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## Sermon

### ***Stephen – Sold out for Jesus***

**2 Chronicles 24:20-22; Acts 7:51-60 ; Matthew 13:43-46**

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### ***Stephen***

Stephen was a remarkable man!

The early church had a food bank programme to provide for their widows which ran into trouble. Some complained that it wasn't doled out fairly. The Apostles resolved it by telling the people to choose leaders to manage the food distribution. What was the criterion? They should be full of wisdom and of the Holy Spirit.

Isn't it interesting that even for this fairly simple task they knew they needed spiritually alert and mature leaders to manage it? Since they had already run into discord I guess they made sure plenty of wisdom was available to correct the problem.

Stephen's initial role was administrator. We know that he went on to develop a powerful ministry. Stephen is described as being full of God's grace and power and he did great wonders and miracles. He also proved to be a powerful speaker and defender of the faith.

So administrators among us – don't think you are unsuited for dynamic spiritual ministry! You have a great example before you in Stephen.

He was so effective a preacher that the Jews were threatened by his persuasive words. Unable to win in debate, they distorted his words and brought charges against him before the religious authorities of wanting to destroy the temple and the Law. The reading from Acts is the end of his defence.

Luke records a long speech which started with a very orthodox telling of the history of God's dealings with the Hebrews. There is a point to it for Stephen is defending himself against their accusations. He particularly speaks of God's dealings with Abraham, Joseph and Moses – all when there was no temple, showing God as free agent unconfined by buildings. Then he spoke of David and his desire to build the temple – but the emphasis is on God not needing such a building.

In answer to the second accusation of changing the Law, he has interwoven examples of the faithlessness of the people. He then charged his accusers with the same error – being unfaithful to the Law and killing Jesus, the very one to whom the Law pointed, the Messiah.

Outraged the Sanhedrin attacked him and stoned him to death for 'blasphemy'. Stephen was granted an open heaven - a vision into heaven where he saw the glory of God and Jesus at the right hand of the Father.

The rear window of the chapel attempts to portray his vision – the blaze of light overwhelming everything else.

Stephen was the first Christian martyr; the first witness to give his life for his belief. His name means ‘crown’ from which the church came to refer to martyrdom as the crowning of the witness’s life. Our stained glass window has seven jewels swirling perhaps to form a crown. A crown which reminds us of Stephen. They remind us to the crown of life waiting in glory.

Blessed is the man who perseveres under trial, because when he has stood the test, he will receive the crown of life that God has promised to those who love him.<sup>1</sup>

Paul, Peter and John all refer to this crown as well.<sup>2</sup>

So Stephen died, forgiving his persecutors and entrusting his spirit to Jesus. He, indeed, is one who in his turn shines like the sun in the Kingdom of God as Jesus said in the gospel reading. He was one who had found the pearl of great price. He correctly saw its value and was sold out for Jesus. Having discovered the wonder and immense value of Jesus, nothing else competed for value. All would be sold to have this one thing – this connection with him. Nothing else mattered compared to following Jesus and proclaiming him to the people.

## Jesus First

What about us? How much does Jesus matter to us? Is he an immensely valueable treasure you have discovered? Does having that treasure make everything else worthless in comparison?

Stephen found his treasure and served Jesus even to death. He was empowered by the Holy Spirit, used in miraculous ways and given great wisdom. He had counted what he had before as worthless compared with salvation through Jesus and a relationship with the living God. He counted this life as of less value than maintaining that relationship into the next life.

It is not coincidental that the ideas of treasure and relationship with God come up again in the same context. We cannot serve both God and wealth. To stay with the idea of finding hidden treasure - If you regard the price of the field too great, then you are saying wealth matters more than this treasure. Or do you value Jesus more highly than material things and put him first?

It was Martin Luther who said there are three kinds of conversion – first: conversion of the head; second: conversion of the heart; third: conversion of the wallet.

Our heads – our minds may give assent to the Lordship of Jesus. “Yes, I believe there is a God.” Well, James tells us that the demons believe that too and tremble.<sup>3</sup> Yes, our heads need to be converted to accept the truth, but that is not enough. Do you believe the simple facts of the gospel? That is only the first step towards conversion.

Our hearts need conversion so our loyalty, our commitment is given to Jesus. Is Jesus Lord of our lives? Does he actually rule? Or is he more of a *maitre d’* – a bit intimidating, holding some power, useful to have on your side, but ultimately a high-class servant.

Luther said the third conversion touches our wallets. Does Christ’s lordship extend to our money? Does he dethrone our self-determination? Is he allowed to break the hold that mammon has over our hearts?

Today is not only the feast day of Stephen, the patron saint of this church, it is also our pledge day. It is not at all inappropriate for the two to be combined - why? Because as we celebrate our fellowship - our being called together to worship God in this place - we need also to check up on our commitment to this parish which we celebrate today. Don’t ever think money and Christianity should not be discussed together. It is a major part of Jesus’ teachings.

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<sup>1</sup> James 1:12

<sup>2</sup> 2 Tim 4:8; 1 Peter 5:4; Rev 2:10

<sup>3</sup> James 2:19

Howard Dayton wrote in "Leadership" magazine,

"Sixteen of the thirty-eight parables were concerned with how to handle money and possessions. In the Gospels, an amazing one out of ten verses (288 in all) deal directly with the subject of money. The Bible offers 500 verses on prayer, less than 500 verses on faith, but more than 2,000 verses on money and possessions."<sup>4</sup>

For those of you who may have missed the last two weeks we reviewed some principles of giving from scripture and why we have a Pledge Day.

## ***Biblical Principles***

A key verse is 1 Corinthians 16:2: "On the first day of every week, each one of you should set aside a sum of money in keeping with his income..."

Our giving is part of our worship to God. It is to be planned and proportional to our income.

Last week, we saw we are to give to God as the first priority not the scraps left over when everything else is doled out. We considered what that proportion might be. The Old Testament standard was a tenth of one's income. We considered Abraham and Jacob who lived long before the time of the Law of Moses. They freely gave a tenth of their increase in their worship of God. The Book of Hebrews tells us that the Jesus is the same type of priest as Melchizedek who gave Abraham bread, wine and a blessing and received his tithe offering.

What proportion should we give? It is not directly commanded in New Testament but there are strong suggestions of a minimum of a tenth. What you do is between you and God and I requested that you pray and ask him to speak to you about the amount.

## **God's Generous Provision**

The other aspect we looked at was God's desire to be generous to us. He wants to provide for us. He wants us to have enough to live and to give away. He commits himself to generosity to us even as we are generous.

I don't mean the prosperity gospel which sees wealth as the goal. It claims you can force God to give large amounts by 'sowing' to him – that is a distortion of what he said. My point is we don't need to be afraid that we will out give God and be left poor. He actually says, "Test me on this and see if I will not throw open the floodgates of heaven and pour out so much blessing that you will not have room enough for it."<sup>5</sup>

Or from the New Testament, Paul wrote about the relief gift for the Jerusalem church: "God is able to make all grace abound to you, so that in all things at all times, having all that you need, you will abound in every good work."<sup>6</sup>

Listen to his complete provision and abundance. God is able to make **ALL grace** (not just a little!) **ABOUND** (not trickle) to you, so that in **ALL things** at **ALL times** having **ALL you need** (which part of your affairs is not covered by that?) you will **ABOUND** in **EVERY** good work.

All grace - abound – all things – all times – all you need – abound in every good work! That is comprehensive, generous provision!

## ***Pledge Day***

Why are we having a Pledge Day? To give us the opportunity to update our pledges. To get established with regular giving if that has not already happened. To allow us to back up the resolution of our AGM to employ an additional fulltime staff member. The Job Description is posted on the notice board but simply put it is to

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<sup>4</sup> Howard L. Dayton, Jr., *Leadership*, Vol. 2, no. 2. Quoted from <http://www.preachingtoday.com/illustrations/1997/december/410.html>

<sup>5</sup> Malachi 3:10

<sup>6</sup> 2 Corinthians 9:8

build up the younger families and oversee the children's work. We need to increase our weekly giving by \$680 to be able to support that person. That is an average increase of \$5.20 each. **That is easily possible.** Of course, the way averages work, some will give more, and some less.

A few last things about your pledges:

1. We would like everyone to move from loose cash to either automatic payments or the envelopes for the simple reason that then we can give you a receipt for your year's giving and you can claim back 1/3 of it from your tax. Why throw away that help from the government? If it doesn't matter to you, give us the refund!
2. I know some of you do not have the freedom to give as you would like because of an unsympathetic spouse – relax about that – God knows. Still ask the Lord what and how you might give – who knows what he may do.
3. If you realize you are giving far too little, you may need to move progressively to a more Biblical proportion – whether your income is a benefit or rather more – it can take adjustment.
4. Lastly, please take your pledge seriously. We need to budget based on your promises. But also God takes our pledges seriously. A few years ago I made a pledge to give monthly to a Christian charity. Afterwards, I had doubts. Even as I thought maybe it was too much, I heard clearly and firmly, "You promised!" I was left in no doubt that God took my pledge seriously and I had better not reduce it.

May God make all grace abound to you, so that in all things at all times, **having all that you need**, you will abound in every good work!