

Hebrews 7:11-28

by St. John Chrysostom

The sermon explains how the priesthood of Melchisedec is superior to the Levitical priesthood and how Christ's high priesthood is significant because He is holy, harmless, and undefiled.

Scripture: Hebrews 7:11, Hebrews 7:25-28

Topics: "Christ's Priesthood", "Eternal Salvation"

Description

John Chrysostom preaches about the superiority of Christ's priesthood over the Levitical priesthood, emphasizing the change in priesthood and the law, as well as the eternal nature of Christ's priesthood after the order of Melchisedec. He highlights the perfection found in Christ's sacrifice, the power of His endless life, and the assurance of salvation through His intercession. Chrysostom urges believers to imitate Christ, live virtuously, and not take God's grace for granted, warning against complacency and the dangers of delaying repentance and good deeds.

Transcript

If therefore perfection were by the Levitical priesthood; (for under it the people have received the law?) what further need was there that another priest should arise after the order of Melchisedec, and not be called after the order of Aaron? For the priesthood being changed, there is made of necessity a change also of the law. For He of whom these things are spoken, pertained to another tribe, of which no man gave attendance at the altar. For it is evident that our Lord sprang out of Judah, of which tribe Moses spoke nothing concerning priests.

1. If therefore (he says) perfection were by the Levitical priesthood. Having spoken concerning Melchisedec, and shown how much superior he was to Abraham, and having set forth the great difference between them, he begins from this point forward to prove the wide difference as to the covenant itself, and how the one is imperfect and the other perfect. However he does not even yet enter on the matters themselves, but first contends on the ground of the priesthood, and the tabernacle. For these things would be more easily received by the unbelieving, when the proof was derived from things already allowed, and believed.

He had shown that Melchisedec was greatly superior both to Levi and to Abraham, being to them in the rank of the priests. Again he argues from a different point. What then is this? Why (he says) did he not say, after the order of Aaron? And observe, I pray you, the great superiority [of his argument]. For from the very circumstance which naturally excluded His priesthood, viz. that He was not after the order of Aaron,

from that he establishes Him, and excludes the others. For this is the very thing that I say (he declares); why has He not been made after the order of Aaron?

And the [saying] what further need has much emphasis. For if Christ had been after the order of Melchisedec according to the flesh, and then afterwards the law had been introduced, and all that pertained to Aaron, one might reasonably say that the latter as being more perfect, annulled the former, seeing that it had come in after it. But if Christ comes later, and takes a different type, as that of His priesthood, it is evident that it is because those were imperfect. For (he would say) let us suppose for argument's sake, that all has been fulfilled, and that there is nothing imperfect in the priesthood. What need was there in that case that He should be called after the order of Melchisedec and not after the order of Aaron? Why did He set aside Aaron, and introduce a different priesthood, that of Melchisedec? If then perfection, that is the perfection of the things themselves, of the doctrines, of life, had been by the Levitical priesthood.

And observe how he goes forward on his path. He had said that [He was] after the order of Melchisedec, implying that the [priesthood] after the order of Melchisedec is superior: for [he was] far superior. Afterwards he shows this from the time also, in that He was after Aaron; evidently as being better.

2. And what is the meaning of what follows? For (he says) under [or upon] it the people have received the Law [or have been legislated for]. What is under it [&c.]? Orders itself by it; through it does all things. You cannot say that it was given to others, the people under it have received the law, that is, have used it, and did use it. You cannot say indeed that it was perfect, it did not govern the people; they have been legislated for upon it, that is, they used it.

What need was there then of another priesthood? For the priesthood being changed, there is of necessity a change of the law also. But if there must be another priest, or rather another priesthood, there must needs be also another law. This is for those who say, What need was there of a new Covenant? For he could indeed have alleged a testimony from prophecy also. This is the covenant which I made with your fathers [&c.]. Hebrews 8:10 But for the present he contends on the ground of the priesthood. And observe, how he says this from the first. He said, According to the order of Melchisedec. By this he excluded the order of Aaron. For he would not have said After the order of Melchisedec, if the other had been better. If therefore another priesthood has been brought in, there must be also [another] Covenant; for neither is it possible that there should be a priest, without a covenant and laws and ordinances, nor that having received a different priesthood He should use the former [covenant].

In the next place, as to the ground of objection: How could He be a priest if He were not a Levite? Having overthrown this by what had been said above, he does not even think it worth answering, but introduces it in passing. I said (he means) that the priesthood was changed, therefore also the Covenant is. And it was changed not only in its character, or in its ordinances, but also in its tribe. For of necessity [it must be changed] in its tribe also. How? For the priesthood being changed [or transferred], from tribe to tribe, from the sacerdotal to the regal [tribe], that the same might be both regal and sacerdotal.

And observe the mystery. First it was royal, and then it has become sacerdotal: so therefore also in regard to Christ: for King indeed He always was, but has become Priest from the time that He assumed the Flesh, that He offered the sacrifice. You see the change, and the very things which were ground of objection these he introduces, as though the natural order of things required them. For (he says) He of whom these things are spoken pertained to another tribe. I myself also say it, I know that this tribe [of Judah] had

nothing of priesthood. For there is a transferring.

3. Yea and I am showing another difference also (he would say): not only from the tribe, nor yet only from the Person, nor from the character [of the Priesthood], nor from the covenant, but also from the type itself. Hebrews 7:16 Who was made [became so], not according to the law of a carnal commandment, but according to the power of an endless life. He became (he says) a priest not according to the law of a carnal commandment: for that law was in many respects unlawful.

What is, of a carnal commandment? Circumcise the flesh, it says; anoint the flesh; wash the flesh; purify the flesh; shave the flesh; bind upon the flesh; cherish the flesh; rest as to the flesh. And again its blessings, what are they? Long life for the flesh; milk and honey for the flesh; peace for the flesh; luxury for the flesh. From this law Aaron received the priesthood; Melchisedec however not so.

Hebrews 7:15-17

And it is yet far more evident, if after the similitude of Melchisedec there arises another priest. What is evident? The interval between the two priesthoods, the difference; how much superior He is who was made not according to the law of a carnal commandment. (Who? Melchisedec? Nay; but Christ.) But according to the power of an endless life. For He testifies, You are a Priest for ever after the order of Melchisedec; that is, not for a time, nor having any limit, but according to the power of an endless life, that is, by means of power, by means of endless life.

And yet this does not follow after, who was made not according to the law of a carnal commandment: for what would follow would be to say, but according to that of a spiritual one. However by carnal, he implied temporary. As he says also in another place, carnal ordinances imposed until the time of reformation. Hebrews 9:10

According to the power of life, that is, because He lives by His own power.

4. He had said, that there is also a change of law, and up to this point he has shown it; henceforward he enquires into the cause, that which above all gives full assurance to men's minds, [I mean] the knowing the cause thoroughly; and it leads us more to faith when we have learned also the cause, and the principle according to which [the thing] comes to pass.

Hebrews 7:18

For there is verily (he says) a disannulling of the commandment going before, for the weakness and unprofitableness thereof. Here the Heretics press on. But listen attentively. He did not say for the evil, nor, for the viciousness, but for the weakness and unprofitableness [thereof], yea and in other places also he shows the weakness; as when he says In that it was weak through the flesh. Romans 8:3 [The law] itself then is not weak, but we.

Hebrews 7:19

For the Law made nothing perfect. What is, make nothing perfect? Made no man perfect, being disobeyed. And besides, even if it had been listened to, it would not have made one perfect and virtuous. But as yet he does not say this here, but that it had no strength: and with good reason. For written precepts were there set down, Do this and Do not that, being enjoined only, and not giving power within. But the Hope is not such.

What is a disannulling? A casting out. A disannulling is a disannulling of things which are of force. So that he implied, that it [once] was of force, but henceforward was of no account, since it accomplished nothing. Was the Law then of no use? It was indeed of use; and of great use: but to make men perfect it was of no use. For in this respect he says, The Law made nothing perfect. All were figures, all shadows; circumcision, sacrifice, sabbath. There fore they could not reach through the soul, wherefore they pass away and gradually withdraw. But the bringing in of a better hope did, by which we draw near unto God.

Hebrews 7:20

5. Hebrews 7:20 And forasmuch as not without the taking of an oath. You see that the matter of the oath becomes necessary for him here. Accordingly for this reason he previously treated much [hereon], how that God swore; and swore for the sake of [our] fuller assurance.

But the bringing in of a better hope. For that system also had a hope, but not such as this. For they hoped that, if they were well pleasing [to God], they should possess the land, that they should suffer nothing fearful. But in this [dispensation] we hope that, if we are well pleasing [to God], we shall possess not earth, but heaven; or rather (which is far better than this) we hope to stand near to God, to come unto the very throne of the Father, to minister unto Him with the Angels. And see how he introduces these things little by little. For above he says which enters into that within the veil, Hebrews 6:19, but here, by which we draw near unto God.

Hebrews 7:21-24

And inasmuch as not without an oath. What is And inasmuch as not without an oath? That is, Behold another difference also. And these things were not merely promised (he says). For those priests were made without an oath, Hebrews 7:21-22 but This with an oath, by Him that said to Him, The Lord swore and will not repent, You are Priest for ever after the order of Melchisedec. By so much was Jesus made a surety of a better covenant. He lays down two points of difference, that it has no end as the [covenant] of the Law had; and this he proves from [its being] Christ who exercises [the priesthood]; for he says according to the power of an endless life. And he proves it also from the oath, because He swore, etc., and from the fact; for if the other was cast out, because it was weak, this stands firm, because it is powerful. He proves it also from the priest. How? Because He is One [only]; and there would not have been One [only], unless He had been immortal. For as there were many priests, because they were mortal, so [here is] The One, because He is immortal. By so much was Jesus made a surety of a better covenant, inasmuch as He swore to Him that He should always be [Priest]; which He would not have done, if He were not living.

Hebrews 7:25

6. Hebrews 7:25 Wherefore He is able also to save them to the uttermost, that come unto God by Him, seeing He ever lives to make intercession for them. You see that he says this in respect of that which is according to the flesh. For when He [appears] as Priest, then He also intercedes. Wherefore also when Paul says, who also makes intercession for us Romans 8:34, he hints the same thing; the High Priest makes intercession. For He that raises the dead as He will, and quickens them, John 5:21, and that even as the Father [does], how [is it that] when there is need to save, He makes intercession? John 5:22 He that has all judgment, how [is it that] He makes intercession? He that sends His angels Matthew 13:41-42, that they may cast some into the furnace, and save others, how [is it that] He makes intercession? Wherefore (he says) He is able also to save. For this cause then He saves, because He dies not.

Inasmuch as He ever lives, He has (he means) no successor: And if He have no successor, He is able to aid all men. For there [under the Law] indeed, the High Priest although he were worthy of admiration during the time in which he was [High Priest] (as Samuel for instance, and any other such), but, after this, no longer; for they were dead. But here it is not so, but He saves to the uttermost.

What is to the uttermost? He hints at some mystery. Not here only (he says) but there also He saves them that come unto God by Him. How does He save? In that He ever lives (he says) to make intercession for them. You see the humiliation? You see the manhood? For he says not, that He obtained this, by making intercession once for all, but continually, and whenever it may be needful to intercede for them.

To the uttermost. What is it? Not for a time only, but there also in the future life. 'Does He then always need to pray? Yet how can [this] be reasonable? Even righteous men have oftentimes accomplished all by one entreaty, and is He always praying? Why then is He throned with [the Father]?' You see that it is a condescension. The meaning is: Be not afraid, nor say, Yea, He loves us indeed, and He has confidence towards the Father, but He cannot live always. For He does live always.

Hebrews 7:26

7. For such an High Priest also became us, who is holy, harmless, undefiled, separate from the sinners. You see that the whole is said with reference to the manhood. (But when I say 'the manhood,' I mean [the manhood] having Godhead; not dividing [one from the other], but leaving [you] to suppose what is suitable.) Did you mark the difference of the High Priest? He has summed up what was said before, in all points tempted like as we are yet without sin. Hebrews 4:15 For (he says) such an High Priest also became us, who is holy, harmless. Harmless: what is it? Without wickedness: that which another Prophet says: guile was not found in His mouth Isaiah 53:9, that is, [He is] not crafty. Could any one say this concerning God? And is one not ashamed to say that God is not crafty, nor deceitful? Concerning Him, however, in respect of the Flesh, it might be reasonable [to say it]. Holy, undefiled. This too would any one say concerning God? For has He a nature capable of defilement? Separate from sinners.

Hebrews 7:27

8. Does then this alone show the difference, or does the sacrifice itself also? How? Hebrews 7:27 He needs not (he says) daily, as the High Priest, to offer up sacrifices for his sins, for this He did once for all, when He offered up Himself. This, what? Here what follows sounds a prelude concerning the exceeding greatness of the spiritual sacrifice and the interval [between them]. He has mentioned the point of the priest; he has mentioned that of the faith; he has mentioned that of the Covenant; not entirely indeed, still he has mentioned it. In this place what follows is a prelude concerning the sacrifice itself. Do not then, having heard that He is a priest, suppose that He is always executing the priest's office. For He executed it once, and thenceforward sat down. Hebrews 10:12 Lest thou suppose that He is standing on high, and is a minister, he shows that the matter is [part] of a dispensation [or economy]. For as He became a servant, so also [He became] a Priest and a Minister. But as after becoming a servant, He did not continue a servant, so also, having become a Minister, He did not continue a Minister. For it belongs not to a minister to sit, but to stand.

This then he hints at here, and also the greatness of the sacrifice, if being [but] one, and having been offered up once only, it affected that which all [the rest] were unable to do. But he does not yet [treat] of these points.

Hebrews 7:28

For this He did, he says. This; what? For (he says) it is of necessity that this [Man] have somewhat also to offer Hebrews 8:3; not for Himself; for how did He offer Himself? But for the people. What do you say? And is He able to do this? Yea (he says). For the Law makes men high priests, which have infirmity. Hebrews 7:28 And does He not need to offer for Himself? No, he says. For, that you may not suppose that the [words, this] He did once for all, are said respecting Himself also, hear what he says: For the law makes men high priests, which have infirmity. On this account they both offer continually, and for themselves. He however who is mighty, He that has no sin, why should He offer for Himself, or oftentimes for others?

But the word of the oath which was since the Law [makes] the Son who has been consecrated for evermore. Consecrated: what is that? Paul does not set down the common terms of contradistinction; for after saying having Infirmity, he did not say the Son who is mighty, but consecrated: i.e. mighty, as one might say. You see that the name Son is used in contradistinction to that of servant. And by infirmity he means either sin or death.

What is, for evermore? Not now only without sin but always. If then He is perfect, if He never sins, if He lives always, why shall He offer many sacrifices for us? But for the present he does not insist strongly on this point: but what he does strongly insist upon is, His not offering on His own behalf.

9. Since then we have such an High Priest, let us imitate Him: let us walk in His footsteps. There is no other sacrifice: one alone has cleansed us, and after this, fire and hell. For indeed on this account he repeats it over and over, saying, one Priest, one Sacrifice, lest any one supposing that there are many [sacrifices] should sin without fear. Let us then, as many as have been counted worthy of The Seal, as many as have enjoyed The Sacrifice, as many as have partaken of the immortal Table, continue to guard our noble birth and our dignity for falling away is not without danger.

And as many as have not yet been counted worthy these [privileges], let not these either be confident on that account. For when a person goes on in sin, with the view of receiving holy baptism at the last gasp, oftentimes he will not obtain it. And, believe me, it is not to terrify you that I say what I am going to say. I have myself known many persons, to whom this has happened, who in expectation indeed of the enlightening sinned much, and on the day of their death went away empty. For God gave us baptism for this cause, that He might do away our sins, not that He might increase our sins. Whereas if any man have employed it as a security for sinning more, it becomes a cause of negligence. For if there had been no Washing, they would have lived more warily, as not having [the means of] forgiveness. You see that we are the ones who cause it to be said Let us do evil, that good may come. Romans 3:8

Wherefore, I exhort you also who are uninitiated, be sober. Let no man follow after virtue as an hireling, no man as a senseless person, no man as after a heavy and burdensome thing. Let us pursue it then with a ready mind, and with joy. For if there were no reward laid up, ought we not to be good? But however, at least with a reward, let us become good. And how is this anything else than a disgrace and a very great condemnation? Unless thou give me a reward (says one), I do not become self-controlled. Then am I bold to say something: you will never be self-controlled, no not even when you live with self-control, if you dost it for a reward. Thou esteemest not virtue at all, if you dost not love it. But on account of our great weakness, God was willing that for a time it should be practiced even for reward, yet not even so do we pursue it.

But let us suppose, if you will, that a man dies, after having done innumerable evil things, having also been counted worthy of baptism (which however I think does not readily happen), tell me, how will he depart there? Not indeed called to account for the deeds he had done, but yet without confidence; as is reasonable. For when after living a hundred years, he has no good work to show, but only that he has not sinned, or rather not even this, but that he was saved by grace only, and when he sees others crowned, in splendor, and highly approved: even if he fall not into hell, tell me, will he endure his despondency?

10. But to make the matter clear by an example, Suppose there are two soldiers, and that one of them steals, injures, overreaches, and that the other does none of these things, but acts the part of a brave man, does important things well, sets up trophies in war, stains his right hand with blood; then when the time arrives, suppose that (from the same rank in which the thief also was) he is at once conducted to the imperial throne and the purple; but suppose that the other remains there where he was, and merely of the royal kindness does not pay the penalty of his deeds, let him however be in the last place, and let him be stationed under the King. Tell me, will he be able to endure his despair when he sees him who was [ranked] with himself ascended even to the very highest dignities, and made thus glorious, and master of the world, while he himself still remains below, and has not even been freed from punishment with honor, but through the grace and kindness of the King? For even should the King forgive him, and release him from the charges against him, still he will live in shame; for surely not even will others admire him: since in such forgiveness, we admire not those who receive the gifts, but those who bestow them. And as much as the gifts are greater, so much the more are they ashamed who receive them, when their transgressions are great.

With what eyes then will such an one be able to look on those who are in the King's courts, when they exhibit their sweatings out of number and their wounds, while he has nothing to show, but has his salvation itself of the mere loving-kindness of God? For as if one were to beg off a murderer, a thief, an adulterer, when he was going to be arrested, and were to command him to stay at the porch of the King's palace, he will not afterwards be able to look any man in the face, although he has been set free from punishment: so too surely is this man's case.

For do not, I beseech you, suppose that because it is called a palace, therefore all attain the same things. For if here in King's courts there is the Prefect, and all who are about the King, and also those who are in very inferior stations, and occupy the place of what are called Decani (though the interval be so great between the Prefect and the Decanus) much more shall this be so in the royal court above.

And this I say not of myself. For Paul lays down another difference greater even than these. For (he says) as many differences as there are between the sun and the moon and the stars and the very smallest star, so many also between those in the kingdom [of Heaven]. And that the difference between the sun and the smallest star is far greater than that between the Decanus (as he is called) and the Prefect, is evident to all. For while the sun shines upon all the world at once, and makes it bright, and hides the moon and the stars, the other often does not appear, not even in the dark. For there are many of the stars which we do not see. When then we see others become suns, and we have the rank of the very smallest stars, which are not even visible, what comfort shall we have?

Let us not, I beseech you, let us not be so slothful, not so inert, let us not barter away the salvation of God for an easy life, but let us make merchandise of it, and increase it. For even if one be a Catechumen, still he knows Christ, still he understands the Faith, still he is a hearer of the divine oracles, still he is not far from the knowledge; he knows the will of his Lord. Wherefore does he procrastinate? Wherefore does he

delay and postpone? Nothing is better than a good life whether here or there, whether in case of the Enlightened or of the Catechumens,

11. For tell me what burdensome command have we enjoined? Have a wife (it is said) and be chaste. Is this difficult? How? When many, not Christians only but heathens also, live chastely without a wife. That which the heathen surpasses for vainglory, thou dost not even keep for the fear of God.

Give (He says) to the poor out of what you have. Is this burdensome? But in this case also heathen condemn us who for vainglory only have emptied out their whole possessions.

Use not filthy communication. Is this difficult? For if it had not been enjoined, ought we not to have done right in this, to avoid appearing degraded? For that the contrary conduct is troublesome, I mean the using filthy communication, is manifest from the fact that the soul is ashamed and blushes if it have been led to say any such thing and would not unless perhaps it were drunk. For when sitting in a public place, even if you do it at home, why do you not do it there? Because of those that are present. Why do you not readily do the same thing before your wife? That you may not insult her. So then thou dost it not, lest you should insult your wife; and do you not blush at insulting God? For He is everywhere present, and hears all things.

Be not drunken, He says. For this very thing of itself, is it not a chastisement? He did not say, Put your body on the rack, but what? Do not give it free rein so as to take away the authority of the mind: on the contrary make not provision for the lusts thereof. Romans 13:14

Do not (He says) seize by violence what is not your own; do not overreach; do not forswear yourself. What labors do these things require! What sweatings!

Speak evil of no man (He says) nor accuse falsely. The contrary indeed is a labor. For when you have spoken ill of another, immediately you are in danger, in suspicion, [saying] Did he of whom I spoke, hear? Whether he be great or small. For should he be a great man, immediately you will be indeed in danger; but if small, he will requite you with as much, or rather with what is far more grievous; for he will say evil of you in a greater degree. We are enjoined nothing difficult, nothing burdensome, if we have the will. And if we have not the will, even the easiest things will appear burdensome to us. What is easier than eating? But from great effeminacy many feel disgust even at this, and I hear many say, that it is weariness even to eat. None of these things is wearisome if you have but the will. For everything depends on the will after the grace from above. Let us will good things that we may attain also to the good things eternal, in Christ Jesus our Lord, whom to the Father together with the Holy Ghost be glory, might, honor, now and for ever, and world without end. Amen.

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