

“Stephen: 5 Important Lessons from an Ordinary Christian”

Acts 6–7; SENT #9

If you can remember way back into October of last year... I know it seems like a long time ago... October of last year:

- **Justin Bieber** was just a cute little kid only committing misdemeanors
- **Queen Latifah** wasn't Rev. Queen Latifah yet
- **Peyton Manning** was still a football hero for young boys

We were also in a series called *SENT*, going chapter by chapter through the book of Acts. We took an extended break... (not even sure if you remember it).

- Well, today, we are jumping back in.
- Acts 6: We come to the story of the **first Christian martyr**... and in him you're going to see the **profile of the common Christian man**. This guy is not an Apostle or a church leader, just an average guy. But it's **because of guys like him** that the church grows.

CONTEXT: By this point the church has become a huge movement. The Jerusalem church is at least 10,000 people big—all in one city—the entire population of which couldn't have been more than 40,000. From here, we know, it is going to spread around the world. Question is: **Why is it growing like this?**

- Kenneth Scott Latourette, noted history professor at Yale said: *“Never in so short a time has any other religious faith—or for that matter any other set of ideas, religious, political or economic—ever achieved so commanding a position in such an important culture without the aid of physical force, or social or cultural prestige.”* (Other movements spread by conquest or politics, but not Christianity).

- So, how, and why?
- The answer, in part is, the profile of the man you are going to see today.
- Stephen has **one principle that he lives by**: one principle that makes him the kind of guy who keeps people together; that keeps everything going forward... that prob makes him fun to be around; That principle is, “It’s not about me.” if you’ve ever known a guy like Stephen, you’ll recognize him immediately:

[6:1] Now in these days when the disciples were increasing in number, a complaint by the Hellenists (which means Jews with Greek cultural roots—the Greek word “Hellas” refers to the geographic region of Greece) arose against the Hebrews because their widows were being neglected in the daily distribution.

- Now this is a pretty dangerous problem, because there is an edge to it. It’s a racial problem. “You’re prioritizing this group over this one because of their cultural ethnicity.”
- **There are actually two problems with this complaint:**
 - **One, they assign motives:** The text says, *“The Hellenists complained against the Hebrews.”* In other words, they assumed the Hebrews were leaving them out for racial and cultural reasons.
 - Second, they **never brought this to the Apostles!** The text says *“a complaint arose,”* which implies there was this general murmuring and backbiting going on in small groups all across Jerusalem that finally surfaced. *“You know they don’t care about us...”*
- Church: this is a significant threat! Nothing is used by Satan more effectively than distrust and resentment in the church. This is Satan’s third major attack on the church:
 - In Acts 4 he attacked it through a persecuting gov’t;
 - In Acts 5 he attacked it through the embezzling hypocrisy of one of its leaders, Ananias
 - In Acts 6 he attacked it through a spirit of grumbling; distrust; backbiting. This might be the most serious threat that endangers churches.

A spirit of grumbling and complaining kills more churches than persecution—Man on an island. “Church splits”

- Do you understand that when you speak evil of your brothers and sisters, and especially when you judge their motives, you are being used by Satan?
- Two of my life rules—I teach our team, too: **1. Always give people the benefit of the doubt about their motives when you can.**

2. When you do have a problem, always go straight to the source! Do you know how much disharmony you would avoid if you operated that way?

So how did the church leadership respond? Defensively? “*Oh, no you didn’t... How dare you?*”

[2] And the twelve summoned the full number of the disciples and said, “It is not right that we should give up preaching the word of God to serve tables. [3] Therefore, brothers, pick out from among you seven men of good repute, full of the Spirit and of wisdom, whom we will appoint to this duty. [4] But we will devote ourselves to prayer and to the ministry of the word.” [5] And what they said pleased the whole gathering,

- Now, **don’t hear that** as, “*This is beneath us.*” In fact, **the fact that they had to call** on a team to do it when the load of widows got larger implies that the Apostles were already doing it for Jewish widows...
- **The Apostles thought of themselves as servants**—they were followers of man who had washed their feet—so for the first 6 chapters, they have been waiting on tables.
- **But now they realize the load is too heavy**, and would consume their time, and the **greatest act of service they can provide** the church is teaching the Word accurately, seeking God in prayer on behalf of the church, and training other people to do the same. They are not **graduating out of service**, just focusing on the most effective kind of service.

- But that means someone has to do this other part of church ministry...

...and they chose Stephen, a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit, and Philip, and Prochorus, and Nicanor, and Timon, and Parmenas, and Nicolaus, a proselyte of Antioch. (a bunch of other guys whose names are hard to pronounce. BTW: almost all Greek names which means they included the Hellenists in the leadership) [6] These they set before the apostles, and they prayed and laid their hands on them.

[7] And the word of God continued to increase, and the number of the disciples multiplied greatly in Jerusalem, and a great many of the priests became obedient to the faith.

- (Here’s a question: why the specific mention of priests? They weren’t the only group that got saved... I have a speculation: In the OT, priests were in charge of taking care of the poor. Here, you have a whole group of people acting like priests, doing what priests did.
- **Priests had been antagonistic toward Jesus**—they had helped lead in his crucifixion—but their **hearts are changed now...** How? Through apologetic reasoning? No, through the church’s service toward the poor.)

[8] And Stephen (one of those guys), full of grace and power, was doing great wonders and signs among the people. Evidently he’s leading in a lot of the conversions.

Well, all these conversions cause an **uproar**, and so Stephen gets called before the other religious leaders—other priests—to answer for it. **He preaches a sermon** in response (Acts 7)—the **longest sermon** in the book of Acts—and in that sermon he makes 2 major points:

- 1. Israel, you have always resisted the prophets** that God sent to you.

2. Your law can't save you because A. you've never been able to keep it and B. it can't give you a new heart (which you really need).

And then he ends it with this rousing word of encouragement:

[7:51] "You stiff-necked* people, uncircumcised* in heart and ears, you always resist the Holy Spirit. As your fathers did, so do you.

[52] Which of the prophets did your fathers not persecute? And they killed those who announced beforehand the coming of the Righteous One, whom you have now betrayed and murdered, [53] you who received the law as delivered by angels and did not keep it." *You want the truth? You can't handle the truth?*

(What is stiff-necked? Vulgar)

[54] Now when they heard these things they were enraged, and they gnashed their teeth at him. What is that like? (You get the image: majorly P'Oed.)

[55] But he, full of the Holy Spirit, gazed into heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God. [56] And he said, "Behold, I see the heavens opened, and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God."

- Here again we have this **theme of "priests"** emerge. You see, in Israel, only priests could enter the place of God's glory—and only once a year, through a special ceremony. Now Stephen says, "I am seeing heaven opened in front of me!" **He's not a priest**; he's not even an Apostle. Regular guy!
- The church has become a **nation of priests**! They take care of the poor and commune directly in the presence of God.

[57] But they cried out with a loud voice and stopped their ears and rushed together at him. Stop for a minute and think about this. They stopped their ears—and a "loud voice"? They are like children!

[58] Then they cast him out of the city and stoned him. And the witnesses laid down their garments at the feet of a young man named

Saul. (Strange little detail, yes? Watch our clothes. This is Saul is going to undergo his own conversion in a couple of chapters, and God is going to change his name to "Paul." And one of the biggest influences on him was watching this happen to Stephen.)

[59] And as they were stoning Stephen, he called out, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit." [60] And falling to his knees he cried out with a loud voice, "Lord, do not hold this sin against them." And when he had said this, he fell asleep.

5 Lessons We Learn from the life of Stephen:

1. The core of Christian commitment is service

- Stephen is introduced to us as a servant. His job was not glorious: he waited tables for widows. He obviously was a capable leader, a gifted theologian, and a good preacher. But he didn't say, "Well, I'm going to need something a little more in line with my gifts."
 - No, he said, **"It's not about me, and if this how I can serve the body of Christ, I'll gladly do it."**
- And that service, though seemingly insignificant, had a huge effect on the church: not only did he help **preserve church unity**; his service led to the **conversion of some of the chief antagonists** in the community—the religious priests—and, would end up leading to the conversion of the **church's chief prosecutor, Saul.**
- **Francis Schaeffer** said, "The love of the church is the church's most effective apologetic."
- **Our desire at this church:** to be a place characterized by its service. And, if I could commend you for a moment, you really are.
 - I hear **story after story** of how you care for one another:
 - **Family of 6:** lost their house in November... known by a family at one of our campuses... "I've got a place..." Moved in on Christmas day; all decorated
 - ~~**Family over Christmas**~~ whose house got burned down

- Family here who was **working with a girl through our ministry to unwed mothers**—convince her not to have an abortion. Teenage girl gets kicked out the of the house... they take her in and are helping her learn to be a good mom.
 - I asked our **CAMPUS PASTORS**
 - We also want people to feel that spirit of service the moment they step foot on our church campus
 - Barna study: **70% of new people decide** whether or not they'll come back to a church within the first **7 minutes** of arriving on campus. "The sermon starts in the parking lot." BEFORE THEY HEAR ME...
 - We want everything to say, "**You are important!**"
 - (What **2 of our speakers** said this weekend...)
- And we want it to overflow into the streets, just like it did here in Acts 6...
 - The **Roman Emperor Julian**, one of the fiercest persecutors of early Christians (whom early church affectionately referred to as "Julian the apostate"), admitted in disgust that *'these infernal Galileans feed our poor in addition to their own.'*¹
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 - **Historian Eberhard Arnold** notes, "Most astounding to the outside observer was the extent to which poverty was overcome in the vicinity of the communities... Christians spent more money in the streets than the followers of other religions spent in their temples."²
 - Recently I **met with a very well-known cultural leader in the Triangle who is very antagonistic toward our church...** she accuses us of hating women and not caring about the poor... her single mother neighbor.
- **Everyone in this church should serve.** You say, "Well, how do you know where to serve?"

¹ From The Early Christians: In Their Own Words, Eberhard Arnold, p. 14.

² Ibid., 16.

- Place of skill
- Place of passion
- Place of great need
 - *Let me comment on that last one:* sometimes you serve simply because there is a need. I'm not sure "waiting tables for widows" was a passion or skill for Stephen...
 - I say that because while **we have a lot of you who do serve**, we have others who won't do a lot of things in the church because it is beneath them or inconvenient. *"Well, I don't think my talents and teaching ability and general awesomeness are properly appreciated here... serving in the parking lot or helping take care of kids is pretty below my talent level."*
 - **Well, waiting tables probably felt below Stephen.** But he did it, because it needed to be done.
 - I can assure you that **washing feet was below Jesus**—he didn't do it because he had a unique skill in foot washing, or a special passion for it ("I never feel so alive as when I'm washing feet!") but he did it because he wanted to serve.
 - You should **make room in your life**, particularly here in the church, to do things you don't necessarily thrill to do, so that you maintain the role of "servant."
 - **Guys with Ph.D.'s in our parking lot**
 - **CAMPUS PASTORS: SIGN UP TO SERVE**

And that applies to me, too:

- What I do up here is **supposed to be an act of service**, not self-exaltation.
 - As I pointed out, the Apostles were servants before they were leaders (they had been waiting tables in chapters 1–6). So when they quit waiting tables it **wasn't because**

they were too important to serve; they simply found a place in greater need of their service.

- **One of the things I pray is that I will always think about my preaching** that way. It seems like a lot of pastors lose sight of the fact that they are supposed to be serving their congregation, washing their feet with the word—not exalting themselves. I feel like you can tell that in their preaching.
- ***You can pray for me in that, because I deal with that, too.***

But that leads me to #2:

2. Nothing is more important than the Word of God

- ***For the Apostles to have filled up their schedules***, even with something good like taking care of widows would have been a disservice to the church, because the church’s greatest need is the Word of God.
 - Like an **EMT** who does the dishes or sweeps in the wake of an accident.
 - One of the **things I appreciate about this church...** (How it lets me set my schedule.)
- In **chapter 7 Stephen is going to preach the longest recorded sermon in Acts**. *Where did he get all that knowledge about the Word? From hearing the Apostles teach it.*
- Stephen prioritized it by freeing them up to do it... but he also prioritized it by learning?
- Here’s my question for you: **Have you devoted yourself to the word? Would you be ready to preach that kind of sermon?**
- **It’s not enough for me to prioritize teaching it, you have to prioritize learning it**
- Because, like Stephen, **you are going to be called upon to give an answer in places** where I am not going to be present, and you have to be faithful enough to have your mind and heart ready—filled with Scripture.

- The **Holy Spirit can bring things to your memory**, but only things you have already committed to memory. He can’t fire bullets you haven’t stocked in your arsenal.
- Spurgeon: converted through a layman. ‘Hey you, preach! Would you be ready to convert Spurgeon?’

3. God does his greatest work through “ordinary” people

- Stephen preaches the **longest sermon in the book of Acts** with the most powerful effect: the conversion of Saul.
- Why? What is the Holy Spirit trying to show us through this? Ordinary people filled with the Spirit can do everything an Apostle can do.
- **John 16:7**: Jesus actually told his disciples it would be better if he went away because only then could the Spirit come.
 - Think about the absurdity of that statement, on the surface. *How awesome would it be to have Jesus on your ministry team?*
 - You’re throwing a church fellowship and you run out of **Chex Mix**: BAM. Jesus multiplies the remaining crumbs so you have enough for each guest plus 12 more bowls.
 - **Headache: BAM**
 - **Difficult question** about the Bible? BAM
 - **Your dog gets run over**. BAM. He resurrects your dog back to life. Your cat gets run over; Jesus helps you bury it.
- OK, so maybe that’s not exactly what it would be like. **But it would be great to have Jesus here. New campus: Jesus has volunteered to be campus pastor.**
 - **Raudel: may happen.**
- Yet Jesus said the power of the Holy Spirit at work in ordinary believers would be greater than the presence of Jesus beside us—and you see that in Stephen.
 - **How we’ve built our churches turns this on its head.** We built them as a group of people who come admire

one leader... And I think that might be keeping us from tapping into the real potential in the church.

- The **greatest miracles** were supposed to happen through you—like they did Stephen. The **Saul's of our community probably won't be converted by coming to hear me preach**—at least at first, but by you.

4. Christians are a befuddling contradiction to the world

- (We don't use the word 'befuddling' enough; I'm bringing it back)
- Stephen's life is a **contradiction** to everyone:
 - He is **so kind and gracious** and servant-like that he wins the hearts of antagonistic priests. Yet his **rebuke is so stinging** it makes another group of religious leaders want to murder him.
 - Stephen looks at people and says "you are **stiff-necked; uncircumcised** in heart; but then, as they are stoning him, he says, "*God, don't charge them with this sin. They don't know what they are doing!*"
- Stephen is speaking with **grace and truth** (the Christian formula). And the world MOST hates you when you speak with both. Truth without grace is fundamentalism and easy to write off; grace without truth is sentimentality with no power.
- **If you speak with grace and truth, the world will hate you, no matter how much grace you have.**
 - **Dr. Mohler** challenged us on this last week: **Are we looking for the world's affirmation?** If you are going to follow Jesus, you are not going to get it. **They are going to call you arrogant and hateful** and bigoted. (And you should always examine your heart to see if you are those things.)
 - But **you are also going to love them** and return good for evil and serve them and refuse to be bitter at them and ask God for their forgiveness. And **some of them, like Saul, will see the sweetness** of your testimony and how you respond to persecution and will be converted... but the rest will keep pelting you with stones.

- **When I was in college...** always be sweet. Never adopt the spirit of Satan to do the work of Christ.

5. Sometimes God's will for us is martyrdom

- Stephen did everything *right* and he ended up dead. What happened? Why didn't God bless him and reward him grow his ministry and multiply his days?
- I don't know. But it says this: (vs. 58) "***they laid their coats at the feet of a young man named Saul.***" (I get chills thinking about this.)
 - Saul was watching, and **as every stone smashed** into Stephen's face, as his body was **mangled into a bloody heap**, Saul heard Stephen's pleas with God to forgive his persecutors, and he saw the glory of God reflected on Stephen's face, and something happened in Saul's heart he never got over.
 - **Stephen's blood going into the ground was the seed of the Apostle Paul's faith.**
- Stephen's **most effective contribution** to the kingdom of God came through his martyrdom; *Paul was not converted by seeing Stephen delivered; he was converted by seeing Stephen full of the Holy Spirit testify to Jesus' glory in the midst of pain.*
 - **Do you understand** that the sermons you preach through your pain are louder than the ones you preach through your blessings?
 - **(RH dad)**
 - **Raudel's dad; Stephen: It's not about me!** *It's not about me living or prospering. My life is about one thing, pointing people to Jesus—*
- ~~(This is going to happen as we go... (ASCC SITUATION: PEOPLE WILL DIE!))~~

From start to finish Stephen's life screams that: "It's not about me."

- *It's not about my self-actualization or getting the respect I deserve. It's about serving, waiting tables, if that's the need.*

- *It's not about **me obtaining blessing and walking in prosperity**, but about directing people's attention toward Jesus.*

What's it "all about" for you?

- You? (you're probably easily offended in the church; angry at God you're not more recognized; angry at God you're not blessed; limits to your obedience—never go really to sacrifice)
- ~~Your family? (Christian people: God is a convenient way to keep family together; when God calls your child to the mission field, you object and refuse...)~~

Where did Stephen get this kind of courage and selflessness?

- When he looked up into heaven, what did he see?
 - He saw Jesus stretching out nail-pierced hands to receive him.
 - Jesus, the Lord of the Universe, who had given up his life for Stephen.
 - He had washed the feet of sinners (Stephen's feet, so of course Stephen would do it for others)
 - And then Stephen prayed, "Father, forgive them..." Where have we heard that?
 - Stephen is becoming to others what Jesus had been to him.
 - **Those who believe the gospel and behold the gospel become like the gospel.**
- And he includes an odd little detail in his vision: he said, "I see Jesus *standing*." Every other place in the New Testament that talks about Jesus at the throne of God talks about him sitting... But here, he's standing.
- **In affirmation.**
 - All the **religious leaders are calling Stephen a heretic**; but Jesus, the Prince of theology, stands up at God's throne and says, "He's mine! They call him a heretic and a fool; but Father, I say he is mine."
 - **Earth was condemning him**; but heaven was commending him.
 - **Earth rejecting**; heaven receiving

- **And though it looked like his life was in the hands of the devil**, he was actually in the hands of God, who was overruling all of this for good. **Jesus was in charge of it all.**
- **Stephen didn't know it**, but watching him die was the one who would become the greatest evangelist the world would ever know and God was using his death to bring this young man to faith.
- **You who are suffering, or in places difficult to obey, you need to see Jesus' in the same place.**
 - **To see that he is in control!**
 - *Just like he used the overturned the evil plans of Joseph's brothers for good,*
 - *just like he took Stephen's martyrdom and used it to produce the greatest Christian missionary, Paul...*
 - *He's using your suffering for the same thing!*
- *You need to see him standing in love and victory at the right hand of God.*
- **Behold him there the risen Lamb**, my perfect spotless righteousness, the great unchangeable I am, the king of glory and of grace, one with himself I cannot die, my soul is purchased by his blood; my life is hid with Christ on high, with Christ my Savior and my God...
- **The degree to which you understand Jesus' love and victory is the degree to which you will be able to endure suffering well.**

(MUSIC)

One more thing: The name "Stephen" means "crown" in Greek. In Greece, crowns were given to those who overcame.

- **Don't miss this:** Stephen **overcame the world not by experiencing what** we would typically call "blessing," but by dying faithful to Jesus with his eyes fixed upon the risen Christ. ...
 - **And God used his death for more** than he'd ever dreamed, for from his death came the greatest evangelist who would ever live.

- God saves the world through your suffering well in the midst of death.
- **You want to be overcome the world? Serve. Confess that it's not about you. And submit to obedience whatever the cost!**

Many of you are being **called upon by God—right now—to glorify him** in your hour of trial.

- For some of you, it's a **physical or emotional affliction.**
 - You MUST PRAY: Jesus, I see you standing and I trust you. Help me to give glory to you whatever happens.
- Some of you have been put into situations where it is **costly to obey:**
 - **BOB DOLL;** maybe it's a push to compromise standards;
 - **School:** suffering the loss of reputation that comes from standing on what God says. They throw stones, not literal but verbal ones... and it will hurt!
 - You've got to say, "Jesus is worth it."
- For others, God has called you to something sacrificial or uncomfortable. To **SERVE** in some ministry of the church that makes you uncomfortable. To make a **DIFFICULT FINANCIAL SACRIFICE.** To **GO OVERSEAS** on a mission trip... or maybe move there permanently.

We will have Stephen's!!!! ASCC and guy who was shot. Some of our people won't come back!

It's only confidence in the risen Jesus that gives you the ability to obey that way.

Adoniram Judson wrote this letter to Mr. Hasseltine to get permission to marry Ann... *"I have now to ask whether you can consent to part with your daughter early next spring, to see her no more in this world... Whether you can consent to her departure to (foreign, dangerous) lands, and her subjection to the hardships and sufferings of a missionary life? Whether you can consent to her exposure to... every kind of want and distress; to degradation, insult, persecution,*

and perhaps a violent death? Can you consent to all this, for the sake of him who left his heavenly home and died for her and for you; for the sake of perishing, immortal souls; for the sake of Zion (heaven) and the glory of God? Can you consent to all this, in hope of soon meeting your daughter in the world of glory, with a crown of righteousness brightened by the acclamations of praise which shall resound to her Savior from (lost nations) saved, through her means, from eternal woe and despair?"

She died there. But after she died, she left 7000 Christians in a place where previously there had been none before... She joined the long ranks of Christians who say, "It's worth it. He's worth it."

PRAYER:

God wins the world through people who say, "It's not about me," and Jesus is worth it, and they pick up the towel and serve, whatever the cost.

CAN YOU PRAY THAT? "It's not about me." I am convinced that one died for all, so those of us who live should no longer live for themselves..."