

7. Stephen Preaching to the Jewish Council

Acts 6:1-53

During this time of the early church in Jerusalem, the Greek speaking believers complained against the Hebrew believers because their widows were being neglected in the daily distribution of food. The apostles gathered with many disciples and said, "It is not right that we should give up preaching the word of God to serve tables." They then instructed the disciples to choose seven men who were of good reputation and full of the Spirit and of wisdom to be appointed and perform this duty so that they could devote themselves to prayer and to the ministry of the word. The apostles then laid their hands on the seven chosen and prayed for them. Stephen was one of these men. And the Word of God continued to spread rapidly.

After some time, the religious leaders were angry at Stephen because of some of the great wonders and signs that he was doing. They created false witnesses accusing him of teaching against the law of Moses and against the Temple. Stephen was brought before the High Priest and the council, and he asked Stephen,

"Are these charges true?"

Stephen answered by reminding them of God's faithfulness to the often rebellious Israelites and to His promises throughout the Old Testament. He walked through stories of Abraham, Joseph, Moses, Joshua, David, Solomon, even the prophets and the exile in Babylon, showing how the entire Old Testament was pointing to the Christ.

The Stephen said, "You stiff-necked people! Your hearts and ears are still uncircumcised. You are just like your ancestors: You always resist the Holy Spirit! Was there ever a prophet your ancestors did not persecute? They even killed those who predicted the coming of the Righteous One. And now you have betrayed and murdered him—you who have received the law that was given through angels but have not obeyed it."

INTRODUCTION: (Ask a pre-story question to discuss in pairs or as a group.)

- **Think of a time when you noticed a church caring very well for people in need. What did that look like? What was the effect on the church?**

THE STORY: Tell the story and learn it together as a group through many repetitions.

POST-STORY DISCUSSION: Lead a discussion guided by these questions:

OUTLINE VERSION (for teacher to use when teaching)

Details: What happened? To see what truths we can learn.

Let's look at the details that we observe describing what happened in the story in order to see what truths we can learn.

- **In this story we see the first significant conflict within the early church. It seems different from the fellowship we saw in Acts 2 and Acts 4. What was the conflict about? What does this show us about the realities of the life of a church? What does it show us about people's hearts? What sins may have been happening?**
- **How did the apostles address this problem? What might we learn from them about handling conflict between believers?**
- **What kind of people did apostles charge them to appoint? Why were these characteristics important? What does this teach us about Gospel ministry?**
- **What was the fruit of the way the early church handled this conflict? What does this show us?**
- **Religious leaders outside the church became angry when they saw Stephen doing signs and wonders. They had false witnesses telling lies about him, saying he was attacking their religion and customs. (The law of Moses and the Temple) What can we learn from seeing how unbelievers react negatively to the speaking and living out of the Gospel?**
- **How did Stephen answer the high priest when he brought these false accusations to him? How did he NOT respond? How can this help us when we face false accusations?**
- **How did Stephen bring his preaching to a conclusion? How is this a good model for preaching the Gospel? Why is it risky?**

Summary: What do we learn here from the early church? What commandments or examples to follow are found in this story. Which ones still apply to us today?

- **Be aware of Satan's devices to create division.**
- **Don't show favoritism:**
- **Listen:** The apostles listened to and heard the cries of the needy in their body. They also granted the other disciples a voice in choosing deacons
- **Value others' opinions:**
- **Prioritize the Word of God:**
- **Be faithful to God's call on your life.**
- **Don't cling to control. Trust people** enough to delegate.
- **Care about the needy, especially those in the church body.**
- **Prioritize diaconal ministry in church.**
- Look for people who are **filled with Spirit, good reputation, wise.**
 - **1 Tim 3:8-13** - qualifications for deacons
- **Commit to build relationships in the body** so that we really can know each other deeply and discern who is best qualified for certain areas of ministry.
- **Be bold in speaking the truth.**
- **Teach fullness of Scripture**, using it all to **point to Christ. Remind believers of the Gospel** over and over!
- **Preach the law, judgment** as part of the Gospel.
- **Be circumcised in heart and ears** - i.e. sensitive to the Spirit. Don't resist the Holy Spirit!

General Application: (discuss with whole group)

- **Are there ways that churches in general could improve on how they do mercy ministry?**
- **What are ways in which our churches could improve on the way we structure our churches? Elders and Deacons?**
- **In what ways can you struggle in prayer and teaching to put the proper time needed to prepare?**

Personal Application:

- **Think about your own church and discuss how you can better balance the teaching of the word of God and prayer in the church together with the mercy ministries of the church. (caring for the tangible needs of the members)**
- **Are there any practical steps you need to take in your church to have the right leaders in place? Are there people in your church that you feel could be qualified to be trained as a deacon?**

FULL VERSION (for teacher to use for study in preparation)

Let's look at the details that we observe describing what happened in the story in order to see what truths we can learn.

- **In this story we see the first significant conflict within the early church. It seems different from the fellowship we saw in Acts 2 and Acts 4. What was the conflict about? What does this show us about the realities of the life of a church? What does it show us about people's hearts? What sins may have been happening?**
 - Conflict will happen, even in the best of churches. Believers in Christ, though we are forgiven and given the Holy Spirit, we still struggle with sin. We will struggle with favoritism, with complaining and murmuring, with seeking to be in control.
 - Language and background differences can easily turn into prejudice or favoritism when we are not listening to the Spirit within us or when we are allowing the grace of God to work powerfully in our hearts to help us love others.
 - Satan hates the church, hates to see the Gospel spreading. He is always looking for ways to cause division and strife.

- **How did the apostles address this problem? What might we learn from them about handling conflict between believers?**
 - Gathered other leaders and disciples (other stakeholders) to talk together.
 - Pointed out the priority of continuing to preach God's Word clearly.
 - Listened to the concerns of the Greek speaking believers.
 - Showed by their actions that caring for physical needs is indeed part of the work of the Gospel, that it was important.
 - Delegated responsibility to other leaders to choose people to take care of the physical needs of believers who were needy.
 - Recognized that different believers have different callings and gifts to exercise in the body of Christ.

- **What kind of people did apostles charge them to appoint? Why were these characteristics important? What does this teach us about Gospel ministry?**
 - **Men of good reputation.** It was important that all the people trusted these men to do things with fairness and honesty.
 - **Men filled with the Holy Spirit.** This shows that this role is not “unspiritual.” It is just as important for these men as for those focused on teaching and prayer to know the Gospel clearly and to submitting themselves to the strong influence of the Holy Spirit. This ministry, though physical, is still a spiritual, Gospel ministry.
 - Through the Gospel God is redeeming all things. It begins with our hearts being redeemed but also involves redeeming problems like hunger, loneliness, or disunity.
 - **Men filled with wisdom.** It would not be an easy ministry. They needed practical wisdom about how to organize themselves and how to promote healthy relationships between believers of different ethnic origins.

- **What was the fruit of the way the early church handled this conflict? What does this show us?**
 - The Word of God continued to spread rapidly.
 - When issues - conflict, physical needs, etc - are handle in a Gospel centered way by people guided by the Spirit, outsiders notice how well the people in the church love each other. Thus Jesus is glorified in the eyes of the world. And people want to experience the life that they see the believers experiencing. They begin to believe that the Word they are sharing is true.

- **Religious leaders outside the church became angry when they saw Stephen doing signs and wonders.** They had false witnesses telling lies about him, saying he was attacking their religion and customs. (The law of Moses and the Temple) **What can we learn from seeing how unbelievers react negatively to the speaking and living out of the Gospel?**
 - Unbelievers often feel jealous, threatened, by the Gospel so they lash out.
 - They listen to and even create lies, trying to make what is good seem bad.
 - The gospel is truly offensive to those who have yet to repent and put their faith in Jesus. It is offensive because it shows us our sin and how we fall short of God's glory and cannot save ourselves.
 - The heart is deceitfully wicked. When we don't get what we want we can create other pathways to make things happen. We can find it hard to celebrate others and can try to tear others down when they have success.

- **How did Stephen answer the high priest when he brought these false accusations to him? How did he NOT respond? How can this help us when we face false accusations?**
 - He did not try to defend himself or protect himself. He trusted God so much that he did not fear what they might do to him.
 - He pointed them to God and his faithfulness to His promises to Israel.
 - He spoke with boldness and with clarity.
 - He connected with things that his listeners already knew and were familiar with and built on those truths.
 - He showed clearly (through CBS!) how all the Law and the Prophets (the Old Testament) was pointing toward Jesus being the long awaited Messiah.
 - He connected his listeners' lives and actions directly with the lives of their ancestors, the characters in the OT stories.

- **How did Stephen bring his preaching to a conclusion? How is this a good model for preaching the Gospel? Why is it risky?**
 - He confronted them personally. He forced them to consider their own hard hearts.
 - He showed them how their external behaviors or qualities (their physical circumcision) meant nothing when a true spiritual circumcision had not happened in their hearts and in their ears?
 - **What should true circumcision mean?**

- It meant identifying yourself by faith with God through the promised Savior. Being part of the covenant people.
 - It meant being cleansed by the shedding of blood.
 - It meant being ready to listen to God's Word and to receive it and respond through an obedient faith.
- He used the example of their ancestors, whom they revered, to show them their own sin and rebellion. To show them how their ancestors had so often rebelled against those calling them to live lives of holiness as they awaited the promised Savior. And to show how they were the same, since they actually killed the one and only Savior, the Messiah, Jesus.
 - He showed them how their privileged status of being the people who received the Law and the promises had been wasted because they refused to believe and obey God's law.

Summary: What do we learn here from the early church? What commandments or examples to follow are found in this story. Which ones still apply to us today?

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- **Don't show favoritism:**
- **Listen:** The apostles listened to and heard the cries of the needy in their body. They also granted the other disciples a voice in choosing deacons.
- **Value others' opinions:**
- **Prioritize the Word of God:**
- **Be faithful to God's call on your life.** The disciples knew their primary calling was to pray and teach God's Word.
- **Don't cling to control.** Be willing to entrust things to other people. **Trust people** enough to delegate.
- **Care about the needy, especially those in the church body.**
- **Prioritize diaconal ministry in church.**
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