

1 Peter 2:4-12 (focus vv. 5, 9 - 1984 NIV)
We Are Each a Priest of God

4 As you come to him, the living Stone—rejected by men but chosen by God and precious to him—5 you also, like living stones, are being built into a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood, offering spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ. 6 For in Scripture it says: "See, I lay a stone in Zion, a chosen and precious cornerstone, and the one who trusts in him will never be put to shame." 7 Now to you who believe, this stone is precious. But to those who do not believe, "The stone the builders rejected has become the capstone," 7 Now to you who believe, this stone is precious. But to those who do not believe, "The stone the builders rejected has become the cornerstone," 8 and, "A stone that causes men to stumble and a rock that makes them fall." They stumble because they disobey the message—which is also what they were destined for. 9 But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light. 10 Once you were not a people, but now you are the people of God; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy. 11 Dear friends, I urge you, as aliens and strangers in the world, to abstain from sinful desires, which war against your soul. 12 Live such good lives among the pagans that, though they accuse you of doing wrong, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day he visits us.

Introduction

When Richard Nixon was the President of the US, he did two things that were well remembered by the American people. He normalised relationship between the US and China; he withdrew US combat forces from the Vietnam War.

But Nixon was more readily remembered, though in a negative way, for another thing he had done—i.e. the Watergate Scandal. He tried to cover up the attempt of some government officials to listen to confidential conversations using devices hidden in telephones. For this, he received adverse publicity and was forced to resign, making him the first ever US President to do so.

As far as the American people were concerned, Nixon was a big let-down and embarrassment because he had misused his high office.

Indeed, the hard facts of life is this—when much is given or entrusted, much is expected.

The church today is also given a highly exalted position in the sight of God—the church is a “holy priesthood” (v. 5); a “royal priesthood” (v. 9). This implies that each of us as a member of the Body of Christ is a “priest of God”. And if we do not exercise well our high priestly office, we can be a big let-down and even embarrassment to God who has called us to be His priests.

1 Peter was believed to be written at a time when Christians in the Roman Empire were facing persecution under the reign of Nero. It was written to exhort the Christians to keep on living in holiness in the midst of such persecution.

In our text today, the writer seems to be pressing forth this message to the suffering Christians—“The pagans are accusing you of wrong doing; they are applying pressure on you. But you must remain steadfast, and show that you are indeed different. You must order your lives by looking to Jesus who is the living stone, the cornerstone, and the capstone of your faith. You must know for sure who you are in Christ. You are the living stones, a spiritual house, a holy priesthood, a chosen people, a royal priesthood, and a holy nation. So live as befitting of your high priestly calling.”

For today’s purpose, we will focus our thoughts on what it means to be a “holy and royal priesthood” as the Body of Christ—i.e. we will focus much on vv. 5 and 9.

So, in what ways are you and I priests of God?

- Does it mean we all put on long, clerical robes?
- Does it mean we all work full-time in church?

Of course, we are not all like that. The term “priest” is not so much an honorary title, but very much a responsible position in our text today. And each of us is a priest of God because we are entrusted with and responsible for certain priestly functions in Christ. We are each a priest of God because ...

I. A priest intercedes for others before God (v. 5).

Verse 5 exhorts us “to be a holy priesthood, offering spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ”.

- The concept of a holy priesthood in the Bible doesn’t imply that we’re inherently holier than others.
 - Rather, it highlights our privileged role as believers to intercede/plea on behalf of others before God (see Eph. 6:18; 1 Tim. 2:1-2).
 - Our “holiness” comes from our position in Christ, not from our own merits.
 - We’re set apart to serve God and others, and our prayers are a vital part of that service.
- In the OT, the Aaronic High Priest has the privilege and responsibility to enter the Holy of Holies in the temple to intercede for the people of Israel.
 - Today, we too each has the same privilege and responsibility as a priest in Jesus Christ to come directly into the presence of God to intercede for others, even for ourselves.
 - Today, we come to God not with trembling knees but with confidence because of who we are in Jesus Christ; because our “holiness” comes from our position in Christ.
 - The OT priest represents the people in that he presents their needs to God; he also conveys the divine will of God to the people.

- He is like a “bridge” between God and His people—in fact, the Latin word for “priest” is “pontifex”, meaning “bridge-builder”.
- By interceding for the people, the priest acts like a bridge and allowing people to be brought to God by and through his intercessions.
- By conveying the will of God to the people, the priest acts like a bridge and allowing God’s will and word to be heard and known by them.

We are each a priest of God, praying for ourselves as well as for others. We have not much problem being sensitive to our own needs. Perhaps, we need to work more on being sensitive to the needs of others if we are to intercede for them as priests of God in Jesus Christ.

- Husbands, are you interceding for your wives?
- Wives, are you interceding for your husbands?
- Parents, are you interceding for your children—that they will grow up in the fear of the Lord, and not just the fear of poor grades in school?
- Children, are you interceding for your parents—not only for their salvation, but also for their understanding of you and your understanding of them?
- People, are you interceding for the leaders of the church—that their will have godly wisdom and perseverance as the devil shoots arrows of discouragement and doubt at them?
- Leaders, are you interceding for the people of the church—that they be protected by the Lord and guided by His Word and Spirit so that they can indeed be in the world, but not of the world?

In the OT, the priest intercedes on behalf of the people before God. In other words, if he leaves people out of his sphere of concern, then there will be an important aspect missing in his priestly functions.

- This implies that each of us as a priest of God in Jesus Christ needs to be interested not only in ourselves, but also in the lives of one another so that we can intercede for one another.
- There will be times when we are so out of step with God that we need others to intercede for us, and even to minister God’s Word to us—e.g. an advice, a challenge, an encouragement, a correction, a rebuke in love.
- This is what it means to be a priest to one another in Jesus Christ without adopting a “holier than thou” posture before one another.

Engaging in such intercessions does not make me feel “holier” than others because as I begin to understand more and better the other person’s situation and needs, I often feel rather inadequate myself. Thus, it makes me more dependent on the Lord than on myself. That’s what it means to intercede for others before God as a priest in Jesus Christ, and exhort them in God’s love.

- We do what is humanly possible, and leave the impossible to God.
- We bring the names of others to the throne of God’s grace, love, and mercy; we lay their cares and concerns in life before His throne by our intercession.
- We then trust God to do what is beyond our human capacity or ability.

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- We bring others to God as their interceding priest, and we do not try to be God to them.

Each of us is a priest of God in Jesus Christ. We intercede for one another as priests to one another before God. The priesthood of believers implies that the pastor is NOT the ONLY priest who can intercede for us; the priesthood of believers means we are all fellow priests in the Body of Christ who have both the privilege and responsibility to intercede for one another before God.

There's a second priestly function highlighted in our text today, and that is ...

II. A priest brings his best to God (v. 5).

Verse 5 tells us that a priest is to offer "spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ".

- This act of offering pictures the priest bearing the animal sacrifice up to the altar in the temple.
- In the same way, the Christian as a priest is also to offer not an animal sacrifice, but a spiritual sacrifice—i.e. his own consecrated life dedicated to God.
- Only then is this spiritual sacrifice "acceptable to God"—literally, it means "received by God Himself with pleasure".
- God is pleased with the consecrated life of a Christian that is dedicated to Him.
- In the OT, God was pleased with the sacrifices offered by the priest because these pointed to Jesus Christ as the Ultimate Sacrifice for the atonement of the sin of fallen humanity.
- Today, God is pleased with the spiritual sacrifice of a consecrated Christian life dedicated to Him because He sees a reflection of the Lord Jesus Christ in such a life.

There is also one important one very important responsibility of the priest that we need to note.

- In the OT, the Aaronic priest is to ensure that the animal sacrifice brought to God must be without blemish; that the best must be offered to God.
- But there were times during the OT period when the priests had failed to bring the best to God at the altar in the temple (as in the days of Malachi, Ezra, and Nehemiah).
- The priests did not even see the need for themselves to be pleasing and holy before God, and hence, God was greatly displeased with them as well as Israel as a nation of people.

In the same way, we are each a priest of God and we are to offer ourselves as a spiritual sacrifice before God; we are each to bring the best of ourselves to God—who we are, what we do, and what we have.

- Thus, even the seemingly smallest task can be pleasing to God when we do it unto Him with our utmost best.

- We then should undertake each task seriously and offer our best (in or out of church), never mind if our effort may seem to amount to nothing much when compared with that of others.
- Yes, unrealistic comparison can discourage us from bringing our best to God because we think our giving seems to amount to little or nothing.
- Another way we can lose the spiritual zeal and fervour in bringing our best to God is when our Christian life and service becomes not our best routine, but a boring routine.

What are some examples of us not giving our best to God as His priests?

1. One example is when we allow our Sunday worship to become a boring routine because we do it every Sunday.
 - Having been taxed by the demands and rigours of the week, we come to church on Sunday but lost that sense of personal preparation and concentration—we become easily distracted in church.
 - When we sing “Turn Your Eyes upon Jesus”, our eyes are looking at someone else or at our mobile phone.
 - When the offering bag is passed round, our mind does not focus on giving to God, but instead wanders to that person who owes us some money.
 - When the pastor is preaching on the testing we face in life, we become anxious of the coming test or examination we have to take in the new week to come.
 - Indeed, to be at our best on Sunday and offer it to God in worship, we need to prepare ourselves for it on a daily basis, not just that few minutes before Sunday service begins.
 - The Bible exhorts us to “be still and know that I am God” (Psalm 46:10), and a good discipline to cultivate as we prepare for Sunday to come is to learn to be still before God and reflect on the events of the day before we lay ourselves to sleep.
 - Is there a joy to thank God for?
 - Is there a concern or burden to commit to God?
 - Is there something not right in us that we need to settle with God?
 - We cannot be sad and angry for the preceding six days, and then expect to be suddenly happy and calm when Sunday comes.
 - Feelings like sadness and anger can distant us from God, and if we do not attempt to resolve them during the week, we will find it difficult to worship with the best of our mind, body, and spirit.
 - In other words, a worshipful experience does not solely depend on others—e.g. the preacher, the worship leader, the choir.
 - As a priest of God, we are each responsible in contributing to that experience by preparing ourselves well in mind, body, and spirit before we come together in worship on Sunday.

2. A second example of us not giving our best to God as His priest is when we take God's grace for granted, and become lazy and complacent in our Christian living.

American pastor Francis Chan resigned from his church in the US, Cornerstone Community Church, due to concerns that the church had become too focussed on his own speaking gift and sermons, rather than on fostering a deeper relationship with God among its members. He felt that the church had become too focussed on him, and that people were coming to hear him preach rather than to seek an encounter with God.

After leaving Cornerstone, Chan spent time in Asia, where he was inspired by the passion and purity of faith among persecuted Christians. He realised that the Western church model, with its emphasis on large buildings and professional clergy, was not the only way to do church.

He has since stepped out of the comfort of his own megachurch to attempt new things for God and expect new things from Him. Currently, Chan is involved in a new church-planting network called "We Are Church", which focuses on planting small, home-based churches that are more relational and less focussed on professional clergy. Each church in the network is made up of 10-20 people, and they meet in homes rather than large buildings. This model allows for more intimacy and accountability among members, and it also enables the church to be more mobile and adaptable.

Chan is also continuing to speak and write, and in his latest book, "Crazy Love" (Chapter 4), he shares about his own struggles with the concept of eternal security—i.e. the understanding of "once saved, always saved". He writes:

I used to think that because I was saved, I could live however I wanted. I thought that God's love for me was not dependent on my obedience or my love for Him. But as I read through the Bible, I began to see that this was not the case.

I realised that my salvation was not just about getting to heaven, but about living a life that honours God. I saw that God's love for me was not just a feeling, but a call to action.

I began to understand that my faith was not just about believing in God, but about trusting Him and obeying Him. And as I started to live out my faith in this way, I experienced a depth of joy and peace that I had never known before.

Francis Chan's testimony highlights the importance of living out our faith in obedience to God, rather than using the concept of eternal security as an excuse to live a lukewarm-ness. Chan believes that one must not take

God's grace in one's salvation for granted by remaining lazy and complacent, becoming lukewarm or even sinful in our Christian life.

(<https://www.premierchristianity.com/interviews/francis-chan-why-i-quit-my-megachurch-and-started-again/1183.article>)

Our human tendency is to want the best from God, but without demanding the best from ourselves. However, we are reminded that as a priest of God, we are each responsible in bringing our best to Him—that's our spiritual sacrifice to God as we believe in Him and live for Him in this world.

Lastly, a third priestly function that we have in Christ is ...

III. A priest declares the praise of God (v. 9).

Verse 9 reads—"But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light."

- We as a priesthood are to "declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light"—the word "declare" carries the idea of "to advertise" in our modern usage.
- This implies that the priest in the OT is constantly aware of the mighty acts of God and His excellence, and always ready and willing to share these with others.
- It is not just declaring the praises of God in the past Exodus experience because God does not only speak and act in the distant memories of yesteryears, but also with the freshness of today and the hopefulness of tomorrow.
- Thus, the priest declares the praises of God not only with the past experiences of God's greatness and grace; he also declares the praises of God with the freshness of today's encounters with Him and the hopefulness of God's unfailing faithfulness in the future.

We are each a priest of God, and this implies that we too are to be aware and anticipative of God's acts of greatness and grace—past, present, future—and declare ("advertise") this for all to know and to see.

1. To lost people, we are to tell them that there's salvation in Jesus Christ.
 - We are to be an "advertisement" for the Lord so that others may know and see His grace, love, and mercy.
 - For an advertisement to be effective, it must convince people that what is advertised is not only different, but also better.
 - If we are each a priest of God who is declaring ("advertising") His grace, love, and mercy, think of the words we say and the things we do—are these any different and better than what the world has to say and do?
 - Why should others be convinced that our God is worthy when they hear and watch us?

- The world may say, “Greed is OK because it motivates you to be successful. There is no such thing as work-life balance because if you want to be successful in work, you must be prepared to have less time for your family.”
 - What about us—as a priest of God in Jesus Christ, are we each declaring/advertising a different and better message by living a lifestyle alternative to that of the world?
 - A lifestyle that says relationships and people are more important than achievements and possessions.
 - A lifestyle that affirms a man with achievements and possessions that are less than another in the eyes of the world is not a lesser person in the sight of God.
2. To fellow believers in Christ, we are to encourage one another to exemplify praises to God as we live each day.
- Do we still talk in the language of yesteryears? How real is God to you and me today such that you and I can truly praise Him with the freshness of new encounters and experiences with Him?
 - Modern day life is such that it can so influence us that we can end up as a busy person of the world, but not a praising person of God ... because we have lost that sense of praise for God; that sense of being still and know that He’s God and He’s present.
 - What then are some things we need to say “no” in order to be a priest of God in Jesus Christ, declaring the praises of God in our world today?

Brother Lawrence (1611-1691) was a Carmelite monk who lived in France. He’s famous for his simple, yet profound approach to living a life of praise and worship. Some key aspects of his life that reflect his commitment to living as a person of praise to God are:

Practising the presence of God: Brother Lawrence believed in cultivating a constant awareness of God’s presence in his life. He’d often say, “I make it my business to persevere in His holy presence.”

Finding joy in menial tasks: Brother Lawrence saw every task, no matter how mundane, an opportunity to worship and praise God. He’d say, “The time of business does not with me differ from the time of prayer.”

Living in the present moment: Brother Lawrence focussed on the present moment, rather than dwelling on the past or worrying about the future. He’d say, “I do nothing else but abide in His presence.”

Cultivating gratitude: Brother Lawrence practised gratitude by thanking God for everything, big or small. He’d say, “I never pass a day without thanking God for the blessings He has bestowed on me.”

Embracing simplicity: Brother Lawrence lived a simple life, free from distractions and worldly desires. He’d say, “I am content with what I have, and I am not troubled with the desire of anything more.”

Brother Lawrence's life is a powerful reminder that we can praise and worship God in every moment, no matter what we're doing. His approach to living in the presence of God is an inspiration to many, and his writings continue to be widely read and studied today.

(<https://www.learnreligions.com/biography-of-brother-lawrence-5070341>)

Conclusion

1 Peter was written at a time when the pressure of Roman persecution threatened to squeeze the Christians out of their pattern of godly living. Thus, the writer wrote to remind them that they're a holy priesthood of believers, living for God in their hostile world.

We have different pressures that are threatening us today though in the same way—i.e. trying to squeeze us out of our pattern of godly living. Thus, we too are to be reminded that we are a holy priesthood of God, living for God in our present world.

- We seek God as a "holy priesthood"—we intercede and exhort others in Jesus Christ not because we are spiritually superior to them, but only because of our position in Christ; we do this as our priestly privilege and responsibility, being aware of our own need to be interceded and exhorted by others as well.
- We serve God as a "holy priesthood"—we are to give of our best to God in all that He has called us to be and do, big or small, as our offering of sacrifice to Him.
- We share Christ as a "holy priesthood"—we are to declare the praises of God—yesterday, today, and tomorrow—to both the lost and the saved in our daily lives. In this way, we worship, work, and witness for the Lord for a whole life time by doing so one day at a time.

We are a "holy priesthood". Let's encourage and challenge one another to be priests of God in Jesus Christ, making a difference in our own selves, in our church, and in our world. Amen!