**The Christ-Centered Life**

**Acts 6:8-15 (ESV)**

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Today we’re going to be opening up our Bibles to Acts 6. We’ve been studying the book of Acts, which is a book that really leans heavily into us with this sense of mission. Jesus’ church is a church of worship. It’s a church of fellowship. It’s also a church of mission, to bring a dark world, a world that is dying without Christ, a world without hope, without God, access to God through the Gospel. So we find this amazing evangelist here, this story. He becomes the first martyr as a result of His witness for Christ. His name is Stephen. He was introduced, I believe, last week, by Pastor Josh. Now we’re going to pick up his story this week and then the next time we’re in Acts, we’ll look at Acts 7 as well. But today, we’re in Acts 6:8-15 and we consider God’s call upon our life to be His witnesses.

***8*** *And Stephen, full of grace and power, was doing great wonders and signs among the people.* ***9*** *Then some of those who belonged to the synagogue of the Freedmen (as it was called), and of the Cyrenians, and of the Alexandrians, and of those from Cilicia and Asia, rose up and disputed with Stephen.* ***10*** *But they could not withstand the wisdom and the Spirit with which he was speaking.* ***11*** *Then they secretly instigated men who said, “We have heard him speak blasphemous words against Moses and God.”* ***12*** *And they stirred up the people and the elders and the scribes, and they came upon him and seized him and brought him before the council,* ***13*** *and they set up false witnesses who said, “This man never ceases to speak words against this holy place and the law,* ***14*** *for we have heard him say that this Jesus of Nazareth will destroy this place and will change the customs that Moses delivered to us.”* ***15*** *And gazing at him, all who sat in the council saw that his face was like the face of an angel.*

As the book of Acts opens, Jesus tells His disciples in

**Acts 1:8** But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth.”

This is our mission! It’s a mission given to us directly from our Lord, from our King. The story in front of us in Acts 6 is both sobering and encouraging. It’s sobering because it reminds us of the extreme cost of discipleship. Jesus calls us to take up our cross and follow Him. In other words, be willing to die. It’s encouraging because it reminds us of the great worth of Jesus. What we’re about is the most valuable, the greatest thing ever in all of creation. Every Christian is called by Jesus to give the world a witness to the power and grace and saving nature of Jesus. We’re called to give a witness that Jesus rules as King of all kings. We’re called to give a witness that Jesus died in order to bring forgiveness of sin and the hope of heaven.

When Jesus calls us to be His ambassadors, He gives us a very dangerous vocation because the world to whom we witness is not friendly toward Christ. Yet, we’re motivated to be faithful in this vocation, to be faithful to this call to be witnesses, first by a love of God, a love of His glory, but also by a love for people. We are burdened for their condition.We know that Jesus is worth sacrificing everything in order to possess. We know that the lost, our friends and family members and our neighbors who are without Christ, will die and they will endure an unending agony, separated from God forever and ever if they don’t hear the message and if they don’t believe in Jesus.

Let’s take a moment and just let that settle in as we all have friends and family and neighbors who are without Christ. I know it’s something that even believers don’t like to think about very often because it’s almost too painful to consider, but it’s vital that we do. That friend, that neighbor, that family member, if they die in the condition that they’re now in, they will endure an unending agony forever and ever, separated from God, separated from His love, separated from all that is good. God calls us to be instruments in His hand to offer the hope of the Gospel to them.

We are empowered in our witness by God’s Spirit. We measure the success of our witness by the smile of God, and not by the smiles of people around us. We expect trouble for our witness. We anticipate that our witness will invite ridicule and opposition and persecution, and perhaps even death.

In Acts 6, we meet a man who is a Greek-speaking Jew. His name is Stephen. You were introduced to him last week.He is chosen and approved by the church as one of seven men fit to address the problem of distributing food to widows in the church. He appears to be the leader of these seven as his name appears first in the list and also his story is told in great detail right after the list is given. This man, Stephen, strengthens the church by serving tables. It’s a very humble way of serving Christ, yet His Christianity is not confined to this physical service. His Christianity and His Christian mission and purpose is extended beyond that. We see that even here in this sermon that he preaches before the Jews. He strengthens the church through humble service, and yet he glorifies God as well through bold witness.

Stephen acts as sort of a transitional figure in the book of Acts. He spans the gap between these two prominent giants of apostles. There is Peter, whose ministry is primarily among the Jews. Then there is Paul, whose ministry is primarily among the Gentiles. Stephen’s fearless proclamation of Jesus ultimately leads to his martyrdom. He is the first martyr of the church, but he will not be the last. Stephen reminds us of our mission, the mission that Jesus Christ gave to us. Jesus calls us to be His ambassadors in this world. We’re no longer citizens of this world, but we’re citizens of heaven. We’re here as exiles on assignment. Our place is not to be assimilated into the world. Our place is to minister the Gospel to the world, a world that is without hope and that is spiritually dark and that is spiritually dying.

So at the outset of our study in Acts 6 this morning, we want to ask ourselves the question, how do I relate to my world? Think about that for a moment. How do Irelate to my world? A follow-up question sets the options in front of us. Am I being conformed by the world into its way of thinking and living or am I faithfully bringing the Gospel to the world? I believe these are the only two choices we have in answer to the question, how do I relate to the world? We either are being conformed by the world into its way of thinking, its way of living or we are giving witness to Jesus Christ. Apart from giving witness to Jesus Christ, we will be conformed to this world.

Stephen did not have great talent so much as he had great love for Christ. His love for Jesus shapes his character by the power of the Spirit. We find in him sort of a secret to being an effective witness and that is just simply being devoted to Jesus, to worshiping Him, to obeying Him, to serving Him.As we place Jesus at the center of our lives, our character is transformed into the likeness of Jesus. Stephen illustrates what kind of fruit that God bears through such a life.

The main idea we’re going to trace through this story today is that God values Christ-like character over talent. There was a 19th century pastor by the name of Robert Murray McCheyne and he wrote to a missionary friend a sentence that has become rather famous. He wrote, “It is not great talents that God blesses so much as great likeness to Jesus.” I hope that encourages you as we think about witness, because oftentimes when we think about the subject of witness, right away, there are all kinds of thoughts of our own inadequacy that begin filling our hearts and our minds.

We think, “I’m not really skilled enough to be an effective witness for Jesus in this world. I’m not sure I have the people skills or the speaking skills or the reasoning skills to effectively share the Gospel. This world is becoming so complex with all these ideologies and I’m not even sure I understand. How is a person like me to deliver a message that presents Christ to a world that seems to be consumed by these other gods, these other ideologies?” Well, I pray this story encourages you. If you are a follower of Jesus Christ, God calls you to be His witness. When God calls us to a task, He equips us for that task. So this morning, we’re going to look at the character qualities of Stephen and recognize that these character qualities are within reach of every follower of Jesus. We’re going to look at four specific qualities that mark a Christ-centered life. They’re not the only qualities, but they’re the ones that stand out to me as I look at Stephen’s life. And I believe they’re the ones that sort of fuel him to be effective as a worshiper and as a witness to the Gospel. The first quality, if you’re taking notes is

**1. The Holy Spirit.**

Stephen is a man full of the Holy Spirit. Three times in this very short biography of Stephen, Luke describes him as a man full of the Spirit.

**Acts 6:3** 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.

**Acts 6:5** And what they said pleased the whole gathering, and they chose Stephen, a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit,

After Stephen stands before this council, it says

***10*** *But they could not withstand the wisdom and the Spirit with which he was speaking.*

Even his opponents recognized that there was a spirit about Stephen that was so forceful. They couldn’t stand up underneath what the Spirit was doing.

Skip down another page to Acts 7. Stephen now is dying as a result of being stoned to death by those who opposed the Gospel. Luke describes him this way.

**Acts 7:55** 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.

We make mention of this quality because we don’t want to think that Stephen is an effective witness because of something related to Stephen in his life that was unique to him. Stephen is an effective witness because he has the Holy Spirit. Without the Holy Spirit, we have no ability to become more like Jesus first in our own personal life, to live this kind of life or to have this kind of character. And we have no power, no ability to be an effective witness. Left to ourselves, our own efforts, our own wisdom, our own personal discipline, we are going to fail in our worship of God, in our desire to be transformed and become more like Christ.

The enemies of our soul are too strong for us to strive against in our own power. The enemies of our soul are the world, the flesh and the devil. This world will just tear us apart. Our own flesh will fail us in its weakness. Satan himself will destroy us. We need the Holy Spirit every moment of every day to lead us and guide us and empower us. Here’s the good news! Jesus gives every disciple a full measure of the Holy Spirit. There is not one of you who are a believer in Jesus Christ, who has more of the Holy Spirit than anyone else. Jesus, when He sent His Spirit, He sent His Spirit upon His people to indwell us. And He gives each one of us a full complement of the Spirit. Jesus is now seated at the right hand of God. That’s where His resurrected body resides. When Jesus ascended into heaven, He promised He was going to send His Spirit to indwell His people, His followers, and that is precisely what He did. Listen to what Paul writes about this gift in 1 Corinthians 12.

**1 Corinthians 12:13** For in one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—Jews or Greeks, slaves or free—and all were made to drink of one Spirit.

The Holy Spirit is not so much a doctrine to Stephen, a doctrine to be discussed, so much as the Holy Spirit is a Person. He is a Person to be enjoyed, a Person to follow, a Person to depend upon. The Holy Spirit is the third Person of the one Triune God. Stephen is a man who yields his life to the Holy Spirit every day. He relies upon the Spirit to lead Him. He relies upon the Spirit to instruct him in the truth of God. He depends upon the Spirit to grant him access to escape temptations. He relies upon the Spirit to empower him to be obedient to God in every way. Stephen lives a life fully conscious of the Spirit’s presence and ministry in his life. Stephen woke up each day and experienced the Holy Spirit’s filling in his soul. We know that because of the way Luke describes him. He is a man full of the Holy Spirit.

How about you? If you’re a follower of Jesus Christ, what relationship do you have with the Holy Spirit? Could it be said of you that you are a man or you’re a woman full of the Holy Spirit? This is a command by God upon every one of us who are followers of Jesus. In Ephesians 5:18, God commands us

**Ephesians 5:18** And do not get drunk with wine, for that is debauchery, but be filled with the Spirit,

Perhaps, as you’re thinking about that command, there is a yearning. You’re saying, “Yes, I want to be filled with the Spirit. How might I live a life full of the Holy Spirit? How might I be filled with the Spirit? How might I obey this command?” In short, I would give a two word answer. The first word is the word, dependence. The second word is the word, submission.

The first word is dependence. We are filled by God’s Spirit when we depend upon Him for everything.We depend upon the Spirit of God when we embrace the truth first that we’re not adequate in ourselves. That’s step one. We depend upon God’s Spirit when we refuse to trust in our own wisdom, our own resources, our own strength, our own skills to simply do God’s will. Every morning, we wake up with a sense of utter inadequacy, utter insufficiency. “I can’t live this day without you, Lord. I need your Holy Spirit. I need your Holy Spirit to guide me, direct me, grant me wisdom. I need you to direct my path and to empower me to be able to overcome the obstacles and challenges that your enemies are going to throw in my path today.” We depend upon God’s Spirit when we know and are assured that all that we need is given to us by Jesus through His Spirit.

There is a great picture of dependence in the Old Testament that I love dwelling upon. It’s the picture of Jacob. He has just crossed the Jabbok River. He’s at Bethel in Genesis 32. Jacob is a deceiver. He is a man who has wrestled with people all his life. And mostly, he has won those battles. He’s wrestled with his brother, Esau. That’s a famous part of his story. He has wrestled with his father, Isaac. He has wrestled with his Uncle Laban. And so far, Jacob has relied on his cunning to win against these folks. So God meets Jacob at a moment of great need in Jacob’s life, as he is coming back, returning home from Uncle Laban’s house. He’s going to have to meet his brother, Esau; a brother who is really angry with him. Or at least, he had been the last time they were together. God says to Jacob, “So Jacob, you like wrestling, do you? Let’s wrestle.” God wrestles with Jacob all night long.

Jacob recognizes at the end of that tussle that he will not win this fight. He realizes that the only way to win this battle is through absolute surrender, yielding over to the One with whom he is wrestling, yielding his life to God Himself. In desperation, he reaches out and grabs hold of God as he is defeated and exhausted and now surrendering. He says, “God, I can’t let you go unless you bless me, because I recognize now that I can’t win life by wrestling against people and striving through deception and striving through my own efforts to get ahead in life. I need you.” In surrender, he holds onto God in desperation and says, “I need you!” God promises that He’s going to be there for Jacob, but do you know what He does? God reached down and He touches Jacob’s hip. And it hurts! I can’t imagine how searing the pain must have been when God touches his hip. From that day on, Jacob woke up every morning with pain in his hip and with a limp.

That was not a curse of God upon Jacob. It was a blessing because He was telling Jacob, “This sense of absolute inadequacy and insufficiency that you’re feeling right now as I’ve been wrestling with you all night, I want you to hold onto that. I want you to hold onto that sense of helplessness and desperation every moment of every day. So I’m going to help you hold onto that desperation by giving you something that is really, really painful. It’s something that you’ll remember every time you take a step.” So I want to ask you, have you surrendered your life to Christ? And if you have, let me ask you, how is your hip? Is there something, in other words, every day, that helps you to remember your helplessness and your desperation? We need that. We need those things that call us back to the sense of utter dependence upon God.

The second word is submission. So in dependence, we place ourselves under God’s authority. We submit to God when we consciously place ourselves under His commands. We submit when we vigorously yield our hearts over to God’s law, specifically. God has given us a book, He has given us laws where we can know what is righteous and what is unrighteous and He says, “How are you going to respond to my righteous decrees in your life?” Being filled with the Spirit requires that we place ourselves under. We don’t place ourselves over alongside and begin to argue. A couple signs of a lack of submission is when we begin to argue with God’s law and sort of rationalize and say, “This is the reason why this doesn’t apply to me today.” Or a lack of submission is we begin to look for loopholes. “I know that’s what it means for most people, but this is a little different. Here are some of the circumstances that make this a different situation.” That’s a total lack of submission. That’s something that we naturally do.

It’s impossible to be filled with God’s Spirit if we don’t have first, a spirit of dependence and then a spirit of submission. I love what John says about God’s law because what happens in the life of a believer who avails himself in dependence and then submission to God, is that God changes their heart so that God‘s law is no longer an enemy where you would say, “Okay, I guess if I have to,” and it’s sort of obligation. But rather, God changes their hearts so we say, “God, you know how to live my life better than I know how to live my life. When I try to live my life, it’s turned out into a big mess. Thank you for giving me a path that shows me how to walk toward blessing and how to walk toward joy.” Here’s what John says about this.

**1 John 5:3** For this is the love of God, that we keep his commandments. And his commandments are not burdensome.

If you are a believer in Jesus Christ, God has changed your heart. If you’re walking by the Spirit, one of the evidences of that is this sweet submission. It’s not a stifling submission. It’s a sweet submission. God’s law is no longer burdensome to me. That doesn’t mean it’s easy. That doesn’t mean there is not sometimes that my flesh doesn’t rise up and say I don’t like it. But overall, God’s commandments are sweet to me. I want to hear what God would have to say because I need that path. Otherwise, I will be lost.

Let me ask you, is there anything in your life that is hindering you from experiencing the Holy Spirit and His filling in your life? Is there any lack of dependence or any lack of submission? Here’s the application. Let us live each day with a conscious need for Christ’s Spirit to fill us. Let us live each day with a conscious trust in God’s Spirit to provide everything that we need to live for Christ.

The second quality that marks a Christ-centered life is not only the Holy Spirit, but

**2. Grace.**

***8*** *And Stephen, full of grace and power, was doing great wonders and signs among the people.*

When Luke tells us that Stephen was full of grace, there are two possible ideas that come into view. First, Luke may be sort of repeating the idea that he is full of the Holy Spirit. In other words, through the Holy Spirit, he is living in the power of grace that God provides for him every day. The apostle Paul, I believe, references this in 2 Corinthians 12, when Paul has this thorn in the flesh and he asks God three times to take it away, and each time, God says no.

**2 Corinthians 12:9** But he said to me, “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.”

In other words, there is this provision of God’s grace that comes to a believer’s life wonderfully, I believe, mystically. It supernaturally comes into our life, where God strengthens us by His grace. Paul says

**2 Corinthians 12:9** …Therefore I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me.

So “full of grace” may mean that Stephen is a man who immerses himself in the grace of God, in the means of grace. God uses specific means to bring grace into our life. He uses His Word. He uses prayer. He uses the fellowship of the church. He uses the Lord’s Supper as we celebrate the Lord together. He uses a number of means of grace. When we receive these means of grace by faith, we receive spiritual strength. That’s why listening to the preaching of the Word together, private devotions, private, corporate prayer, the Lord’s Supper, worship, fellowship, all these things are means by which God brings grace to strengthen us when we receive these by faith.

But here, I think that Luke is saying something different. I believe he is saying something about Stephen’s character.Stephen lived a life that exemplifies grace. Grace is not a theological idea to be discussed so much as it is a gift from God to be lived, to be experienced. To be full of grace means that Stephen is living in a way that is easy to be around. He’s not living a life that is ungracious, that is lacking grace. He’s not demanding his own way. He is a man who has become winsome and gentle and generous and kind. He believes the best of others and He labors. He serves humbly for their good.

The opposite of this grace would be someone who is critical or stern or stingy or hard to please. If we have a reputation for being hard to please or critical it is likely that the Holy Spirit is absent in our lives. This full of grace was not due to Stephen’s natural personality, that he just happens to be a really great guy. This full of grace, this character quality is because of the working of God’s Spirit.

There is a Christian friend who lived most of his life as an unsaved man. I didn’t know him before he was saved. He is saved now and he is full of grace. He’s a man who is so wonderful to be around, so generous and kind and patient. Someone came up to me and said, “You should have known him before he became a Christian. He was a real wreck. He was miserable to be around. The change is just remarkable.” I said that I can’t hardly imagine that because all I’ve known is since he’s had the life of the Spirit and the life of God has changed him. This is what the Gospel does to a heart. The Holy Spirit comes and He fills a person, and the person’s life becomes full of grace, full of love and joy and peace and patience and kindness and goodness and gentleness and self-control.

Look what is said of Stephen in verse 15. Here is this council, made of these folks who hate Christ and who now hate Stephen. They’re condemning him. They’re moving toward this absolute condemnation. They’ve seized him. It was rather rough. There is a description of how they’re treating him already. He is giving explanation for his faith. He’s giving answer even to these false witnesses. And here’s the council. It’s interesting how Luke describes what is happening in the inner workings of this council. Look at what he says.

***15*** *And gazing at him, all who sat in the council saw that his face was like the face of an angel.*

Stephen is under full assault as witnesses are being paid to make terrible accusations against him. Have you ever had someone call you a name or make a false accusation against you? Have you ever been in that situation where other people around you are actually influenced by it and they think ill of you as they’re calling you names or making accusations about you? Let me ask you, at that moment, as it’s happening, could others say, “That person had the face of an angel”? It’s kind of remarkable because it’s not like after a day, after Stephen blew off some steam and got angry and railed against the people, then he kind of calmed down and said, “Oh, I’m sorry,” and then he had the face of an angel. It was in the moment, as it was happening. There’s only one way to explain that. It’s that the Spirit of God is at work. So in the moment, as the worst is happening to him, his enemies are describing him as having the face of an angel.

Let’s consider also, how did Luke know that Stephen had the face of an angel as he was sitting in a private council, being tried? How did Luke know that? Because everyone else there is an enemy of Stephen. So who gave Luke this information? Well, I think Luke tells us, doesn’t he? Look at Acts 7.

**Acts 7:54-58** Now when they heard these things they were enraged, and they ground their teeth at him. 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. And he said, “Behold, I see the heavens opened, and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God.” But they cried out with a loud voice and stopped their ears and rushed together at him. Then they cast him out of the city and stoned him. And the witnesses laid down their garments at thefeet of a young man named Saul.

There is a young guy there in the midst of this council, and at this point, he is loving what is happening. In fact, if you read verse 1 of chapter 8, it says

**Acts 8:1** And Saul approved of his execution.

Here is Saul. He’s in the inner workings of the council and he’s taking notice, though. He’s not influenced by it yet, but he’s taking notice that “This guy is responding differently to anybody I’ve ever seen undergo this kind of accusation.” I believe it is Saul, who becomes Paul, by the grace of God, and I believe, by the testimony of Stephen. I think that’s why Luke is writing it. It’s so that we’ll prepare for Acts 9, when God miraculously saves Paul, for us to connect the dots that Stephen’s testimony was not in vain. But Saul was taking notes even while he’s there. “That guy has the face of an angel.” And when he tells the story later, he tells Luke this very issue. Stephen is a witness because he is full of the Holy Spirit and he is full of grace.

Here’s the application. Be bold in standing up for Christ, but do not be frustrated. Be confrontational in telling the truth of Christ, but do not be angry. I have yet to hear of a testimony of someone who said, “Here’s what happened. We were in a big argument about moral or political issues and the Christian got really angry at me and started saying some really harsh things to me and then I became saved.” (Laughter!) Have you ever had anybody say that as their testimony?

Here is Stephen in the midst of the worst kind of accusation and he is full of grace and gentleness and patience. Yes, he is saying some really hard things. We’ll get into that two weeks from now. He’s saying some really confrontational things. He doesn’t back away from the truth. But he says it with grace. The third quality is

**3. Courage.**

Look at verses 9-14 and think about this for a moment. Again, Stephen is an ordinary guy who just loves the Lord. He’s a disciple of Jesus. He’s full of the Holy Spirit. But he’s an ordinary guy. Think of this as though it may happen to you someday.

***9*** *Then some of those who belonged to the synagogue of the Freedmen (as it was called), and of the Cyrenians, and of the Alexandrians, and of those from Cilicia and Asia, rose up and disputed with Stephen.*

In other words, it’s a big group. It’s a group that ordinarily doesn’t even get along with each other. But now they’re getting along in order to rise up and dispute with Stephen. They don’t like what Stephen is saying regarding Jesus.

***10*** *But they could not withstand the wisdom and the Spirit with which he was speaking.*

The more they talk with Stephen, the more that the Spirit of God is refuting their wisdom. So then they get violent.

***11*** *Then they secretly instigated men who said, “We have heard him speak blasphemous words against Moses and God.”* ***12*** *And they stirred up the people and the elders and the scribes, and they came upon him and seized him and brought him before the council,*

That’s a really strong word. They grabbed him roughly. Then they paid people to make accusations in the court of law.

***13*** *and they set up false witnesses who said, “This man never ceases to speak words against this holy place and the law,* ***14*** *for we have heard him say that this Jesus of Nazareth will destroy this place and will change the customs that Moses delivered to us.”*

In this story we see so many parallels to the trials and death of Jesus, don’t we? This is purposeful. Luke wants us to understand that followers of Jesus should expect to be treated like Jesus. Jesus told us already that. He told His disciples that prior to His death. “They hated me, they’ll hate you also.” But Luke is telling the story in a way so that we’ll expect it and we won’t be surprised by this. We need to expect that we will be treated like Jesus when we speak the Gospel.

Stephen knows the penalty of blasphemy. That’s what he is being accused of. He knows that the penalty is execution, death. He knows that this is the very same group who, a couple months earlier, were effective at convincing Rome to crucify Jesus. He knows they have it in their power to do this. And you can imagine the sobering nature of this moment for Stephen. Do you think Stephen was afraid? I tell you that I think he was. He’s a human. He’s just another man like others. But Stephen is not overcome by his fears. He knows that Jesus is with him and he is depending upon God’s Spirit for courage. Eddie Rickenbacker, a WWI flying ace, said this. “Courage is doing what you are afraid to do! There can be no courage unless you’re scared.”

Stephen then goes on in the midst of these accusations and these threats, and he confronts his culture with the Gospel. Look at chapter 7. We’ll look at this more closely the next time we’re together in Acts.

**Acts 7:51-54** “You stiff-necked people, uncircumcised in heart and ears, you always resist the Holy Spirit. As your fathers did, so do you. 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, you who received the law as delivered by angels and did not keep it.” Now when they heard these things they were enraged, and they ground their teeth at him.

Now, Stephen didn’t say these things because he was angry and because he wants to shoot a dart at these guys who have been shooting darts at him. Stephen cared about these people who were cursing him. Stephen said these things in a very direct and very confrontational way for two reasons. One, he is zealous for the glory of Jesus. He knows that Jesus is worthy of being lifted up. Right now, these guys are the people who want to just put him into a corner and shut the door, never to have him be exposed to the light of day ever again. And Stephen says, “No, as long as I live, Jesus is going to be made known, because He’s worthy.” Secondly, Stephen says these things because he is zealous for the salvation of his brethren. These are Jewish people and Stephen is a Jew. He cares for them. He cares for their salvation. He knows that they need to be confronted with their rejection of the Messiah if they’re ever to receive the Messiah. That’s not something he can skirt around.

Friends, our world is growing more and more hostile to the true Jesus. It’s becoming more and more evident every day. The strategy of this world is first to attack the true Jesus and make any presentation of the true Jesus so ridiculed, so belittled, as to bring shame to anyone who would grab onto the true Jesus and present Him to this world. That’s the first strategy. The second strategy then is to create false Jesus’. It is to create Jesus’ that are more in alignment with the world. “Here’s the Jesus that is real. Here’s the Jesus that we believe all Christians should worship.” A lot of churches are in alignment with that.

Stephen is one of those guys who said, “No, I’m going to lift up the true Jesus. You can attack me for it, but I will not settle for a false Jesus or a diminished Jesus. I will present a Jesus full of glory and full of grace, full of righteousness and full of truth, full of mercy.” We will have to make decisions that will be hard, even as Stephen had to make a decision. He knew where this was going. He may not have absolutely known for sure that it was going to end in his death, but he knew that was very, very possible. He knew the risks and he said it’s worth it. When He called me, Jesus said, ‘Take up your cross and follow me.’” Stephen had already made that choice. The choice was made before he got in this situation, to lay his life on the line for Christ if Christ would call him to do that.

Our world is growing more and more hostile. Almost every week, there is some news story that would highlight that. This past week, Oral Roberts University, a Christian university, Sweet 16, it’s a big story because they were the number 15 seed. It’s only the second number 15 seed to ever reach there. USA Today, it’s a national newspaper, printed an opinion piece that said the NCAA needed to explicitly condemn ORU University. Why? What have they done? Well, they have a Christian statement of moral ethics and that Christian statement includes sexual purity. It includes denial of homosexuality, as a for instance. For that reason, in a national newspaper, there was a call, a very harsh call, for the NCAA to publicly and explicitly condemn the university.

Now, I say this not so that we get riled up politically. Not so that we rise up and say, “We have to do something!” I say that so that we would be prepared. If you are a follower of Jesus Christ, be prepared for this to happen. I pray that there is revival and that there may be reversal. But we must be prepared. God calls His people to be prepared from the beginning, from the time of Stephen, for this. We shouldn’t be surprised that it may be our hour. In preparation, let us make sure we prepare our little ones that this world is not a friend of grace and that they may have to, early on in their life, make decisions either for Christ or away from Christ. But the time of walking the fence is growing shorter and shorter.

Stephen was a man who was able to give witness because of his courage. Witness requires courage. It is courage that God gave him by His Spirit. We do not measure success of witness in terms of the here and now, but in terms of eternity. We are not home here in this world and we don’t expect our world to feel like home. We care for one thing; the smile of God, His pleasure. Here’s what the author of Hebrews writes.

**Hebrews 11:13** These all died in faith, not having received the things promised, but having seen them and greeted them from afar, and having acknowledged that they were strangers and exiles on the earth.

This is what Christians have always thought of themselves in this world. We’re strangers. We’re exiles. This isn’t home.

**Hebrews 11:14** For people who speak thus make it clear that they are seeking a homeland.

**Hebrews 11:15** But as it is, they desire a better country, that is, a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God,

What a statement! Stephen is one of many illustrations we have of a person whom God is not ashamed to be called their God. May we be such people in our age! May we be faithful with this kind of boldness and with this kind of faith!

**Hebrews 11:15** …for he has prepared for them a city.

We do not look for our reward in this world. We look for our reward after we die. I was so encouraged this morning. One of our members came and she hasn’t been able to come. She’s been struggling with cancer all year. She talked about chemotherapy and radiation. She’s been through it! She was so happy to be in the presence of God’s people and fellowship the last couple weeks as she’s been able to, now. But she says, “I know why God had me to go through so many radiation treatments and so much chemotherapy.” There have been just tons of doctors and nurses and she said, “I know why. Every one of them, I was able to tell them about Jesus. God had me go through this so that I could tell every one of those many nurses and many doctors about Jesus.” Isn’t that a Christian perspective?

The application is to prepare your minds and hearts for the moment when God calls you to stand up for Jesus. Be ready for the opposition that will confront you. Ask God for courage and wisdom in that moment to do that which would most honor Jesus. I believe within this week, most of you will have such a moment. Will you be prepared? Stephen was already prepared. He didn’t say, “Hey, time out! Could you give me a couple days to have a spiritual retreat so then I can come back?” He was ready in the moment, to courageously stand up for Jesus. I don’t know what specific way that might be. It might be with a neighbor. It could be in your workplace. It could be a hundred different ways. But I believe that for many of you, this week will present a moment like that. I believe most weeks are that way. I believe that because we’ve kind of gotten into the condition of “Well, I’m just going to walk away from those moments. I’m going to leave those doors shut,” that we don’t even see them. But I would ask you, won’t you pray and say, “God, show me that moment, because by God’s grace and through the power of the Holy Spirit, I want to be faithful as a witness for Jesus.” The last quality is

**4. Mercy**

**Acts 7:58-60** 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. And as they were stoning Stephen, he called out, “Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.” 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.

Hatred from the world did not fill Stephen with hatred for the world. Stephen’s response reminds us of Jesus’ response upon the cross, “Father, forgive them for they do not know what they do.” We must not become hostile to the people who live in our world. Yes, they are often hostile to us. But we must not become hostile to them. We must be people who love the people of this world even as God loves them and presents Christ to them, offers Christ to them. The Holy Spirit gives us the ability to love people who abuse us, who hate us, who cancel us, who oppress us. But we are free to have mercy. We are free from bitterness. We are free from anger. We are free from hostility. We are free! Friend, are youharboring resentment or bitterness over a wrong suffered? This is a spiritual opportunity for you to be free! Jesus says

**Matthew 5:10-12** “Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. “Blessed are you when others revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you.

We will become witnesses for Jesus when we become forgivers like Jesus. Stephen, even as stones were raining down upon his body, and I can’t hardly imagine what that must be like to be stoned. Even as he is being stoned, he calls out to God in sincere prayer on behalf of the souls of those who are flinging rocks, rocks that would kill him, and he asks the Father to forgive them. Be encouraged! God uses the quality of mercy to powerfully impact the world, even if we don’t see it in the moment.

The last two applications are big applications. First, receive Jesus as your Savior and King. Stephen saw heaven open and he saw Jesus standing at the right hand of God. He said, “Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.” Stephen is ready to die because he already knows Jesus. He knows Jesus died for him. Jesus rose again. Jesus ascended into heaven. Jesus is waiting in heaven to receive all who are His own. Stephen is ready to die.

Let me ask you, are you? The moment to be ready for death is not at death’s door. The moment to be ready for death is now. There is only one person in heaven that could open the door for us to be received by God into His home forever, and that is Jesus. No one on their death bed will effectively be able to cry, “Dad, mom, make a way for me. Brother, sister, make a way. Pastor, make a way for me.” No one is able to crawl out on any other name, not any other god, not any other person, other than “Jesus, receive my spirit.” If you call upon Jesus by faith, you are guaranteed to have the experience that Stephen has of being received by God into His very presence on the day of your death. More than that, you are guaranteed to be given eternal life now to enjoy every day until the day you die. Praise God for that!

Secondly, beloved, let us be a witness. Proclaim Jesus as your Savior.You are Jesus’ witnesses. God calls you and me to speak His Name to our world. People are without Jesus. Please, please, please, if you don’t have a burden, ask God for a burden for the souls of your friends and family and neighbors. Ask for that burden to be crushing, because I think until it’s crushing, it won’t change us. It won’t change our behavior. Ask God to provide a great burden so that you and I will be faithful in being His witnesses.