As my kids get older, I’m having to learn the art of mediation more and more. When my kids fought when they were younger, it was pretty easy to assess what was going on, figure out that one kid had taken another’s toy, and make sure things were put right.

Now that they’re older, when two of them are fighting they come stand in front of me at the same time and they both try to tell me their side of the story all at once. There’s usually a lot of blaming on both sides while they try to convince me their version of the story is the truth.

A mediator is someone who acts as a go between for two people in conflict. We see this when two people are trying to settle terms of a contract and can’t figure out their differences on their own. An objective third party steps in to help them think through things and make the best decision they can. Sometimes mediation or arbitration is ordered by a court and the results are legally binding. I’ve had to learn to act as that third party for my kids.

I have to help them slow them down, get both sides of the story, and help them learn how to resolve their conflicts in a healthy, respectful way. Sometimes that results in discipline, sometimes not. There may or may not be duct tape and zip ties involved at times. It sounds a lot calmer talking about it than it usually is.

What is true of my kids when they are upset with each other is true of us all. We all need a mediator. But our greatest need for a mediator is not between ourselves when we have conflict. Our greatest need is to have someone to go between us and God. We need a mediator with God because we are sinful people who cannot be in the presence of a Holy God.

Hebrews 4 tells us that we have just that in the person of Jesus Christ. **Hebrews 4:14–16 ESV — 14** Since then we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus, the Son of God, let us hold fast our confession. **15** For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin. **16** Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.

Some of you may have studied the Old Testament and Jewish religion enough to know exactly what the author of Hebrews is talking about here. Some of you may look at that and say, “What in the world is going on here?” To understand what the author of Hebrews is talking about here, we need to dig into what it meant for the Israelite people to have a high priest and what exactly he did.

The first time we ever see the idea of a high priest mentioned in Scripture is in Genesis 14. Abraham, was on his way back from rescuing his nephew Lot, and he met a man named Melchizedek. Melchizedek was the King of Salem, and he was also the priest of God Most High. That’s all we know about his origins. He blessed Abraham and in turn Abraham, the patriarch of all the Israelite people, paid the first tithe. He gave Melchizedek a tenth of all that he had. We’ll talk more about Melchizedek in a couple of weeks, because the author of Hebrews has a lot to say about his connection with Jesus in Hebrews 7.

In Exodus 28 we see the position of the high priest of the Israelites officially instituted for the first time in the Jewish faith. The Israelites were on their way to the Promised Land after coming out of Egypt when God appointed Aaron and his sons as the priests of the nation of Israel, and Aaron as the high priest. The high priest had specific garments he had to wear: a breastpiece, an ephod, a robe, a checkered coat, a turban, and a sash. He actually looked a lot like Belloq did in *Raiders of the Lost Ark*. (High Priest picture)

God told Aaron and his sons how he was to be worshiped. He told them exactly what they were to do and it was the job of the priests to make sure the people worshiped God in the proper manner.

God was serious about what he required. When two of Aaron’s sons decided they were going to do things their own way and offered sacrifices in a way that God had not commanded, they were consumed by fire before the altar. That’s how serious God is about how he is worshiped. God deserves the absolute best that we can give him, and he made that very clear.

The Tabernacle and later the Temple in Jerusalem were designed with different sections that all served different functions. There was the Court of the Gentile where anyone could be, Jew or Gentile. Next was the Court of the Women or the Outer Court. That’s as far as the Jewish women could go. In the Outer Court they had places reserved for those who had taken a Nazarite vow and those who suffered from leprosy, so those people could still worship as well.

Just beyond the Outer Court was the brazen altar where burnt offerings were sacrificed on a daily basis in the Inner Court. Only Jewish men who were ceremonially clean could even enter into the Inner Court, and only the priests could perform the duties and rituals that were done there.

Inside the Inner Court there was another area that was even more restricted and even more holy. The Holy Place is where the altar of incense, the table for the bread of the Presence, and the golden lampstand that are described in Exodus 25 and 30. Only the priests were allowed to go beyond the brazen altar and into the Holy Place. (temple picture)

Any priest could offer sacrifices and do the regular daily and weekly rituals of the priesthood. In fact, there was a rotation of priests who would serve in the different roles required on a regular basis. But the high priest was special among all the priests.

There was one part of the Temple beyond the Holy Place. It was called the Holy of Holies or the Most Holy Place. The Holy of Holies was separated from the rest of the Temple by a huge, thick veil. We know from the Bible that the veil was 30 feet tall and 30 feet wide. Jewish tradition claims that the finished veil was 4 inches thick. The veil was meant to show a stark separation between this part of the Temple and everything else. That veil is the one that was torn when Jesus died on the cross.

The reason it was so important, so holy is because the only thing in that part of the Temple was the Ark of the Covenant. You may remember from the Raiders of the Lost Ark what the Ark looks like. Hollywood surprisingly did a fairly good job of representing what historians think the Ark actually looked like. (ark picture) The lid of the Ark with the two cherubim on top is what was known as the Mercy seat. The Holy of Holies and the Mercy seat is where God’s presence rested on earth. There were no candles or lights in the Holy of Holies. All the illumination that was needed came from the glory of God himself.

The only human being who could enter into the Holy of Holies was the High Priest, and even he could only go into the most holy place on earth once a year. The Day of Atonement, or you might be more familiar with the name Yom Kippur, was a day set aside for the high priest to atone for the sins of the people of Israel in the presence of God in the Holy of Holies.

The people were not to work or to eat or drink on the day of Atonement, and no other activity was to be going on when the high priest went into the Holy of Holies. Because the high priest himself was a sinful human being, he had to first offer a sacrifice for his own sin and sprinkle the blood of the sacrifice he had made for himself on the Mercy seat. Only then could he offer a sacrifice on behalf of the people in the presence of God himself.

Out of all the sacrifices that were made throughout the year at the Temple in Jerusalem, the sacrifices made on the Day of Atonement in the Holy of Holies were by far the most important. It was not a day of celebration. The Day of Atonement was a day of repentance and mourning for their sin. It was the day when their sin was atoned for before God, when they wiped their slate clean before God.

This was not done lightly. No one could enter the Holy of Holies except the High Priest, and if he did so improperly he would die on the spot. We don’t have any record of that happening in the Holy of Holies, but God told Aaron if he entered into God’s presence improperly, he would die. In fact, and this is not in the Bible, but Jewish tradition says that they always tied a rope around the waist of the High Priest before he entered into the Holy of Holies, so if he messed up somehow, they could pull his body back out.

There was real fear involved here. It wasn’t just the reverent, respectful fear that we think of when we think of the fear of the Lord today. This was the knowledge that one misstep, one careless act while in the presence of God would cost them their lives. There was real fear in approaching God. Being the High Priest was a great honor, but I have to believe that there was also a lot of apprehension involved as well. They were doing a job that was both full of great honor and full of great risk unless they did their job perfectly.

Only one person could offer that sacrifice. Only the high priest could perform that service before God. The random Israelite off the street could not approach God this way. They couldn’t go into God’s presence, and they couldn’t offer the sacrifices to atone for their own sin. The high priest was the one who acted as the mediator between the people of Israel and God. He is the one who offered sacrifices on behalf of the people of Israel so that their sin could be atoned for in the presence of God.

Even though this system was put in place by God, there were still some things about it that didn’t work very well. Understand that’s not a failure on the part of God’s plan, but on the part of sinful human beings who usually tend to mess things up.

The worst part of the whole thing was that even though they were having their sins atoned for, all the people of Israel were still separated from God. If the ceremonies of the Day of Atonement were not enough of a reminder, all they had to do was look at that enormous veil that separated the rest of the world from the presence of God. One look at that curtain would be a stark reminder that they had no access to God. They couldn’t get to him. They couldn’t go to God whenever they wanted to, they couldn’t offer their own sacrifices, they couldn’t get to God without someone in between doing it for them. They had to go through the high priest who was the mediator between man and God.

Even the high priest was limited in his ability to represent the people. There’s a reason they had to offer a sacrifice for themselves first. They were sinful people, too. They needed atonement just like everyone else.

**Hebrews 5:1–3 ESV — 1** For every high priest chosen from among men is appointed to act on behalf of men in relation to God, to offer gifts and sacrifices for sins. **2** He can deal gently with the ignorant and wayward, since he himself is beset with weakness. **3** Because of this he is obligated to offer sacrifice for his own sins just as he does for those of the people.

A fallen, human high priest is sympathetic to our brokenness because he is in the same boat himself. However, he is just as weak and just as prone to sinfulness as anyone else. Not a great representative between man and God. But for the Israelites, that’s all they had.

As Rod said last week, one of the things that happened over time is the Jews relied so heavily on their human leaders that they missed Jesus when he was right in front of them. They let their high priests do everything for them. They thought that going through the rituals and ceremonies was enough and they never built a personal relationship with God themselves. It ended up that the priesthood didn’t foster a relationship between people and God. They were the middlemen between humanity and God. There was no relationship there.

Here’s the thing: people still do that today. I can’t tell you how many times I’ve been asked to pray simply because I’m a minister. Part of that is simply experience praying in public or something of that nature. And we recognize that a part of our calling as ministers is to be a representative of Jesus. There’s nothing wrong with that. But it’s evident that some people assume that a minister’s prayer is more powerful or more able to reach the ears of God than anyone else’s. I’ve actually had people ask me to pray for them because, and I quote, “I have a direct line to God.” Bet you didn’t know they give you that phone number in Seminary. The truth is, Rod and I may be more practiced in praying out loud in front of people, but our prayers are no more holy, no more honored by God than any other believer’s prayer.

People tend to put their ministers up on a pedestal and in some situations almost idolize them. Rod talked last week about the Christian celebrities that we almost see as the prophets of our time. Billy Graham, Rick Warren, Francis Chan, John MacArthur, Ravi Zacharias, David Jeremiah. We tend to idolize people like that sometimes. We take what they say as Gospel instead of going to Scripture to make sure that it’s right. Just because someone is a popular leader or teacher does not mean they are any more holy or any better Christian than another believer.

In March we are going to have Gary Johnson come back to lead another Leadership Conference for us. To many people Gary is one of those Christian celebrities. He speaks all over the country, he even goes to Austria on a regular basis to teach at a Seminary there. But the reason we are having him come lead a conference for us is because he’s an experienced leader in the church and he can help others grow in their leadership as well. It’s not because he’s a Christian superstar or he’s somehow more spiritual or more connected to God than anyone else.

Just like the Israelites with their high priest, many people in churches today allow their ministers to do all the work of their spirituality for them. The only study of Scripture they ever do is sitting in a church on Sunday morning listening to a sermon for 30 minutes. The only time they pray throughout the week is when whoever is leading worship at the time asks everyone to pray with them.

The author of Hebrews was writing to Christians who were going through a difficult time of persecution sometime in the several years leading up to the destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70. These people had come from a Jewish background and they might have been tempted to go back to the faith that they had always known. The faith that allowed them to sit back and let someone else take the burden. The faith that allowed them to take an easier road than what they had in store for them as believers in Jesus.

Hebrews was written to help these believers stay firm in their faith in Christ. To help them keep walking toward Jesus and growing in their faith. It was written to show them how much better Jesus is than all the things they had known before.

The idea of a High Priest is no exception to that. The author of Hebrews lets us know that we have a different high priest. We have a better high priest. We have a superior high priest. Last week Rod took us through Hebrews 2, 3, and part of 4 that talked about how much better, how much greater, how superior Jesus is than all the other aspects of religion. Jesus is superior to the angels. He is superior to Moses. He is superior to all the other aspects of Jewish religion that the original audience of this letter would have followed all their lives until they heard the Gospel story. Here in Hebrews 4 we find that Jesus is superior to any human high priest. We don’t need anyone besides Jesus himself to go between us and God.

Jesus serves in that role of high priest for us, just as the human high priests did for the Jewish people throughout their history. Hebrews calls Jesus “a great high priest”. That word great doesn’t mean that Jesus is really good at it, that he’s top of his class. That’s the Greek word μέγας (megas) which means to be superior in importance. It is a word often used of God to signify his importance above all others. It was also used in Luke 1 when Gabriel foretold the births of both John the Baptist and of Jesus. He told both sets of parents their kids would be great, meaning they were more important, they were superior. They weren’t just random kids.

That same word describes Jesus as our high priest. Yes, there had been many high priests before him, but Jesus overshadows them all. They were all in a position of honor and importance, but the importance of Jesus as our high priest is so much higher and greater than any other person ever could be.

One of the most important ways that Jesus is far superior to any human high priest is that, unlike the human high priests, he is sinless.

**Hebrews 4:15 ESV — 15** For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin.

The author of Hebrews here obviously didn’t have the same English teachers I had in high school. He uses a double negative here, which might make this a little difficult to understand. If we were to write this in proper English, it might look something like this:

“For we have a high priest who is able to sympathize with our weaknesses, one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin.”

That means three things for us:

1. First of all, that means that Jesus does not have to atone for his own sin before he can be our mediator. He is able to be with God the Father, and in fact sits at the Father’s right hand. Jesus has full access to God with nothing to hold him back. He has no fear of the wrath of God because he is perfectly righteous. Jesus is uniquely qualified to be our mediator. No one else can do what Jesus does because no one else can live the sinless life that Jesus lived.
2. The second thing that means for us is that Jesus is the only one that could make the perfect sacrifice for us. **Hebrews 2:17 ESV — 17** Therefore he had to be made like his brothers in every respect, so that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest in the service of God, to make propitiation for the sins of the people.

For those of you who don’t use the word ‘propitiation’ in your vocabulary every day, that’s the Greek word ίλάσκομαι (hilaskomai) – which means to wipe out our sin, to wipe our slate clean. By doing that Jesus removed everything that stood between us and God. He was able to do that because he lived a sinless life.

Jesus’ sacrifice for us met the requirement of God’s justice and wrath. The penalty that we owe for our sin against God has already been paid. Hebrews 10, which we’ll talk about in a few weeks, tells us that he paid the price once for all.

He doesn’t have to keep offering a sacrifice once a year. He doesn’t have to keep putting a band aid on a wound that would never fully heal. Jesus took the penalty of our sin once for all so that there is nothing more to be done, nothing more to be paid. The price has been paid for us so that we can be with God for all eternity.

1. And finally, Jesus being tempted as we are and yet remaining without sin means that he is sympathetic to our sufferings and temptations. The Greek word here means to suffer with, to share in the same suffering or emotion, allowing him to feel compassion toward someone. Jesus knows what we are going through when we are tempted, because he was tempted in every way that we are. In Matthew 4 we have recorded when Jesus was tempted in the wilderness by the devil. We only have three specific temptations recorded there. But the author of Hebrews makes it very clear both here in Hebrews 4 and in Hebrews 2 that Jesus was tempted in all the ways that we are and yet remained righteous and faithful to God.

That means that Jesus can help us through our weaknesses and our struggles. He came to bring us redemption of our sin, to wipe our slate clean. And because he has been where we have been and made it through unscathed he can help us not only be redeemed, but also conquer sin in our lives right now.

That principle is true of you and me as well. Your greatest struggle will one day be your biggest ministry if you let God work through it. When you struggle with something and then come out on the other side, it means you know the way through. You know how to handle the problems that arise from that struggle or temptation.

That struggle could be going through divorce. It could be losing a loved one. It could be struggling with addictions, going through depression, fighting an illness, losing a job.

Someone who is brand new to that struggle might not see a way to get through it. That person may think it’s impossible. That’s when you can take him by the hand and walk side by side to show him the way through to the other side.

What the author of Hebrews tells us here is that Jesus has been through every temptation that we could ever face. He has experienced those temptations and come out the other side free of sin. That means Jesus knows the way through every temptation we will ever experience. And he’s right there to lead us by the hand, to help us in our time of need.

What does that mean for us? When Jesus died on the cross, Matthew tells us in:

**Matthew 27:50–51 ESV — 50** And Jesus cried out again with a loud voice and yielded up his spirit. **51** And behold, the curtain of the temple was torn in two, from top to bottom. And the earth shook, and the rocks were split.

That enormous, 4 inch thick, 30 foot tall curtain was torn in two, not from bottom to top, but from the top down. When that veil tore from top to bottom it signaled the end of that division between God and man. There was no longer a physical barrier between the two, and there is no longer a the spiritual barrier between the two either.

Now we tend to think of the veil being torn giving us access to God, allowing us in. But in the Jewish mindset, it was the other way around. The veil being torn didn’t let us have access to God in the Holy of Holies. It meant that God could now be out among us. He no longer had to only be in this little room behind a giant curtain.

That’s a little odd for us to think about, until we read something like this:

**Revelation 21:3–5 ESV — 3** And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, “Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God. **4** He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away.” **5** And he who was seated on the throne said, “Behold, I am making all things new.”…

Because of what Jesus did for us on the cross, and because he was our perfect sacrifice, we have free access to God and we don’t have to fear going before the throne of grace. God can now live among us and in us through his Holy Spirit. Our high priest is sitting at the right hand of God, and we have free access to him at any point in time. Where there used to be this overwhelming fear of doing things wrong in the presence of God, now there is no fear, no condemnation. There is only our high priest, our Savior, sitting at the right hand of God to be our mediator.

That means that when we are in need, when we need the mercy and grace of Jesus, we can draw near to the throne of grace with confidence. We don’t have to fear. We don’t have to wonder if God will accept us. Because of Jesus we can have the confidence to draw near to God and know that he will draw us close and overwhelm us with his love and mercy and grace.