

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

- I. To be a person of influence, you must be willing to serve (8).
 - A. God was real in Stephen’s life.
 - B. Stephen wanted God to be real in the lives of others, too.
 1. That’s why he served in the church.
 2. That’s why he served outside the church.
- II. To be a person of influence, you must be willing 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: Two lessons to ponder 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: 2 Corinthians 4:1-12

We need heroes. And thankfully, what we need, our generous Father has provided. Some of them are living, but many have finished their course and are now in the presence of their Savior.

That’s one of the reasons I read biographies and urge you to do the same. There’s so much we can learn from those who’ve walked this path before us.

Last year Sherry gave me a book for Christmas entitled, *Preaching in Hitler’s Shadow*, edited by Dean Stroud. It’s the fascinating account of how German pastors responded to the predicament facing them in the 1930s and 1940s.

Jesus said, give unto Caesar what is Caesar’s, and to God what is God’s. How do you do that when your Caesar is Adolph Hitler? The book tells about men like Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Karl Barth, Paul Schneider, Martin Niemoller, and others.

For instance, in 1938 a German church leader thought it would be a good idea to honor Adolph Hitler on his birthday, April 20. So he called on all pastors in Germany to swear an oath of loyalty to their fuhrer, just as military officers did. Those who refused would be dismissed from their pastorates.

This created a dilemma for these men. Most of them were very patriotic and loved their country. Schneider was a decorated veteran that received the Iron Cross for being wounded serving his country in WWI. Bonhoeffer’s father was the head doctor of psychiatry in Berlin. So these were patriotic men. But what was called for was more than love of country. It demanded personal allegiance to a human leader.

The wording was: “I swear that I will be faithful and obedient to Adolph Hitler, the Fuhrer of the German Reich and German people, and will observe the laws and will conscientiously fulfill my official duties, so help me God.”²

^{**}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 expositional series in Acts at WBC in 2001.

² *Preaching in Hitler’s Shadow*, edited by Dean Stroud, p. 178.

What would you do? Remember this is 1938. WWII is yet a year away. The country, let alone the world, does not yet know what Hitler's going to do to 6 million Jews. In deciding whether to take the oath or not, these men of God were facing a question that's as old as the church. *What do Christians owe the state?*

According to Stroud, most pastors in Germany ended up taking the oath. But not all. Many, including Bonhoeffer, refused. Karl Barth lost his teaching position in Bonn for refusing to swear a similar oath required of university faculty.³

Paul Schneider refused to bow to pressure from the state, but fearlessly preached God's Word until he was arrested and eventually sent to Buchenwald concentration camp. There he continued to preach the gospel to fellow prisoners and guards alike, was and was beaten again and again for doing so. Finally, in 1939, he was executed, the first evangelical pastor to be martyred by the Nazis.

According to Ephesians 4:7, "But to each one of us grace has been given as Christ apportioned it." So the Lord gives gifted people to His church. And why? To influence others to seek first the kingdom of God.

These German pastors didn't go with the flow. They were influencers. The Lord is still using them to influence people, including me.

Do you ever struggle to stand for the One who died for you? We need influencers in our lives. Models. Heroes.

That's what this series is all about. Stephen was a wonderful gift from God. The Lord used this man to influence His church to reach the world in remarkable (and costly) ways.

He certainly influenced many in his own day, chiefly, Saul of Tarsus. Humanly speaking, Paul became an influencer like none other because he was *influenced* by Stephen, as we'll see.

It's so easy to coast. A lot of people just go with the flow. Then there are *pacesetters*. The church needs pacesetters, *influencers*.

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 more recently, missionary Roni Bowers who died in Peru, 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."

Such was the life testimony of Stephen, the man who became the first Christian martyr. In today's text, Acts 6:8-15, we discover from Stephen two qualifications for being a God-used person of influence. One, you must be willing to *serve*, and two, you must be willing to *suffer*.

I. To be a person of influence, you must be willing to serve (8).

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

We began to look at Stephen last time. God used, of all things, a church problem to put this man on the church's radar.

As we saw, the early church had experienced growing pains which resulted in an internal conflict. Some of the Greek-speaking Jews complained against the Hebrew-

³ Ibid. p. 179.

speaking Jews that their widows were being neglected in the church's food pantry 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." Out of 20,000 or so church members at the time, he topped the church's recommended list.

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

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

First, *God*.

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." 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."⁴ In other words, 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 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 was a second passion. God didn't call us to love Him in an ivory tower, but in the real world with real people. Like Stephen did.

B. Stephen wanted God to be real in the lives of others, too. Stephen loved God, but he also loved people. His second passion showed up in two areas.

1. That's why he served in the church. We've been saved to serve, starting in our local church. Stephen was committed to his 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...

⁴ Hughes, p. 103.

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.

So Stephen becomes a transitional figure in the book of Acts, followed by Philip in chapter 8. Neither are apostles, but they become the bridge between the Twelve apostles (whom the Spirit uses to take the gospel to the Jews) in chapters 1-5 and Paul (whom the Spirit uses to reach the Gentiles) in chapters 9-28.

In between we find Stephen and Philip, whom the Spirit used to begin to break the first church out of its Jews-only approach to evangelism.

You shall be my witnesses in Jerusalem AND. The church was stuck on Jerusalem. The Spirit used Stephen and Philip to move the church to the AND of its mission.

Apparently, Stephen wasn’t afraid to try new methodology in reaching the lost. 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 seems to suggest he went to the synagogues. Why do that? 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. The Savior predicted by the Old Testament had come. *Jesus.*

By the way, a few years later someone else practiced this same methodology of synagogue evangelism. In fact, he learned a lot of things from Stephen, including new covenant theology. That’s Paul, of course.

For instance, Acts 14:1 states, “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, again, as well as many more things.

This is a good place to reiterate something mentioned before. If there had been no Stephen, humanly speaking, there would have been no Paul.

Paul actually listened to Stephen in Acts 6 & 7, 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.”

Friends, let’s make this personal. The Spirit uses people to influence people to love and live for Christ. Who has He used in your life? And in whose lives is He using you right now? Think back, to answer the first, and give thanks. Parents. Sunday School teachers. Maybe a friend, or spouse, or neighbor. Who has the Lord used to influence you for Christ? And now, who is He using you to influence? Again, thank Him for the privilege, of being influenced *and* being an influencer. It’s all of Him.

So there’s the first qualification. If you want to be an influencer, 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 may watch the race go by, you get involved, both with believers in the church and non-believers outside the church.

II. To be a person of influence, you must be willing 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 of the things 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).

And 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? 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 Jesus. He told them that Jesus died for sinners, rose again, and that Jesus could do what the Mosaic law and temple ritual could not do—save them from their sins.

And that’s still true, my non-Christian 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, you can, but there’s only one way. You must receive Jesus as your Messiah 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—blasphemy against Moses, and blasphemy against God. By the way, notice they mention Moses before God. Such was their zeal for their religious system.

Those are two unthinkable crimes. This isn't a mild disagreement. Those accusations, if they stick, will cost Stephen his life. This is warfare. Step #3...

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 fickle. 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. No, 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 more than enough.

I experienced His sufficiency the other night. It was another pain filled night with a migraine that wouldn't quit. I can't even put into words what happened. "Lord, help me!" I cried, over and over. And He did, not by taking the pain away, but by making His presence so very real, and specifically, by helping me feel so very loved by Him.

Sometimes He takes the pain away. Sometimes He joins us in the pain.

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. Step #4...

4. *People accused him unjustly (13-14)*. "They produced false witnesses." Why not *true* witnesses? They couldn't find any! Stephen was a good and godly man. Remember, he helped care for 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 had taken 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 was true, then it meant there was no longer any need for the temple, nor the sacrificial system. But Stephen didn't *attack* those good, God-given things. He just put them in their place. They were good, in their place, but that place had been fulfilled by the coming of the Messiah.

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."⁵

Do you know what really incensed his 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." The Jews loved their building and their customs. In the end, these became their functional *God*.

⁵ Bruce, *Acts*, p. 135.

Functional God. Not the God in whom you *say* you believe, but the God who functionally controls your life. For these Jews, it was custom and tradition. They said they believed the Bible, but what controlled them were their extra-biblical traditions.

We face the same thing today. Here's a sure way to get people 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 God's 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. First, Stephen faced what Jesus faced. Then...

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."

Don't read Michael Angelo into this. There was no halo around Stephen's head. But 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."⁶

When wronged, Stephen responded as did his Lord. And even the critics saw it. 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!'"⁷

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. We'll examine it, the Lord willing, next time.

But today, let's take inventory as we consider Stephen's life. We've just seen a man of influence. The Spirit of God raised up this man to mobilize the church, to launch it into next phase of the church's mission. To go beyond Jerusalem.

He wasn't an apostle, not even an elder. But the Lord used him in a strategic way.

How did it happen? How did Stephen become an influencer? That's a vital question for every person in this room, for we all have people the Lord intends to influence through us. If you're a parent or grandparent, that's true. If you're a school teacher, that's true. If you have a job and work with people, that's true. If you're a church member, that's true.

So what does it take? According to Stephen, two things. To be a person of influence, you must be willing to serve, and then suffer.

⁶ F. F. Bruce, *Acts*, p. 136.

⁷ Wiersbe, p. 430.

First, serve. Right where the Lord has placed you. And then in the new places He opens up. Stephen was a faithful church member, and the church recognized it, and gave him a position of influence in the care of widows.

But then his influence expanded. First, benevolence, then evangelism. First, widows in the church, then lost people outside the church. That's who the Lord used him to influence next. Lost people, and specifically a lost religious zealot named Saul.

Which is where the suffering came. To influence, you must *serve*. But also at times, *suffer*. And not just suffer, but suffer in ways that enable others see Jesus in you.

Of course, we need to back up. People can't see what we don't have. Do you have Jesus in you? Have you ever admitted that you are a sinner, cut off from God, heading for a deserved hell? And then, has God's Spirit ever opened your eyes to that fact, and granted you the desire to repent and turn from your sins to the only One who can deliver you from your sins, Jesus? And has the Spirit granted you faith in that One, Jesus the Messiah? Have you believed in the One who died in the place of sinners, who then conquered death, and gives eternal life to all whom He saves?

If not, that's what you need. Jesus.

But if you have Jesus, you have the capacity to influence others as did Stephen.

Make It Personal: Two lessons to ponder from Stephen's life...

1. *It's important to give your whole life to God.* Not part of it, but the whole. 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!"⁸

That's what I call devotion.

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 live for God." Which means, "I've got plenty of time to get serious about living for God *later*."

That's why we need Stephen to teach us this second, vital lesson. As important as it is to give your whole life to God...

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*?

⁸ *Our Daily Bread*, January 30, 1994.