

Main Idea: In the life of Stephen as recorded in Acts 6:8-15, we discover two qualifications for being a pacesetter.

- I. A willingness to serve (8)
 - A. God was real in Stephen’s life.
 - B. Stephen wanted God to be real in others’ lives, too.
 1. That’s why he served in the church.
 2. That’s why he served outside the church.
- II. A willingness to suffer (9-15)
 - A. Stephen faced what Jesus faced (9-14).
 1. People argued with him (9-10).
 2. People attacked him (11).
 3. People arrested him (12).
 4. People accused him unjustly (13-14).
 - B. Stephen responded as Jesus responded (15).
 1. He stood for God.
 2. God stood with him.

Make It Personal: A couple of lessons from Stephen’s life...

1. It’s important to give your whole life to God.
2. It’s just as important to live wholly for God every day.

Scripture Reading: Psalm 15

Years ago our High School Cross Country team played a game in practice called “Rabbit.” Coach Lehman used the game to motivate his runners to work hard. It went like this. Coach would pick some of the second-team runners, and give them a one-fourth mile or half-mile head start. Then he would release the first-team runners.

“Your job,” he would tell the second team, “is to run the five mile course without getting caught by the first team runners.” And to the first team, “Your job is to catch them.”

It was a great strategy. Both groups now had incentive for running as well as they could. You didn’t *coast* in the game of “Rabbit.”

If you want to be a good runner, it helps to practice with someone *faster* than you are, someone that will encourage you ever so often, “Come on, let’s pick up the pace. You can do it.”

We need pacesetters. Not just on Cross Country teams either. We need them in the church. It’s so easy to coast. A lot of people go with the flow. Then there are *pacesetters*. The church needs pacesetters.

Every so often God raises up in His church individuals who set the pace in an extraordinary way. People like David Brainerd, Jim Elliot, and in recent days, our brother Don Boggs who though now in heaven still remind us that life is too short to waste.

C.T. Studd, the famous English cricketer and member of the English XI cricket team, gave away his vast wealth and became a missionary a century ago. His slogan was, “If Jesus Christ be God, and died for me, then no sacrifice can be too great for me to make for him.” C. T. Studd was a pacesetter.

**Note: This is an unedited manuscript of a message preached at Wheelersburg Baptist Church. It is provided to prompt your continued reflection on the practical truths of the Word of God.

¹ For an earlier development of this text, see the Acts series preached at WBC in 2001.

This morning for Father's Day, we're going to see a biblical illustration of a pacesetter. His name is *Stephen*. Stephen was a pacesetter, and there's much we can learn from him as we open our Bibles to Acts 6.

Stephen was no ordinary man. To him belongs the distinction of going down in history as the first Christian martyr.

As you read the history of the church in the book of Acts, you discover not only that the church was making an impact on its world, but why. Yes, God was working—that's the ultimate reason. But God uses instruments to do His work, people dedicated wholly to Him. People like Stephen.

The church is made up of individuals, and the church moves ahead when individuals do what Stephen did. Stephen is a refreshing character. A convicting one, too. From his example in Acts 6:8-15, we discover two qualifications for being a pacesetter.

I. A willingness to serve (8)

"Now Stephen, a man full of God's grace and power, did great wonders and miraculous signs among the people."

We first met Stephen in our last study. The church had experienced growing pains which resulted in an internal conflict. Some of the Greek-speaking Jews complained against the Hebrew-speaking Jews that their widows were being neglected in the church's "soup kitchen" ministry (6:1). The twelve apostles dealt with the problem in a straightforward manner.

First, they clarified the church's priorities. "It would not be right for us to neglect the ministry of the word of God in order to wait on tables (2)." Next, they proposed a solution, "Choose seven men from among you who are known to be full of the Spirit and wisdom. We will turn this responsibility over to them (3)."

And so it happened. The church chose seven servants—some have called them the church's first "deacons." One of them was Stephen. In fact, his name is mentioned first in verse 5, "They chose Stephen, a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit."

To be a pacesetter, you must be willing to serve. Stephen was. The first mention of his name occurs in a context of service.

Let's probe further. To understand the kind of person Stephen was—and indeed, to understand what it takes to be a true servant—two passions are essential.

A. God was real in Stephen's life. I mean God was *real* in his life. He was not a man who merely went through the motions. He was a man *full of faith* and *full of the Holy Spirit* (5). He was a man who trusted God and lived under the control of the Holy Spirit.

But that's not all. Dr. Luke informs us that he was also *full of God's grace and power* (8). He didn't dabble in the grace and power of God, but was *full* of it.

He was "full of grace." That's significant. Not only does grace save us, but it changes us. Wesley once humorously said, "One of the advantages of the grace of God is that it makes a man a gentleman without the aid of a dancing master."² That is, grace changes a person inside out. Stephen was full of grace. He was a *gracious* man. He was a pleasure to be around, a true gentleman, so much so that he was one of the men to

² Hughes, p. 103.

whom the church authorized the care of its widows. In the end, he would even be gracious towards those who killed him.

He was also “full of God’s power.” Though he served people, he was no mere people pleaser. The power of God marked his life, so much so that he possessed a tenacity, a boldness that enabled him to stand up for God even if it might cost him his life. And in the end, it did.

Yes, God was real in Stephen’s life. God was his first passion, as He will be in the life of any true servant. But there must be a second passion. God didn’t call us to love Him in an ivory tower, but in a real world with real people. Like Stephen did.

B. Stephen wanted God to be real in others’ lives, too. Love God. Love neighbor. Those are the two greatest commandments, said Jesus. And Stephen did both. His second passion showed up in two areas.

1. *That’s why he served in the church.* We’ve been saved to serve. Stephen was committed to his local church. That’s why he waited on tables.

The name “Stephen” is Greek. It means “a crown” or “a garland.” Stephen was truly a crown in the early church, a real pacesetter. He loved his church and delighted to serve in it. He wanted God to be real in the lives of His people. That’s why he served in the church. But he also wanted God to be real in the lives of the lost.

2. *That’s why he served outside the church.* According to verse 8, he did “great wonders and miraculous signs among the people.” Sound familiar? That’s what the apostles did (5:12). They did wonders and signs to authenticate the gospel message they preached. Remember, the apostles had laid hands on Stephen, thus commissioning him to the ministry. Consequently, he received apostolic power which he used for the advancement of the gospel.

Apparently, Stephen wasn’t afraid to try new methodology in reaching people. To this point in Acts, the church’s outreach consisted mainly of preaching in the temple courts (2:46; 5:20) and going house to house (5:42). But what did Stephen do? Verse 9 indicates he went to the synagogues. Why there? Because he knew he’d find people there, people who needed to hear about the Messiah.

His strategy was simple. He knew the people in the synagogue would be studying the Old Testament Scriptures. So he went there to tell them something they didn’t know, or at least, didn’t understand fully. The Savior predicted by the Old Testament had come. His name is *Jesus*.

By the way, a few years later someone else practiced this same methodology of synagogue evangelism. Who was that? We see him in Acts 14:1, “At Iconium Paul and Barnabas went as usual into the Jewish synagogue. There they spoke so effectively that a great number of Jews and Gentiles believed.”

It was Paul’s customary practice to evangelize in synagogues whenever he entered a new town. Perhaps he learned that strategy from Stephen, as well as many more things.

This is a good place to mention something important. It’s been rightly said, “If there had been no Stephen, humanly speaking, there would have been no Paul.”

If you want to understand Paul, you must start with Stephen. Paul actually listened to Stephen in Acts 6 & 7, though not as a supporter for sure. At this point in this life, Paul (then known as Saul) was a devout Pharisee. According to Acts 8:1, when the mob stoned Stephen, Paul was there “giving approval to his death.”

Many today know about Paul, but few about Stephen. That's the way it is with God's kind of pacesetter. It's not about us. It's about being faithful to the role God assigns us. And Stephen did that, as we'll see.

So here's the first qualification. If you want to be a pacesetter, you must be willing to serve. As with Stephen, God must be real in your life, and you must want Him to be real in the lives of others. So much so that you do something about it. Though others watch the race go by, you get involved—both with believers in the church and non-believers outside the church.

Application:

So there's the first mark. A willingness to serve. Here's the second.

II. A willingness to suffer (9-15)

“Everyone who wants to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted.” That's a guarantee according to 2 Timothy 3:12.

Notice the first three words in verse 9, “Opposition arose, however.” You can count on it. Where there's opportunity, there will be opposition. One thing that stands out about Stephen is his *Christlikeness*. In fact, no higher compliment can be given to someone than this: *You remind me of Christ*. Stephen does remind us of Christ, in two ways.

A. Stephen faced what Jesus faced (9-14). People did four things to him, just like they did with the Master.

1. People argued with him (9-10). “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.”

Jews from all over the world lived in Jerusalem in their own sections of the city. Some of these ethnic groups had their own synagogues, including one group Luke identifies as the “Freedmen (or, “Libertines”).”

The Freedmen were descendants of Jewish slaves that had been captured by Pompey in 63 B.C., taken to Rome, and then later granted their freedom. They came from different Hellenistic areas. Luke mentions Jews from Cyrene—a key city in north Africa (Libya). There were also Jews from Alexandria—another city in north Africa and the second most important city in the Roman Empire next to Rome; it also had a large Jewish population. In addition, Luke identifies Jews from the provinces of Cilicia and Asia—Roman provinces in Asia Minor (modern day Turkey).

Ponder this fact. Paul's hometown was Tarsus which was located in Cilicia (Acts 21:39; 22:3). That being the case he probably attended this very synagogue when he moved to Jerusalem. Let that sink in. It's possible that Stephen actually went to Paul's synagogue to evangelize.

What kind of reception did the Synagogue of the Freedmen give Stephen and his teaching? Not very hospitable. They argued with him. The Greek verb *suzeteo* refers not to a quarrel, but to a formal debate. Luke doesn't spell out the content of the debate, but we can safely assume—especially from the charges that followed—that Stephen talked about the Messiah.

He told them that Jesus was God's Son whom God sent into the world clothed in human flesh. He told them that Jesus, after living a perfect, Law-keeping life, then died

for sinners making a ransom payment, rose again, and that Jesus could do what the Mosaic law and temple ritual could not do—save them from their sins.

Indeed, Stephen proclaimed the gospel. It's what his Jewish brethren needed to hear. It's what we need to hear today.

It's true, dear friend. If you want to experience God's forgiveness, if you want to become part of God's family, if you want to spend eternity in paradise with your Maker, there's only one way. You must believe in Jesus the Messiah and receive Him as your Savior and Lord.

Nobody could match Stephen. That being the case, the only alternative—since they were unwilling to humble themselves and believe his message—was to proceed to step 2.

2. *People attacked him (11)*. Just like they did with Jesus. “Then they secretly persuaded some men to say, ‘We have heard Stephen speak words of blasphemy against Moses and against God.’”

They couldn't beat him with the truth, so they used a lie. They resorted to an *ad hominem* argument. They recruited some shady characters to attack him with two accusations. One, blasphemy against Moses, and two, blasphemy against God. By the way, notice they mention Moses before God. Such was their zeal for the legalistic system they so loved and put their trust in.

Those are two unthinkable crimes. This isn't a mild disagreement. Those accusations, should they stick, will cost Stephen his life. Indeed, this is warfare, spiritual warfare instigated by the murderer and accuser of the brethren, the devil himself.

3. *People arrested him (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.”

Again, that's what they did to Jesus. Although Jesus had lived a perfect life, he was arrested by jealous, self-seeking religious leaders.

Crowds are so fickle, aren't they? One minute they like you (5:13), the next they believe a lie and turn against you. The mob tactics worked. Upon hearing the slanderous accusations, they seized Stephen. The verb *sunarpazo* means “to seize with violence.”

Notice the use of aggressive force. It wasn't fair, but what they did to Jesus wasn't “fair” either. Our Lord didn't promise us “fair treatment” by the world. He did promise He'd always be with us—and that's sufficient.

Luke doesn't tell us how long after they seized Stephen that his trial began. Eventually, however, they hauled him into court, and put him on trial before the Sanhedrin. Just like they did with Peter and John in Acts 4. Just like they did with all the apostles in Acts 5. Just like they would do with many others later. Just like they did with the Savior Himself.

4. *People accused him unjustly (13-14)*. “They produced false witnesses.” Why not *true* witnesses? Because they couldn't find any. Stephen was a good and godly man, so much so that he was entrusted with the care of needy widows.

“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.’”

They accused Stephen of undermining the temple and the law of Moses. That was an *unjust* accusation. No doubt, they took Stephen's words and twisted them.

Stephen probably did talk about the temple, the Law, and Jewish customs. Perhaps he told them what Jesus said in John 2:19, “Destroy this temple, and I will raise it again

in three days.” Of course, the temple Jesus had spoken of was his body, but His listeners misunderstood Him. They did the same thing with Stephen.

Granted, if the gospel is true, if Jesus did make an atoning sacrifice for sinners, then it means there is no longer any need for the temple nor the sacrificial system. The book of Hebrews will later make that perfectly clear.

But Stephen didn't *attack* these things. They were good things, God-ordained things, yet things which were fulfilled by the person and work of Jesus the Christ.

F. F. Bruce explains, “They are called ‘false witnesses,’ as those who brought similar testimony against Jesus are called (Matt 26:59-61; Mark 14:55-59). But in both cases the falseness of their testimony consisted not in wholesale fabrication but in subtle and deadly misrepresentation of words actually spoken.”³

Do you know what really incensed Stephen's critics? Listen to their final words again (14): “We heard him say that Jesus will destroy this place and *change the customs* Moses handed down to us.”

There it is. There's the cause. The Jews loved their building and their customs. In the end, these became their *God*.

We wrestle with the same tension. In fact, here's a sure way to get a crowd stirred up. Accuse somebody of initiating *change*. Tradition is a powerful thing. It's so easy to get hung up on externals. Stephen gave people the Word, but they rejected it. Not because it wasn't true, but because it involved change.

May I remind you that this court is the same one that convicted Jesus? And leading the way is the same high priest. Yes, Stephen is in trouble.

There's another way Stephen reminds me of Christ. Not only did Stephen face what Jesus faced, but...

B. Stephen responded as Jesus responded (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.”

What does that mean, *like the face of an angel*? I'm not sure. I don't think we should read Michael Angelo into this and put some halo around Stephen's head. Yet there was, as F. F. Bruce puts it, “a look that told of inspiration within, clear eyes burning with the inner light.” Bruce continues, “We can hardly doubt that it was Saul who remembered that look, a look which burnt into his soul until he too was turned to accept Jesus as his master and learnt in his own life to experience the presence of the Holy Spirit.”⁴

When wronged, Stephen responded as did his Lord. Simply put...

1. *He stood for God.* He didn't worry about the consequences. He just stood for God. That's not easy to do when you're all alone, is it? But Stephen knew something we're prone to forget. He wasn't alone.

2. *God stood with him.* He stood for God, and God stood with him. The evidence was so real that even his accusers could see it on his face.

The members of the Sanhedrin certainly remembered the account of Moses' shining face (Ex. 34:29-30). Warren Wiersbe observes, “It was as though God was saying, ‘This man is not against Moses! He is like Moses—he is My faithful servant!’”⁵

³ Bruce, *Acts*, p. 135.

⁴ F. F. Bruce, *Acts*, p. 136.

⁵ Wiersbe, p. 430.

At that point, the high priest asked Stephen, “Are these charges true (7:1)?” The response Stephen gave is one of the most incredible messages found anywhere in the Bible—and Stephen gave it all from memory. The Lord willing, we’ll examine it in a future study.

But for now, it’s vital that we think carefully about what we’ve just seen. A willingness to serve. And a willingness to suffer. That’s what Stephen modeled for us. That’s what a pacesetter does. And that’s what we need today, in our homes, in our church, in our world.

Application:

Make It Personal: A couple of lessons from Stephen’s life...

1. *It’s important to give your whole life to God.* Not part of it, but the whole. Have you ever done that? *Take my life and let it be, consecrated Lord to Thee.*

Vance Havner once said, “A wife who is 85% faithful to her husband is not faithful at all. There is no such thing as part-time loyalty to Jesus Christ.”

Is Jesus Christ your Lord and Savior?

In his book *One Crowded Hour*, Tim Bowden describes an incident in Borneo in 1964. Nepalese fighters known as Gurkhas were asked if they would be willing to jump from airplanes into combat against the Indonesians. The Gurkhas didn’t clearly understand what was involved, but they bravely said they would do it, asking only that the plane fly slowly over a swampy area and no higher than 100 feet. When they were told that the parachutes would not have time to open at that height, the Gurkhas replied, “Oh, you didn’t mention parachutes before!”⁶

That’s what I call devotion. Look at Stephen again. Men, that’s what the Lord intends for us. That’s what a man’s man looks like. He serves. He’s willing to suffer.

My friend, it’s important to give your whole life to God. But I need to warn you of something. That decision can turn into a copout if we’re not careful. It’s possible for us to say, “I’ve given my whole life to God.” Yet what we mean is, “I’ve got a whole life to life for God.” Or to put it another way, “I’ve got plenty of time to get serious about living for God *later*.”

That’s why we need Stephen to teach us a second, vital lesson. Yes, it’s important to give your whole life to God. But...

2. *It’s just as important to live wholly for God every day.* As if today would be our final day on the planet.

As it turned out, Stephen didn’t live a long life. But the life he lived mattered for God. Better a short life that blazes for God than a long life that fizzles out along the way.

How are you doing in the race of life? It’s possible to coast. Then again, it’s possible to follow in Stephen’s steps. Will you resolve this very moment to live wholly for God *every day*?

⁶ *Our Daily Bread*, January 30, 1994.