Is it possible to be too good or too great? A while back, 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.

Is Jesus great? No question about it. He is almighty Son of God. But is he 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? That was a question the first readers of Hebrews had on their minds. The writer assured his readers that Jesus is not only the Great High Priest, but he is also the perfect High Priest.

It seems strange to hear the author say here that Jesus was made perfect, doesn't it? The phrase conjures up the image of someone who gradually progresses from imperfection to perfection. But that is not what the writer of Hebrews is saying. He is referring to Jesus as true human being.

When he talks about how Jesus offered up prayers and petitions with fervent cries and tears to the One who could save him from death, he is taking us back to the Garden of Gethsemane. There we see Jesus as a true human being with a body and soul. He says: My soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death. He prays, cries out with tears in eyes, sweat like drops of blood falls. Jesus Christ is true man.

But he is not just true man. The writer has not lost sight of his theme that Jesus is God's Son. Throughout the book he proclaims the greatness of God's Son. He is proclaiming same truth here - that Jesus of Nazareth is the true and eternal Son of God. The true human being Jesus of Nazareth is also the true Son of God.

We see that in the Garden. Think of the cries we hear from our Lord’s lips; the tears from his eyes; and the sweat from his face 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!

Think of the crushing burden of guilt and shame that just one sin can lay on a soul. Criminals in the news cover their faces, hiding from the cameras and the crowds. Think of the countless men and women for whom that burden of guilt and shame proved to be too heavy and who tried to silence that voice by suicide.

But the Savior, driven into the dust by the guilt of every sin and the haunting voice of a million consciences, and above all the horrible prospect of enduring the 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. Truly, Jesus in his human flesh and blood is the Son of God.

So Jesus is the perfect High Priest - the God-man who is perfectly able to represent mankind before God. Remember the words the angel spoke to Mary when he announced that she would be with child and give birth to a Son. He spoke about how the holy one to be born will be called the Son of God. Clearly, there is no room for progress from imperfect to perfection to take place in the life of Jesus. At his baptism and again on the Mount of Transfiguration, God the Father proclaimed Jesus to be his Son and added: With him I am well pleased. St. John says of God’s Son: You know that he appeared so that he might take away our sins. And in him is no sin. Jesus is indeed the perfect High Priest - perfect already in the way he prayed.
But if that is true - 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 away the cup of punishment and suffering 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 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 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 to his burial in Joseph’s new tomb, Jesus willingly gave up the full and constant use of his divine power and glory. Our writer calls the state of Christ’s humiliation the days of Christ’s flesh. 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 that was assigned for him to drink, he found its contents revolting, just as a child might recoil from taking some icky-tasting medicine. Though the child may rebel and push the spoon away, spilling its contents and making a mess, Jesus did not rebel. In reverent submission he obeyed his heavenly Father. He did not resist nor complain. 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 mankind. 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.

How thankful we are that Jesus is our perfect High Priest! He prayed in reverent submission for us sinners, who do not always live in reverent submission to God’s will. We do not always say and pray: Father, your will be done. Like the sheep the prophet Isaiah talked about, we sinners go astray and turn to our own way. We do not always pray in reverent submission to God’s will. We complain about God’s ways and insist on living our way. Like the world, we say: My will, my way, my body, my business. And if things go wrong in life - if there is pain or loss, sickness or cross - we easily give into grumbling and complaining.

Where we failed to say and pray: Your will be done, our great High Priest prayed for us: Your will be done. Yes, Jesus was our perfect High Priest already when he prayed, but as our reading says, Jesus was made perfect by the way he obeyed.

If it is hard to say to God: Your will be done, imagine how hard it is to actually do God’s will. That is 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.

To use an imperfect illustration: it is like the couple being asked on their wedding day if they will love and honor each other in marriage and both answer with a hearty and happy I will. Then the husband finds out that this means telling his buddies to go on the annual guys-only fishing trip without him because his wife does not want him to spend money that is needed to pay bills. Or the wife finds out that this means telling her girlfriends to do lunch by themselves because her husband needs her help at home. That is when you learn what obedience is - through painful self-denial and sacrifice. Sadly we do not always put our promises into practice. We say I will, but do not always do God’s will - whether it is a promise made to parents, a confirmation vow, or a wedding vow. Though we often promise to obey God, we do not 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 have caused those we love by failing to follow our promises. He endured the cross, scorning its shame. That is what it means when we read of Jesus: And, once made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation. Or to put it literally: After he had finished his work.

Sound familiar? Think ahead to Jesus’ triumphant cry from the cross: It is finished. The word translated as perfect in text comes from the same root 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 - or to say it another way, if Jesus had lived perfectly but refused to suffer and die for sinners - he would not have been the perfect Savior. His rescue mission would not have been complete. He would not have finished his work. We would still be in our sins and lost forever. But Jesus finished the work, and our perfected High Priest became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him.

That last phrase does not sound right, does it? Jesus became the source of eternal salvation to all who obey him. The writer is not saying that our obedience is part of the equation when it comes to salvation - that we are saved by our works, that we are not saved by God’s grace through faith.

You see, faith is obedience to God. God wants us to be saved so much that he not only invites us to believe in Jesus - he commands it. John writes: This is his command: to believe in the name of his Son, Jesus Christ, and to love one another as he commanded us. Our Lord commands us to believe in Jesus, and his Spirit, working through those words, creates the faith they command. The result is that we quit trying to earn eternal life and cling instead to Jesus by faith for our salvation. He is the perfect Savior; he lived perfectly to provide us with the righteousness we need to stand before God. He died to remove every trace of sin and guilt from our souls.

As we hear his invitation: Come to me and I will give you rest, and with believing hearts find rest for our souls in Jesus, we find the joy and peace of eternal salvation. That is salvation by grace through faith. That is the obedience our author is talking about. His words also serve to remind us that the obedience of faith will show itself in a life of obedience. From the heart filled with joyful faith in Jesus the Savior will flow a life of love that will show itself in love for God and for others.

Yes, Jesus is our Great High Priest. He is our perfect High Priest. He was perfect already in the way he prayed. He finished his work and was made perfect by the way he obeyed his heavenly Father, even to the point of death. May we render to our perfect High Priest the obedience he has earned: the obedience of confident faith, which shows itself in love!

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