow Jesus because I know he understands. I follow Jesus because he is sympathetic with his understanding. Jesus converts a full understanding of the human condition into mercy and grace. "For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses. . . ." (Hebrews 4:15a). Even the human High Priest was "able to deal gently with the ignorant and wayward" (5:2a). The phrase "deal gently with" might be read, "to take the middle course between apathy and anger — not indifferent to moral failure, yet not harsh to those who fail. How much more powerful is the perfect High Priest, Jesus? Focus with me on the key words of Hebrews 4:16:

"approach the throne of grace —what a vision of God and of his heart, his nature!"

"With boldness" — confidence, plainness of speech. Because of Jesus, I can move into the very throne room of God and "speak my peace!" Here I am free to openly reveal the real me without fear of censure or rejection!

"Receive mercy" — here is what Jesus freely extends to me as I move close to God.

"To help in time of need" — my spiritual quest ends in a discovery of God's fatherly, unmerited favor just when I need it most.

In Jesus I escape from shame, blame, and guilt. What a "burden-lifter" he is! Quite unlike some

who claim to uphold his name. Did you read story of the minister and two church members who attempted to "beat the devil out of" a fellow church member? The incident unfolded when Ray Weimers went to the minister of a small church in Devine, Texas seeking counsel concerning financial and marital problems. The preacher responded by calling two other church members who joined in literally beating Weimers in an attempt to "correct his behavior" (Dallas Times Herald, September 22, 1990, p. A-26). How different Jesus responds to my problems, to my failure, and to my rebellion. No matter where we have been, what we have done, how we have failed; no matter what the extent of our sin and rebellion, in Jesus we have a merciful, grace-giving, sympathetic Lord who wants to set us free from every burden! Life at times becomes so full of pain and an unrelenting sense of lonely responsibility, doesn't it? At times we just want to give up. Evil can become so real and so powerful that we feel overwhelmed. But there is Jesus! Do you need a word of hope? Listen:

"Although he was a Son, he learned obedience through what he suffered; and having been made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him. . . (Hebrews 5:8-9).

I love the words of Diogenes Allen,

How is evil removed? By contact with what is pure and good. Evil cannot remove evil. When evil strikes something that is itself not pure, it bounces back, often with an increment of evil, or it ricochets and hits someone else. Allow jealousy or envy to arise in an organization and watch its effects. Unless it is absorbed by some people who have sufficient goodness to overcome their natural reaction, jealousy and envy spread and grow. But a genuinely good person, instead of responding to evil with evil, absorbs it. Evil cannot soil genuine goodness and purity; it cannot defile it. It causes good people to suffer, but because of their suffering and their refusal to pass it on, evil vanishes. If there is enough goodness, any evil can be absorbed; if there is inexhaustible goodness, all evil can be absorbed.

Left alone, everyone of us fights a losing battle against great evil. . . a battle whose outcome is shame, guilt, blame and in the end, despair. But Jesus absorbs the evil from my life in and through his obedient death, so that as I accept and embrace him by faith, I receive his life, his cleansing, and God's unending forgiveness.

You have heard Bette Midler sing Julie Gold's song, "From a Distance;"

From a distance the world looks blue and green and the snow-capped mountains white. From a distance the ocean meets the stream and the eagle takes to flight. From a distance there is harmony and it echoes through the land. . .

Its the voice of hope. . .

Its the voice of peace. . .

Its the voice of every man. . .

From a distance we all have enough and no one is in need. And there are no guns, no bombs, and no disease, no hungry mouths to feed. From a distance we are instruments marching in a common band, playing songs of hope, playing songs of peace, they're the songs of every man. God is watching us, God is watching us, God is watching us from a distance. From a distance you look like my friend, even though we are different. From a distance I just cannot comprehend what all this fighting is

for. From a distance there is harmony and it echoes through the land. And its the hope of hopes, its the love of loves, its the heart of every man. Its the hope of hopes, its the love of loves, this is the song of every man.

And God is watching us, God is watching us, God is watching us, from a distance. . .

Oh, God is watching us, God is watching, God is watching us from a distance.

But is that the final word? No, he was not content just to "watch." He found that it was impossible to stand forever "at a distance." He actually came into this crazy, shameful, broken, hurting world to help us and to shout loud enough for everyone to hear as he died to remove the brutal reality and the ugly consequences of our failure. "Never forget, I love you this much!"

This is the real reason why I follow him. Are you a follower? Why not join me on the road?