

Acts 7:51-60
For the Contempt of Christ

3/2/25- Communion Sunday

Today in scripture we will see the sad **culmination of contempt** the Jewish leaders held for everything to do with their own deliverer, Jesus of Nazareth.

After today's lesson, in the book of Acts, we will see TWO dynamic shifts.

- 1) In the direction of the church, as it pertained to the target audience of the gospel,
- 2) In the fervor, the passion and the zeal of those who opposed that message and those who proclaimed it.

We are going to continue to look at a fully committed man of faith, Stephen, and a mob moved to violence by misguided and self-righteous fury.

In Acts 3, we saw how the BEGINNINGS OF THE CHURCH – those first members of the congregation of Christ Jesus, committing themselves to carrying on the MINISTRY and the MESSAGE that Jesus had given to them.

In Acts 4, we saw THE FIRST ARREST of those who proclaimed the truth and heard the threats made by their government to speak and teach NO MORE in the name of Jesus of Nazareth.

In Acts 5, we saw the SECOND ARREST of those who refused to bow to men where God had given them clear instruction.

“Go, Stand, and Speak, the whole message of this Life”

We heard the response of the faithful saints when their government commanded them to disobey God.

“We must obey God rather than men”

We read of the flogging, the brutal lashing, they underwent. For defying men of influence, choosing instead to honor God.

And how they went away rejoicing! That they had been found worthy to suffer shame for no other reason than the name of Jesus of Nazareth, the Messiah, the Christ.

In Acts 6, we read how the church continued to grow – to flourish – even though the dangers in acknowledging Jesus of Nazareth as the Christ were increasing.

We saw the appointing of the first deacons of the church – to oversee areas of ministry. To allow those called to leadership to lead well – devoting themselves to prayer and to the ministry of the word.

We saw the most outspoken of these deacons, STEPHEN, filled with grace and power – targeted by the religious leaders and called to give an account for his words and his deeds.

Though they lied and conspired against him, Peter refrained, remaining calm in the presence of his enemies.

Last week, Pastor Dennis pointed out the fine example of apologetics that Stephen provided us.

- Stephen did not focus on defending himself – but the facts of the faith that had saved him.
- Stephen did not make his apology, his defense, about himself, but about the word of God.

I want to emphasize again, as Pastor Dennis declared last week, that there is a time to **EVANGELIZE**.

To share the Good News of the gospel in love. Sharing the hope and joy that comes with the knowledge that all who have sinned can be saved if they will believe and repent!

But there is also a time to bring the **beliefs of blasphemers** and the **holdings of heretics** into **conflict** with the Word of God

Especially when they are counted among those who claim to - or ought to - know the truth.

At times like these let our words be bold.

Let us wield the Word of God as the Sword of Truth that it is and let it have its intended effect on the unrighteous.

Hebrews 4:12

"For the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow, and is a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart."

Last week, in Acts 7, it was in this manner that Stephen wielded the word of God as he **schooled the scholars** with the history of their own people.

Showing from the Word of God how it was the sad tradition of the people of Israel to turn time and again **AWAY from their God** and to follow their own way, their own wisdom, and their own path.

He concluded his apology by moving from the general to the personal as he confronted the sins of the men who stood and accused him of wrong doing.

Acts 7:51-53

“You men who are stiff-necked and uncircumcised in heart and ears are always resisting the Holy Spirit; you are doing just as your fathers did.

Which one of the prophets did your fathers not persecute?

They killed those who had previously announced the coming of the Righteous One, whose betrayers and murderers you have now become; you who received the law as ordained by angels, and yet did not keep it.”

This was NOT evangelism.

Stephen did not declare the bad news regarding sin and the judgement of God. He did not declare the love of God and the presentation of the Savior.

Only at the end did he declare Jesus of Nazareth as the Christ And he made no mention of repentance, forgiveness, or salvation.

This was a pointed rebuke of the sin of unrighteous men.

Stiff necked- Like a stubborn ox, unwilling to submit to the yoke – unwilling to submit to God

Uncircumcised in the heart – unwilling to cut away the things of the heart that identified them as men of the world - so that they could be identified as men of God.

Unhearing, unrelenting, resisting, opposing the Holy Spirit of God – as unrighteous ruling men of Israel had done in the past, so were these men doing today.

Friends, when you and I with such boldness confront people like these, there can be only a few responses.

Pray that God will open their ears to hear, their hearts to receive, and that they may consider these things, and repent.

Otherwise – as Stephen pointed out from his lesson on the history of those who rule in rebellion –

- The response of those who walk in blindness in the world is to violently oppose the light of the truth of the word.

- And the easiest way to do that, is to act violently in opposition to the messenger.

Acts 7:54

Now when they heard this, they were cut to the quick, and they began gnashing their teeth at him.

How the tables had turned!

Stephen – having been arrested and put on display, accused and demanded to give an account, an apology, a defense for his words and his deeds-

Had defended **his** faith and in the doing put the Jewish leaders on trial for their **lack of faith!**

Behold the two faces on display that day-

1) Stephen – calm, self-controlled, peaceful, and yet resolute. The face of an angel

2) The Jewish leaders - grinding their teeth, hissing in uncontrolled anger.

The Christian Countenance

Countenance- Hebrew { *panim* } Face, surface, appearance

Proverbs 15:13

*A joyful heart makes a cheerful face,
But when the heart is sad, the spirit is broken.*

In Genesis 4:5-6 we see the countenance of the unrighteous

*And the LORD had regard for Abel and for his offering; but for Cain and for his offering He had no regard. So Cain became very angry and his **countenance** fell.*

The blessing of Israel- Numbers 6:22-27

Then the LORD spoke to Moses, saying, "Speak to Aaron and to his sons, saying, 'Thus you shall bless the sons of Israel. You shall say to them:

*The LORD bless you, and keep you;
The LORD make His **face** shine on you,
And be gracious to you;
The LORD lift up His **countenance** on you,
And give you peace.'*

So they shall invoke My name on the sons of Israel, and I then will bless them."

For us who have trusted in Christ Jesus as our Savior and our Lord –

We walk in faith, and with the saints who have gone before us, the face of the Lord shines on us, and He lifts up our face, our countenance, and gives us peace.

Regardless of your circumstances, let your face be found reflecting the faith, and the hope, that it is in you!

Peter instructed us in this in **1 Peter 3:9**

Do not repay evil for evil or insult for insult, but on the contrary, bless, for to this you were called, that you may obtain a blessing.

Stephen's heart was filled with grace and power. The Spirit of God that lived in Him gave him the words and the strength to stand calmly and in confidence.

The Jewish leaders on the other hand? Their hearts were not filled with grace but with the desires of the flesh.

The evidence of the difference of the matter of their hearts was about to become very evident.

- The Jewish leaders had voiced their contempt for Jesus,
- They had demonstrated their contempt for Jesus
- They had exercised their contempt for Jesus.

And compounding their contempt, was that for all their efforts, they had failed on every front.

The words of Stephen brought this all to the front.

That a common man – a Hellenistic Jew – was able to so clearly demonstrate their arrogance from the word of God, was an insult to their arrogant hearts.

At these words they were "*cut to the heart*" means they deeply, emotionally, passionately moved by Stephen's words.

What a contrast!

In **Acts 2:37**, the crowds, **with ears to hear**, were "cut to the heart" at the admonishment of Peter regarding their actions toward Jesus.

- "Brothers, what shall we do?" they pleaded in sincerity of conviction.

But now in Acts 7:54 - The religious leaders were also "cut to the quick" – your translation may say – but the Greek word here is { kardia } cardiac – the heart.

Their ears were deaf to the truth, **their eyes were blind** to the light, and **their hearts hardened**, so that they could not feel anything but anger, fury, and rage.

And this became their countenance- and in their hearts, and on their faces, they were moved to violence.

Stephen saw all these things. He knew the cost of his actions.

- But for the sake of His Savior and in the strength of his faith, he would not back down.

Acts 7:55-56

But being full of the Holy Spirit, he gazed intently 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 up and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God."

Stephen was no fool.

He knew his words, though spoken in truth, would most likely be received on deaf ears that would be moved to violence at the truth of them.

Unrighteous people have no tolerance for words of righteousness.

It is the way it has always been. – It is the way it is. – And it is the way it will be until the day the Son of God comes to judge the wicked and reward the righteous.

Saints, be strengthened I pray that we do not fight the battle alone.

Surrounded by the enemies of the Lord, Elisha prayed that his fearful servant may see the angel armies standing at the ready-

Through the lens of the Spirit of God – he saw the hills full of horses and chariots of fire all around.

God granted Stephen eyes to see – and with them he beheld the throne room of God – and there standing at the right hand of God was Jesus of Nazareth – the Christ, the Son of Man-

Son of man- found 82 times in the New Testament

- Jesus often referred to Himself in this manner-

- Where the Son of God refers to his deity – The Son of Man refers to His humanity.
- One person of the Trinity of God – the only one to take on flesh and walk among man – Immanuel – God with us.

Colossians 2:9 For in Christ all the fullness of Deity dwells in bodily form.

Here Stephen is given sight to see Jesus of Nazareth – the Man, and his Lord-

- Crucified
- Resurrected
- Ascended
- And standing at the right hand of God the Father

It has been noted by theologians that Jesus is typically described as “Sitting” at the right hand of the Father. In authority.

- But here He is observed as standing –
 - Standing – as in keenly observing and ready for action
 - Intervening – proclaiming Steven to God the Father
 - And Receiving – with open arms- to welcome Stephen into the halls of heaven and proclaim to him, **“well done”**

The proclamation of Stephen was too much for dead ears to hear!

Too much light of truth on hearts darkened by sin to bear.

Acts 7:57-58

But they cried out with a loud voice, and covered their ears and rushed at him with one impulse.

When they had driven him out of the city, they began stoning him; and the witnesses laid aside their robes at the feet of a young man named Saul.

They would hear no more.

The religious leaders had threatened Peter and John.

They had beaten the disciples.

One of their own, the well-respected teacher Gamaliel, had cautioned them to hold their hand of violence and see what would happen.

But the message and the ministry of Jesus of Nazareth would not stop!

And their hatred of Him would not subside!

And without the capacity to repent – they turned to violence.

Peter and John had been grabbed by forceful hands- epiballō

The Apostles had been grabbed by epiballō

And now Stephen was grabbed by epiballō

- Forced out of the meeting hall of the Sanhedrin and driven by religious men, incited to a murderous rage, who, throwing stones to inflict injury, drove Stephen out of the temple district, down the streets of the city and out one of the gates of Jerusalem.
- Stoning a person to death was the prescribed method of execution under the Jewish law for various crimes against God.
 - It was reserved for sins that caused irreparable damage or were of such offense before God that the death of the flesh as a consequence were warranted.
 - Offenses included Murder – Practicing in the occult – Blaspheming the name of God – and an assortment of Sexual sins.
- Under the Mosaic Law – prior to the judgement of stoning unto death – the accused was provided a public trial, where at least TWO witnesses had to come forward to provide testimony.
 - *Deuteronomy 17:6 On the evidence of two witnesses or of three witnesses the one who is to die shall be put to death; a person shall not be put to death on the evidence of one witness.*
 - Then, in verse 7, the law instructed the witnesses were to be the FIRST to throw stones, thereby accepting responsibility for the judgement against the wrongdoer.
 - They were then to be followed by the remainder of the people, “So that evil would be purged from their midst.”

Much in the same way the Sanhedrin had produced false witnesses against Jesus – they had done the same against Stephen.

But even so – make no mistake – what drove the Jewish leaders to violence had nothing to do with the what the witnesses had to say about Stephen and everything to do with what Stephen had to say about them and about Jesus of Nazareth!

Friends, don't miss the degree to which those of the world are capable of despising the message and the ministry of Jesus Christ.

Imagine one stone after another slamming into Stephen's body. This was not a quick way to die. It was not an easy way to die.

So laborious was the task that the men took off their outer cloaks and gave them to one of their younger members to hold while they chose and hurled the stones at Steven.

- This man, Saul, as we will learn later was eager to see the task done. Agreeing whole heartedly with Stephen slain.
- And yet, we will also see later, that young Saul would never forget this day, and that it would be part of the transformation of his own heart.

Acts 7: 59-60

They went on stoning Stephen as he called on the Lord and said, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit!"

Then falling on his knees, he cried out with a loud voice, "Lord, do not hold this sin against them!" Having said this, he fell asleep.

What an amazing witness to those who heard and saw these things!

- In the same character of the Lord who had died to save his soul – Stephen, likely with a raspy voice, through bleeding lips, and tears of pain, Called out to His Savior with **two requests**-
- "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit" - and "Lord, do not hold this sin against them."

Stephen knew his race was complete – that he had fought the good fight – and He had chosen to Love the Lord his God with all his heart, soul, mind and strength and to love his neighbor as himself. –

- AND IT WOULD COST HIM HIS LIFE!

He also knew that his death was not about him – but for his accusers' contempt for Christ Jesus!

He asked only that his Lord receive him – and amazingly, that his Lord would forgive these men.

It is the same wish that Jesus conveyed to His father from the cross-
Luke 23:34 Jesus said, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do."

Having done said these things, and sinking to the ground, the stones hammered into his body until the blows, likely to his head, caused such injury, that Stephen died.

Ask yourself friends – With men such as this built on the foundations of the church that you and I are part of today –

- Are you committed to following Christ?

Not every saint will pay such a price – but through the generations of the church – Thousands upon thousands have.

Can you see this horrific scene?!

As the Jewish leaders, the Sanhedrin, the High Court of the Jews. The Priests of the temple. The scholars and teachers at the universities of the Jews-

Looked down at the broken and bloodied body of Stephen.

Understand, these men were now directly guilty of murder, and other sins!
(*Thou shall not bear false witness / murder*)

- But instead of guilt – they felt justified.
- Instead of remorse – they felt empowered.
- Instead of regret – they felt a zealous rage against Jesus and His followers.

Following this day, the Sanhedrin would begin an all-out campaign AGAINST **ANYONE** who proclaimed the name of Jesus of Nazareth or were found to be a part of His followers, who called themselves, "The Way"

It had all begun when a man named John had come out of the wilderness proclaiming, "Repent! For the Kingdom of heaven is at hand"

- It had nothing to do with John – **but for their contempt of Jesus** – when Herod sought to have John beheaded, they sat idly by.

For the contempt of Jesus, they sought to put Jesus to death – they conspired with their Roman occupiers to have the execution completed.

But still their contempt festered and grew – Threats and beatings had not been enough to silence the message and the ministry of Jesus of Nazareth –

- And now they had literally taken matters into their own hands.

Driven by their sinful hearts – their contempt for Jesus – Had just turned the page for the next chapter of the church.

Stephen's death had nothing to do with Stephen.

It was for their **contempt of Jesus** whom he boldly proclaimed.

Those who walk in the pride of life today still declare their **contempt of Jesus** by their words and their lives.

And for the same reasons, you or I could very well face their unrighteous wrath.

When our countenance remains Christ-like and yet the worldly gnash their teeth, hiss and are cut to the heart by the truth of God's word...

Know that it is for His name's sake that we suffer and take heart.

Find courage, Proclaim Christ and even seek to find the strength to forgive those who despise Christ in you.

Romans 14:7-9

⁷ For not one of us lives for himself, and not one dies for himself;

⁸ for if we live, we live for the Lord, or if we die, we die for the Lord;

therefore, whether we live or die, we are the Lord's.

⁹ For to this end Christ died and lived again, that He might be Lord both of the dead - and of the living.

Friends, decide today to live, and die if called on, for the Lord our God.

Decide today to stand fast, and with a Christian Countenance, before those who grind their teeth and are moved toward hatred and violence toward those who live and speak in the name of Jesus of Nazareth.

Decide today to live for the hope of the upward calling we have in Christ.

And commit today to pray for those who are so misled, or so hard-hearted, that they do not know Jesus as their Savior but view Him with contempt.

Amen