



BELIEVERS CHAPEL

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The Sermons of Dan Duncan

Acts: 5:1-16

Acts

"Sin Unto Death"

TRANSCRIPT

[Message] We're going to continue our studies in the book of Acts and we are in Acts, chapter 6. We're going to look at the entire chapter this morning, verses 1 through 15. The apostles have been under duress. They were arrested, they were beaten and warned not to speak the name of Christ. But it didn't stop them. They have gone on teaching and preaching Jesus as the Christ. So things have been going well for the church in Jerusalem. But now we read in chapter 6, verse 1.

At this time while the disciples were increasing in number, a complaint arose on the part of the Hellenistic Jews against the native Hebrews because their widows were being overlooked in the daily serving of food. So the twelve summoned the congregation of the disciples and said, "It is not desirable for us to neglect the Word of God in order to serve tables." Now that serving tables doesn't mean waiting on tables like we might think. It has to do with all that has to do with providing the food, the distribution of aid that was connected with the needy in the church.

Verse 3: "Therefore, brethren, select from among you seven men of good reputation, full of the Spirit and of wisdom, whom we may put in charge of this task. But we will devote ourselves to prayer and to the ministry of the word." The statement found approval with the whole congregation; and they chose Stephen, a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit, and Philip, Prochorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas and Nicolas, a proselyte from Antioch. And these they brought before the apostles, and they prayed; and after praying, they laid their hands on them. The Word of God kept on spreading; and the number of the disciples continued to increase greatly in Jerusalem, and a great many of the priests were becoming obedient to the faith. And Stephen, full of grace and power, was performing great wonders and signs

among the people. But some of the men from what was called the Synagogue of the Freedmen, including both Cyrenians and Alexandrians, and some from Cilicia and Asia, rose up and argued with Stephen. But they were unable to cope with the wisdom and the Spirit with which he was speaking. Then they secretly induced men to say, "We have heard him speak blasphemous words against Moses and against God." And they stirred up people, the elders and the scribes, and they came up to him and dragged him away and brought him before the Council. They put forward false witnesses who said, "This man incessantly speaks against this holy place and the law; for we have heard him say that this Nazarene, Jesus, will destroy this place and alter the customs which Moses handed down to us." Fixing their gaze on him, all who were sitting in the Council saw his face like the face of an angel.

May the Lord bless this reading of his Word. Let's bow together in a word of prayer.

[Prayer] Father, we do thank you for the great privilege we have to be together this morning to open up this text of Scripture and to read it. What we read is your inerrant Word and it records very important events for our consideration. And so, Lord, we thank you also that we have the opportunity to consider in some depth the text that we have read; and we are greatly privileged to know that we have a teacher who can open it up for us, who can guide us through it, and that is the Holy Spirit.

What a privilege it is to be a believer in Jesus Christ and whose heart has been sealed with the Spirit of God as every believer has been. And we have the privilege of being taught of him, and we pray that we would be receptive to that instruction. May he open our hearts to receive the truth of this text. May he guide us in our thinking; enable us to think critically and to consider the words that are said, and measure them by the Scriptures.

We pray, Lord, that as we are taught, we would be built up in the faith, and we would be conformed to the image of Jesus Christ. We see that in our text and the consequences, the marvelous results of one whose life has been change and is Christ-like in the use it is put to by you. And so we pray, Father, to be like that. Make us men and women who are conformed to the image of Christ, who are active in your service, and are beneficial to those in this assembly, but to those outside as well; to those of the world. May we be good, faithful witnesses there.

We look for you to bless us spiritually; and, Father, we look to you to bless us in the physical material things of life. We are dependent upon you for all that we have and all that we receive. We thank you for employment and we pray that we would be good employees wherever we are. We pray for those who are without employment and we pray that you might open doors and supply their need.

We pray for those who are sick, those who are suffering discomfort, physical discomfort, or those who are simply discouraged from the difficulties of life. We pray that you'd give great encouragement. We pray that you'd give healing. Bless them, Lord, as only you can. Your Son is the Great Physician and he has gained for us healing in the cross; a healing of a spiritual nature. But our triune God can also give physical healing as well, Father, and we pray for that where it has been requested.

And thank you for your faithfulness to us. We thank you that you are a great God; a God that is beyond our comprehension; a God who is well able to manage all of the affairs of this universe without any effort, and can certainly manage the affairs of our lives. And we thank you that you are a God who is unchanging and so faithful, and that we can look to you with the assurance that you do all things well and you will take care of us. So may we become men and women of increasing faith and trust you for all things. So bless us to that end this morning as we study. May we see that in our text and learn from it.

We pray for our meeting this evening and pray you'd bless it. As we come together again to remember our Lord, we pray that you would bless that time. May we be sanctified through it. May we be conformed to the image of Christ. Bless all who will participate. May it be a good and worthwhile time for us we pray and may it be honoring to you; and may that be the case in this hour.

Prepare our hearts as we study together through our final hymn, and we pray that would be prepared to learn and worship. We pray these things in Christ's name. Amen.

[Message] From ancient times, it seems the number seven has had great significance. When men looked up to the heavens, they found the seven sisters in the stars. When they considered the works of man, they calculated seven wonders of the world. Rome was built on the seven hills, and sometimes their heroes were in sevens, as in the popular story *The Seven Against Thebes* who fought at the seven gates. So

the number seven has had significance for the world. But it is also important in the Bible and is usually understood as the number of perfection or completeness.

We find that number in our text of Acts 6 which gives the origin of the New Testament office of deacon. Seven men were selected for it. And as far as the text goes, the only significance of that number is that it required seven men to fix the problem that had arisen in the church. Still, there does seem to be some significance to the fact that the office of deacon, which means "servant," was filled by seven men. This is the first administrative office established in the church, established before that of elder as far as we know. And it does seem fitting that a number associated with completeness or perfection would be attached to the office that embodies what is essential to true Christianity: service.

Of the seven, one man in particular stands out, and that is Stephen. He was a great servant; a champion of the church. His name means "crown" and he seems to rise above everyone else, even the apostles in his brief, but brilliant ministry. He preached in the synagogue and the text says that the Jews were unable to cope with his wisdom. Stephen illustrates the fact that the length of a person's service does not determine the value of that service. He lived only a short time, but he did a great work.

The events that occasioned the emergence of Stephen and the establishment of the deacons was a controversy. Just when things seemed to be going so well when the church was growing, the witness of the church was extending beyond the city of Jerusalem; the sound of grumbling began to be heard. That's what we read in verse 1: Now at this time while the disciples were increasing in number, a complaint arose.

The word complaint in Greek is "gongysmos." It means murmur or grumble. It sounds like grumbling, which has always been a problem with God's people. It was Israel's problem in the wilderness. The people grumbled against Moses and against God; and God heard them and he disciplined them.

Not every complaint is unreasonable. But even legitimate complaints can become seeds of discontent that grow into disruptions that damage the church and its witness. So it is one of the schemes of the evil one to get people murmuring, to get them grumbling, to get them whispering among themselves. And we can well imagine that he orchestrated a whispering campaign in the church to try to fragment it,

to try to frustrate its progress, as well as involve the apostles in nonessential labor; at least labor that was not essential to their primary responsibility.

He had tried various tactics; various strategies. He had tried persecution. He had tried compromise and they failed. Now he tries distraction, which John Stott calls, "The cleverest of the three." It was an attempt to get the apostles so preoccupied with administrative details that they would be kept from their God-given responsibilities of praying and preaching.

It's a strategy that he uses today by means of indifferent or even good activities; but activities that can distract us from our primary responsibilities as Christians, as servants of the Lord and servants of his people. If Satan can't scare us away with persecution, if he can't compromise our faith with materialism, then he will simply try to set us off-track with issues that are not essential to our calling. That's what he attempted to do when a complaint arose in the church. It was not an unreasonable complaint. A problem of favoritism had occurred in the congregation; at least that was the protest.

A church of Jerusalem was not homogenous, it was composed of two different groups: native Hebrews on the one hand and Hellenistic Jews on the other. The native Jews were born in the land of Palestine, they spoke Aramaic as their native tongue. The Hellenistic Jews came from the lands around the Mediterranean Sea, and Greek was their first language; and so the two differed in some significant ways. They differed linguistically and they differed culturally; and these differences occasioned some tensions between them, some rivalry evidently, which became a problem over a practical issue. Not a theological issue; this was a practical issue.

There were many poor people in the church, and daily they were cared for from the common fund that the wealthier members of the congregation had established by means of selling property and possessions. But one group complained of being left out. A complaint arose on the part of the Hellenistic Jews against the native Hebrews because their widows were being overlooked in the daily serving of food.

Now when problems arise in a church, there are all kinds of ways to deal with them. Some wise; some not so wise. What people often do is simply leave. They go to another church, which is easy to do because in our day, in our age, in our city, there

are many churches to go to. But at that time, there was only one church, so leaving was not an option.

Another way people respond to disputes is with a church split. People just separate from one another and form a new congregation. Now sometimes that's necessary because of theological error. It is better to divide over truth than it is to unite in error. But often it happens because of trivial offenses that went unresolved.

In one of his books, Dr. Dwight Pentecost, who was one of my Bible teachers at Dallas Theological Seminary, tells of a division in a church here in Dallas that became so serious that the two groups split and they entered into a lawsuit over possession of church property. This happened a number of years ago; I don't know the date. But in the course of the legal proceedings, the judge ruled that since it wasn't a civil matter, it had to be decided by the church denomination. And so a church court was held; and in the process of reaching a decision, it learned that the source of the dispute began at a church dinner when an elder received a smaller slice of ham than the child seated next to him. Now what was bad about that is that the whole proceeding was covered in the newspapers. And as Dr. Pentecost said, "The people of Dallas had a good time laughing at Jesus."

The problem in Jerusalem had the potential for that, but the apostles wisely dealt with it quickly to preserve unity and prevent a split. But they realized that it wasn't their primary business to deal with the financial and material needs of the congregation, so they called the church together and they explained that it is not desirable for us to neglect the Word of God in order to serve tables. So they gave the people instructions.

We read in verse 3: "Therefore, brethren, select from among you seven men of good reputation, full of the Spirit and of wisdom, whom we may put in charge of this task. But we will devote ourselves to prayer and to the ministry of the Word." The church was pleased with that. They got together and chose seven men. And what is interesting is that all of the names of those men that they chose appear to be Greek.

Well, they are Greek names, and what that suggests is that all of these men were Hellenistic Jewish believers; at least six of the seven. One was a Gentile convert. Stephen and Philip; two men who become very prominent in the next two chapters: Stephen as a defender of the faith and Philip as an evangelist. Little or nothing is known of the others however. According to tradition, Prochorus became

bishop of Nicomedia and was martyred in Antioch. But nothing else is known of Nicanor, Timon, and Parmenas. The seventh, Nicolas, is described as a proselyte from Antioch. So he was not a Jew by birth; he was a convert from paganism before believing in Christ.

Well, these are the first deacons of the church. They're not identified as that. The word "deacon—diákonos" is not actually used of them, but the function they filled is given in the related words of "diakonia" and "diakoneo" in verses 1 and 2 used of the daily distribution of food and serving tables. The word diakonia is also used of the apostles in verse 4 with the ministry of the Word. So the Word can't be limited to one group; and some have seen in that a caveat, a warning against seeing these men as actually the first deacons that it's not that specific.

Perhaps, these were simply men who filled an immediate need in the church. But what I think this illustrates in the use of diakonia among the apostles as well as the service that these men filled is that all ministry is one of service. All Christians are to be deacons in the sense that we are to be servants; but the function that these men filled fits the basic ministry of the office of deacon, which is not the spiritual care and instruction of the church. They may have a part in that if they are so gifted, as we will see later on in some of the deacons. But that's not the primary responsibility of the office of deacon. It's care for the material needs of the church; and that's what these men filled.

Now Paul develops that in 1 Timothy 3 with the qualifications and the function of the elder and the deacon in 1 Timothy 3; and what is clear there as is clear here is that the requirements of a deacon are very strict. Not just anyone can be a deacon. These first deacons were men of good reputation. Their reputation was good not only within the church, but outside of the church. They were spiritual men; they were wise men. And that is what is needed in deacons today; not men who act on their own strength, but who walk by the Spirit, who know the truth of God's Word, and are able to apply it practically to the situations of the church.

Well, the church selected seven such men and presented them to the apostles for their approval; and we read in verse 6 that after praying, they laid their hands on them. Laying on of hands did not confer power to these men, it was a way of affirming the choice and identifying with these men in their ministry. And remember that on the Day of Atonement, the high priest would place his hands on the head of

the animal that was to be sacrificed and confessed the sins of the nation; and in so doing, by laying his hands upon that animal, he was identifying as the representative of the nation, the whole nation with that animal. He was making a connection, an identification with it. And that's what the apostles were doing with these men. In laying their hands upon them, they were identifying with their ministry saying in effect, "We are one with them in what they are doing, and they had their approval."

Now we learn some important principles from all of this about the way the church functions, and we see it first in the way these men were selected. This was not a democratic process in which men were elected by the congregation. A selection was governed by the apostles, governed by the ruling authorities; that is the human authorities of the church. And it was guided, we can assume, by the Holy Spirit. The people followed the high standards laid down by the apostles so that it was not a popularity contest judged by personality or looks, but a selection of spiritually mature men. When that is the standard, when people seek the Spirit's guidance through study of God's Word and through earnest prayer, the right people will be placed in positions of leadership and responsibility.

If it is true that all of these were Hellenistic Jews, then it only proves that men can minister effectively regardless of differences, whether the differences are linguistic, or cultural, or racial. Those differences will not be problems when those men are mature in the faith, are spiritual men, walking by the Spirit, walking according to the truth. So this was not a democratic process, it was governed by the leaders of the church, it was guided by the Holy Spirit; and those who engaged in it followed the principles that had been laid down by the apostles, followed the Word of God in effect, and sought high spiritual standards for these men in their character.

Secondly, it demonstrates the nature of church ministry, which is not invested in one man; it's not invested in a small group of men. Every Christian is a servant of Christ, and the ministry is to be widespread according to a person's calling. The apostles recognized the impossibility of trying to manage all of the affairs of the church by themselves. They couldn't do that. It would be distracting; it would be inadvisable; it would be contrary to the structure of the church the way God had set things up. But this was the temptation that they faced.

No doubt, many of the people pressed them to do that. It would be a logical conclusion that these were the men who should take care of this problem. The

apostles were the most trusted men in the church and they could be relied upon to deal with everyone fairly. And so no doubt, they pressed these men to take on this added responsibility; but the apostles realized that this would have been a diversion from their main responsibilities of prayer and preaching, of teaching the Word of God. "It is not desirable for us to neglect the Word of God in order to serve tables," they said.

That sets an example for us, and that's the third principle here that we see: the ministry of the Word is to have priority in the church. It was in being witnesses for Christ by proclaiming the Word that the apostolic church had power. That's the reason it was effective because they proclaimed the Word of God. The Word of God gives power; the Word of God is effective. That's what we read in Hebrews 4:12, "It is living and active and sharper than any two-edged sword." And when it is neglected, the church becomes weak and it loses its witness.

The apostles knew that. They knew the importance of Scripture and they knew the importance of God's Word. They knew how much time needed to be devoted to the study of Scripture and preparation for the ministry, the ministry to the church, and also the ministry outside in proclaiming the gospel to the people of Jerusalem and beyond. And so they did not allow themselves to fall in the temptation of being overwhelmed with important responsibilities, but responsibilities different from the ones God had given them. And so as a result of this crisis, a new office in the church was formed; that of deacon.

Deacons carry the burden of the daily physical needs of the saints so that those responsible for the spiritual needs can do that freely. And the outcome of all of this was significant. We read in verse 7 that the Word of God kept on spreading. Can't spread if it's neglected, and the apostles didn't allow that, and it spread. The result was that the number of disciples continued to increase greatly in Jerusalem. And Luke adds the astonishing fact that, "A great many of the priests were becoming obedient to the faith."

These were not the chief priests or members of the Sanhedrin; though it may have included some of them. After all, they have heard the ministry of the Word given by Peter and the apostles twice in a very bold and clear proclamation of the truth of the gospel. They were witnesses to the healing of the lame man. They had much evidence, great witness, great light, and so it's not unreasonable to assume that

some of them did come to faith. But mainly this refers to the ordinary priests who minister daily in the temple.

Every day they saw the church meeting there, they saw it growing, and that must have attracted their attention to this new body of believers, and they couldn't have helped but be attracted to it or had their attention drawn to it in some way, if not by the numbers that continued to increase; and certainly by the miracles that were taking place. And so as they began to investigate, the Holy Spirit worked among them and drew many of them to faith.

One of the men used of God in the spreading of God's Word was one of the seven deacons, Stephen; and in verse 8, Luke introduces us to his brief, though brilliant ministry. "And Stephen," he writes, "full of grace and power, was performing great wonders and signs among the people."

Earlier, he was described as, "Full of faith and the Holy Spirit." He was a man of great spiritual character, a man full of grace, indicating that he was a man with a Christ-like character, a man who was obedient to God's Word. As a result, he became a vessel, an instrument, an agent fit for the Lord's use; and the Lord used him greatly.

Robert Murray M'Cheyne once gave counsel to a friend who was going off to the foreign mission field, and counsel that is so true. He was 27 when he wrote, "How diligently the cavalry officer keeps his sabre clean and sharp; every stain he rubs off with the greatest care. Remember, you are God's sword, his instrument: I trust, a chosen vessel unto him to bear his name. In great measure, according to the purity and perfection of the instrument, will be the success. It is not great talents God blesses so much as great likeness to Jesus. A holy minister is an awful weapon in the hand of God."

I know I've read that before not all that long ago; but those are wise words from a young man. It is not great talents God blesses so much as great likeness to Jesus. Still, people will never have great likeness to Jesus if they do not devote themselves to his Word and to prayer as the apostles did; as Stephen did. He was full of faith we're told.

Now faith has an object, and that means he was a student of God's Word. He knew God's Word and he believed in the Word that he read and that he knew. He was full of faith. He had that before he began ministering in Jerusalem. He had that

before he became a deacon. That was one of the qualifications that led to his selection.

He was, first of all, devoted to Christ; to knowing him and following him. But he also had great talents and he applied those talents. By faith, he used those talents; and so God greatly used him. He preached in the synagogues of Jerusalem; principally, the Hellenistic synagogues. He was a Hellenistic Jew and probably went back to his own synagogue where many of his friends were. And one particular synagogue: the Synagogue of the Freedmen.

Now the Freedmen were former slaves who had been emancipated by their owners, probably Romans who had taken Jewish captives when Judea was conquered in 63 BC. After they set these men free, they returned to Jerusalem and they established a synagogue there. It was composed of worshippers from the Diaspora, the Gentile lands. They are listed in verse 9: Cyrenians and Alexandrians; some from Cilicia and Asia. This was probably the synagogue where Saul worshipped since Tarsus was the principle city of Cilicia; and as the story unfolds, he's very much involved in all of the events that take place. And it was there at this synagogue that Stephen went and preached.

The content of his preaching is not given; we don't know exactly what he said. But what he said raised objections, and the nature of his instruction can be inferred from the charges that were made against him. He told the Jews that Jesus was their Messiah, and that with his death and resurrection, the old covenant, the covenant that God made with Israel at Mount Sinai when he gave the law, that covenant had ended. Having ascended in heaven, Jesus sent the Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost, and it is in the Holy Spirit among believers that true worship takes place; not in the temple in Jerusalem, not in the temple made with stones, but a spiritual temple: the people of God.

Now Stephen was a man who knew the Word of God. As we see, he was a man full of faith. He knew the Scriptures, he believed the Scriptures, and no doubt, he was very well familiar with that great text of Scripture, Jeremiah 31, which gives the promise of a new covenant, a covenant different from the one at Sinai; and so he was preaching that. He was preaching that as having been fulfilled and established now that Jesus Christ had come and died on the cross. And as he spoke, men in the synagogue rose up and argued with him. They opposed the things that he said. But

verse 10 states: They were unable to cope with the wisdom and the Spirit with which he was speaking.

His wisdom, his knowledge, his ability to reason, his ability to explain the faith and defend it was inspired of God. This was a spiritual exercise. He wasn't out there on his own speaking in his own skill, and his own ability, and his own courage. The Spirit of God was in him, ministering through him, enabling him to be a powerful agent in God's service. The Spirit works through those who know his Word. It doesn't work in a vacuum.

Stephen was a man of faith. He knew the truth of God's Word; he believed it. It was stored up within his mind, and the Spirit of God used that. He used it greatly; he used it powerfully. And so frustrated in debate, unable to disprove his teaching, they began to attack him and smear his name with a campaign of lies.

That's what people do when they can't defeat an argument or overturn a theological position; they attack the person who holds it. They say things like, "He's controversial; he's a trouble-maker; he teaches doctrine that divides; he's unloving," and so on. And what these men did was persuade other men to lie about Stephen and say they heard him blaspheming by speaking against Moses in the temple. In that way, they were able to stir up the people and the elders and scribes who seized Stephen, brought him before the Sanhedrin, and put him on trial. Verse 13: They put forward false witnesses who said, "This man incessantly speaks against this holy place and the law; for we have heard him say that this Nazarene, Jesus, will destroy this place and alter the customs which Moses handed down to us."

Stephen had evidently taught what the Lord taught in Matthew 5:17 where he explained with all reverence to the law, without any attack upon the law, because the law as our Lord certainly knew, was God's Word, it was inspired of God. But with all reverence to the law said that he did not come to destroy the law, but to fulfill it. And having fulfilled it through his life and death having offered the final sacrifice for sin as the spotless Lamb of God, the ceremonies and the institutions of the law had been fulfilled and they've come to an end. And the temple, the priesthood and sacrifices, the feasts and the Sabbath are all fulfilled in Jesus Christ. They look forward to him as types, as pictures of his person and his ministry. But now that they have served their purpose, now that the perfect has come, they are no longer necessary.

A law with its ceremony still has value. The Lord didn't suggest that it didn't; nothing in the New Testament would suggest that we cannot learn from the law; we learn a great deal from it. It illustrates principles of righteousness, it illustrates truths about the Lord God, about his character, about his dealings with us. But it is no longer a code of behavior binding on the believer of the new covenant. Now that's what our Lord taught. But just as he was misunderstood by the Scribes and Pharisees, Steven was misunderstood by the people just as Paul was misunderstood when he taught grace.

Paul was accused of being antinomian, which means "against law." You see that in Romans 6:1. After saying at the end of chapter 5 of Romans where sin increased, grace abounded all the more, Paul begins chapter 6 with an objection that he must have heard many times: "Are we to continue in sin that grace may increase?" After all, if grace abounds where sin increases, then let's sin all the more; that's the objection. That's what these people are saying: "Paul, if you're right about grace, if it increases where sin abounds, then well, we may as well just go sin." That's a way of disproving what Paul was saying.

Well, Paul wasn't saying anything of the kind that we should sin in order to magnify grace. It wasn't his meaning and he denies it in the strongest language: "May it never be. How shall we who died to sin still live in it?" Perish the thought is what he's saying. But this was the accusation that Paul heard often. When a person preaches free grace, he or she will be accused of being against law and righteousness. And Stephen who had said that Christ is the fulfillment of the law was accused of being against the law. He was accused of being a blasphemer.

We should not be surprised if we are misunderstood and falsely accused when we are teaching the truth of God. Whether it is the grace of God or justification by faith alone of the sovereignty of God, we will upset people, and we will be falsely accused, if the apostles and the men of the New Testament are any example for us – and they certainly are. The way to avoid that, of course, is to avoid many doctrines; to preach to felt needs or something like that; to preach to sort of a common denominator that won't offend anyone. But if we do what Paul did, what the apostles did, and preach the whole counsel of God, then we will experience what our Lord experienced; what Paul experienced; what Stephen experienced.

Men will distort the position that is made. They might call it blasphemy, they might slander it in some other way; but having distorted the position in what they do is they attack the distortion, not the position itself. That's what they did to Stephen. They couldn't refute his teaching and his defense of the faith, and so they falsely accused him and then they attacked him on the basis of that false accusation.

It was very much a replay of our Lord's trial. But Stephen remained calm and unaffected. The judges fixed their gaze on him and they saw his face like the face of an angel. That's an interesting description: the face of an angel. We don't know what the face of an angel looks like. We're not to understand it I don't think in physical terms.

In 1 Chronicles 12:8, David's Mighty Men are described as having faces like the faces of lions. Well, not physically. They didn't have a horrific look about them. It's a description of their character. They had the faces of lions in the sense that they were war-like men; they were resolute; they were courageous men. And the face of an angel is one that radiated confidence, peace, and courage; maybe more than that. Maybe there was a light about Stephen, we don't know. But, certainly, it was confidence, and peace, and courage in an unusual degree in a hostile situation.

Something similar is said of Moses after he came down from Mount Sinai. "His face shone," we're told. It was a light about it. In 2 Corinthians 3, we read of, "The glory of his face." He been in the presence of God and it was evident. It was seen in his appearance. And now Stephen is on trial for blaspheming God and contradicting Moses, and his face is radiant in a way similar to that of Moses, which indicated that God was with him.

He always is with his people. And when we stand for his truth, he stands with us, he does not abandon us, and he empowers us. He did Stephen. He would go on to make a strong defense before the court, which again, his enemies would be unable to cope with; and this time they would kill him. But he would be glorious in his death. God would bless him greatly in that moment, and he would make him a blessing long after.

To this day, we honor Stephen; we remember him; we name our children after him. His ministry was brief, but brilliant, and a reminder that greatness of service cannot be measured in length of days. Many people like Stephen have died young serving Christ.

Robert Murray M'Cheyne died at the age of 29. Had a short life, but a brilliant ministry, wholly devoted to the Lord. And as M'Cheyne said, "That is what determines greatness of ministry. That's what determines greatness in the Christian life: great likeness to Jesus."

And what was Jesus like? He was a servant, obedient to his Father; the Suffering Servant who was obedient unto death itself, even death on a cross; and as an obedient servant to his father, he was a blessing to men. He served. That's what Stephen did; that's what Stephen was. He was a deacon. He was a servant who served the saints and served in the synagogue. He blessed the church and he blessed the world. He was a blessing to the believers and to the unbelievers alike as he gave the truth of God and did mighty works for the Lord. May that be true of us as well.

You don't have to occupy the office of deacon to be a servant. You don't have to preach a great sermon to serve Christ. He has gifted each of you to serve him in a special way, and serve this body, and to serve others. All of us can serve in one way or another. Our character ought to be that which produces service, because all of us can be loyal friends and bear one another's burdens. All of us can be faithful partners. All of us can be loving parents, if that's our situation in life.

We can be good workers wherever we are; diligent students if you're student. We can be helpful in the church where we see a need. And there are needs in every assembly; there are needs in this church. May God open your eyes to see them. May God give you a heart that desires to take up the responsibilities that are seen, where the need is present.

There are many ways to serve Christ, many places to serve and be a witness for him. That's what we are to strive for. Not looking out for our own personal interest, but also for the interest of others. That's what Paul told the Philippians; and his great example in that was the Lord Jesus Christ who emptied himself; took the form of a servant. That's what we're to be.

Now that's a disposition; that is not natural to us. And even though we become new creatures in Christ and we enter into a new life, we bring a lot of the old life with us; and so it is not natural to be a servant. That is a disposition that must be developed; and it develops as we study God's Word, make it a priority in our lives, and become men and women of prayer. That's what we're to be. And that means that we must put aside certain activities in our lives, because we live busy lives. There are

all kinds of activities around us that are legitimate activities, good in and of themselves: activities of entertainment or something of that nature that are not wrong in and of themselves. But they can begin to crowd out time in our lives and so that we fall into the same temptation that was given to the apostles—a diversion; to be diverted from the primary responsibilities that we have.

Primary responsibility we have is not to open up the paper and find out what's going on in the world the past day or two. Before we do that, it's to open up the Word of God and to know what he says, what his eternal truth is. It's not to follow the latest television show or whatever that may be, it's to know him, and to fellowship with him, and commune with him in prayer. That takes discipline; that takes time. May God give us the discipline and the desire to do that. It's as we do that that we become men and women like Stephen and are used greatly by God as that man was used.

Do you desire to be a servant like him and to have an influence like Stephen had? You'll never have that if you're not a student of the Word of God; if you're not a man or a woman full of faith as he was. May God help us to do that. But before that happens, before you can be that, before you can be a servant of the Lord, you must know the Lord. You must trust in him, for your character can be changed.

Before the sanctifying work of the Spirit of God can take place, you must first become a new creature in Christ. You must be born again. You must become obedient by trusting in the Lord Jesus Christ as your Lord and Savior. He died for sinners, he suffered in our place, he bore our punishment for us, and all who believe in him are forgiven and saved. So if you're here without Christ, may God help you to understand that you're without him and you are in need of the Savior to look to Christ.

Look to the crucified Son of God and believe in him as the one who died for you. The moment you do that, your sins are forgiven, every one of them; you're sealed with the Spirit of God; and you're given life everlasting. So may God help you to do that, and help each of us to have as our great desire service: service for the Lord. Let's pray.

[Prayer] Father, we do thank you for your goodness and grace. We thank you for the example you have given us in Stephen. The standard, the pattern you have given us in the seven deacons that were selected; we can see in them what should be in us. We can see in this one man, Stephen, what should be in us. May we emulate that; may we strive for that.

Far more, Father, may we strive to be like your Son, the Lord Jesus Christ. And by the work of the Spirit, may we be conformed to his image. And we look to you to do that, and pray that you would cause each of us to live profitable lives, which is to, say, cause each of us to be servants. We pray these things in Christ's name. Amen.