

The Power of a Faithful Witness

Acts 6:8-7:60

I. INTRODUCTION

Have you ever had a favorite actor? Athlete? Star? Expert in their craft? Activity?

Have you ever wondered why you looked up to that person or that activity?

When we observe people who are experts in their fields it is impressive to observe and it inspires us.

When I was a kid one of the things I absolutely loved was BMX. I would watch BMX bike stunts, races, and tricks all the time. I wanted to be just like those guys. While they had thousand-dollar bikes I had a Huffy from Walmart. One time, I was trying to impress some friends with my BMX skills and I decided I would jump off about a 12-15 foot high bunk of lumber in the lumber yard in the sawmill we lived at. The first jump went amazing. I got a solid push and got to the end of the 12 foot of board and jumped going just high enough to come down. Now when I hit it was a jolt, landing on flat gravel but it looked so cool. So, what did I do? I decided to prove my awesomeness by jumping a second time. I should have known not to, when my kickoff was with my left foot and not my right. So, when I got to the end of the bunk of lumber my timing was off and I did not pull up hard enough. I dropped down 15 feet with the front tire smashing into the gravel and it shoved me faced first into the ground. I got up with gravel stuck in my face, rocks literally inside my hands and wrists, and lots of blood.

What went wrong? The experts do this type of stuff all the time, so why could I not do it?

The answer was simple. They dedicated their lives to the craft and I only did it as a hobby. The result was that when I tried awesome tricks, they ended up not looking like their tricks.

The same thing happens in the Christian walk all the time.

We read about the Old Testament saints and the power of God in their lives. We are inspired by Jesus and the apostles, but when it comes to our lives being lived as faithful witnesses for Christ, when our lives have the potential to have an impact like theirs, we often fall flat.

We wonder why.

Can I be honest for a moment? The reason many of us fall flat in our Christian walk is that for many of us living the Christian life is not our way of life, it is simply a hobby.

So, when it comes time to step up and be filled with the Spirit, to have that rock-solid faith, we fall flat because we have not put in the work of daily discipline, spent genuine time with Jesus, or covered our lives in prayer.

Today, I want us to follow a man named Stephen, in Acts 6-8, and see how we can walk with Christ and have a powerful and faithful witness in the world we live.

Why is this important? Two reasons come to mind. The first and most important reason is that walking with Christ and having an impact on the world is our mission. The second reason is that living out this mission is going to be more difficult for our generation than previous generations.

Is your life being lived as a faithful witness for Jesus?

May we take encouragement and strength from our text this morning.

The text covers two whole chapters.

⁸And Stephen, full of grace and power, was performing great wonders and signs among the people. ⁹But some men from what was called the Synagogue of the Freedmen, including both Cyrenians and Alexandrians, and some from Cilicia and Asia, rose up and argued with Stephen. ¹⁰But they were unable to cope with the wisdom and the Spirit with which he was speaking. ¹¹Then they secretly induced men to say, "We have heard him speak blasphemous words against Moses and against God." ¹²And they stirred up the people, the elders and the scribes, and they came up to him and dragged him away and brought him before the Council. ¹³They put forward false witnesses who said, "This man incessantly speaks against this holy place and the Law; ¹⁴for we have heard him say that this Nazarene, Jesus, will destroy this place and alter the customs which Moses handed down to us." ¹⁵And fixing their gaze on him, all who were sitting in the Council saw his face like the face of an angel.

In this story we see a man who was as much like Jesus as anyone in the Bible.

Tony Merida asks a question we should all wrestle with- Do I really want to be like Jesus?

In his commentary on the book of Acts he has an extended quote which might help us.

"To be like Jesus does not mean simply gathering facts about Jesus' life and then copying him.... We must not try to be like Jesus in our own power or imagine that we can earn salvation by copying Jesus' words or behaviors. Rather, as Christians we must realize that we can pursue likeness to Jesus because we have been united to Jesus. Through that union with Christ we can live out Christlike lives. Through Jesus we are able to bear that fruit of righteousness. Stephen was not sinless; like the rest of us, he needed the Savior. Once he accepted Jesus, he was empowered to live a life that reflected his Savior." (100).

I would like to walk us through several aspects of a faithful model of ministry so we can have a powerful faithful witness.

A FAITHFUL MODEL OF MINISTRY

Empowered Like Jesus (6:8)

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

A faithful powerful model of ministry is empowered like Jesus.

Stephen, chosen as one of the 12 servants of the church in Jerusalem, was full of grace and power.

Stephen was doing what God called him to do. He stepped up to serve the church and was serving in the manner that God equipped him to serve

Stephen was a man filled with gifts from God and he sought to faithfully use those gifts in the mission of the church.

How different is that from many churches today? So many use the church as their platform to get their way, to demonstrate power, or to have control.

Stephen used his gifts for the glory of God. Stephen used his gifts to serve the church.

That is no different for anyone today. God has called each person in the church to service. He has given each of us a gift to serve. The question is: Are we using our gift to serve the Lord through his body?

Stephen used his gifts because he was empowered by the Spirit.

The Spirit empowered Stephen to serve widows, speak and act with wisdom, and perform miracles.

Stephen was willing to be used by Christ and so he humbled himself to the Lord and in doing so he was filled with the Spirit to serve the church.

In what way are you serving the church with your gifts? Are you living in the power of the Spirit?

We daily ask God to fill us with power, with faith, and with wisdom.

We are controlled by whatever fills us and if we are filled with the world we will serve the world, but if we are filled with the Spirit we will serve Christ and his church.

If we desire to have a powerful and faithful witness that impacts our world for Christ, then we must be empowered with the Spirit like Christ.

Wisdom Like Jesus (6:9-10)

⁹But some men from what was called the Synagogue of the Freedmen, including both Cyrenians and Alexandrians, and some from Cilicia and Asia, rose up and argued with Stephen. ¹⁰But they were unable to cope with the wisdom and the Spirit with which he was speaking.

If we desire a powerful and faithful witness, we need wisdom like Jesus.

It did not take long for opposition to come up.

When people see God doing a work, many do not like the work which God is doing. Because when God is doing a work, it usually means he is tugging on someone's heart strings. And when our heart strings begin to get tugged on, it means God is convicting us about something in our lives.

This goes for the believer and the unbeliever. I fully expect the unbeliever to act like an unbeliever. It does not surprise me at all when an unbeliever gets mad at me, yells at me, tells me to stay out of their lives.

What does surprise me is when God tugs on the heart of a brother or sister in the Lord and then they begin to act like unbelievers. They get upset, anxious, worried, mad, or sad that God has the audacity to stick his finger in our lives.

Beloved, this should not be. When God touches our hearts through the Holy Spirit, through his Word, through the wisdom of a brother or sister, let us accept what the Lord has for us, for we know that he means good for us. No matter what God is speaking to you it is for your benefit and his glory.

There was a group of Jews who were previously slaves to Rome, but who were now free. They apparently lived in several communities and had their own synagogue known as the Freeman's Synagogue.

This marks a turn for the church. The church was originally accepted by the community and despised by the leaders, but now the community turned on them.

Where they once enjoyed the people's praise, the people now began to turn on them.

These men began to argue with Stephen. Why were they arguing? Two reasons (mainly): they did not like what he was doing (signs and wonders) and they did not like what he was saying. Why?

Because the things he was doing, along with the other disciples and apostles, showed them that God was not pleased with them and that God wanted to bring them to himself through Christ and not through the traditional temple methods. The law had been replaced by grace and they did not like this, so they argued with Stephen.

People don't like being found in the wrong and when we present the gospel, it shows us in high definition, the reality of our sin.

But their argument was in vain. Why? A few reasons. And I think this will help us as servants of Christ who live in a world hostile to the gospel.

These are some principles that if we place in our lives, we can be sure we are standing on a firm footing, when it comes to living out the gospel message and standing for Christ in a world that hates him.

Stephen was able to stand for Christ and push back against the world because:

- He was full of wisdom- How? He was in the word and spent time with God
- He was full of the Spirit- How? He was in the word and spent time with God

Notice how the text says this, *"his wisdom and the Spirit by whom he was speaking."*

Stephen was living each day, each moment in the power of the Spirit. This is of vital importance in our lives. If we are not living in the Spirit, we are living in the flesh.

If we are to have the wisdom to walk in the world and make decisions for the glory of God, we need the wisdom of Christ.

We will not have the wisdom of Christ without the Holy Spirit.

We will not be filled with the Spirit without spending time in the word and in prayer.

Stephen was not a learned man with an advanced education. How did he have the confidence to say and do the things he did?

He was filled with the Spirit and believed the promise of Jesus in Luke 21:12-18 when Jesus said he would be persecuted and placed on trial, but in that very moment not to worry because God will use you to be a witness to his glory.

As our spirit is formed into the image of Christ by the Holy Spirit, we are more and more glorifying God with our lives.

Dianne Chandler says, “the formation of our spirit [is] the ongoing, interactive and grace-based process of being conformed to the image of Jesus through the indwelling Holy Spirit, within the community of faith, in order to bear fruit that glorifies the Father.”

Are you interacting with the Spirit of God and Jesus on a daily basis?

We cannot expect to have any power over, or any influence in the world without the power of the Spirit!

We cannot expect to have the wisdom of Christ without the Spirit working in us.

If the Spirit is not actively working in our lives then we cannot and will not be able to glorify God with any part of our lives, much less be able to stand firm for Christ when the world pushes against us.

Strength Like Jesus (6:15)

The next principle in having a powerful and faithful witness is to have strength like Jesus.

These men could not stand with Stephen’s power and wisdom so what did they do? They did the same thing to Stephen that the Jewish leaders did to Jesus.

They got people to lie about him and had him falsely accused. They said he was speaking against Moses and the Temple.

But, notice verse 15. This is so beautiful.

¹⁵And fixing their gaze on him, all who were sitting in the Council saw his face like the face of an angel.

When you are serving God in the power of the Spirit, living right, walking humbly in the Spirit, you don’t have to fake righteousness, you don’t have to fake holiness, you won’t have to fudge godliness.

You can walk confidently, stand boldly, live courageously for the glory of God when you are filled with the Spirit. The world will be on notice.

Will your life always draw them to Christ? No. Will your stances, choices, values, and priorities often be at odds with those of the world? Sure. Will they like it? No. Will they fight against you? You bet. But that is ok because you are walking in the wisdom and the Spirit of the Lord, so you say, "Bring it on!"

Just as with Stephen, the world will never be able to stand up to the wisdom of Christ, so they will invent new ways to attack, they will lie, and they will deceive.

Stephen was accused of speaking lies against Moses and the Temple, but he was simply teaching that Jesus was the fulfillment of the law and the Temple.

There is no temple to go to, no building to attend in order to meet Jesus. You can go directly to Jesus.

If a person wants forgiveness, he or she does not need to self-atone because Jesus has done the work for them.

But we must be prepared. When we share these gospel truths, we will face opposition. We will be mocked, shamed, and even killed for believing and preaching it.

Just as with Stephen, we need the strength of Jesus to withstand the world.

We have no need to fear. When we are empowered like Jesus and have the wisdom of Jesus, we will have the strength of Jesus to withstand whatever the world throws at us.

We acquire the strength of Jesus by being with Jesus.

We will not have the strength of Jesus without spending time with Jesus.

Do you want to be able to stand for the Lord at school, among your friends, and make an impact? Do you want to be a witness for Christ in a hostile work environment? Do you desire for your family to lead your family in Christ?

If we want the strength of Jesus and to have an impact for Jesus, we must spend time with Jesus.

Knew Scripture Like Jesus (7:1-53)

If we are to have a powerful and faithful witness, we need to know Scripture like Jesus.

After they accused Stephen, Annas, the high priest, asked Stephen if the accusations were true.

In response, Stephen drops the longest sermon in Acts.

He used the Old Testament to paint the picture of their sin.

In this sermon he traces the history of Israel and how they have spurned God's attempt to send them a savior for their time and that they have followed suit by rejecting Jesus.

Israel continually rejected God's man and plan for them, and they continually were under the judgement of God.

Abraham-saved by grace through faith, but they misunderstood this and thought they only needed to be children of Abraham. They rejected the faith of Abraham.

Joseph- Joseph's brothers rejected him when first he came to them. They hated him and sold him into slavery.

Moses- the Jews rejected Moses the first time God brought him to them and then again in the desert after the exodus, they rejected God for a golden calf.

These two events, Joseph and Moses' rejection, illustrate how Israel treated Jesus.

Israel rejected their Messiah.

Solomon-Solomon built his Temple for God's worship, but instead of worshipping God in faith, the worship at the Temple degenerated into mere religious formality and eventually placing idols in the Temple.

We are no different, if we continually reject God's man (Jesus) and God's plan (His Glory) for our lives we should not be surprised if our lives are out of whack.

Resisted the truth of God- this is the last section of the sermon.

But it was the last part of his sermon that got their blood pumping.

⁵¹"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. ⁵²Which 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; ⁵³you who received the law as ordained by angels, and yet did not keep it."

He basically says, "Every time God tries to rescue you from yourselves you refuse the rescue."

Least we be so hard on these individuals, our world is pretty good at resisting Christ as well.

- Unbelievers
 - Unbelievers resist the gospel. As we pray for the Holy Spirit to be longsuffering and patient with unbelievers, we pray that the Spirit continue to convict them of sin and to show them God's love.
 - We pray for opportunities to witness and serve the unbeliever so that perhaps they may see the love of Christ through our acts of service
- Believers
 - We resist God's working in us in regard to temptation, service, ministry, surrender

If we don't know the Scripture how can we grow in Christ? How can we be filled with the Spirit? How can we faithfully serve?

May we, as believers in Christ, be so in love with the word of God, that we daily wash in its rich and wonderful waters.

Mission Minded Like Jesus (7:54-60)

Finally, if we desire to have a powerful and faithful ministry, we must be mission-minded like Jesus.

Stephen knew full well the impact and consequences of his speech.

He was ready to live, and he was ready to die for Christ.

Why? Because Stephen was mission-minded like Jesus.

⁵⁴Now when they heard this, they were cut to the quick, and they began gnashing their teeth at him. ⁵⁵But 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; ⁵⁶and he said, "Behold, I see the heavens opened up and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God." ⁵⁷But they cried out with a loud voice, and covered their ears and rushed at him with one impulse. ⁵⁸When 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. ⁵⁹They went on stoning Stephen as he called on the Lord and said, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit!" ⁶⁰Then 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.

The truth that Stephen presented to the Sanhedrin convicted them greatly, but instead of responding in faith and repentance, they acted out against Stephen.

The world will actively fight against the gospel and use whatever means to destroy the church.

They quickly went from a group of dignified men to an angry mob in seconds, screaming to the top of their lungs and rushing Stephen.

"One impulse"-one large mindset and movement.

They grabbed him and brought him outside of the city and began stoning him.

Individuals condemned to stoning were usually thrown off a 10-12 foot cliff and one big stone and then a second big stone resulting in a quick death. Stephen did not get this.

While being stoned Stephen repeated the very words of Christ upon the cross, "Lord receive my spirit!" "Lord, do not hold this sin against them!"

It is often when we are most aroused, pressed, stressed, emotional highs or lows, tired, or in a hurry that we forget to follow Jesus' example.

Let us follow Stephen's example here and follow Christ's example in all situations, even the most stressful, because you never know the impact your example may have.

Stephen's example spurred an entire missionary revolution with the gospel spreading across Samaria and eventually out of Palestine.

What will your example do?

Even as his perpetrators were murdering him, he asked God to continue to seek their good.

What will you do when friends, family, coworkers, and others stand against you for standing for Christ?

To stand for Christ in a world that hates him means to be against the world and many times this can have dire consequences.

But even those consequences can have an impact for Christ.

TAKE AWAYS

1. When living for Jesus expect persecution
2. Living for Jesus requires both wisdom and power
3. Be ready to stand firm against the world
4. Be willing to lose it all

Are you living a Spirit empowered life?

Are you standing firm against the world?

Are you willing to lose it all for Christ? (believer and unbeliever)

Do you have a powerful and faithful witness?