

## Hebrews 7:4-7

### Timeless Truth

#### *The less is blessed of the better – v. 7*

Verse 7 presents to us the very core of the argument that Paul is utilizing to demonstrate the superiority of Christ as our Great High Priest. It is because the less is blessed of the better that Abraham paid tithes to Melchizedek. And it is because the less is blessed of the better that Melchizedek conveyed the blessing of God upon Abraham. And because the tribe of Levi, from which the Levitical priests would arise was in the loins of Abraham when Abraham received the blessing and paid tithes, therefore, the priesthood of Melchizedek was superior to the Levitical priesthood. And since Christ's priesthood is from the order of Melchizedek and not from the order of the Levitical priests, Christ was and is a superior priest to any of the high priests that came from the tribe of Levi.

All of this springs from the general principle or perhaps you could even call it the proverb of v. 7 which tells us that *the less is blessed of the better*. Now I think it's important to understand what this verse is really teaching us. Paul is not suggesting that there was any kind of moral superiority of Melchizedek over Abraham. Abraham, after all is the Father of the faithful. His faith stands out as an outstanding character trait of the man. He had the faith to leave his homeland when he was called away from it and he had the faith to offer his son, Isaac, on the altar when God called for it.

Paul draws from the character Abraham when he writes to the Romans and gives us a description of faith. Listen to what he says in Rom. 4:20,21 *He staggered not at the promise of God through unbelief; but was strong in faith, giving glory to God; And being fully persuaded that, what he had promised, he was able also to perform.* What a great definition for faith – being fully persuaded that what God promises He will perform.

So when we read this phrase *the less is blessed of the better* we're not being asked to believe that there was any kind of moral superiority in Melchizedek over Abraham. The terms *less* and *better* refer to rank, not to character. As a priest of the Most High God Melchizedek was of an elevated rank. And of course as the King of Salem he was also of an elevated rank – ranks that God Himself had bestowed upon him. And this rank was recognized and acknowledged and submitted to by Abraham when he paid tithes to Melchizedek and when he received the blessing from him.

Of course, when we're talking about the One that Melchizedek typifies, even Christ our High Priest, we most definitely affirm that there is superiority of rank as well as superiority of character. Christ, you see, is not only a priest and a king but He's our Great High Priest and He is King of Kings and Lord of Lords.

The greatest contrast that comes out of the 7<sup>th</sup> chapter of Hebrews between Christ and the Levitical priests is the contrast between life and death and the contrast between sinfulness and sinlessness. Look at Heb v. 8 where we read of the Levitical priests and then of Christ: *And here men that die receive tithes; but there he [receiveth them], of whom it is witnessed*

*that he liveth.* Add to this v. 16 where referring to Christ we read: *Who is made, not after the law of a carnal commandment, but after the power of an endless life.* You see the contrast between the priests that die, v. 8 and the priest with an endless life, v. 16? We see this contrast again in vv. 23,24 *And they truly were many priests, because they were not suffered to continue by reason of death: But this man, because he continueth ever, hath an unchangeable priesthood.* And if you add v. 25 the contrast is again magnified: *Wherefore he is able also to save them to the uttermost that come unto God by him, seeing he ever liveth to make intercession for them.* So the contrast between death and life is brought out plainly between these two priestly orders.

The moral contrast is brought out in v. 27 where we read again of Christ that *He needeth not daily, as those high priests, to offer up sacrifice, first for his own sins, and then for the people's: for this he did once, when he offered up himself.* Of course His endless life vindicates His sinless character for if death had any claim on Him He would not have risen from the dead.

So the statement in v. 7 *the less is blessed of the better* is limited in scope when the comparison is drawn between Melchizedek and Abraham but the scope is infinitely wider when the statement is applied to Christ. And what I would like to do this morning is to look at this verse as it stands as a principle and as it applies to Christ. By viewing the verse these ways I think you'll see that it provides for us consolation, guidance, and encouragement. Let's look, then, at this general statement that forms the core of Paul's argument in this section:

***And Without All Contradiction the Less is Blessed of the Better***

Would you notice with me first of all:

## I. The Certainty of This Statement

The fact that the less is blessed of the better is said to be *without all contradiction*. Some versions render it *without any dispute*. Young's Literal Translation reads: *apart from all controversy*.

We know that every statement of Scripture is inspired of God and therefore settled beyond all controversy. But there are certain expressions in Scripture that the Scripture itself emphasizes as being incontrovertible. 1Tim. 3:16 for example, says *And without controversy great is the mystery of godliness: God was manifest in the flesh, justified in the Spirit, seen of angels, preached unto the Gentiles, believed on in the world, received up into glory.*

Here, then, in our text is such a statement. Nobody that Paul was addressing would argue with the truth of it – *and without contradiction the less is blessed of the better*. The certitude of such a statement rests on a foundation that is under severe attack in our day. It's the foundation of the authority structure that God Himself has ordained.

I said a moment ago that the terms refer to rank when it comes to the comparison between Melchizedek and Abraham. Even in ancient times that preceded the Levitical order of worship there was at least some form of ecclesiastical structure to the people of God. We know little about it in the narratives that are given to us in the Old Testament but the narration in Gen. 14 of Melchizedek and Abraham certainly makes it plain that such a structure existed.

In the ensuing generations the structure would become much more intricate and concrete as God would call for the tribe of Levi to be the priestly tribe among the Hebrews. And in the New Testament dispensation there would also be a definite structure to ecclesiastical order. As Presbyterians we believe the Bible reveals clearly an order of Elders (who are sometimes called Bishops), who have the rule of the church. We'll have occasion to visit this issue again when we get to the end of this epistle to the Hebrews.

- Heb 13:7 *Remember them which have the rule over you, who have spoken unto you the word of God: whose faith follow, considering the end of [their] conversation.*
- Heb 13:17 *Obey them that have the rule over you, and submit yourselves: for they watch for your souls, as they that must give account, that they may do it with joy, and not with grief: for that [is] unprofitable for you.*

Ecclesiastical structure is only one of the realms in which God has ordained an authority structure. He has also ordained the authority structure in the home. This authority structure in the home or in creation is one of the things that is honored in our worship through the use of headcoverings. So we read in 1Cor. 11:8,9 *For the man is not of the woman; but the woman of the man. Neither was the man created for the woman; but the woman for the man.* This order in creation is honored symbolically through the use of headcoverings. And one of the reasons we know that the practice is a continuing practice and not just a local custom is because of the timeless theological arguments that are behind the practice. It's based on an authority structure that God has ordained.

We know that within the home husbands are to love their wives and wives are to be submissive to their husbands and children are to obey their parents. This is not to say that there's any kind of superior or inferior grades when it comes to gender, it's only to say that God has established the ranks within the home. The same holds true for civil government. Rom. 13:1 *Let every soul be subject unto the higher powers. For there is no power but of God: the powers that be are ordained of God.*

So when it comes to church or when it comes to the state or when it comes to the home the statement of our text applies that there are divinely ordained ranks and the less is blessed of the better – or the higher rank confers blessing on the lower rank and the lower rank submits, as Abraham did, to the higher rank.

From Abraham's example we may draw the lesson that the mark of a spiritually minded man or woman or boy or girl is that they recognize these authority structures in the church, in the home and in the nation. And where this authority structure is honored and followed

the blessings of God ensue but where this authority structure is resisted the blessings of God are stopped up. Or, we can also say that where authority is misused or abused instead of used for service the blessings of God become stopped up.

And in affirming the principle of our text we are able to account in large measure for why the blessings of God are not known. Where a spirit of independence prevails the blessings of God are lost whether it be in a nation or a church or a home. Where authority is not recognized or respected the blessing of God is forfeited. In a sense it was this resistance to authority and the assertion of independence which characterized the fall of man.

Man in his sin resists the notion of authority. Sinners despise authority. And in our politically correct culture there is such an emphasis placed on equality that the very idea of authority is held in contempt. And we bear the rotten fruit that comes from being unwilling to acknowledge that the less is blessed of the better. Churches are engrossed in compromise as they cater to the culture rather than set the standard for the culture. Families are destroyed and marriages dissolve because this authority structure either isn't recognized or it's abused. And we're on the road to anarchy in our country where each one does what's right in his own eyes and society breaks down at every level. Stability evaporates, trust disappears, and society becomes dangerous.

On the other hand, where the precept of the text is respected the blessings of God become certain. *And without all contradiction the less is blessed of the better.* This is tantamount to saying that a nation that honors and respects the authority structures that God has ordained enjoys the blessing of God. Society functions with mutual respect and stability. The church operates the way it should in administering the means of grace and practicing discipline. And the home knows peace and joy and unity. These blessings are made certain by honoring what God has ordained.

So we see the certainty of the statement – *without all contradiction the less is blessed of the better.* Let's think next for a moment on:

## II. The Guidance That This Statement Provides Us

If the statement holds true that *the less is blessed of the better* then the way for the Christian to strive in order to know God's grace and God's blessing is to take the position of the lesser and grant to Christ His rightful position as the better. This principle is perhaps nowhere better exemplified than in the statement of John the Baptist when he says of Christ in Jn. 3:30 that *He must increase, but I must decrease.*

That statement and the Spirit behind that statement of John the Baptist has always amazed me. Here was a man who came on to the scene of time when the prophetic voice of God had been silent for some 400 years. Now at long last that silence is broken and John's ministry was blessed of God as multitudes came out into the wilderness to hear John the Baptist preach. And his preaching had such an impact on people that they willingly submitted to the baptism of repentance.

But the time came when Christ Himself arrived on the scene. And Christ began to be the prominent figure. And so John the Baptist's disciples come to him – *Rabbi*, they say in Jn. 3:26 *he that was with thee beyond Jordan, to whom thou barest witness, behold, the same baptizeth, and all men come to him.* His ministry is growing, yours is declining – that's what they said to John.

And if we could take that complaint of John's disciples and transport it through time to our present day then the usual reaction in a church or a denomination would be *we've got to do something.* Too often churches today become as jealous of other works or movements as the Pharisees became jealous of the apostles and they search for ways to slander others and pull them down, as it were.

What a refreshing contrast does John the Baptist represent to us in comparison to such a competitive spirit that is governed by pride. And John certainly came to know the truth that the less is blessed of the better when he received from Christ such commendation that recognized John as the greatest of the prophets.

And so the principle of our text *the less is blessed of the better* provides for us the guidance we need in order to enjoy the blessing of God. We must be willing to occupy the low ground, as it were. We must learn to be clothed with humility. Listen to the words of Peter in 1Pet. 5:5 *Likewise, ye younger, submit yourselves unto the elder. Yea, all [of you] be subject one to another, and be clothed with humility: for God resisteth the proud, and giveth grace to the humble.*

Doesn't this verse teach us to honor the authority structure that God has ordained? And doesn't it teach us to use authority to serve? And doesn't it teach us that where this authority structure is resisted that God Himself resists the resister because he's proud and the resister forfeits the grace that God freely gives to the humble.

So the Christian must willingly occupy the place of lesser rank. Listen to how Paul expresses it in Php 2:3 *Let nothing be done through strife or vainglory; but in lowliness of mind let each esteem other better than themselves.* I'm willing to take the low post, as it were, and to elevate others to the higher post in my esteem which means that I respect authority that God has ordained or I use authority to serve.

But not only must we as Christians be willing to be clothed with humility and to esteem others better than ourselves but we must also constantly be striving to have Christ Himself occupy the place of the better. *The less is blessed of the better* which means I strive to decrease and I also strive to have Christ increase in my estimation of His greatness.

There's a verse in the Psalm 78 where the psalmist, in reflecting on the wilderness wanderings of the Israelites, remarks in vv. 40, 41 *How oft did they provoke him in the wilderness, and grieve him in the desert! Yea, they turned back and tempted God, and limited the Holy One of Israel.*

They limited the Holy One of Israel! Christ certainly does not increase or occupy the place of the better when His people place limitations on Him. You've heard me say it

before that we never run the risk of overestimating the greatness of our Redeemer but we constantly run the risk of underestimating His greatness. Avoiding this propensity is one of the things that the epistle to the Hebrews is designed to help us correct. This is why the Apostle lays great stress on Christ being better than the angels and better than the prophets and better than the Levitical High Priests.

In so exalting Christ this way and leading the readers of his epistle to exalt Christ this way the Apostle is contributing to helping his readers know the truth that *Without all contradiction the less is blessed of the better*. We put ourselves on the pathway to blessing, then, by taking the place of the lesser and exalting Christ to His rightful place of the better. And before leaving this point let me just say that the two things work together – i.e. as we succeed in exalting Christ we will at the same time succeed in humbling ourselves. The perception of His glory will stir our hearts to humility. It's important to approach the matter this way because some Christians can abuse the idea of humility by thinking it means that they adopt some form of monastic mentality and beat themselves up the way Luther beat himself up as an Augustinian monk.

*And without all contradiction the less is blessed of the better*. We find in such a statement a general principle that acknowledges the authority structures that God has ordained. We find in it also a theological truth that pertains to Christ and we find in it an ethical statement that guides us in our striving. It remains for us to consider:

### III. The Blessing of the Statement

*The less is blessed of the better* our text reads. The question that now needs to be considered for a moment is how? – how are the less blessed of the better? And in order to answer that question as it pertains immediately to the context we need to understand something about the blessing that a priest would communicate to a recipient. We're told in v. 1 that Melchizedek met Abraham when Abraham was returning from the slaughter and that he blessed him. What does that mean?

If we can take the Levitical priests as an example of this practice then we can answer the question based on the instructions the priests received about blessing the people. So in Numbers 6:23-27 we read:

*Speak unto Aaron and unto his sons, saying, On this wise ye shall bless the children of Israel, saying unto them, The LORD bless thee, and keep thee: The LORD make his face shine upon thee, and be gracious unto thee: The LORD lift up his countenance upon thee, and give thee peace. And they shall put my name upon the children of Israel; and I will bless them.* You see in the last verse of this portion the certainty of the blessing. When this procedure was followed by the priests then the Lord affirmed *I will bless them*.

We're given, I think, an ever clearer picture of this concept of the priest blessing the people in 2Ch 30:27. *Then the priests the Levites arose and blessed the people: and their voice was heard, and their prayer came [up] to his holy dwelling place, [even] unto heaven.*

You see a connection in this verse with the priests blessing the people and prayer. Their blessing amounted to a prayer and as the text indicates their voice was heard and their prayer came up to his holy dwelling place, even unto heaven. What, then, are the blessings that are received by the less and conveyed by the better? Could we not say that the blessings in view are the blessings of answered prayer – and the blessings of grace conveyed through those prayers.

The grace of God's favor, the grace of the brightness of His countenance shining upon us, the blessing of peace and joy filling our hearts and the blessings of all that pertains to salvation – sins forgiven, righteousness imputed, assurance of eternal life and a home in heaven. These are blessings in view.

And if we apply the text to Christ as our Great High Priest after the order of Melchizedek then when we say the less is blessed of the better we affirm that Christ prays for us. He intercedes for us, according to v. 25 in such a way that salvation is applied to us to the uttermost. And when salvation is applied to us to the uttermost then we can't help but conclude that we are a blessed people indeed.

*Blessed with all spiritual blessings in heavenly places in Christ* Paul writes in Eph. 1:3. Blessed with benefits of forgiveness and spiritual healing, redemption from destruction, lovingkindness and tender mercies according to the psalmist in Ps. 103. And when we're blessed with all these things then accompanying these spiritual blessings will be the grace to persevere in the faith. That's Paul's design in Hebrews – to encourage the Hebrew believers to persevere in the faith. And the greatest encouragement a believer can have that will enable him to persevere even in the midst of circumstances that seem insurmountable is the encouragement of knowing that he's blessed of God.

*The less is blessed of the better* which means that you and I are blessed of Christ – so long as He has his place as the better and we have our place as the lesser. And so we see in this text a general statement that pertains to God's ordained authority structure. We see in the text guidance to lead us to the place of blessing – we humble ourselves and strive to boost our esteem for Christ. And we see the encouragement of knowing with certainty that the blessings of God will flow where humility is found and Christ is exalted.

*The less is blessed of the better.* May the Lord stamp His word on our hearts and guide us to the place of being able to enjoy His bountiful blessings.