

## Grace Leads to Forgiving

Acts 6:8-13; 7:51-60 (NIV)

<sup>8</sup> Now Stephen, a man full of God's grace and power, performed great wonders and signs among the people. <sup>9</sup> 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—who began to argue with Stephen. <sup>10</sup> But they could not stand up against the wisdom the Spirit gave him as he spoke. <sup>11</sup> Then they secretly persuaded some men to say, "We have heard Stephen speak blasphemous words against Moses and against God." <sup>12</sup> So they stirred up the people and the elders and the teachers of the law. They seized Stephen and brought him before the Sanhedrin. <sup>13</sup> They produced false witnesses, who testified, "This fellow never stops speaking against this holy place and against the law." [Stephen said] <sup>51</sup> "You stiff-necked people! Your hearts and ears are still uncircumcised. You are just like your ancestors: You always resist the Holy Spirit! <sup>52</sup> Was there ever a prophet your ancestors did not persecute? They even killed those who predicted the coming of the Righteous One. And now you have betrayed and murdered him—<sup>53</sup> you who have received the law that was given through angels but have not obeyed it." <sup>54</sup> When the members of the Sanhedrin heard this, they were furious and gnashed their teeth at him. <sup>55</sup> But Stephen, full of the Holy Spirit, looked up to heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God. <sup>56</sup> "Look," he said, "I see heaven open and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God." <sup>57</sup> At this they covered their ears and, yelling at the top of their voices, they all rushed at him, <sup>58</sup> dragged him out of the city and began to stone him. Meanwhile, the witnesses laid their coats at the feet of a young man named Saul. <sup>59</sup> While they were stoning him, Stephen prayed, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit." <sup>60</sup> Then he fell on his knees and cried out, "Lord, do not hold this sin against them." When he had said this, he fell asleep.

As the church after Jesus' resurrection was growing and they were taking care of each other by sharing their possessions and doing good works, the 12 apostles realized that the ongoing care needed for believers was too great for them. They would have to neglect preaching and teaching about Jesus in order to care for all the needy people within the growing church. So, they gathered all the believers and had them choose seven people from among them to make sure that the needy widows among them were cared for.

This is where we are introduced to a man named Stephen, "a man full of God's grace and power" who also "performed great wonders and signs among the people." (verse 8) He didn't just stick to helping make sure that the Greek widows had their daily food needs met. But with his actions and words, Stephen preached what he himself believed: that God's grace had been poured out on them all with Jesus having fulfilled his role of the promised Messiah, the Christ who perfectly kept and fulfilled all of God's laws for us, who also sacrificed his life on the cross to pay for our sins, and now they knew that this is done for them and they were saints because Christ had been raised from the dead. Stephen knew that he was forgiven and made right with God, and was compelled to share this with others so that they would have this joy and completeness on top of helping the needy widows.

Members of the Synagogue of the Freedmen started arguing with Stephen over his preaching. However, the opposition "could not stand up against the wisdom the Spirit gave [Stephen] as he spoke." (verse 10) So, they stirred up the people to bring Stephen to trial using liars who claimed, "This fellow never stops speaking against this holy place [the temple] and against the law." (verse 13) When asked about these charges, Stephen launched into a sermon against them, culminating in the blunt conclusion that these people constantly resisted God and his Word, persecuting and even killing the very prophets who predicted that the Messiah would come exactly as Jesus, the Righteous One, did. "When the members of the Sanhedrin heard this, they were furious and gnashed their teeth at him... They covered their ears and, yelling at the top of their voices, they all rushed at him, dragged him out of the city and began to stone him." (verses 54, 57, 58) They did the childish, "I'm not listening" and actually start killing Stephen by hurling large rocks at him!

Yet Stephen, knowing that he is dying, prays: "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit." Then he fell on his knees and cried out, "Lord, do not hold this sin against them." (verses 59, 60) Wait, what? Hold on, Stephen. You're dying because these people couldn't counter your preaching about God's grace. They hired false witnesses to bring up false charges against you, and now, when they can't refute your charge that they always resist the Holy Spirit and persecuted and killed the prophets who predicted that the Messiah would come exactly how Jesus did, they are killing you, and your final words are: "Lord, do not hold this sin against them."? (verse 60)

Is that what you would have prayed? Or would your final words have been something like, "God, don't let the guilty go unpunished!?" "Lord, pay them back for me!?" "Avenge me!?" I mean, there's biblical precedent to do that. Holy people like David wrote in the Psalms multiple times that God should judge his enemies, the people trying to kill him, the people who did not listen to God's Word. These people deserve judgment, not forgiveness. How can anyone pray that God would forgive people who are so blatantly wicked and evil and wrong? God, I would rather you nail them to the wall, give them the hell they truly deserve.

If you are kind of feeling right now, “Tell it, preacher man,” or that you at least see the point that God should judge these people instead of forgiving them, that’s because God has given us a sense of justice. When something doesn’t seem right or fair or proper, when something is unjust, we know that proper justice needs to be administered.

When a husband or a boyfriend hits you and forbids you to go out, when a wife or a girlfriend calls you an idiot in front of your friends and your family, when your friend accuses you of lying in front of others when you know that you’re telling the truth, when you’re deeply struggling with anxiety or depression and that one person says, “You’re just being dramatic,” when you get yelled at for trying to help, when you point out someone’s sin only to have them say, “Well, that’s the pot calling the kettle black,” you know that these things are not okay. Some people will try to tell you to brush it off. We even are taught as kids to tell someone who did something wrong against us, “It’s okay.” It’s not okay. The reason that this is not okay is because these things are unjust. There is a right and a wrong, and this person did something wrong. It created a debt against you. That’s sin. It needs to be paid for.

Stephen had a sense of justice. So, how can he pray with his last breath, “Lord, do not hold this sin against them?” (verse 60) How could he pray for that debt against him be removed? It’s because Stephen knew where the justice for their sins was exacted. It was exacted on the cross.

God does not tell us lightly that he made Jesus who no sin to be sin for us. When we think of Good Friday and what Jesus is suffering, it’s not just the pain of the nails piercing his flesh and the scourge of the whip and the agony of slowly asphyxiating; he was suffering the full price for every injustice that was ever done against us and that we had ever done to anyone else. Jesus suffered on the cross the price of what the members of the Sanhedrin were doing to Stephen. Jesus suffered on that cross to pay the price for the abuse, the insults, the neglect, the dismissal, the lies you have suffered. The debt was paid in full with his suffering and death.

This is why Stephen could and did pray, “Lord, do not hold this sin against them.” (verse 60) If Stephen were to instead demand that they pay for what they were doing to him, he would then be confessing that Jesus’ suffering and death on the cross was not enough to pay for these sins. In fact, that’s the claim we make when we refuse to forgive those who have personally wronged us. If will not forgive someone because of the injustice they did against us, we’re saying that Christ didn’t suffer enough for this wrong done against me.

I know that I am guilty of withholding that forgiveness. And in kind of stupid, seemingly trivial ways. Just the other week I went in for a doctor’s appointment which included my annual blood draw. I dread it because I hate needles. Although I have pretty decent veins to poke, this nurse missed it, and then kept poking around in my arm to try to get the vein. That got very painful, and she still didn’t get it and would have to try again. When she apologized, I was not willing to forgive her. I felt the injustice that she should have done her job better, that she needlessly caused me pain, and that wasn’t okay. At the same time, though, I knew that Jesus had forgiven her for this unintended mistake, but I didn’t want to let the debt go. I hung on to it and refused forgiveness. Shame on me for acting as if Jesus didn’t suffer enough to forgive even this. The guilt piles on even more when I remember God’s Word that says, “Forgive each other, just as in Christ God forgave you.” (Ephesians 4:32) To hold on to someone’s sins against us, to refuse forgiveness to them, is unbelief. This is when I need to see again the grace of the cross.

The empty cross is a beautiful symbol of the Christian faith because it reminds us that the price for all our sins, all the sins of the whole world, have been paid in full. The full payment for injustice was made with Jesus’ blood and his righteousness. No more suffering required. No more can be demanded. The empty cross says the debt of injustice against me is paid in full.

Remembering that the debt of injustice is paid in full is a good reason to have a different symbol of the cross called a crucifix. The crucifix is different from the empty cross by having a representation of Jesus suffering on the cross. I purposefully keep one in my office to remind me that he really did pay the price, suffered the debt that was owed. When I see the crucifix, I am reminded of the truth that Jesus did suffer enough and I can never refuse forgiveness to my enemies, to those who are blatantly unjust against me.

Seeing the crucifix helps move me to pray like Stephen, “Lord, do not hold this sin against them.” (verse 60), to mean it and apply it when I pray, “Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us.” So, I think I need to tell that nurse that I forgive her for the pain she caused me. Might be awkward, especially the more I have to explain it. But this is forgiving with the grace that forgave me.

For whom do you need to pray that the Lord would forgive them for how they have treated you unjustly? As the sense of justice bubbles up, demanding that they pay you back for their injustices, see again the crucifix, Christ on the cross. There we see the grace that leads to forgiving, that since he has paid the debt in full, I hold it against them no more. Amen.