

August 9 “Acts 7:48-53

"However, the Most High does not live in houses made by men. As the prophet says: 49 "Heaven is my throne, and the earth is my footstool. What kind of house will you build for me? says the Lord. Or where will my resting place be? 50 Has not my hand made all these things?' 51 "You stiff-necked people, with uncircumcised hearts and ears! You are just like your fathers: You always resist the Holy Spirit! 52 Was there ever a prophet your fathers did not persecute? They even killed those who predicted the coming of the Righteous One. And now you have betrayed and murdered him— 53 you who have received the law that was put into effect through angels but have not obeyed it."

Background

The Book of Acts describes “the gift” Jesus gave to His disciples: the indwelling of the Holy Spirit within the hearts of all who believe in Him. This dynamic power completely changed the weak and fearful disciples into men who were willing to give their lives for Christ. In fact, they all became martyrs (or in John’s case, an exile) for their Lord. The 1st INTERNAL problem of the early church had been with Ananias & Sapphira in Chapter 5. Their hearts were NOT filled with the Holy Spirit, but by the presence of Satan. We also saw the EXTERNAL threat to the early church as being the religious leaders, the Sanhedrin, whose hearts were full of jealousy (5:15) and unbelief.

Last week we saw that the early church had its 2nd internal dispute. People were filled with complaining about the daily distribution of bread. This is reminiscent of the problems of the Israelite grumbling with they left Egypt (Exodus 16). God gave them “manna.” Hundreds of years later, the scene is repeated. People were upset because someone was giving them food. This was not a government program, but was the early church did to meet the needs of their people. When they complained to the Apostles, it was investigated and found that the complaint was legitimate. The Apostles realized the distribution was important, but they weren’t the ones who were supposed to be administering it. The Apostles saw their responsibility as casting a vision for the direction of the church, and to preach and pray. The Apostles were dreaming the vision and doing the work, but they were not managing the life of the organization. It is this understanding that has moved me, as the senior leader at Asbury, to employ laity into the management of the church. Something goes wrong with the air conditioner – I’m not the one who’s going to fix it. If we have a problem with a program or a staff person, we’ll address the issue; but seldom will I be the one involved. I’m in sales...not in management. We can help people get into the right office, but my call isn’t about management. My call is about setting the overall vision of the church, finding good people to manage it, and then allowing me and the pastors to tend to the spiritual life of the church. We are to lead, preach/teach, and pray. I get my direction from the Book of Acts. (A book by the name of “[The E-Myth Revisited](#)” by Michael Gerber has been one of the most influential business books I’ve ever read – and it makes the same point.)

I can’t tell you how important it is for us to understand the Book of Acts. It is the beginning point for the Christian faith. It really shows us what it means to be a Christian. It shows fundamentally, that they were filled with the Holy Spirit. When that happens, the world was turned upside down. The early church was never perfect. We should not pretend otherwise. That’s why we can be grateful that Luke included chapter 6. And of

course, the church of today faces the same problems: INTERNAL inconsistencies (taking care of the needs of the church) and EXTERNAL (cultural) pressures.

Introducing Stephen – in Chapter 5 we met Stephen Acts 6:8-15. *Now Stephen, a man full of God's grace and power, did great wonders and miraculous signs among the people. 9 Opposition arose, however, from members of the Synagogue of the Freedmen (as it was called)-Jews of Cyrene and Alexandria as well as the provinces of Cilicia and Asia. These men began to argue with Stephen, 10 but they could not stand up against his wisdom or the Spirit by whom he spoke. 11 Then they secretly persuaded some men to say, "We have heard Stephen speak words of blasphemy against Moses and against God." 12 So they stirred up the people and the elders and the teachers of the law. They seized Stephen and brought him before the Sanhedrin. 13 They produced false witnesses, who testified, "This fellow never stops speaking against this holy place and against the law. 14 For we have heard him say that this Jesus of Nazareth will destroy this place and change the customs Moses handed down to us." 15 All who were sitting in the Sanhedrin looked intently at Stephen, and they saw that his face was like the face of an angel.*

We've been asking the question: "What are you full of?" Stephen is "full of God's grace and power" and later is described as having a face like that of an angel.

Sanhedrin – this is the body of religious experts who are prosecuting (and will execute Stephen). They are extremely agitated by the message the Apostles are proclaiming.

Sermon – he preaches a long sermon. This is the 1st account in Acts where we have an extended sermon. In the previous 6 chapters we've seen references to sermons & some summaries of sermons preached by Peter. But they were abbreviated. But this sermon is extended.

What did the sermon say?

*He did not begin with "his story," but he began with "history." The Christian faith did not begin with Stephen. His testimony was not about him. It went back into ancient Judaism. The entire sermon comes from the Old Testament scriptures. Many Christians do not understand the vital role the Old Testament has for us. Without understanding it, we have no framework of understanding the New Testament. That's why we study it and need it, too. It tells us of God's creation, of our sin, and of God's attempt to reconcile lost people to Him. It introduces us to the prophecies of the coming Messiah.

*Stephen begins by honoring God. He describes God's goodness (see Genesis 1). We do not see today the world as God originally made it or intended for it to be. He also describes the "glory" of God. This is a great Old Testament word.

*Then he moves from God to discuss God's Call upon 3 specific individuals:

1.) His chosen one THE Patriarch (Abraham). There were actually 4 major patriarchs: **Abraham** (God promised him the LAND, descendants and "blessings"), Isaac, Jacob, and **Joseph**. He says that Abraham was from Mesopotamia. God acted in Abraham's life by calling him Abraham to go to a new place. God gave Abraham a "covenant." The

major thing we should emphasize about Abraham is that he believed God – and he responded in an appropriate way.

2.) While just mentioning Isaac and Jacob (much material about Jacob), Stephen focuses on **Joseph**. Like Jesus, Joseph was rejected because of his claims to his identity. Stephen points to the Sanhedrin and accuses them of doing the same thing to Jesus that Joseph's brothers had done to him. Just as Joseph's brothers had missed the point, so they had missed the point, too. They rejected Christ because their hearts were filled with the wrong things: deception and evil.

3.) He spends the majority of his time talking about the great Lawgiver. **Moses**. Like Jesus, Moses had every right to enjoy the palace of luxury and comfort (for Jesus it was heaven, for Moses it was Pharaoh's court) but instead chose to become poor and displaced. He chose to suffer for his people. Instead of the Israelites following Moses, they became unbelievers. In spite of that they had seen God do, when they were faced with uncertainty and delay, they did not have the spiritual depth and resources to stand firm. Their hearts were **not filled with the Holy Spirit**, as were Moses and Jesus, but with unbelief. In Moses' absence, they convinced his brother, Aaron, to build a golden calf. *"When the people saw that Moses was so long in coming down from the mountain, they gathered around Aaron and said, 'Come, make us gods who will go before us. As for this fellow Moses who brought us up out of Egypt, we don't know what has happened to him.'"* (Exodus 32:1) The golden calf is one of the most absurd things in the Bible...but so is idolatry in general. (See Isaiah 44:9ff)

You can tell when someone is an unbeliever because the "golden calves" start showing up. Since we were created to worship – we ARE going to worship – it's just a matter of whether we will worship the true God or whether we will worship an idol. This is the pull within every human heart. Idolatry's allure never goes away. **America** is a reflection of idolatry. While we don't fashion golden calves that look like theirs, our idolatry is the same 2 basic things: materialism (note the gold) and unbridled sexual activity. Part of the problem with idolatry, too, is spiritual and moral blindness. You just fail to see what is happening. It is wrong to think that **Christians** are immune from idolatry. It grabs at our hearts, too.

Though we have this God-given freedom to worship whatever we want, **HOWEVER**, there are **consequences**. When individuals fall into rank idolatry, there will be an impact upon their own hearts (i.e., Ananias & Sapphira are filled with pride; the Sanhedrin is filled with jealousy & unbelief). When groups and nations fall into idolatrous living the consequences eventually lead to destruction. *Therefore I will send you into exile' beyond Babylon (7:43)*. It is true for individuals, nations, and also true for churches, too.

Part of our problem, too, is our inability to even admit we have a problem. Aaron was supposed to be administering the spiritual life of the Israelites while Moses was on Mt. Sinai receiving the commandments. Aaron capitulated to their demands to make a gold calf. When confronted with what he had done, here is Aaron's lame explanation: *He said to Aaron, "What did these people do to you, that you led them into such great sin?" "Do not be angry, my lord," Aaron answered. "You know how prone these people are to evil. They said to me, 'Make us gods who will go before us. As for this fellow Moses*

who brought us up out of Egypt, we don't know what has happened to him.' So I told them, 'Whoever has any gold jewelry, take it off.' Then they gave me the gold, and I threw it into the fire, and out came this calf!" (Exodus 32:21-24)

They were **deceived**. They lied to themselves first, and then to God. No wonder the first of the Ten Commandments is: *"I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery." "You shall have no other gods before me."* (Exodus 20:2-3) It seems that the human race can never move beyond Genesis 3. Deception, lies, cover-up, guilt, blame, and alienation become the norm. Once we forget that God is the Lord who has redeemed us, and once we begin to worship other gods...the other 9 commandments are going to be broken, too (lie, cheat, steal, murder, adultery). The whole culture breaks down. People ask, "What's wrong with America?" The answer is nothing new – it's something very, very old. It was illustrated by the ancient Israelites. It was in evidence with the Sanhedrin – we want to be independent, autonomous...in short...we want to be "like God" (*"For God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil."* (Genesis 3:5))

Their unbelief led to idolatry. Throughout the history of Israel, this scene will be repeated time & again. God continually raised up godly men, & the people followed initially, but eventually rejected the leaders & then God. This was the cycle of the History of Israel. Stephen accuses the Sanhedrin of being part of this conspiracy to thwart the work of God.

51 "You stiff-necked people, with uncircumcised hearts and ears! You are just like your fathers: You always resist the Holy Spirit! 52 Was there ever a prophet your fathers did not persecute? They even killed those who predicted the coming of the Righteous One. And now you have betrayed and murdered him— 53 you who have received the law that was put into effect through angels but have not obeyed it." (Acts 7:51-53)

His speech was NOT a way to "Win Friends and Influence Enemies." He's not trying to roast Israel, but is pleading passionately with the Sanhedrin. He is courageous. He is not afraid to witness.

"You stiff-necked people" = a term they were familiar with. It means "stubborn, proud, unwilling to bow their heads and that their necks were stiff." They were hard and inflexible instead of engaging. They became legalists, ruling by Law, rather than being people of grace. They were very narrow, mean-spirited people. They weren't willing to listen. They didn't want to hear the message, and instead decided to "shoot the messenger." They developed a spiritual callus - a barrier to keep from being rubbed raw with sensitivity. Developing a callus in our relationship with God is one of the great dangers to the people of God. The charges he levels against the Sanhedrin are not new. He says they have learned nothing from history. They were just like their fathers. "The only thing we have learned from history = we haven't learned anything from history." It culminates in their ultimate rejection –of Messiah. Not only did they not believe in Him...they actually crucified Him.

They had all of these privileges, including first the Tabernacle. Then, eventually Solomon built the glorious Temple. Regardless of their place of worship, the Israelites

persistently fell into idolatry. They consistently wanted to limit God – even into a place where they could put Him. He accuses this most powerful religious group of the days of being UNBELIEVING and UNFAITHFUL to God. These leaders had all of the facts. They knew the history that Stephen was telling. Though they knew the facts, they completely missed the point of them. They had received the Law but were not living it. Jesus said the Greatest Commandment was to Love God with all your heart – and the 2nd was to love your neighbor. These religious leaders who had the Law are filled with hatred instead of love.

Many people in church are in the very same position. They know the story. They even believe the story is accurate, or at least for the most part. They have allowed other things than the Holy Spirit to captivate them.

Maybe unbelief stems from **ignorance**. Maybe people today do not know what the gospel is about. That is entirely possibly. That was certainly my case as a teenager. Maybe it's because of **idolatry**. There is certainly ample evidence to support that we are all idolaters.

But the Gospel is indeed good news. However, it also demands something of us – that we understand that while God is our creator, loves us, and wants for us to live in relationship with Him; that we have within us something that is dark and insidious. It resides within every human heart. It lurks within you & within me.

There is always a choice we have to make. How are you responding to the Holy Spirit? Abraham, Joseph, Moses, and the Apostles were open to Him, and were being filled with the Spirit. They were NOT perfect people, but their hearts were open. Stephen was filled with the Holy Spirit. He was a witness to these things. The Sanhedrin had the completely opposite position. It's always a matter of our hearts. Are we open or closed to Him? Are we surrendering to the Holy Spirit or are we grieving Him? How are we obeying Christ? The 4th step in Celebrate Recovery is to take a fearless, moral inventory of oneself. If we were to do that, how would we fare?

Remember, ALL have sinned. Some of us have the sin of the prodigal son – who left home and lived in immoral ways. He had moral blindness. Some of us are in that position today. We are living in immoral ways and we need to come home. Some of us have the sin of the older brother – who stayed at home, but was filled with hatred for his brother. Both hated the Father. The prodigal returned home, physically and spiritually. The one who simply cannot be reached is the one who does not understand or acknowledge their need. This is all about grace. When we receive grace into our lives we are able to understand what transformed the lives of the Apostles. The purpose of our church is to try to communicate this grace to our world. Have you received it into your own heart? Have you repented of your sin? Have you trusted Christ as your savior? Have you been forgiven and empowered by the Holy Spirit? That is what changed the lives of the Apostles. That's what turned their lives upside down. And that is what will turn our world upside down, too – when we allow the Holy Spirit to fill our hearts.

