

In our passage last time, Luke introduced us to, what we refer to today as, the first deacons. A problem arose within the church when some of the Grecian widows were overlooked in the daily distribution of food. The disciples realized they could not do all of the ministries that needed to be done within the body by themselves. They needed help, so that they could focus on their primary responsibilities of the leading the church, preaching the gospel, and teaching the word of God.

The Apostles led the people to choose from among themselves, seven men who were known to be full the Holy Spirit, and wisdom, so that could meet the needs of the Grecian widows. These specially selected servants of Christ, and the church, took on the responsibility of their ministry to preserve the peace within the body, and to provide for the needs of its members.

In the gospel of Luke, and in the book of Acts, the author uses very good Greek grammar, and a more formal Greek style of writing, as compared to the other New Testament writers. In his list of names Luke mentions Stephen first, and Philip secondly, because immediately he follows with a focus on what happens to Stephen, and then, in chapter 8, he switches to a focus on Philip's ministry. In our passage this evening, we read of the events that led to Stephen becoming the first Christian martyr. I pray that none of us ever have to face what Stephen suffered, but his example is a model for all Christians for all times, when it comes to taking our stand for Christ, regardless of the opposition. Please read along with me Acts 6:8-15.

From our previous passage of scripture, we know that Stephen had a reputation, among the believers, as a man full of the Spirit and wisdom. In our passage this evening we learn that he was full of God's grace, and power, and he did great wonders and miraculous signs among the people. All of these characteristics suggest that Stephen was very mature in his faith, and in his personal relationship with the Lord. While the scriptures do not spell it out, due to the relative youth of the church, Stephen was more than likely a disciple of Christ while Jesus still walked the earth. He was not one of the original twelve, but Luke suggests, that in every other way, he was just like the apostles in his walk with the Lord, and in his abilities to do all the things they did.

Today, as we face opposition to the word of God, and the gospel of Jesus Christ, we best arm ourselves by developing these same characteristics in our lives. In order to be full of the Spirit, we must be totally surrendered to the Lordship of Jesus Christ, in every area of our lives. To be full of wisdom, we must immerse ourselves in the contextual word of God, and apply all that we learn in our lives, and circumstances. To be full of God's grace, which is His unmerited favor, and to have His power demonstrated in our lives, we have to be fully in love with Jesus, with His will as the priority over our lives. I cannot say that if we will live this way we will be able to do great wonders, and miraculous signs, the way Stephen did, but we will see God's hand of protection and provision over our lives. We will experience His power in our circumstances, and in answer to our prayers.

Be warned, however, whenever a person is fully committed to Christ, he or she should expect some opposition from the lost world. Luke's brief description in this passage informs us that God had his hand on Stephen. Stephen had a powerful witness, and ministry, among the people. He was making a real difference for the kingdom of God and Satan would not allow his actions to go unchallenged. If he could not get to Stephen directly, he would use others to try to trip him up, and destroy his witness. In this case, the devil moved in the hearts of a group of Jews known as the Synagogue of the Freedmen to begin a resistance that resulted in Stephen's murder.

I did some research of the Synagogue of the Freedmen, but what I found was mostly speculation, and not based upon the word of God. The Jews had temple worship in common, but throughout the known world, they had Synagogues, local churches, where they worshiped, and studied the word of God. Under the Sadducees, temple worship remained pretty much the same for all, but under the Pharisees, individual Synagogues had a measure of autonomy, and groups of Synagogues would take on the character of modern day denominations within the Christian faith.

Since these Jews were from Cyrene, and Alexandria, in northern Africa, and Cilicia and Asia, in the area of modern day Turkey, these were Grecian Jews. Isn't it ironic that Stephen's primary ministry was to the Grecian widows, and his primary opposition came from the Grecian Jews?

The text is unclear if the opposition came as a result of jealousy, as it had developed against the Apostles, or if it came from stubborn refusal to accept the gospel message. It was probably a combination of the two. The bible says that the opposition started as these men began to argue with Stephen.

This is the primary source of opposition against our witness today. Even in the most severe cases of Christian opposition, our opponents argue against our faith, and the reliability of God's word. The opposition comes for many reasons. Some argue because they have convictions about a false religion. Some argue because the gospel demands introspection, and forces a person deal with God honestly about their sin. People oppose Christians who have a biblical worldview, because our stand upon God's word sheds light upon the world's godlessness, whether it is personal godlessness, or someone's desire to impose godless agendas on others.

No matter how much these men argued with Stephen, they could not stand against his wisdom, or the Spirit, by whom he spoke. I find within these verses a promise of God, and a hope that should help us all to be more willing to take our stand, and to always be prepared to give the reason, to anyone who asks, about the hope that we have. The wisdom that comes from a thorough knowledge of God's word, coupled with being filled with the Holy Spirit, equips us to stand against any argument that the world might try to use against us. When we stand upon the truth of God's word, in the power of His Spirit, we become the light in this dark world. When we stand together, with conviction, God can use us to make a difference, and to defeat the devil in his schemes.

Stephen boldly stood upon the truth, but rather than receiving the gospel of Jesus Christ, the opponents took wicked, and godless, actions against Stephen to try to silence him, and to destroy his witness. They persuaded others to accuse Stephen of blasphemy, and twisted the words of Jesus, which Stephen quoted. They accused him of subverting their customs, and they probably brought other similar charges.

In other words they lied, and they solicited others to lie as well. Do you notice a trend here? The revolt against Stephen is the same pattern of opposition that came against Peter and John in chapter 4, against Peter and the Apostles in chapter 5, and we will see Paul face the exact same set of circumstances, and opposition, in chapter 22. The charges against Stephen are the exact same charges the Jews made against Jesus in Matthew 26.

The general principle, which I have shared with you many times before, is that the devil is very powerful, but he is not very original. He uses people's sin nature against them to oppose the work, and people of God, but he uses the same old tricks, over and over, because they are effective.

Armed with this knowledge, we gain discernment, so that we are better prepared to know how to take our stand. When the devil trips us up, we should be wise about how to not get tripped up the next time. When we are opposed by the world, and we don't know how to stand, we turn to the word of God the wisdom of mature, and godly, men and women of faith. We study Christian apologetics in order to defend our faith. As we grow in Christ, and the knowledge of God's word, we develop convictions, so that we are able to stand upon the truth, no matter what the opposition.

Through lies, and half-truths, Stephen's opponents stirred up the people, the elders, and the teachers of the law. In one sense, the opposition was coming from the outside, but in another sense, it came from within. Remember that at this point, they were all Jews. The old guard was not going to let anything threaten their traditions.

The opposition we face today should not come from within, but sometimes it does. What effect would it have on our worship services today, if we did not incorporate praise and worship music? As I observe our congregation on Sunday Mornings, I see genuine worship among our people, whether we are singing contemporary Christian songs, or traditional hymns. What does it matter, so long as the songs exalt the Lord, and we use them as an expression of our love, and faith? Yet I remember a time, in our own church, when there was opposition to using the very songs that we now hold dear in our worship services. There was a time when some people didn't want to use any musical instruments other than the piano, and organ, because that was what they were accustomed to in the past.

I was in a church that once split because one group wanted one color of drapes, and the other wanted a different color. That same church lost a significant number of people when someone donated a pool table to the youth department. I have received telephone calls, in my office, from people I have never met, who should have been brothers in Christ, and they told me that that I am going to hell because I do not preach out of the King James Bible, or because we use musical instruments in our worship services.

The point is that we will never be able to stand against the world, if we are not able to stand together as brothers, and sisters, in Christ. This is why it is so important that we all be led by the Holy Spirit, and that we surrender our all to the Lordship of Christ. This is why we must allow God's word to give us wisdom, and discernment, about what is really important, and what is superficial, so that we do not allow the devil to get a foothold, and we are able to remain effective in our stand, according to God's will.

Following the same pattern we have already seen, his accusers brought Stephen before the Sanhedrin council, and they accused Him of repeating Jesus words, but taking what he said out of context. Do you suppose that people who oppose the gospel today would resort to twisting our words to oppose our message? Do you think that perhaps, in this day of political correctness, those opponents of Christian faith might take our testimonies, and our stands, and twist them to paint us in the worst possible light? When we speak out against abortion, or homosexual marriage, the unconstitutional actions of government, or individuals in government, or any of a countless number of political and social agendas, do you think we will have to deal with any pushback?

If we take our stand upon the truth of God's word, there will always be opposition. It has always been that way, and it will always be that way, until the Lord's return. But if we are unwilling to stand, and to stand together, we are defeated already. Jesus said that we are to be the light of the world. We hold out the light of truth regardless of what happens, or the opposition we

might have to face. We take our stand and say, “This is wrong, because it does not line up with God’s word”, and stand, without waver, no matter what the consequences.

Our passage this evening ends with Stephen facing his accusers, who looked at him intently, and observed that his face was like the face of an angel. Stephen had the glow of the Holy Spirit about Him. The power of the Holy Spirit was upon Him. He had confidence in the face of opposition that would eventually require his life. It did not matter, because his eyes were upon the Jesus, his future secure, and nothing could shake his faith, or his stand.

Who knows what we might have to face in the future. Right now our stands are not nearly as threatening as what our brothers and sisters face in other parts of the world. But, we must take our stands today, based on the truth of God’s word, if there is any hope of not facing greater opposition in the future. If we are in the last days, we are running out of time, and if there is anyone here who has not yet bowed his or her knee in faith to the Lord Jesus Christ, you too are running out of time. Tonight can be your time of coming to Jesus for the forgiveness of your sins. Tonight you too can receive God’s grace, and eternal life in Jesus’ name.