

“How To Be A Martyr”

Text: Acts 6:8 – 7:60

Series: Book of Acts [#07]

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Theme: **A True Witness Lives Like Christ.**

Introduction

This morning we are going to learn about something. We are going to learn about “*How To Be A Martyr*.” Now, some of you may be asking yourselves, “What is going on? Has Pastor Lyle gone off the deep end? I mean, *Us, martyrs? Me, a martyr? No thanks!*”

That’s not an unusual response. I sometimes have wondered when we sing “Faith of our Fathers” on Father’s Day if we really pay attention to and mean what we sing in verse 2, “... How sweet would be their children’s fate, if they [that is, *us*] like them could die for thee!” Perhaps, on second thought, “*No thanks!?*”

The word martyr, to us in a Christian context, brings certain pictures to our minds. Perhaps, pictures of...

- early Christians being imprisoned and torn apart by lions in the Roman Coliseum;
- of reformers being burned at the stake or drowned;
- of missionaries being killed by the people they wanted to reach with the gospel.

Martyrs. People who voluntarily suffered and gave up their lives for Christ.

Let’s look at this word *martyr*. It is a *transliteration* of a New Testament word. That is, rather than *translate* the New Testament word, its sound was transposed into English characters. The New Testament word is *martus* or *marturos*. From *martus* to *martyr*.

Now, the basic meaning of *martus* is *a witness*. Later in today’s passage, this word is used in a legal sense,

“When they had driven him [Stephen] out of the city, they began stoning him; and the *witnesses* [i.e., those who had testified against Stephen] laid aside their robes at the feet of a young man named Saul.” (7:58)

This word was also used in a more general, non-technical sense of testifying to something in any setting. Then, in Revelation 1:5 John describes Jesus as “the faithful witness.” And, just a bit later in 3:14, Jesus refers to Himself as “the faithful and true witness.”

In addition to these uses, the word developed the special meaning we know best to refer to those witnesses who were killed because of their witness. Here in Acts, chapter 22, Paul recalled Jesus appearing to him, telling him to leave Jerusalem, and his response to Jesus,

in which he said, “when the blood of Your *witness* Stephen was being shed, I also was standing by approving, and watching out for the coats of those who were slaying him” (20). In Revelation 2:13 Jesus, speaking to the church at Pergamum, described a man named Antipas as “My *witness*, My faithful one, who was killed among you...”

But the basic overall sense of the N.T. word is *a witness*.

In this section of Acts we learn “*How to be a Martyr*,” or “*How to be a Witness*” from Stephen. While the record of Stephen is short, it speaks volumes about his character and about how he lived. He lived following his Savior’s pattern. He lived like Jesus. We want to be Jesus’ witnesses. Stephen shows us the basic truth that a true witness lives like Christ. *How?*

Live Out Your Life With Christ-like Character.

The first thing to note from Stephen is that to live like Christ means to live out your life with Christ-like character. Luke gives us four key building blocks of Christ-like character from Stephen.

The first is in 6:8 where Luke tells us Stephen was “full of *grace*.” The basic ideas behind *grace* include beauty and favor. Grace is something that is both given and received. Giving beauty or favor to another. Receiving beauty or favor from another, such as receiving favor, *grace* from God.

Back in 2:47, we found that the church was “having *favor [grace]* with all the people.”

What *does it* mean to be “*full of grace*,” full of beauty and favor? It’s more than being nice, polite and charming. In short it means to be Christ-like.

In John 1:14 John says “And the Word [Christ] became flesh, and dwelt among us, and we saw His glory, glory as of the only begotten of the Father, *full of grace and truth*.” Stephen followed his Savior’s pattern. He was full of God’s grace. He displayed, radiated, and was a channel of God’s beauty and favor to others. His character and actions were filled and flowed with grace, regardless of how deserving or undeserving, of how accepting or rejecting people were. He forcefully confronted wrong and sin (cf. 7:58-60), but he wasn’t on the prowl for a fight. As he died at the hands of an angry mob, he said, “Lord, do not hold this sin against them” (7:60).

It sounds like, it *was* like his Savior. Remember, in his gospel Luke told us that when Jesus was on the cross, He prayed, “Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing” (Luke 23:34).

Do we follow our Savior’s pattern? Are we “*full of grace*?” Here is where the ideal and the real may not line up. Being *full of grace* excludes being *full of self*, being concerned about our own reputation. It excludes not being concerned, or not that much concerned, about the thoughts, aspirations, reputations and positions of others.

Question: Were you, was I, *full of grace* this last week?

The second building block of a Christ-like character is being full of power. Luke tells us Stephen was “full of grace and *power*” (6:8).

Some people have mistaken ideas about God’s power in His people. Just ahead in chapter 8 we will meet Simon, a man who thought he could buy the authority and power the apostles had, and then sell it to others.

Then and now some people, many people focus more on the specific acts and forms of power than on the nature of God’s power in His people.

In 6:8 we read that Stephen “was performing great wonders and signs among the people.” This was *one* evidence of God’s power in him. But so also was what is described in the next verses, as he was:

- effectively presenting the case for Christ so that his opponents “were unable to cope with the wisdom and the Spirit with which he was speaking” (verse 10);
- effectively defending himself before the Sanhedrin by walking them through the familiar history of Israel focusing on Abraham, Joseph, Moses and David and linking the truth about God and the people in that history to Jesus and the Sanhedrin themselves;
- steadfastly, calmly facing his death at the hand of an angry mob, and even interceding for them.

In this he also lived like Jesus. Luke tells us in chapter 4 of his gospel about a day when Jesus went into the Synagogue and read from Isaiah 61 where it says of the Messiah that “the Spirit of the LORD is upon me, because He anointed Me” and then Jesus went on to tell them that “today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.” He, God the Son, ministered in the *power* of the Holy Spirit when He was here on earth.

Back in 1:8 Jesus told the disciples that they “would receive *power* when the Holy Spirit has come upon [them].” And so, Paul would later write, “I can do all things through Him who strengthens me” (Philippians 4:13).

The question for us is not only “Do we believe this?” but also, “Do we live in the power of the Holy Spirit?” We can adapt Paul’s statement and ask ourselves the question, “Do I do all things in the power of God?”

The third building block of a Christ-like character we see in Stephen is to be full of *wisdom*. Verse 10 tells us Stephen was debating with some opponents on their *home turf*, and they could not cope with his wisdom. This was God’s wisdom in him.

Last week, in 6:3, we saw that wisdom was one of the qualities required for the seven men chosen to oversee the distribution of food. Stephen was qualified and was one of those chosen.

Wisdom is the ability to see or understand things the way they really are, the way God sees them, knows them to be.

Stephen's wisdom was another part of being like Christ. In Luke 2:40 we read that as a young child Jesus was "increasing in wisdom." Just a few verses later we are told that as an older child he "kept increasing in wisdom" (Luke 2:52). Later, when Jesus ministered in His home town, the people kept on asking, "Where did this man get this *wisdom*?" (Matthew 13:54).

God promises every believer the wisdom he or she needs. James 1:5 tells us,

"But if any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask of God, who gives to all generously and without reproach, and it will be given to him."

The fourth building block of a Christ-like character we see in Stephen is to be full of *the Spirit*. To be filled, controlled, directed by the Holy Spirit. This also was one of the qualities for the leadership positions in the opening part of this chapter.

Luke tells us three times that Stephen had this quality:

- when selected to that leadership position (6:3);
- as he debated those who opposed him (6:10);
- and once more just before he was killed (7:55).

His model and pattern was Jesus. Luke chapter 4 opens by telling us,

"Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led around by the Spirit in the wilderness for forty days, being tempted by the devil."

A true witness lives like Christ. A true witness lives out his or her life with Christ-like *character*. Building on this character, a true witness also then reaches out with Christ-like ministry.

Reach Out With Christ-like Ministry.

From Stephen we learn to begin with faithful completion of our responsibilities. We see this in Stephen in a number of ways, but I want to draw your attention to his speech or sermon in 7:1-53. We don't have the time to examine it today.

The false charges against him leading to this speech were:

- speaking blasphemy against Moses and God (6:11);
- and, speaking against the temple and the law (6:13).

He answered the charges through an interpretive tour of Israel's history. That might surprise us, but it was targeted for his audience, the Sanhedrin.

He did not panic. He did not try to play it safe by side-stepping issues or appeasing his accusers. He gave a true, faithful witness to what God had done, to the promise and coming of the Messiah, and to these leaders' own rejection of Jesus, the Messiah.

We also see his faithfulness before this, in 6:1-7. He had been faithful and growing in the faith. He met the qualifications for administering the distribution of food. He was faithful in that task, and also in other areas of ministry: preaching, debating, performing wonders and signs.

He faithfully completed his responsibilities in the church. He faithfully completed his responsibilities as a witness to those outside the church. He mirrored Jesus' faithful ministry to His followers and to those who did not believe.

To be a true witness we also must "*reach out with Christ-like ministry.*" In the early 21st century we enjoy many technological advances that make our lives easier. But, at the same time, there are an ever-increasing number of opportunities and demands pressing on us. We need to live by a clear set of clear priorities, which include ministry. We also need to be careful to avoid the pitfall of having the desire and plans, and not following through.

Sometimes it may seem that what we are doing is not important, does not seem to be making a difference. As you evaluate your ministry, realize that you never will see all the results while you are here on earth. Sometimes you won't see any of the results that God brings about through some of your ministry in this life.

Be faithful, follow through, complete your ministries.

In addition to that, keep alert for all opportunities. Stephen and the six other men had a demanding ministry of oversight in light of the great numbers of people and needs, as well as the great sensitivity that was required because of the earlier problems.

But Stephen didn't say, "Being on this leadership team is my ministry. That's it." He was also involved in witnessing, preaching, debating. Last week we saw in the apostles that trying to do it all is a disaster waiting to happen. We need balance—a balance determined by God's call and priorities for our lives.

We probably don't have as wide a spectrum of spiritual gifts as Stephen had, but the principle remains true. I've discovered that opportunities God gives me sometimes come disguised as intrusions and inconveniences. You may have discovered this as well.

Some of the greatest opportunities to minister for God, in what we see as small or large things, thrust themselves into our nicely ordered and managed world. One reason I try—and note I said, "*I try*"—to be open to the unexpected that breaks into already busy and demanding days, is because I have discovered that they can be great times of ministry.

And so what if all the things on my agenda don't get checked off? What if the time I want to spend doing certain things gets pared back or is eliminated completely? God knows that. It is, after all, His work anyway.

A true witness lives like Christ. A true witness lives out his or her life with Christ-like *ministry*.

The next area of living like Christ is one we might want to skip over. But we can't. It is

to endure with Christ-like suffering.

Endure With Christ-like Suffering.

Stephen endured suffering under false accusations. We've already noted the false accusations against Stephen:

- Blasphemy & heresy. "Then [*his opponents*] secretly induced [*bribed*] men to say, 'We have heard him speak blasphemous words against Moses and against God.'" (6:11)
- Then there was the false charge of disrespect for the temple and the law. "They put forward false witnesses who said, 'This man incessantly speaks against this holy place and the Law; for we have heard him say that this Nazarene, Jesus, will destroy this place and alter the customs which Moses handed down to us.'" (6:13-14)

Both charges were capital offenses in Jewish law, although the Romans did not allow the Jews to carry out capital punishment on their own.

Do the charges sound familiar? When Jesus spoke of His future coming in power, the Sanhedrin tore their robes as a sign of outrage over what they saw as blasphemy and heresy. They accused Jesus of threatening to destroy the temple.

Jesus told His disciples, "If the world hates you, you know that it has hated Me before it hated you" (John 15:18). And again, He said, "They will make you outcasts from the synagogue, but an hour is coming for everyone who kills you to think that he is offering service to God" (John 16:2).

2 Timothy 3:12 tells us that "all who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will be persecuted." Peter, writing about 30 years after these events in Acts 6 & 7, directs us to

"...not be surprised at the fiery ordeal among you, which comes upon you for your testing, as though some strange thing were happening to you; but to the degree that you share the sufferings of Christ, keep on rejoicing, so that also at the revelation of His glory you may rejoice with exultation" (1 Peter 4:13).

To be a true witness we are to endure suffering under false accusations. And also, we are to endure suffering under cruel treatment. Stephen's defense exposed the leaders' sinfulness. When he finished speaking,

"But they [Sanhedrin] 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..." (7:57-58a)

This was mob violence, just like mob lynchings. No official verdict was reached. They didn't ask the Romans to execute him. In violent anger, they dragged him out and stoned him.

Jesus was faithful, as Paul tells us, "obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross" (Philippians 2:8). And Jesus told the church at Smyrna, in Revelation 2,

“Do not fear what you are about to suffer. Behold, the devil is about to cast some of you into prison, so that you will be tested, and you will have tribulation for ten days. Be *faithful until death*, and I will give you the crown of life.”

None of us in this room may ever face death for our witness. But, whenever you feel embarrassed and want to blend into the woodwork because people look at you in disbelief, or even ridicule your testimony, remember Jesus ... and also remember Stephen.

A true witness lives like Christ. That includes *enduring with Christ-like suffering*.

End Up With Christ-Like Triumph.

Here we get to the results, the rewards. Stephen triumphed, first of all, in his attitude toward his enemies. Think about how they treated him. The debating and arguing were totally acceptable. But they bribed people to make false accusations against him. Then, on the basis of those lies, they arrested him and dragged him to a hasty trial before the Sanhedrin. He was unfairly, wrongfully *convicted*. In fact, there wasn't even a formal verdict. They interrupted the proceedings, dragged him outside of the city, and murdered him.

How did he respond? Did he look them straight in the eye and say, “God will get you for this!”? *No!* Go to the closing verse in chapter 7, verse 60, “Then falling on his knees, he cried out with a loud voice, ‘Lord, do not hold this sin against them!’”

This might sound familiar. Luke tells us that Jesus, on the cross, said “Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing” (Luke 23:34). Stephen did not sentimentalize sin any more than Jesus did. He told those leaders that they were betrayers and murderers of Jesus (7:52). He did not gloss over their sin or its cruelty. But He looked to God for mercy and grace on them rather than vengeance, or even justice.

Do we look and sound like that? *Do we look and sound like that?* Our triumph in our attitudes toward our enemies, like Stephen's, is the result of allowing God to build Christ-like character within us, expressed in Christ-like ministry and suffering.

Stephen also ended up triumphing in his attitude toward death. God to 7:59, “They went on stoning Stephen as he called on the Lord and said, “Lord Jesus, receive my spirit!”

In many ways, Stephen's ministry was just starting. He had recently been given that important responsibility. He was preaching, and God was working miracles through him. *What a future lay ahead of him in ministry!* I am sure that is what many in the church in Jerusalem thought. But God's plans were different. Totally unexpected. Up to this point only the apostles had been bothered by the religious leaders, and no one had been killed because of his or her testimony.

Because of his Christ-like character and service, Stephen's mind was set on things above in heaven, not on earth. What is your attitude toward death, toward your own death? Christ-like character and ministry will lead us to end up with the triumph of looking forward

to be at home with Christ.

Conclusion.

Stephen was a *true witness*, a *true martyr* of Jesus Christ. A true witness lives like Christ. The ease or severity of our circumstances are not the critical factor. The quality of our witness is the critical factor.

In the next moments with God, evaluate the quality of your witness, of how much you really live like Christ. Ask God to help you see yourself as you really are—no better, no worse, but as you are. Determine above all else that by God's grace you will live like Christ, that you will be His true witness.

The desire of a true witness is summed up well in a prayer of W.H. Griffith Thomas.

I do not ask that my life may be honored and known of men; I do not ask a brilliant path with voice, or with song, or with pen. But, oh, I ask that my human strength may give place to God's power divine; that, filled with His wisdom, His goodness, His life, my life with His glory may shine.

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