

FAITHFUL TO THE WORD

Systematic Theology Series

CHRISTOLOGY

The Doctrine of the Person and Work of Christ

UNIT 4: THE HYPOSTATIC UNION — TWO NATURES IN ONE PERSON

Lesson 12

The Impeccability of Christ

Could Jesus Have Sinned? The Theological Debate and Its Implications

Both Genuinely Sympathetic and Utterly Reliable

Key Texts: Hebrews 4:15; 2 Corinthians 5:21; 1 Peter 2:22; James 1:13; Hebrews 7:26

“Holy, Innocent, undefiled, separated from sinners”

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SERIES VERSE

*“For we do not preach ourselves
but Christ Jesus as Lord,
and ourselves as your bond-servants
on account of Jesus.”*

2 CORINTHIANS 4:5, NASB 1995

INTRODUCTION

There is a question about the Person of Jesus Christ that cuts right to the heart of the hypostatic union and that has occupied the most careful christological thinkers from the patristic period to the present day: Could Jesus have sinned? Not merely: Did Jesus sin? The New Testament answers that question with absolute clarity and with multiple independent witnesses. He did not sin. He “kne w no sin” (2 Corinthians 5:21, NASB 1995); He “committed no sin” (1 Peter 2:22, NASB 1995); He is “holy, innocent, undefiled, separated from sinners” (Hebrews 7:26, NASB 1995); He was “tempted in all things as we are, yet without sin” (Hebrews 4:15, NASB 1995). On the historical sinlessness of Jesus, the New Testament is unanimous, and the church’s confession has never wavered.

The question that generates genuine theological debate is the deeper ontological question: Was the sinlessness of Jesus merely a contingent historical fact, something that happened to be true of Him because He consistently made the right choices throughout His life? Or was His sinlessness the expression of an ontological necessity rooted in His divine nature and the structure of the hypostatic union, so that it was not merely true that He did not sin, but true that He could not sin? This is the distinction between peccability (He could have sinned but did not) and impeccability (He could not sin because sin was constitutionally impossible for the Person He is).

This lesson works through the theological debate with the care it deserves, presenting the arguments for both positions fairly before making the case for impeccability on the grounds of the Chalcedonian christological structure. The most important pastoral implication of the debate, the question of whether impeccability undermines the genuineness of Christ’s temptations and therefore the sympathetic relevance of His high priesthood, receives sustained attention, because it is precisely this pastoral concern that motivates most contemporary resistance to the doctrine of impeccability. The lesson will argue that impeccability and genuine temptation are not merely compatible but that impeccability actually heightens rather than diminishes the significance of the temptations, and that the orthodox doctrine of impeccability provides a stronger and more secure pastoral foundation for the believer’s confidence at the throne of grace than the peccabilist alternative.

I. THE QUESTION STATED: PECCABILITY VERSUS IMPECCABILITY

Defining the Terms and the Stakes of the Debate

A. The Peccabilist Position

The peccabilist position, the view that Christ could have sinned but did not, has been held by a significant number of orthodox theologians across the history of the church. Its primary appeal is

pastoral and exegetical. Pastorally: if Christ could not have sinned, then the temptations He endured were not “real” temptations in the sense that the believer experiences temptation, the sense of a genuine possibility of failure that makes the struggle meaningful and the victory significant. If there was no genuine possibility that He would fall, the argument runs, then His sympathy with our temptations is correspondingly limited: He knows what temptation looks like from the outside but not from the inside, because He never faced the genuine existential threat of actual failure.

Exegetically: Hebrews 4:15 declares that He was “tempted in all things as we are.” If the temptations of Jesus were not genuinely dangerous, if they could not in principle result in sin, can the parallel with our temptations be maintained? Does the addition “yet without sin” describe a contingent historical outcome (He was tempted and happened not to sin) or an ontological necessity (He was tempted and could not have sinned)? Peccabilists typically argue that the former reading is more consistent with the pastoral intent of Hebrews 4:15 and with the genuine reality of the Gethsemane agony.

B. The Impeccabilist Position

The impeccabilist position, the view that Christ could not sin because sin was constitutionally impossible for the divine Person of the Son, has been the majority position of the orthodox christological tradition. The Chalcedonian framework provides the decisive argument: the one who acts in the incarnation is a divine Person, and a divine Person cannot sin. The divine nature is constitutionally, ontologically, and necessarily holy, sin is not merely something that God has decided not to do; it is something that is incompatible with the very nature of God. And since the one who would sin in the incarnation is not a human person distinct from the divine Person (Nestorianism) but the one, undivided divine Person of the eternal Son, sin is impossible for Him in principle, not merely in practice.

The impeccabilist argument does not deny that the temptations of Christ were real or that His human nature genuinely experienced the pull toward sin. It insists rather that the reality of the temptation does not require the possibility of failure, and that the divine Person who is the subject of the temptation is constitutionally incapable of yielding to it. The question “Could Jesus have sinned?” receives the impeccabilist answer: No, because the Person who would sin is the divine Person of the eternal Son, and the eternal Son cannot sin. This is not a limitation on the power of the Son; it is an expression of His infinite holiness. He cannot sin for the same reason He cannot lie (“God cannot lie,” Titus 1:2, NASB 1995), not because sinning is beyond His power in the sense of being too difficult, but because sinning is incompatible with what He essentially is.

“He made Him who knew no sin to be sin on our behalf.” | “Holy, innocent, undefiled, separated from sinners.” | “Tempted in all things as we are, yet without sin.”

2 CORINTHIANS 5:21; HEBREWS 7:26; 4:15, NASB 1995

II. THE BIBLICAL FOUNDATION: THE SINLESSNESS OF CHRIST

The New Testament's Unanimous Testimony to a Sinlessness That Exceeds Mere Historical Fact

A. The Explicit Sinlessness Texts

The New Testament's testimony to the sinlessness of Christ is not confined to a single text or tradition; it is a consistent, multi-witness affirmation that spans the Gospels, the Pauline letters, the General Epistles, and the letter to the Hebrews. John 8:46 records Jesus' own challenge to His opponents: "Which one of you convicts Me of sin?" (NASB 1995), a challenge issued not merely as a rhetorical device but as a genuine invitation to identify any moral failure in His life or teaching. The silence of His opponents, who were motivated to find fault with Him, is itself a form of testimony.

2 Corinthians 5:21 provides the most theologically loaded of the sinlessness affirmations: "He made Him who knew no sin to be sin on our behalf, so that we might become the righteousness of God in Him" (NASB 1995). The phrase "kne w no sin" (μη γνόντα ἁμαρτίαν, *mē gnonta hamartian*) is not merely the description of a sinless history; it is the description of a Person for whom sin was alien and foreign, one who had no acquaintance, no familiarity, no experiential knowledge of sin from within. This is not the language of one who could have sinned but consistently chose not to; it is the language of one whose entire being is oriented away from sin in the most fundamental possible sense.

1 Peter 2:22 cites Isaiah 53:9 in direct application to Christ: "Who committed no sin, nor was any deceit found in His mouth" (NASB 1995). The Isaianic background is significant: the Suffering Servant who bore the iniquities of others is himself entirely free from iniquity, not merely behaviorally, but in the very character of His inner life. Hebrews 7:26 describes the high-priestly qualities of Jesus with a vocabulary of holiness that goes well beyond the description of sinless behavior: "holy, innocent, undefiled, separated from sinners and exalted above the heavens" (NASB 1995). The accumulation of four moral adjectives, holy (ὅσιος, *hosios*), innocent (ἄκακος, *akakos*), undefiled (ἀμίαντος, *amiantos*), and separated from sinners (κεχωρισμένος ἀπὸ τῶν ἁμαρτωλῶν, *kechōrismenon apo tōn hamartōlōn*), is the description of a character so constitutively oriented toward holiness that the language of mere behavioral compliance is wholly inadequate to describe it.

B. James 1:13 and the Impossibility of Divine Temptation

The impeccabilist argument receives decisive support from James 1:13: "Let no one say when he is tempted, 'I am being tempted by God'; for God cannot be tempted by evil, and He Himself does not tempt anyone" (NASB 1995). The clause "God cannot be tempted by evil" (ὁ δὲ θεὸς ἀπειραστός ἐστιν κακῶν, *ho de theos apeirastos estin kakōn*) establishes a categorical statement about the divine nature: God is untestable, untriable, immune to the lure of evil. This is not a description of God's

consistent choices; it is a description of His nature. The divine nature as such is constitutionally incapable of being genuinely enticed toward evil.

If the divine nature is constitutionally immune to the lure of evil (James 1:13), and if the Person who acts in the incarnation is a divine Person who subsists in two natures (the Chalcedonian definition), then sin is impossible for that divine Person in principle. The divine nature that is untestable by evil is the same divine nature that the incarnate Son brought into the hypostatic union without diminution or modification. The impeccability of God as declared in James 1:13 is the impeccability of the incarnate Son, not because the human nature cannot experience temptation (it can and did), but because the divine Person who is the ultimate subject of any hypothetical act of sin is constitutionally incapable of sinning.

III. THE CHALCEDONIAN ARGUMENT FOR IMPECCABILITY

Why the Structure of the Hypostatic Union Demands the Orthodox Conclusion

A. The Person Who Acts Is a Divine Person

The most decisive argument for impeccability is christological rather than merely moral: it flows directly from the Chalcedonian definition of the hypostatic union. In the Chalcedonian framework, the one who acts in the incarnation, the one who speaks, chooses, suffers, obeys, and would hypothetically sin, is not a human person distinct from the divine Person (that would be Nestorianism) but the one, undivided, divine Person of the eternal Son. Actions, in the Chalcedonian framework, are predicated of persons, not of natures: it is not the divine nature that walks on water or the human nature that forgives sins, it is the one Person of the Son who does these things through the appropriate nature. In the same way, it would not be the human nature that sins but the one Person of the Son who sins through the human nature.

But the divine Person of the eternal Son cannot sin. This is not merely a contingent fact about the Son's consistent choices; it is a metaphysical necessity grounded in the divine nature. The divine nature, as James 1:13 declares, is constitutionally immune to the lure of evil. The divine nature is constitutively, necessarily holy, not as a consequence of a decision or a discipline, but as an expression of what God essentially is. And since the one who would sin in the incarnation is this divine Person subsisting in this divine nature, sin is impossible for Him in principle. The peccabilist position, whatever its pastoral motivations, involves a subtle inconsistency: it holds that the divine Person of the Son could have sinned, which requires either that the divine nature is not constitutively holy (against the consistent biblical testimony) or that the divine Person can act contrary to the divine nature (which is incoherent).

B. The Argument from the Enhypostasia

The doctrine of enhypostasia, examined in Lesson 10, provides a complementary argument for impeccability. The human nature of Christ does not subsist in a separate human hypostasis but in the divine hypostasis of the eternal Son. This means that the human nature of Christ does not have its own independent personal subject who could, in principle, act independently of the divine nature. The human nature's will, decisions, and moral life are all the will, decisions, and moral life of the one divine Person of the Son, not of a separate human person who might make choices that the divine Person does not make.

The peccabilist position, by contrast, requires a kind of independence for the human nature that verges on a Nestorian division of the Person: it requires that the human nature have the kind of independent volitional autonomy that would allow it to make moral choices that the divine Person does not ultimately determine. But on the Chalcedonian account, the human will of Christ is the human will of the divine Person, not the human will of a separate human person. And the divine Person cannot sin. Therefore, even the human will of Christ, which genuinely experienced the temptations directed against it and genuinely chose to resist them, is the human will of a Person for whom sin is impossible, not merely a human will that happened to make the right choice each time. The impeccability is grounded not in the human will's consistency of choice but in the divine Person's ontological incapability of sin.

IV. THE CENTRAL OBJECTION: DOES IMPECCABILITY UNDERMINE THE GENUINENESS OF TEMPTATION?

The Most Pressing Pastoral Challenge to the Doctrine and Its Resolution

A. The Objection Stated

The most persistent and the most pastorally serious objection to impeccability is this: if Christ could not have sinned, then His temptations were not genuine temptations in the sense that the believer's temptations are genuine. Genuine temptation requires a genuine possibility of failure; where the outcome is predetermined by the ontological structure of the Person, the "temptation" is merely a performance, not a real moral struggle. And if the temptations of Christ were not genuine, then the pastoral comfort of Hebrews 4:15 is undermined: He was "tempted in all things as we are" only in the superficial sense of facing the appearance of temptation, not in the deep sense of genuinely experiencing the threat of moral failure from within. The sympathetic High Priest is not genuinely sympathetic because He never faced what we face.

This objection is not trivial, and it deserves a thorough response. The pastoral stakes are real: if the impeccabilist position reduces the temptations of Christ to a kind of divine pantomime, then the most

personally consoling dimension of the High Priest doctrine in Hebrews is evacuated. The response to this objection must therefore be both theologically precise and pastorally convincing.

B. The Resolution: The Reality of Temptation Does Not Require the Possibility of Failure

The resolution begins with a fundamental distinction: the reality of a temptation is not the same as the possibility of failure. These two things are frequently conflated in popular discussion of the impeccability question, but the conflation is philosophically unjustified. A temptation is real if the external pressure is real, if the inclination toward what is being offered is genuinely present, and if the resistance required is genuinely costly. None of these conditions require that the outcome be in doubt. An absolutely holy person can be genuinely tempted, can genuinely feel the pull of what is contrary to holiness, can genuinely experience the cost of resistance, and can genuinely prefer the good over the evil in a costly and meaningful way, without there being any genuine possibility that he will yield.

The analogy of the unbreakable beam is instructive but imperfect. A more illuminating analogy is the perfectly just judge. A judge of absolute and unimpeachable integrity who is offered a bribe may genuinely feel the pressure of the offer, he is aware of what the bribe is, he knows what accepting it would provide, he experiences the social and financial pressure of the situation, without there being any genuine possibility that he will accept it. His refusal is not a performance; it is the expression of a character so deeply formed in the virtue of justice that bribery cannot gain purchase in him, however real the pressure. His integrity does not require the possibility of corruption to be genuine; it is precisely because his integrity is so constitutively deep that the possibility of corruption is excluded.

C. Impeccability Heightens Rather Than Diminishes the Temptations

There is a further and more powerful response to the objection, one that inverts the intuitive worry entirely. If the impeccabilist doctrine is correct, then the temptations of Christ were not merely “as real” as ours; in a specific and important sense, they were more fully and more completely experienced than any temptation that a peccable (capable of sinning) human being has ever experienced. This paradox, which sounds counterintuitive at first but becomes clear on reflection, is the key to understanding why impeccability is actually pastorally superior to peccability as the foundation for Christ’s sympathy with tempted believers.

Consider what happens when a human being yields to temptation: the temptation stops pressing. The moment of capitulation is the moment at which the struggle ends and the pressure is released. The person who yields to anger no longer has to resist the impulse; the person who gives in to lust no longer has to maintain the discipline of refusal; the person who tells the lie no longer has to bear the cost of truthfulness. Yielding is always, in the immediate moment, a form of relief from the pressure of temptation. This means that peccable human beings, who sometimes yield, never

experience the full extent of a temptation's pressure, because they are relieved of it at the moment of capitulation. Christ, who never yielded, bore the full weight of every temptation to its uttermost extreme, without the relief that capitulation provides. He knows the assault of temptation more completely and more exhaustively than any peccable human being, because He resisted every temptation to the end without ever being relieved by surrender.

This is the pastoral point that the impeccabilist doctrine uniquely provides: the High Priest who sympathizes with our temptations does not sympathize merely because He faced similar external pressures. He sympathizes because He bore those pressures more completely, more extensively, and more exhaustively than we have ever borne them. He has been where we are, not merely as far as our surrender allowed us to go, but further. He resisted where we failed. His sympathy is the sympathy of one who has borne the full weight of every temptation we face and has not broken under it, which is precisely the kind of sympathy that a struggling believer most needs from a High Priest.

"For since He Himself was tempted in that which He has suffered, He is able to come to the aid of those who are tempted."

HEBREWS 2:18, NASB 1995

V. THE SOTERIOLOGICAL STAKES OF IMPECCABILITY

Why the Doctrine of Impeccability Is Not Optional but Necessary for the Gospel

A. Impeccability and the Active Obedience

The doctrine of impeccability has direct and significant implications for the doctrine of the active obedience of Christ, His lifelong, perfect obedience to the law of God on behalf of His people (the subject of Lesson 15). The active obedience is the theological basis for the imputation of Christ's righteousness to the believer: the believer's standing before God rests not merely on the cancellation of guilt (which the passive obedience, the atoning death, accomplishes) but on the positive righteousness credited to their account from Christ's perfect law-keeping.

But the quality of the active obedience depends on the nature of the obedience rendered. If Christ's obedience to the law was the obedience of a peccable being, one who could have disobeyed and chose not to, then the righteousness it produces is the righteousness of a contingent moral achievement, not the righteousness of one who is constitutively, necessarily holy. The imputed righteousness would be the righteousness of a supremely disciplined human being, not the righteousness of the ontologically holy Son of God. But on the impeccabilist account, the obedience of Christ is the obedience of a Person who is constitutively holy, whose obedience flows from the deepest springs of His divine-human being and is therefore not a moral achievement that could in principle have been

otherwise but the necessary expression of who He is. The righteousness imputed to the believer is not a contingent achievement that might have failed; it is the righteous expression of the holy Person of the eternal Son.

B. Impeccability and the Sufficiency of the Atonement

Impeccability is also directly relevant to the sufficiency of the atonement. The atonement is sufficient to bear the infinite weight of divine justice against the sins of all who will be saved, not merely the sins of one individual or of a small group, but the cumulative guilt of the entire elect community across all of human history. For the atonement to have this infinite sufficiency, the one who provides it must be of infinite worth. And the infinite worth of the atoning sacrifice depends on the perfect holiness of the one who offers it: a sacrifice tainted by even the possibility of moral corruption cannot have the absolute, unconditional, infinite worth that an atonement of infinite scope requires.

The impeccabilist doctrine secures the infinite worth of the atoning sacrifice by grounding it not merely in the historical sinlessness of Christ (which a peccabilist could also affirm) but in the ontological impossibility of His sinfulness. The sacrifice offered on Calvary is not the sacrifice of one who happened not to sin during the period of His life preceding the cross; it is the sacrifice of one whose holiness is constitutively, ontologically, and necessarily perfect. The infinite sufficiency of the atonement rests on the infinite holiness of the one who provides it, and the impeccabilist doctrine, by grounding the holiness of Christ in the ontological structure of His Person rather than merely in His consistent historical choices, provides the most secure possible foundation for the infinite sufficiency the gospel requires.

C. Impeccability and the Reliability of the Intercession

A third soteriological implication of impeccability concerns the intercession of Christ. Hebrews 7:25 declares that “He is able to save forever those who draw near to God through Him, since He always lives to make intercession for them” (NASB 1995). The reliability of the intercession, its perpetual, unconditional, unyielding character, is the ground of the “forever” in “save forever.” The believer’s salvation does not rest on the continuing good choices of an intercessor who, in principle, could choose to stop interceding or could sin in a way that disqualifies Him from the intercessory office. The intercession is reliable precisely because it is performed by one whose holiness is constitutive rather than contingent, whose commitment to the salvation of those He represents is as deep as His own being and as secure as the divine nature He shares with the Father.

The impeccabilist doctrine alone provides the full theological warrant for the pastoral confidence of Hebrews 7:25. If Christ’s holiness were merely contingent, a consistently maintained moral achievement that could in principle have been otherwise, the “forever” of “save forever” would be qualified by the theoretical possibility that the intercessor might at some future point fail in the holiness that qualifies Him for the office. But on the impeccabilist account, the holiness of the intercessor is constitutive and necessary: it is the holiness of the one who “always lives” in the most

absolute and unconditional sense, whose intercession is as permanent and as secure as His own eternal being. The believer's security rests not on the intercessor's consistent moral performance but on the intercessor's ontological holiness, and this is the security the gospel requires and the impeccabilist doctrine alone can fully provide.

VI. DOXOLOGICAL CONCLUSION: THE HOLY ONE OF GOD

The doctrine of impeccability is, in the end, a doctrine about the absolute, unconditional, ontological holiness of the one who came to be our Savior. He did not come to us as a fellow sinner struggling toward holiness, inspiring us by the example of His moral achievement. He came to us as the Holy One, the one whom the demons recognized with terror ("I know who You are, the Holy One of God!" Mark 1:24, NASB 1995), the one before whom Peter fell at his knees in the overwhelming recognition of his own sinfulness ("Depart from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man!" Luke 5:8, NASB 1995), the one whose holiness is not a moral achievement but the expression of who He essentially is.

This is not a doctrine that makes Christ less accessible to sinners; it is the doctrine that makes His accessibility to sinners the most astonishing reality in the universe. The one who is constitutively holy, who "knew no sin" (2 Corinthians 5:21), "was made sin" on our behalf. The one who is "holy, innocent, undefiled, separated from sinners" (Hebrews 7:26) bore our transgressions in His body on the tree. The one who could not sin became, in the mystery of the atonement, the one who bore sin, not by participating in it, not by being contaminated by it, but by bearing its legal guilt and its penal consequences as our substitute. The impeccability of Christ is not the wall that keeps sinners from Him; it is the holiness that makes His condescension to sinners the most staggering expression of grace in the history of the universe.

The congregation that understands the impeccability of Christ will understand the atonement more deeply, the intercession more confidently, and the active obedience more gratefully. They will know that their standing before God does not rest on the moral achievements of a supremely disciplined human being who happened not to fail, but on the constitutive holiness of the eternal Son incarnate, whose righteousness is not a contingent achievement but the necessary expression of who He eternally is. And they will worship Him not merely as the one who did not sin but as the one who could not sin, the Holy One of God, before whom every knee will bow, in whose name every tongue will confess, and in whose constitutive holiness the redeemed will rejoice forever.

Key Texts: *Hebrews 4:15; 7:25–26; 2:18; 2 Corinthians 5:21; 1 Peter 2:22; James 1:13; John 8:46; Mark 1:24; Matthew 4:1–11*

THEOLOGICAL TERMS AND DEFINITIONS

Term	Definition
Impeccability	The theological doctrine that Jesus Christ could not sin, that sin was constitutionally, ontologically, and necessarily impossible for the divine Person of the Son. Distinguished from sinlessness (the historical fact that He did not sin). The impeccabilist argument grounds Christ's holiness not in consistently made right choices (a contingent moral achievement) but in the ontological structure of the hypostatic union: since the one who would sin is the divine Person of the Son, and the divine nature is constitutively immune to the lure of evil (James 1:13), sin is impossible for Him in principle rather than merely improbable in practice. Impeccability is the majority position of the orthodox christological tradition.
Peccability	The theological position that Jesus Christ could have sinned but did not, that His sinlessness was a contingent historical fact resulting from consistently made right choices rather than an ontological necessity. Peccabilism's primary appeal is pastoral: if Christ could not have sinned, peccabilists argue, His temptations were not 'genuine' in the sense that the believer's temptations are genuine (involving a real possibility of failure). The impeccabilist response is that the reality of temptation does not require the possibility of failure, and that impeccability actually heightens rather than diminishes the depth of Christ's experience of temptation.
Sinlessness	The historical affirmation that Jesus Christ did not sin, a fact affirmed unanimously by the New Testament (John 8:46; 2 Corinthians 5:21; 1 Peter 2:22; Hebrews 4:15; 7:26). Sinlessness is the narrower claim: it describes what happened (He did not sin). Impeccability is the wider claim: it describes what was possible (He could not have sinned). Both peccabilists and impeccabilists affirm the sinlessness of Christ; the debate is whether the sinlessness reflects a contingent historical record or an ontological necessity. The impeccabilist holds that impeccability grounds and guarantees the sinlessness, not merely that the sinlessness happens to be the record.
Active Obedience	The theological term for Christ's lifelong, perfect obedience to the law of God on behalf of His people, distinguished from the passive obedience (His bearing of the law's penalty in the atoning death). The active obedience is the positive ground of the righteousness imputed to the believer in justification: sinners need not merely the cancellation of guilt but a positive righteousness credited to their account. The impeccabilist doctrine grounds the active obedience more securely than peccabilism: the righteousness imputed is not the contingent achievement of a supremely disciplined peccable human being but the constitutive expression of the ontological holiness of the divine Person of the eternal Son.

Term	Definition
Passive Obedience	<p>The theological term for Christ’s bearing of the penalty of the law in His atoning death on the cross, distinguished from the active obedience (His lifelong law-keeping). The passive obedience addresses the negative problem of sin: the guilt that sinners have accumulated through their violations of the law. Through His passive obedience, Christ bears the punishment that sinners deserve, satisfying the demands of divine justice on their behalf. Together, the active obedience (providing positive righteousness) and the passive obedience (removing guilt) constitute the comprehensive work of atonement that the gospel declares.</p>
Apeirastos	<p>Greek: ‘untestable,’ ‘unable to be tempted.’ Used in James 1:13 (‘God cannot be tempted by evil’) to declare the constitutional immunity of the divine nature to the lure of evil. Apeirastos is a key term in the impeccabilist argument: if the divine nature is constitutionally apeirastos (untestable by evil), and if the one who acts in the incarnation is a divine Person subsisting in the divine nature, then the divine Person of the Son is constitutionally incapable of sinning. The term does not merely describe God’s consistent choices; it describes His nature, the divine nature as such is immune to the pull of evil in its deepest ontological structure.</p>
Moral Achievement vs. Constitutive Holiness	<p>The distinction between two accounts of the holiness of Christ: (1) Moral achievement: Christ’s holiness as the result of consistently made right choices throughout His life, a contingent historical record that could in principle have been otherwise. Associated with the peccabilist position. (2) Constitutive holiness: Christ’s holiness as the necessary expression of who He essentially is, the holiness of the divine Person who subsists in a divine nature that is constitutively immune to evil. Associated with the impeccabilist position. The distinction has direct soteriological implications: the righteousness imputed to the believer and the sufficiency of the atonement are more securely grounded in constitutive holiness than in moral achievement.</p>
Sympathetic High Priesthood	<p>The doctrine, drawn primarily from Hebrews 4:14–16 and 5:1–10, that Christ is qualified to serve as the High Priest who intercedes for believers because He has genuinely shared their human experience, including genuine temptation. The impeccabilist doctrine strengthens rather than weakens the sympathetic High Priesthood: because Christ never yielded to temptation, He bore the full weight of every temptation to its uttermost extreme, further than any peccable human being who is relieved of temptation’s pressure by the moment of capitulation. The impeccable Christ knows the full assault of temptation from the inside more completely than those who have yielded.</p>
Holiness (Divine)	<p>The divine attribute affirming that God is absolutely, constitutively, and necessarily set apart from everything morally impure. Divine holiness is not a choice God makes to be holy; it is what God is. The holiness of God is the eternal, necessary expression of the divine nature, what the seraphim celebrate</p>

Term	Definition
	when they cry ‘holy, holy, holy’ (Isaiah 6:3) before the throne of YHWH. The impeccabilist doctrine holds that this constitutive divine holiness is the same holiness that the eternal Son brought into the hypostatic union without modification or diminishment, and that it is therefore the ground of the ontological impossibility of sin for the incarnate Son.
Last Adam Christology	Paul’s typological parallel between Adam and Christ (Romans 5:12–21; 1 Corinthians 15:45–49), in which Christ is the Second Adam who succeeds where the first Adam failed. The impeccability debate intersects with Last Adam Christology at a significant point: the first Adam was peccable (he could sin and did), while the Last Adam is impeccable (He could not sin and did not). The contrast between Adam’s peccability and Christ’s impeccability reflects the contrast between mere creaturely human nature (created good but mutable) and the incarnate divine-human nature of the Son (whose holiness is grounded not merely in creaturely goodness but in the constitutive holiness of the divine Person).

PRACTICAL APPLICATION

A. For the Mind: What Must We Believe?

We must believe that the sinlessness of Christ is not merely a biographical fact about His historical conduct but the expression of a constitutive, ontological holiness that is grounded in the structure of the hypostatic union. The Jesus who “kne w no sin” (2 Corinthians 5:21) is not one who learned to manage His sinful impulses with extraordinary discipline; He is one for whom sin is constitutionally alien, because He is the divine Person of the eternal Son whose divine nature is constitutively immune to the lure of evil (James 1:13). This is the theological bedrock of everything the gospel declares about the atonement, the active obedience, and the intercession: the righteousness imputed, the penalty borne, and the prayers offered all flow from the constitutive holiness of the one who provides them.

We must also believe that the pastoral concern that motivates peccabilism, the concern that impeccability undermines the genuineness of Christ’s temptations and the depth of His sympathy, is answered by the impeccabilist doctrine itself. Christ’s sympathy is not diminished by His impeccability; it is heightened. He knows the full extent of every temptation we face, not merely as far as our capitulation allowed us to go, but all the way to the end of the assault, because He bore every temptation to its uttermost without being relieved by surrender. The impeccable Christ is the most deeply sympathetic High Priest conceivable, precisely because His holiness enabled Him to endure what peccable human beings cannot.

B. For the Heart: What Must We Feel and Desire?

Let the impeccability of Christ produce in you a deeper security in your standing before God. Your justification rests not on the contingent moral achievement of a supremely disciplined peccable human being who might, in theory, have failed. It rests on the constitutive holiness of the divine Person of the eternal Son, whose righteousness is not an achievement but an expression of who He essentially is. The “holy, innocent, undefiled, separated from sinners” High Priest of Hebrews 7:26 is presenting your case before the Father, and the perfect holiness He brings to that presentation is not a fragile moral record but the ontological holiness of the one who could not sin.

Desire also a more adoring response to the condescension that impeccability makes all the more astonishing: the one who could not sin became sin for us. The absolute, constitutive, ontological holiness of the Son, the holiness that made sin impossible for Him, was not a barrier to the atonement but its indispensable precondition. Only the one who could not sin could bear our sin without being corrupted by it. Only the constitutively holy Son could stand under the weight of the sin He bore without being destroyed by it. The impeccability of Christ is not the insulation that kept Him from our condition; it is the holiness that made possible His entrance into our condition as our Redeemer.

C. For the Hands: What Must We Do?

- Preach the temptation narratives of Matthew 4:1–11 and Luke 4:1–13 with the full weight of the impeccabilist insight. The three wilderness temptations are not a display of Christ’s moral willpower overcoming genuine moral danger; they are the constitutively holy Son bearing the full assault of the tempter’s most sophisticated strategies and responding from the depth of His divine-human holiness with the word of God. Preach them as what they are: the victorious encounter of the Holy One with the one who fell from holiness, in which the Last Adam undoes what the first Adam did, not by barely surviving temptation but by bearing it with the constitutive holiness of the one whose victory was never in doubt.
- Use the impeccability doctrine to enrich your pastoral care of those struggling with temptation. The person who is overwhelmed by the pressure of temptation needs to know that their High Priest has been where they are, further, in fact, than they have been, because He bore the full weight of the assault without the relief of surrender. When you bring the struggling believer to the throne of grace, bring them to the one who has been to the end of every temptation they face and has never capitulated. That is not a cold comfort; it is the warmest possible ground of confidence that help is available from the one who knows the territory from the inside, having traveled it more completely than they have.
- Engage the peccability/impeccability debate with pastoral sensitivity. Some believers, particularly those shaped by evangelical traditions that emphasize the complete humanity of Christ, will have a strong intuitive resistance to impeccability because it seems to them to protect the divine dignity at the expense of the pastoral comfort of genuine human solidarity. Address this concern directly, with the argument this lesson develops: impeccability does not

diminish Christ's solidarity with tempted humanity; it deepens it. He knows temptation more completely than any peccable human being, precisely because He never surrendered to the relief of capitulation.

- Teach the connection between impeccability, active obedience, and justification. Many Christians understand justification as the forgiveness of sins (the negative aspect) without understanding the positive aspect: the imputation of Christ's righteousness. And many who understand the imputation of righteousness think of it in terms of a contingent moral achievement rather than a constitutive holiness. A series of lessons or a sermon series connecting impeccability to active obedience to justification will deepen the congregation's understanding of both the nature of their standing before God and the Person who provides it.
- Meditate regularly on Hebrews 7:26 as a description of the one who intercedes for you: "holy, innocent, undefiled, separated from sinners and exalted above the heavens." Let each of the four moral adjectives become a specific act of adoration: He is holy (constitutively set apart from everything impure), innocent (akakos, free from malice or wickedness in the deepest possible sense), undefiled (amiantos, unstained, incorruptible), and separated from sinners (not in the sense of indifference to sinners but in the sense of ontological holiness that sin cannot contaminate). This is the one who lives to make intercession for you. This is the ground of your security.

STUDY AND DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

OPENING QUESTION

1. Before studying this lesson, what was your instinctive position on the question of whether Christ could have sinned? Did you hold the peccabilist position (He could have sinned but did not), the impeccabilist position (He could not have sinned), or were you genuinely uncertain? What theological or pastoral concern most shaped your prior instinct? Has this lesson changed your position, and if so, what argument was most persuasive?

OBSERVATION QUESTIONS (WHAT DO THE TEXTS SAY?)

2. Read Hebrews 4:14–16 carefully. What two things does the author affirm about Christ in verse 15: (a) what He has experienced, and (b) what He has not experienced? What is the logical connection between verse 15 and the exhortation of verse 16? Does the text indicate whether the 'yet without sin' (χωρὶς ἁμαρτίας) is a contingent historical outcome or an ontological necessity? What pastoral conclusion does the author draw from Christ's experience of temptation?

3. Read James 1:12–15. What is the context of James’s discussion of temptation in these verses? What specific claim does he make about God in verse 13 (ὁ δὲ θεὸς ἀπειράστος ἐστὶν κακῶν)? What does the word *apeirastos* (‘untestable’ or ‘unable to be tempted’) imply about the nature of God’s holiness? How does this text function as a key premise in the impeccabilist argument from the structure of the hypostatic union?
4. Read 2 Corinthians 5:17–21. What is the theological logic connecting Christ’s sinlessness (v. 21a) to His being ‘made sin’ (v. 21b) to our becoming ‘the righteousness of God in Him’ (v. 21c)? What does the phrase ‘knew no sin’ (μη γνόντα ἁμαρτίαν) imply about the depth and nature of Christ’s holiness, is it merely describing His behavioral history, or does it describe something more fundamental about His Person?
5. Read Hebrews 7:23–28. How does the author use the contrast between the Levitical priests (who were prevented by death from continuing in office, v. 23) and Christ (who ‘always lives to make intercession,’ v. 25) to establish the superiority of Christ’s priesthood? How does verse 26 (‘holy, innocent, undefiled, separated from sinners and exalted above the heavens’) describe the moral qualifications of the perfect High Priest? What is the relationship between the four moral adjectives of verse 26 and the reliability of the intercession described in verse 25?

INTERPRETATION QUESTIONS (WHAT DOES IT MEAN?)

6. The lesson’s central christological argument for impeccability is: (1) The one who acts in the incarnation is the divine Person of the eternal Son; (2) The divine nature is constitutively immune to the lure of evil (James 1:13); (3) Therefore, sin is impossible for the divine Person of the Son in principle. Evaluate this argument step by step. Is each premise defensible? Does the conclusion follow necessarily from the premises? What is the strongest objection to the argument, and how would you respond to it?
7. The lesson argues that impeccability actually heightens rather than diminishes the depth of Christ’s experience of temptation, because He bore every temptation to its uttermost without being relieved by the moment of capitulation that peccable human beings experience when they yield. Do you find this argument convincing? How would you explain it to a believer who instinctively feels that impeccability makes Christ’s temptations less ‘real’ than their own?
8. The lesson distinguishes between ‘constitutive holiness’ (holiness as the necessary expression of who God is) and ‘moral achievement’ (holiness as the result of consistently made right choices). Explain the significance of this distinction for three areas of Christian theology: (a) the imputation of righteousness in justification, (b) the sufficiency of the atonement, and (c) the reliability of Christ’s intercession. In each area, what is gained by grounding the relevant doctrine in constitutive holiness rather than moral achievement?

- 9.** The lesson presents the argument from the enhypostasia for impeccability: because the human nature of Christ subsists in the divine hypostasis rather than in a separate human hypostasis, the human nature does not have the kind of independent volitional autonomy that would allow it to make moral choices independently of the divine Person. Do you find this argument persuasive? What would the peccabilist need to say in response? Does the peccabilist response risk a form of Nestorianism by positing a kind of independence for the human nature?
- 10.** The lesson connects impeccability to the doctrine of the active obedience: the righteousness imputed to the believer in justification is the constitutive holiness of the divine Person rather than merely a contingent moral achievement. How does this connection strengthen the believer's assurance of justification? What specifically would be lost in the believer's assurance if the righteousness of Christ were grounded in moral achievement rather than constitutive holiness?

APPLICATION QUESTIONS (WHAT DOES IT DEMAND OF US?)

- 11.** The lesson argues that the impeccability doctrine deepens the pastoral comfort available to those struggling with temptation, because the impeccable Christ has been further into every temptation than those who have yielded. How would you bring this truth to bear in a specific pastoral conversation with someone who says: 'Jesus was God, He couldn't really understand what it's like to fight a temptation as long and as hard as I have.' What specific dimensions of Christ's experience of temptation would you point to, and how would you connect the impeccability doctrine to the depth of His sympathy?
- 12.** The lesson recommends meditating on Hebrews 7:26 ('holy, innocent, undefiled, separated from sinners and exalted above the heavens') as a description of the one who intercedes for the believer. Take a few minutes in your study or devotional time this week to meditate on each of the four moral adjectives (ὅσιος, ἄκακος, ἀμίαντος, κεχωρισμένος ἀπὸ τῶν ἁμαρτωλῶν). What does each adjective add to your understanding of the High Priest who presents your case before the Father? Write out what each term means and how it increases your confidence in the sufficiency of His intercession.
- 13.** The lesson notes that some believers in evangelical traditions will have a strong intuitive resistance to the impeccability doctrine because it seems to protect the divine dignity at the expense of genuine human solidarity. How would you address this resistance in a Sunday School or small group context, without making the discussion feel like an abstract theological debate? What specific biblical texts and pastoral scenarios would you use to demonstrate that impeccability deepens rather than diminishes the solidarity?
- 14.** This lesson completes the second lesson of Unit 4 on the Hypostatic Union. Looking ahead to Lesson 13 (the Knowledge and Will of Christ), how does the impeccability doctrine established in this lesson set up the discussion of Christ's two wills? Specifically: how does the impeccabilist

argument from the Chalcedonian structure of the Person, that the one who would sin is the divine Person, apply to the question of the relationship between Christ's divine will and His human will in the Gethsemane prayer?

PRAYER FOCUS

Open this lesson's prayer time with a slow, meditative reading of Hebrews 7:23–28, the most theologically concentrated description of Christ's high-priestly qualifications in all of Scripture. Read it with particular attention to the four moral adjectives of verse 26 ('holy, innocent, undefiled, separated from sinners and exalted above the heavens') and to the pastoral conclusion of verse 25 ('He is able to save forever those who draw near to God through Him, since He always lives to make intercession for them'). Let the group notice the connection between the constitutive holiness of verse 26 and the reliability of the 'forever' in verse 25: the intercession is permanent and the salvation is secure precisely because the intercessor's holiness is constitutive rather than contingent. The one who makes intercession for you cannot fail in the holiness that qualifies Him for the office, because His holiness is not a moral achievement that could in principle lapse but the constitutive expression of who He essentially is.

Spend time in adoration of the holy, impeccable Son of God who bore our sin without being contaminated by it, who entered the full depth of our temptation without yielding to it, and who now stands before the Father with the constitutive holiness of His divine-human Person as the eternal ground of our acceptance. Adore Him specifically for the four qualities of Hebrews 7:26: holy (ἅγιος), constitutively set apart from all impurity; innocent (ἄκακος), free from wickedness in the deepest possible sense; undefiled (ἀμίαντος), unstained, incorruptible, untouched by the defilement of sin even as He bore our sin; and separated from sinners, not in the sense of indifference but in the sense of an ontological holiness that sin could not contaminate even when He was 'made sin' on our behalf.

Pray with specific confidence at the throne of grace, the confidence that Hebrews 4:16 invites and that the doctrine of impeccability grounds more securely than any other christological account. Your access to the Father is mediated by the one who is constitutively holy, whose qualifications for the intercessory office are not contingent on His continued moral performance but on His eternal, unchangeable, divine-human Person. Bring to Him the specific temptations your congregation faces, not as burdens too heavy for the sympathetic High Priest to bear, but as struggles that He has faced further and more completely than those who struggle, and that He is therefore uniquely, perfectly, and constitutively qualified to help with.

Close with a meditative reading of 2 Corinthians 5:21, the most compressed and the most staggering statement of the impeccability of Christ in relation to the atonement, spoken together as both a christological confession and a soteriological celebration:

“He made Him who knew no sin to be sin on our behalf, so that we might become the righteousness of God in Him.”

2 CORINTHIANS 5:21, NASB 1995

Soli Deo Gloria
To God Alone Be the Glory

FAITHFUL TO THE WORD

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