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Title: Exposed!

Preaching: Ryan Hazen, Lead Pastor, Mud Creek Campus

Text: [Hebrews 4:12-16](#)

E-mail: [Ryan Hazen](#)

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Last week, I went for my annual dermatologist checkup. If you haven't done it, do it. I'm happy to have the peace of mind that comes with knowing that I've been checked out. I do have a couple of observations from my visit, however. First, I want one of those spray cans of stuff that freezes things on contact. I had one little place on my

back that the doctor thought was "interesting" so she took her can of freeze spray and zapped it. That is powerful stuff.

My other observation has to do with the gowns. I've been going to doctors long enough that I know the routine. They call you back, the nurse hands you a gown, tells you to take everything off except your underwear and put the gown on – "opening in the back" they remind you, and they'll be in shortly to do the examination. I have a couple of questions for my health care professional friends – first, I know the gowns are supposed to be "one size fits all" and I get that but they must make those gowns in different lengths. Why, then, do I always get handed the mini-skirt length gown? Secondly, do you have to go to a special school to learn how to tie the strings behind you? I simply cannot do it so my gown is short and flapping open in the back. I stand waiting for them to return, usually in a room that is kept at 45 degrees, feeling quite exposed. I apologize if I have ruined your appetite for lunch, but today's scripture brought these memories flooding back to me.

We are exposed before God. The writer of Hebrews uses the word "naked" to describe it. No short gown – no gown period – naked! The Epistle to the Hebrews is often a study in contrasts and our passage today is no exception. It's a passage that sets a chilling warning immediately before giving great comfort. It is God and the reader's relationship with God that unites these very different messages even in our short passage. God is ever the judge but is also the giver of grace. Let's start with ever the judge.

Hebrews 4:12 and 13 are the culmination of the warning the author has been articulating since the third chapter. He does not want his listeners to fall back into the lack of trust displayed by the generation of Israelites who had to wander in the wilderness. Whereas vs. 12 is so easily quotable and applicable to all of Scripture, studying its setting in Hebrews reminds the reader of the verse's seriousness. Here the author compares the word of God to a sword with a sharp blade on each side capable of cutting through bone. Even more terrifying, it can also cut through the human spirit exposing the inner workings of the heart. Everything in creation is exposed – naked – before the eyes of God. ¹

“And before him no creature is hidden, but all are naked and laid bare to the eyes of the one to whom we must render an account.” (Hebrews 4:13)

YIKES - We, Hebrews reminds us, are a part of this creation, so we are under God's searching word. We will have to give an account of our lives and our hearts. God is speaking to us and this essentially asks whether we are ready to stand before his exacting and exposing word? What is the state of our hearts? I can't help but think his imagery is meant to scare the Hebrews into getting their hearts right with God.

Many tactics, even up to 40 years ago or so, stopped there and believed that we could be scared into a relationship with God. If they are using Hebrews as a guide, they stop too soon. That's where the pendulum swings in the other direction. The author of Hebrews throws them and us a rope. What if Jesus, the man born into the tribe of Judah is the Son of God? What if he is also the great high priest who serves God in heaven itself. “Since then, we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus, the Son of God, let us hold fast to our confession.” (Hebrews 4:14)

The author proceeds to draw out a vital implication of this confession. This mighty high priest who stands before the face of God is at the same time the high priest who can completely understand the weaknesses of the Hebrews. If they were nervous or ashamed at the prospect of their hearts being laid bare before God, they now hear that One who is God's own Son understands their weaknesses. And, his level of understanding is not just sympathy but empathy. You know the difference, don't you? Sympathy involves understanding from your perspective. Empathy involves putting yourself in the other person's shoes and understanding WHY they may have these particular feelings.

Jesus experiences the difficulties that weakness brings because he, too, has experienced temptation and testing in all ways as they have. Whatever weakness, whatever secret of the heart, whatever lack of trust the word

exposed, Jesus, too, has faced and overcome it. This Jesus is exactly the kind of priest they need in the situation in which they find themselves. Standing before a God who has spoken to them, whose speech revealed their whole being, who is awaiting a response, they can say nothing in defense of themselves. What they can do, however, is proclaim allegiance to and dependence upon the mediator who sits at God's right hand. The author wants them to grasp this idea that Jesus is sympathetic, not – empathetic, to their situation. He understands why I made the decisions that I did but does not hold them against me.

Their confession of him transforms their stance before God. Whereas fear would be expected, now they can come in boldness. They approach the same living and active God, but now they also know his throne is one of grace and not one of punishment. "Let us therefore approach the throne of grace with boldness, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need." (Hebrews 4:16) The God who knows all about them – has seen their heart naked – the God who could demand their lives gives mercy, favor, and help right when it is needed. God knows the hearts of all but lets that go to cleanse them forever.

A couple of decades back, a young man named Kevin and a few friends made a dreadful mistake. In a lapse of judgment, due to a few beers on a back road and adolescent bravado, they robbed a liquor store. To them at the time, it seemed like a huge prank. The police didn't see it that way. The judge sent him to juvenile detention for two years. When he got out, he discovered that the world had moved on without him. His friends had graduated and many had gone on to college, seeking careers and stability. He discovered that his parents had lost their expectations for him. He had trouble getting a job. After that one night, that one bad mistake, his world had changed. No matter how hard he tried to make amends, his record followed him everywhere.

Then he met George. George had been looking for someone to care for him. He was aging, and he needed help. He hired Kevin to care for him. The pay was meager but for Kevin, it was a job. It had meaning, purpose, and a chance to do something that perhaps could make a difference. During the two years before George died, the two bonded. Kevin found George funny, smart, honest, and caring. He became not only George's helper but his connection with others.

George could see the hurt in Kevin's eyes and offered him his wisdom, friendship, and acceptance. Soon for Kevin going to George's house was no longer about earning pay or doing a service at all, but he looked forward to spending time with George. Kevin hadn't told George about his past, and he

hoped he wouldn't find out. He didn't want to lose the respect of the only friend he had.

When George died of cancer after those two years, Kevin received three letters in the mail. The first was a letter from a local non-profit, inviting Kevin to come and work for them. They said George had arranged for the job, and Kevin had come with George's highest recommendation. He could start on Monday. The second was a letter from the Courthouse, saying that his record had been expunged. The third was a note from George. In the note, George thanked Kevin for his friendship and companionship and then told him to be proud of who he is, to be free of his past, and to always follow his heart. In the envelope was a check for \$20,000 to be used for Kevin's future, his education, and his life. Kevin was astounded.

Although Kevin had known George in his aging years, had gotten to know him as a person and as a kind, caring mentor, he hadn't realized that George had been a judge in his former years and was still well respected in the community. He also hadn't realized that George had known about Kevin's record the entire time. He had cared for him despite his past. George had seen through Kevin's mistakes and recognized in him a beautiful heart. He had invested in him and his future.

Because of George's friendship, his trust, and his forgiveness, today Kevin is a lawyer who works with troubled youth to try to change their lives in a positive way. In expunging not only Kevin's record but also seeing past his mistakes to the truth of who he was, George gave him the best gift anyone could give – he gave him back his hope. He freed him from his past. He saw him for who he was and not what he did. In return, Kevin had done something that made this all possible. He had trusted George enough to let him see his heart. ²

This is what Jesus does for us. It's what the writer was trying to explain to the Hebrews. God's forgiveness, mercy, and salvation come when we are laid bare before God – naked! When we open our hearts to God, expose ourselves and our failings and mistakes, God will expunge them from our lives, and give us the gift of his love, acceptance, forgiveness, and redemption. It's not about the deeds, Kevin, it's about the relationship.

What do we need to do to be redeemed? We expose ourselves to God in all of our failings and mistakes. We expose to God our humanness, both good and bad. We expose to God our hearts and enter into a relationship with Jesus. As God sees our repentance, as we lay out our deeds and past, God expunges our "record." And we are given a new chance at life, eternal life.

To expunge something from one's record means it entirely disappears without a trace. It is not left to resurface later but is entirely wiped from one's life, as though the act never happened. This is the gift that God gives to all of us through Jesus Christ. All we need to do is open ourselves – expose what God can already see. We are who we are. And that is good enough for God. And when God redeems our hearts, when God expunges our sins, we will go on in a new way to make a difference in the lives of others. Because of Jesus Christ, we are assured that nothing blocks our way in our approach to God – nothing keeps us from God because of this one that we have on our side. It's called "grace" for a reason! We can be confident in approaching God! Yes, we're exposed and yet God sympathizes, no – empathizes with us, stands in our shoes with us. This is our indescribable gift. Amen.

¹ Commentary help for Hebrews found at www.workingpreacher.org. Commentary on Hebrews 4:12-16 by Amy L.B. Peeler posted October 11, 2015.

² Illustration found in sermon by Lori Wagner titled "Exposed and Expunged," found at www.sermons.com. Unable to find original citation.