

The Book of Hebrews – The Superiority of Christ

...God has spoken to us in His Son...(Hebrews 1:2)

The Cleansing Power of Christ (Hebrews 10:1-18 – Part 1)

“For by one offering He [Jesus] has perfected for all time those who are sanctified” (10:14).

There was once a college professor who had given an assignment and then collected the papers. The next day, he handed them back to the students, one of which read this statement on the bottom of his paper, “Is this the best you can do?”

The student thought, “No, this is not the best I could do” and so redid the paper. He handed it in again, and to his surprise, he received the same comment. This went on ten times, until finally the student, upon receiving his paper back with the same comment said to his teacher, “Yes, this is the best I can do.” The professor replied, “Fine, now I’ll read it.”

The pursuit of excellence can be painstaking. We consider those who excel in certain fields as those who are committed and consumed by their endeavor. Often times, those who excel in some field are seen as eccentric, having almost a fanatically preoccupation with their subject.

There is no doubt that to pursue excellence requires effort and commitment. But are you aware that the pursuit of mediocrity also requires effort and commitment? To simply maintain at some medium level of existence, some standard of living with which you feel comfortable with means making the effort not to excel while also seeking not to lag too far behind.

The word “excellence” is a noun and means “a fact or state of excelling.” To “excel” means, “to pursue the highest standard or level of completion.” The word “mediocre” means “of only ordinary or moderate quality; neither good nor bad; barely adequate.” The question that I have for you this morning, and that which I hope to expound upon via our text in Hebrews 10 is this, “Which of these terms, mediocrity or excellence, best describes the attitude of your heart – particularly when it comes to your living for Christ?”

I know that generally speaking, most Christians, and even a large segment of people overall, have desires to excel; they have visions of seeking a higher standard. Just look at how many books, videos, and seminars there are on being a better spouse, or parent, or student or even being physically fit. Believers are not exempt from these as well as, I pray, a desire to be closer and more intimate with God? Would we not all agree that Christians ought to pursue excellence - seeking to conduct themselves in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ? To make this implied exhortation more direct, do we believe in the promises of God’s Word – namely that Jesus has come to give us an abundant life (John 10:10), that Christ is our one and only “hope of glory” (Colossians 1:27), that faith is a gift of God to can increase (Ephesians 2:8; Philippians 1:29) and that we truly must seek to excel in these as well as the fruit of the Spirit as noted in Galatians 5:22-23. Let me ask you these simple but profound questions:

1. How abundant is your life in Christ?
2. How mysterious is your hope in Christ?
3. How fervent is your faith in Christ?
4. How deep is your love of Christ?
5. How complete is your joy in Christ?
6. How perfect is your peace in Christ?

The Book of Hebrews – The Superiority of Christ

...God has spoken to us in His Son...(Hebrews 1:2)

7. How practiced is your patience?
8. How lively is your kindness?
9. How great is your goodness?
10. How loyal is your faithfulness?
11. How strong is your gentleness?
12. How exercised is your self-control?

Beloved, Galatians 5:23 tells us that there is no limit, no boundaries, no law that says we cannot – we must not excel in these things. So I ask you, do you believe there is something more in living for Jesus than you have come to experience? Is there something more in which you to excel in your living for Christ? We heartily agree – “there is more!” Yet, we easily grow content with mediocrity and invest much energy, wasted energy to be sure, in maintaining our status quo. What joy is there in laboring and striving after mediocrity? Let us beware, lest we grow to idolize mediocrity. There is a familiar saying that will have bearing on our text – “If you always do what you’ve always done, you’ll always get what you’ve always got.” If we only pursue mediocrity, that is all we will get.

So, could we do more? Could we do better? Should we do more? Should we do better? How does all this fit with the idea that Christ has done it all, paid it all, accomplished it all? What is left for us to do? How is there for a paradox to the question, “what is left for us to do?” I say to you – nothing and everything.

From our text this morning, we are presented with a summary of sorts; the ending of the doctrinal portion of this letter to the Hebrews, drawing the inevitable conclusion of all that has been discussed – the spectacular sufficiency and superiority of Christ over all things – even the things once ordained of God as seen in the Law of Moses. If I could summarize Hebrews 10:1-18 I would do so by saying this is a call to pursue excellence – that higher standard of level of completion. And this begs the question, “By what do I seek this standard, this level of perfection or completion?” Do I seek it by my own labors? Do I seek it by the work of others? Or, do I, by sincere and reasonable faith, seek it in the sole provision and working of the Lord? Do I even desire such perfection (excellence) – or am I satisfied with the way I am now (mediocrity). I see in our text four thoughts that might well challenge our pursuit of excellence – The pursuit of excellence is...

- I. Not founded in Sacred Practices (10:1-4)
- II. Founded in Single Person (10:5-10)
- III. Founded on Specific Purpose (10:11-14)
- IV. Founded on a Special Promise (10:15-18)

I. The pursuit of excellence is not founded in Sacred Practices (10:1-4)

1 For the Law, since it has only a shadow of the good things to come and not the very form of things, can never, by the same sacrifices which they offer continually year by year, make perfect those who draw near. 2 Otherwise, would they not have ceased to be offered, because the worshipers, having once been cleansed, would no longer have had consciousness of sins? 3 But in those sacrifices there is a reminder of sins year by year. 4 For it is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins.

The Book of Hebrews – The Superiority of Christ

...God has spoken to us in His Son...(Hebrews 1:2)

Our text begins with some thoughts that have already been expounded upon in this letter. First we see the reminder that the law, as holy, righteous and sacred as it was, was not the reality, but merely a shadow. The idea here is that of something great casting its shadow over something. I remember one time being atop the Colorado National Monument near Grand Junction. I was standing on a rock that jettied out over one of the impressive canyons. It was near sunset and I was looking east and I notice the long and massive shadow being cast over the city. It seemed that the shadow went on for miles, covering everything in its path. But while the shadow was impressive, what was greater was the size and beauty of the monument that cast the shadow.

If all you ever experienced was the shadow of something, it might come to easily impress you. The first readers were subject to only the shadow – not the reality. The animal sacrifices of the Law could never “make perfect” – that is “make full and complete” anyone. Why, because the animal sacrifices of the law were only a shadow – certainly visible, certainly necessary in their time, but not the full reality of what was to come – the one final sacrifice offered by Christ. Remember that these being first written to were considering moving away from Christ, leaving the substantial for the shadow, the excellent for the mediocre. The author is reminding them that if they always do what they have always done – seeking reconciliation with God via animal sacrifices – they will always get what they have always got (incomplete, temporary reconciliation with God). The call here is to perfection, to excellence, to fullness and completeness.

I would like to illustrate the idea of here of the incompleteness and shadowy nature of the law in a somewhat different fashion this morning. I have chosen a classical piece of music that I suspect many of you have not heard before. The piece is entitled, “The Hut on Fowl’s Legs” by Mussorgsky. I would like you to hear a minute or so of this song – [piano version – fade at 1:02]

Now, I don’t know whether you like this song or not, but there is something you ought to know about it. You heard this segment being played on the piano. And while the pianist was certainly talented, this piece was not intended to be performed solely by a piano but rather was a symphonic piece – meaning that several instruments and dynamics were intended to make this piece full and complete. What you heard was only a shadow. Now, if that is all you ever heard of the piece, you might well grow content as well as thinking that that was all that was ever intended by it. So, what would happen if you actually heard the piece played by a symphony? Perhaps one of two things; first, you might well embrace it, being in awe of how much grander and superior the piece was supposed to be. Or, second, you might be offended and unsure that it was ever supposed to be that way at all. The author of Hebrews is confronting these first readers saying that they have become content with the shadow, with the incomplete, with limited ability of the law to actually save, perfect and complete anyone. Remember that this has been a theme of Hebrews –

Hebrews 7:11

Now if perfection was through the Levitical priesthood (for on the basis of it the people received the Law), what further need was there for another priest to arise according to the order of Melchizedek, and not be designated according to the order of Aaron?

† The Book of Hebrews – The Superiority of Christ

...God has spoken to us in His Son...(Hebrews 1:2)

Hebrews 7:19

(for the Law made nothing perfect), and on the other hand there is a bringing in of a better hope, through which we draw near to God.

The author's desire is to present to his readers, including us here this morning, of the grander, more awe-inspiring superiority of the person and work of Christ. To see and hear the symphony of Christ's saving work – to know that Jesus alone saves and He saves forever, completely and fully those who draw near to God through Him (Hebrews 7:25). Would you like to hear a clip of the intended symphonic rendering of Mussorgsky's piece? [symphony – fade at 1:07].

Oh that we might hear the intended symphony of Christ's work on our behalf; not to be content with hearing just one instrument, just one little aspect of this. O Lord, inspire us with the great volume of our salvation in Christ. May we hear it, may we sing it, may we contemplate all its fullness and speak of its greatness to all.

The OT Law was never intended to be the end-all symphony, but merely the warm-up, the preparation for something far greater, one final act and great performance to be performed not by impure hands and sinful lives, but by pure hand and a holy life – the very life of Christ. Hebrews 10:2 points out that the OT sacrifices were never intended to be the final symphony –

Otherwise, would they not have ceased to be offered, because the worshipers, having once been cleansed, would no longer have had consciousness of sins?

If the OT sacrifices were to be the final song, then why were new priests and new sacrifices constantly performing another new song? While the blood of bulls and goats provided a temporary stay on the wrath of God against sin, their purpose was not to remove the stain of sin or even to make a person perfect. Rather, according to Hebrews 10:3, their purpose was to serve as a reminder, a reminder of the penalty, the power and the presence of sin – Hebrews 10:3

But in those sacrifices there is a reminder of sins year by year.

Everyone under the law was not to look at the law as the end, but rather the prelude to something greater, something promised as far back as in the Garden when God said that the seed of the woman would crush the head and power of the serpent and the sin he introduced to humanity in Genesis 3:15. The sacred practice of slaughtering a dumb, innocent animal in the place of one's self could never take away sin – it could never fully reconcile a person to God – it could only remind you that you were a sinner and that you ought to be looking to the greater sacrifice promised by God. As we see in Hebrews 10:4

For it is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins.

Hebrews 10:1-4 reminds us that there was a time when God's people addressed their problem of sin through a very real, very graphic, and very bloody act. God's law required that each worshipper would come to the assembly with an animal. Some might bring a dove

The Book of Hebrews – The Superiority of Christ

...God has spoken to us in His Son...(Hebrews 1:2)

tucked under the arm, others a goat on the end of a rope. But can you imagine coming to a worship service with such an animal with the intention not bringing it back? Every service was a reminder of the seriousness of sin as the dove's neck would be wrung or the goat's jugular slit. Every worship service was filled with the aroma of burning flesh and the floor was always flowing with deep crimson blood. The pursuit of excellence was to come to a slaughterhouse.

But as we have read here and throughout the book of Hebrews, this literal slashing, bleeding, and burning had only been a copy, a picture of that which was the original. Each sacred practice and ritual had only been the shadow of the real thing yet to come. As we will come to see, Jesus would be the final sacrifice. And so here lies the mystery of faith – namely that Jesus did for us what we could never have done for ourselves no matter how many sacrifices we made. By the grace of God, because of the provision of Christ as our final sacrifice, the vivid and terrible sacrifices of animals came to an end. And herein lies the premise of our first point in the pursuit of excellence – that *all* of our human strivings and efforts, all of our human practices have come to an end. We see this clearly referred to in Hebrews 10:10 and 10:14

Hebrews 10:10

By this will we have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all.

Hebrews 10:14

For by one offering He has perfected for all time those who are sanctified.

So, what is our part in the pursuit of excellence? What do we need to do to seek that higher standard, that greater level of completion? Remember that I answered this question by saying, “nothing and everything.” First, we need to do nothing, realizing that Christ has done it all – he has, according to Hebrews 10:14, ***“perfected for all time those who are sanctified.”*** Next week we will come to more fully appreciate what this means, but I would have you note that Jesus “has perfected” forever. Do you believe that Jesus alone has the power to perfect you? Do you believe that Jesus alone grants abundant life? Do you believe that the divine qualities of love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control are found only in following Jesus; only in trusting Jesus; only fixing your eyes on Jesus? Then I say to you, pursue the excellence of Jesus. I promise that I will say this again for it pertains to our upcoming verses – but we are to pursue excellence in living for Christ not because we must, so that we might be saved by our doing, but rather because we can, having been perfected by Christ. We are to pursue the position to which Christ saved us. You see, the pursuit of excellence in Christian living is not the cause of our salvation, but it is the only viable and assuring mark that we have been saved. Is not the great cause of our rejoicing to see the regenerating power of God at work in our lives causing us to love and serve Him more? And what is the character of this regenerative power of God in our lives? The author of Hebrews will call it being sanctified (10:10, 14) as we will see next week. The apostle Peter reminds us in 2 Peter 1:10-11 –

The Book of Hebrews – The Superiority of Christ

...God has spoken to us in His Son...(Hebrews 1:2)

10 Therefore, brethren, be all the more diligent to make certain about His calling and choosing you; for as long as you practice these things, you will never stumble; 11 for in this way the entrance into the eternal kingdom of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ will be abundantly supplied to you.

What things, Peter? What things show us that God is the cause and is working out His salvation in us, that Christ has done it all and is now manifesting His regenerative power that we might love and serve Him? If you look at the verses preceding verse 10, we see that which is reminiscent of the fruit of the spirit. We to pursue and pray that the excellencies of Christ including faith, moral excellence, knowledge, self-control, perseverance, godliness, brotherly kindness and love. How are you doing in your pursuit of these things? Remember, if you always do what you've always done, you'll always get what you've always God. If you desire these things, you do well, but Peter also says that we are to possess these qualities and they are to be increasing. What would God have you do to see these increased in your life? What change of pursuits are necessary for you to follow fervently after God – not to save you, but to reveal to you and to others that it is truly **“God who is at work in you, both to will and to work for His good pleasure”** (Philippians 2:13). In this regard, are you doing the best that you can do? While we may be hesitant to say with the college student, “Yes, this is the best I can do?” knowing that until Jesus returns there is always room for improvement, I do pray that such would be our desire – to do, to serve and love God with the very best of our abilities. Lord, change our hearts and let us know with greater wonder the blessing of being saved – to Your glory – Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria

Copyright © 2007 Edward K. Godfrey. This message is the sole property of the copyright holder and may be copied only in its entirety for circulation freely without charge. All copies of this message must contain the above copyright notice. This message may not be copied in part (except for small quotations used with citation of source), edited, revised, copied for resale or incorporated in any commercial publications, recordings, broadcasts, performances, displays or other products offered for sale, without the written permission of the copyright holder. Requests for permission should be made in writing and addressed to Edward K. Godfrey, Pastor, Hope Community Bible Church, 2300 South 13th Street Rogers, AR 72758.