

Acts 6 Lecture

Today's chapter isn't too long, so let's take some time getting caught up where we are in our story. In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. Ok - maybe not that far back in the story. We have seen Jesus give the theme of Acts in 1:8: "But you shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be My witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth." Then He was taken up to heaven.

The church was inaugurated on the Day of Pentecost with the Disciples receiving the Baptism of the Holy Spirit. These fearful, combative, and flawed men were now transformed into powerful witnesses and proclaimers of the truth that Jesus was the Messiah; that the people ordered Him to be crucified; but permanent forgiveness of sins was now available because Jesus was resurrected demonstrating God the Father's acceptance of His sacrificial atoning act on their behalf.

Peter gave a great sermon and the church was birthed with 3,000 new believers. The Lord kept adding to the

church and a communal type of society was established where everyone was selling all they had and sharing the wealth. Peter and John encountered a lame man who was simply begging for food or money but ended up getting more than he begged for - a great example for us to think big in our petitions to God. Peter then gave another powerful sermon about Jesus being the fulfillment of the covenant He made with Abraham. The church had now grown to 5,000.

Sadly, but not surprisingly, the power the apostles were demonstrating and the rapid growth in converts upset the legalistic Jewish leadership. These alleged *representatives* of God were doing anything but that. Instead of being thrilled that people were turning to the Lord, they were more concerned about protecting their position in society. They tried to squelch the preaching of the resurrection and threw the disciples into jail for the night. Asking them where they got the power to heal the lame man, Peter - again filled with the Holy Spirit - delivered the truth that there is no other name under heaven, other than Jesus, by which one may be saved.

The Jewish leaders tried to shut them up, but Peter and John said that wasn't going to happen. In the face of this persecution, the people prayed for more boldness to preach the Gospel. We saw the communal effort expanding until a husband and wife tried to dupe the Holy Spirit by holding back some of their proceeds from their sold possessions. As we learned, this didn't turn out too well for them and was a reminder that there is no such thing as secret sin - it always gets found out. People continued getting healed through the apostles and the Lord continued adding to the church.

The Jewish leaders - in more and more fear of the good that was being done (that should tell us the condition of their hearts), threw the apostles back in jail where an angel of the Lord miraculously broke them out, and again they started preaching the resurrection. Arrested and put on trial before the Sanhedrin, the apostles once again told them they're not going to keep quiet. We were then introduced to a man named Gamaliel (who we'll later learn was the Apostle Paul's mentor) who offered wise words to these knuckleheads. But before they would let the apostles go, they had them severely beaten. The apostles rejoiced in this

as they would be worthy of suffering for Christ.

So that gets us to where we are now. Our first revelation in today's reading is that math is important to the Lord. Back in chapter 2 he was adding to the church. In chapter 5 the math turns to subtraction with His dealing with Ananias and Sapphira. Now He is multiplying the church. Notice in each case **Who** is doing the arithmetic!

Now we learn of division - and this is not of God. God is a God of unity. There was an uprising in the communal efforts. There was a sect of the Jews who had adopted the secular Grecian ways, and this put them at odds with the conservative Jews. Part of the communal living was to take special care of the widows in the daily distribution of rations. These Greek-speaking Jews also known as Hellenists, protested that their widows were getting short-changed in the doling out of rations.

The issue was brought to the disciples, and we get a glimpse into what the Lord is doing in their hearts. They could have responded with a "not my problem" attitude. Rather, the disciples acknowledge *they* are the problem – they're trying to do too much, and their stretched duties are creating potential toeholds for the enemy to get into the

church. Therefore, we see the beginning of the recognition of defining roles and responsibilities within the body of Christ. The Twelve make the point they should not leave the Word of God to serve tables. I'm certain that this statement wasn't about them thinking they were above such duties - they likely had already been doing this for some time. They had learned the lesson of humble service from Jesus in His washing of their feet.

This statement was about their recognizing their specific gifts and responsibilities for the Body of Christ. They could continue to serve tables and that would be a humble and helpful act; however, it was not what was best for the Body of Christ. Their best value was establishing the truth that Jesus was the Messiah and demonstrating the power of the Holy Spirit. We need to remember this in *our* roles in the church. You may have heard of the "80/20" rule - 80% of the work that needs to be done is handled by only 20% of the people. This is not a healthy or sustainable scenario.

The 20% are typically made up of either sincere hard working servants of the Lord who keep accepting additional responsibilities because no one else is offering to help; or, the other group of people are the control freaks who are

certain they can do the work better than anyone else and don't allow others to pitch in. In either case, burnout sets in and even bitterness rears its ugly head for the lack of help. A *healthy* church body encourages all members to recognize their God-given gifts, to facilitate and lead them to the activities that line up with their respective gifts, and then show grace to allow them to grow in their service. To further emphasize the importance of spreading the responsibilities across all the people, D.L. Moody used to say that it was "better to put ten men to work than to try to do the work of ten men."

Getting back to our story - the disciples established a deacon-like position and then spelled out the qualifications for these positions. The NIV only points out that these men should be full of the Spirit and wisdom. The NKJV offers one other qualification, and the order of the qualifications is interesting to me. *First* – according to the NKJV - they must be of good reputation. Our reputations **matter** - they are symbolic of our relationship with God. What kind of an example are we setting as God's children when we're out partying, using bad language, telling off-colored jokes, or anything else that could dishonor God? When we do this we

run the risk of being stumbling blocks to people who are looking for a difference in us - in anyone. I don't want to hear excuses like 'Jesus hung out with sinners' - yes He did, but He didn't act like them. It takes courage not to follow the majority of the world in their fleshly indulgences - and most people come to respect that courage. Our reputations do indeed matter.

Secondly, the man for this position must be filled with the Holy Spirit and wisdom. You might think this should have been the first requirement, but think about what duties these men would be performing. Disreputable people can cause doubt and fear in those who are receiving the service - they don't trust their motives - there must be an angle to why they're doing what they're doing. A lack of trust in the fairness of the treatment of the Hellenistic widows was what prompted this move in the first place. The requirement of being full of the Holy Spirit was to ensure there was a true commitment to service. Without the Holy Spirit, we run the risk of our motivation for service to become self-glorifying instead of *God* glorifying. The requirement for wisdom was a recognition that the assignment was going to require actions that satisfied *both* sides of the issue.

Warren Wiersbe points out in his commentary that when a church faces a serious problem, this presents the leaders and the members with a number of opportunities. Problems give us the opportunity to examine our ministry and discover what changes need to be made. In times of success, it is easy for us to maintain the status quo, but this is dangerous. Henry Ward Beecher called *success* "a last-year's nest from which the birds have flown." The disciples, drawing on the wisdom of the Holy Spirit, came up with a good solution.

The decision to establish these positions pleased the people. It's notable that this decision not only benefited them to maintain focus on their roles, it empowered these seven men by demonstrating faith in them. It's also notable to understand the importance of the men selected: Stephen, Philip, Procorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas, and Nicolas from Antioch. Again, who were the people doing the complaining? The Greek-speaking Hellenists. Look at these names - they're all Greek names – they're Hellenists. This not just good wisdom, it is establishing a behavior that Paul stated in Romans 12:10, "Be kindly affectionate to one

another with brotherly love, in honor giving preference to one another."

A quick note about the laying on of hands from the apostles to the seven men. Many churches do this when commissioning people for service; however, the order today is typically to first put their hands on the people and then pray for them. Notably, in this passage, the apostles first prayed and then laid hands on them. I'm not sure this order is all that significant; however, it always makes sense before we do anything to give the issue over to God to allow Him to confirm or stop what is being presented to Him.

Verse 7 states, "Then the word of God spread, and the number of the disciples multiplied greatly in Jerusalem, and a great many of the priests were obedient to the faith." Wiersbe calls this verse a "summary" verse that lets us know the story has reached an important juncture. In effect, we're arriving at the climax of the ministry in Jerusalem with Stephen's death because the persecution following his death will take the gospel to the Samaritans and ultimately to the Gentiles. It has been estimated that there were 8,000 Jewish priests attached to the temple ministry in Jerusalem, and a great many of them trusted Jesus Christ as Savior.

There are two words for “crown” in the New Testament: *diadema*, which means “a royal crown” and gives us the English word diadem; the second word for crown is *stephanos*, the “victor’s crown”, which gives us the popular name Stephen. You can inherit a *diadema*, but the only way to get a *stephanos* is to earn it. Stephen is one of the most impressive people we’re going to learn about in Scripture apart from the apostles and prophets. He was a “full” man – full of faith, full of the Spirit and wisdom, and full of God’s grace and power. We’ll learn that he was a servant, a witness, a judge, and finally a martyr. He proves the Lord’s comments in Luke 16:10a, “He who *is* faithful in *what is* least is faithful also in much.” He started serving tables faithfully, and the Lord rewarded his faithfulness with presenting him a history-making evangelistic opportunity.

Another interesting point about Stephen was during his time there was believed to be about 460 synagogues in Jerusalem – some of them were built by Jews from various countries for their own use. One of these synagogues – called the Synagogue of the Freedmen – included members from Cyrene, Alexandria, Cilicia, and Asia. The city of Tarsus was located in Cilicia, so Saul – who would become the

apostle Paul – *could* have been in this very group of men who began to argue with Stephen. Again, the Scriptures tell us that Stephen performed great wonders and signs among the people. So what was the response of these “godly” representatives of the synagogue? To challenge him. Why? Because he was challenging them with the truth of where *true* righteousness comes from – the blood of Jesus.

These men were no match for Stephen’s Spirit-filled wisdom. We remember what Jesus said, in Luke 21:15, “for I will give you a mouth and wisdom which all your adversaries will not be able to contradict or resist.” We need to remember this when we get full of ourselves and become overconfident in what we think we know. God’s foolishness exceeds our greatest fleshly wisdom. A personal “red flag” for me is when I’m starting to think I’ve got things figured out according to my understanding of how things work. If I get in that place, the Lord is quick to remind me that His ways are not my ways and His thoughts are far greater than mine. Challenging or debating with God has got to be one of the greatest wastes of time a human being can spend. You can’t win.

So these members of the Synagogue of the Freedmen (ironic name, huh?) realized they're getting nowhere matching wits with Stephen, so what did they do? Instead of humbly submitting to God's wisdom, they convince some people to lay false accusations against Moses and God. Interesting that they place Moses – the symbol of the law – *before* God as to who Stephen is allegedly blaspheming. Convincing people that he was blaspheming was probably not difficult if these people heard Jesus speaking of the destruction of the temple (when He was actually referring to Himself).

I love the irony of verse 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." The next verse tells us they bore false witness of Stephen – these "*teachers of the law*" apparently forgot the 9th commandment in Exodus 20:16, "You shall not give false testimony against your neighbor." The absurdity of the behavior of the Jewish leaders is truly staggering when you see them in the face of the very law they claim to be representatives of and experts in following it. It's truly a mockery of God's Word, so it shouldn't have been a surprise

to us to see that Jesus saved His harshest attacks against these self-centered “leaders.”

The Sanhedrin was the Jewish council of Pharisees and Saducees that was the presiding entity when dealing with interpretations of the law. Kind of like our Congress today – and every bit as inept and self-serving. Seems like the more things change, the more they stay the same. To be fair, I’m sure there were some decent men in the Sanhedrin, just as not all members of Congress are bad people. The sad fact is, though, people who get into power (by God’s grace I might add), get drunk with this power and lose sight of what their true roles should be – servants.

The final verse of chapter 6 states, “All who were sitting in the Sanhedrin looked intently at Stephen, and they saw that his face was like the face of an angel.” Do you think any of these leaders at this moment of seeing Stephen’s face radiating an angelic glow recalled what Moses looked like after he was in the presence of God? Wiersbe suggests that it was as though God was saying, “This man is *not against* Moses, He is *like* Moses – he is My faithful servant!”

The image of Stephen's countenance is stunning to me. There are few things that push me from zero to 60 on my "anger meter" than being wrongfully accused. The Lord has had to do a major work on me when it comes being accountable for my behavior, and I'm thankful to report I've made some progress in this area – *some*. Owning our mistakes is an important step in our personal growth – not just in our relationship with God – but in general with our relationships with our spouses, families, and friends.

When I speak of this point, I'm referring to acknowledging mistakes, poor decisions, faults, etc. that I have committed. It's no fun admitting to the things we've done wrong, but there's a "math" to it that makes some sense – a cause and effect can be determined. However, when it comes to being called out for something you have not done – that is really tough to swallow – and I confess I don't handle this well at all. I become angry and indignant – and adding to my confession that my face does radiate – not like an angel – more like a red-faced devil.

So I look at how Stephen is handling this perversion of justice and wonder how he is not only keeping his cool, but also he's glowing like an angel who is perfectly at peace.

How does he do this? We need to remember Stephen was a *full* man – full of faith, full of the Holy Spirit, wisdom, and God’s grace and power. Try to imagine a pitcher full of water. When a pitcher is full, no additional water can get into it – when something is full, nothing can be added to it. Stephen was so full of God, there was nothing that Satan or any of these Jewish leaders could add to him. No amount of lies and false accusations could penetrate the complete satiation Stephen had of God.

I *want* that – to be so full of God as to not allow the relentless attacks of the enemy to change my countenance, attitude, behavior, and most importantly – focus on my role as a servant of God. Stephen must have known God had put him in this situation and, regardless of the outcome, he was to say what God wanted him to say as a faithful servant. He could be at peace because he had God’s peace – the Holy Spirit – filling him, guiding him, enabling him, protecting him, and, most importantly, loving him. 1 John 4:18 tells us that perfect love casts out all fear. God’s love for us is perfect because He is perfect.

The concept of full and perfect is the same – they both indicate that there is a completeness – there's nothing more needed. We remember Jesus' response to Paul's petitions for relief from the thorn in his side – Jesus said, "My grace is sufficient for you." What was the Lord telling Paul? If Paul had Jesus' grace, he would need nothing else. Everything else is just a distraction from the truth that God provides **EVERYTHING** we need.

This is a hard concept for most of us to grasp – especially in today's times. We're barraged every day with reminders of what we don't have, and because we don't have this or that, our lives are somehow not fulfilled. This is a huge issue for all of us because when we recognize that God is not only *able* to provide all we need but also He is willing to provide it, we can begin to arrive at a place of peace and contentment. Can you imagine being in such a place? What does that look like to you? You're so sure of God's complete fulfilling love that no matter what the circumstances are, the presence of God in us in the person of the Holy Spirit gives us a fortress against those distractions and a freedom to serve God and His purposes.

That's where we should all be asking God to lead us – to be completely filled and fulfilled with the Holy Spirit.

The world is not getting better loved ones – the forces of darkness are getting more aggressive as they must be realizing their time is drawing to a close with the Second Coming of the Lord. By God's grace, He will grant you all you need by granting you Himself – the Light of the world. Bask in the glow of His presence, and who knows, you may end up with a face like the one that describes Stephen in this chapter. God is the same yesterday, today, and forever, so I believe what filled to Stephen is absolutely available to fill us today. Let's ask God right now to fill us with Himself.

"Holy Father, we thank you for Your Word. We thank you for Your Son. We thank you for Your Spirit. We thank you for the example of Your servant, Stephen, who demonstrated Your power in the face of life-threatening circumstances. We humble ourselves before Your throne of grace and ask that You fill us with Your Spirit and teach us that His presence in us provides us all we need to withstand the enemy's efforts to lie, cheat, steal, and destroy the very peace Jesus purchased for us at the cross. Build our faith and constantly

remind us of the promises of Scriptures that ensure You are ready, willing, and able to grant such a request to those who truly seek You. Fill us with You, Lord. Keep filling us so that we won't entertain the temptations that You're not enough. We trust that Your grace **IS** sufficient for each of us. We thank you, Father, that You are the God who offers such abundance, and we thank You in faith that You will grant this to each of us. We praise You, God. We love you, God. We thank you, God. In Jesus name, Amen."