

Stephen Acts 6:8-7:60

Introduction

It has been said that “Character is what a person does when no one is watching”

I suppose that statement is true in the sense that what we do in private is done without pretense

But there are other things that are done in public that also reveal a person’s character

With Christmas just around the corner consider these tests of character

- Two words: Black Friday
- How a person responds to finding themselves in “the” slow checkout lane at the store – again. Price check...
- What about when the checker makes an error? Really that one applies whether the error was to your detriment or your benefit...
- How one deals with assembly instructions that were obviously written by a person whose first language is not English is a real test of character – especially around midnight on Christmas Eve...
- Oh, how about tangled Christmas lights? Ever notice that no matter how carefully you packed them away last year they always emerge from the box having morphed into a Gordian knot?
- And then you have the strand that just refuses to light even though you made sure to buy the ones that said they wouldn’t go out if a bulb burned out.
- What about hearing that one annoying Christmas song. I don’t know which song it is for you but you know the one I mean... It seems to be everywhere and you can’t escape it pa rum pa pa pum

Our passage this morning is all about Stephen who Luke introduced us to briefly last week as one of the Seven who were appointed by the apostles to handle the distribution of benevolence to the needy

In **6:5** Luke referred to Stephen as “a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit” and if nothing else was said about him that would be quite a legacy by which to be remembered

But the remainder of chapter 6 through chapter 7 concern Stephen and in these verses we will see a portrait of a godly man

Stephen is a pivotal character in the annals of Christianity as he was the first martyr of the fledgling church but he is so much more than that as we will see

The passage is long by our normal standards as we don’t often consider so many verses on a Sunday morning but in real time the record is rather short – it’s really only part of one day

But in this brief snapshot of Stephen’s life and death Luke records an example that we would all do very well to aspire to

The final eight verses of **chapter 6** serve to set the stage for the remainder of our passage

I have given this section the heading **Stephen’s Expression** of a Christ-like Character

In these verses we will see how Stephen lived his daily life or **his activity** and his **demeanor** or character as it was evidenced by his daily life and his response to being wrongly accused

Then in **7:1-50** we will see **Stephen’s Explanation** of the charges against him in which he demonstrates Christ-like reasoning in answering the charges of **blasphemy against the temple and the Law of Moses**

Lastly we will look at **Stephen’s Execution**, or his Christ-like death, that ends chapter 7 as he verbalizes a **summary judgement against his accusers** and once again shows his true character in **his last words**

I. Stephen’s Expression (Christ-like Character)

You should already have your Bibles open to Acts 6 so let’s begin by looking at Stephen’s Expression of a Christ-like character

A. His Activity

In **verse 8** Luke gives us some additional information about Stephen and his **activity**

Previously he had said that Stephen was “full of faith and of the Holy Spirit”

Now he writes that Stephen was “full of grace and power” and “was doing great wonders and signs among the people”

In being full of grace Stephen was like his Master who **John 1:14** also says was full of grace

Of course we know that grace in the New Testament typically refers to **the unmerited favor of God**

And we know that God lavishly supplies his grace to us through the Son, Jesus Christ

And while we’re not told the precise nature of the “great wonders and signs” that Stephen was doing, they likely included healings and perhaps the casting out of demons as we have already seen from the apostles and which were clearly acts of grace

But we know that it was really God who was doing the signs and wonders so the people were graced by God through Stephen by the power of the indwelling Holy Spirit

However, grace also has the meaning of **elegance of form or manner – an attractive quality**

This quality of grace was also in evidence in Stephen’s life people were moved by him

Look ahead at **verse 15** where we read that “all who sat in the council saw that his face was like the face of an angel”

Clearly, Stephen had an attractiveness of character that drew people to him – just like Jesus

But Stephen also engaged in activity that elicited hostility from some of the people – once again, just like Jesus had

In **verses 9-10** we see that Stephen was also devoted to teaching and preaching and that there were certain men who took exception to what he was saying

Luke describes these men as belonging to **the synagogue of the Freedmen** and further expounds that they were Cyrenians, Alexandrians, and men from Cilicia and Asia

Being part of the synagogue of the Freedmen identifies them as **former slaves** or sons of slaves that had been taken away but who have now returned to Jerusalem and who were meeting together for religious instruction as was common

Last week we saw that Stephen was a Hellenist and now we see that those who disputed with Stephen were also **Hellenists** – and since the Hellenists were looked down on they had reason to try to stay in the good graces of the authorities

Also, with the mention of Cilicia there is a possibility that this was the same synagogue attended by Paul – either way, we know that some of his countrymen were in the crowd

And these Freedmen “rose up and disputed with Stephen”

This may have been an **incidental dispute** or it may have been a **protracted, ongoing fight**

It might even have been an **organized debate** that was arranged to challenge Stephen’s teachings

We aren’t told in plain terms what specifically was in dispute but the ultimate charges brought against Stephen suggest that it had to do with the validity of the Law and with the significance of the temple

In any event, as Stephen was filled with the Spirit’s wisdom, they couldn’t prevail over him

God graced Stephen with **unassailable insight** and **discernment** – his wisdom was God’s own wisdom just as Jesus demonstrated during his time on earth

And just like with Jesus, Stephen’s opponents conspired to lie about the things he had taught

In **verse 11** we see that they accused him of speaking “blasphemous words against Moses and God”

Of course, the penalty for blasphemy was death so the charges were as serious as they could get

The charges were also inflammatory to the people not only because they so honored and respected the temple but because of the importance of the temple to their economic well-being

The temple was big business in Jerusalem and the livelihood of many depended on it

It required little effort to incite people to act to defend the temple on both religious and economic grounds and even if it meant they would need to lie and provide false evidence in the attempt

So Stephen was snatched up and dragged before the Sanhedrin and the false witnesses were brought forward to testify against him

In **verse 13** the charges get more specific

“This man never ceases to speak words against this holy place and the law”

To speak against the temple was, in the minds of the accusers, to speak against God and to speak against the law was to speak against Moses

Then in **verse 14** they got around to what Stephen had supposedly taught

First they testified that Stephen had said that “Jesus of Nazareth will destroy this place” meaning the temple

We aren’t privy to the actual words that Stephen spoke and what he taught but we can know that he taught the truth since he was teaching in the power and wisdom of the Holy Spirit and God cannot lie

And the lie that they were now telling is the same lie that false witnesses told about Jesus at his trial

Look with me at **Mark 14** beginning with **verse 57** and continuing through **verse 59 (Mark 14:57-59)**

And some stood up and bore false witness against him, saying, “We heard him say, ‘I will destroy this temple that is made with hands, and in three days I will build another, not made with hands.’” Yet even about this their testimony did not agree.

The false witnesses said that Jesus said *he* would destroy the temple – the same as they said Stephen had been teaching

But look with me at what Jesus actually said in **John 2:19** –

The Jews had asked for a sign and

Jesus answered them, “Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up.”

Jesus never said *he* was going to destroy the temple

And he wasn’t even talking about the temple building in the first place as we see in **John 2:21** he was speaking of his body and he said the sign would be that *they* would destroy him and he would rise again in three days

Nonetheless both groups heard what they wanted to hear and accused both Jesus and Stephen of blasphemy against the temple which, by extension, meant blasphemy against God

Stephen’s accusers also said that he said that Jesus would “change the customs that Moses delivered to us”

Again this is another lie because Jesus never said such a thing

Look at what Jesus said regarding the Law of Moses in **Matthew 5:17-18**

“Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them. For truly, I say to you, until heaven and earth pass away, not an iota, not a dot, will pass from the Law until all is accomplished.”

What Jesus did call out for elimination were the additional rules and regulations of the Pharisees that they had thrown up as a hedge around the Law – but those didn’t come from Moses

They didn’t come from God either for that matter!

They were manmade rules and regulations that served to enslave the people to a system of works

Both of these charges were lies with just a hint of the truth to make them more believable

I think we would understand if Stephen was upset by these false charges since his life was at stake

B. His Demeanor

But in **verse 15** we see that he had a totally different **demeanor**

It's not perfectly clear what Luke means by saying Stephen had the face of an angel but it could have been a radiance like Moses experienced when he had been face to face with God

More likely it was a look of supreme but benign, nonthreatening confidence

Confidence without an air of superiority based on the peace of knowing all was and would be well

Stephen knew he was innocent of the charges but even better he knew he had God's backing and the expression on his face was compelling

In fact, his countenance was such that Luke reports that those on the council were "gazing at him" which means they were staring at him – they couldn't take their eyes off of him

Whereas the children of Israel couldn't gaze at Moses' face after he had been with God, the Sanhedrin couldn't take their eyes off of Stephen

Angels live in the presence of God and while I've never seen one I imagine their faces show forth the reality that they know whom they serve and what he is capable of and I doubt they get too shook up about anything

Stephen also lived in the presence of God and his face showed the same quiet confidence when facing his accusers

Stephen lived his life as Jesus would live and it showed in his actions and his demeanor

Stephen was busy doing what Jesus would do in the way that Jesus would do it

And his confidence in God showed in both his conduct and his countenance

II. Stephen's Explanation (Christ-like Reasoning)

Having heard the charges the high priest asked Stephen in **Acts 7:1** "Are these things so?"

The high priest was in all likelihood Caiaphas who had previously tried Jesus and the apostles

Jewish law required that the accused should hear the charges against him and be allowed an opportunity to reply to them so whether Caiaphas really cared about Stephen's defense he gave him the

opportunity to provide one

It's hard to imagine what Caiaphas expected to hear from Stephen but I'm sure what he heard came as a surprise

Many people refer to the speech that follows as "Stephen's defense" but he really doesn't defend himself at all

In fact, he never directly answers the either of the charges

What he does do is launch into an explanation of the origins of Christianity

And in explaining the historical roots of God's plan for salvation, he winds up showing the absurdity of the charges against him

Stephen begins his explanation by talking about Abraham in **verses 2-8** – notice if you would that he speaks with respect to the Sanhedrin and his accusers – he calls them "Brothers and fathers"

They are his kinsmen and he treats them accordingly

After Abraham he turns to the example of Joseph in **verses 9-16**

He spends the most time speaking about Moses taking from **verses 17-43** to do so – perhaps because he was accused of being against Moses

And he finishes his explanation by talking about David and Solomon in **verses 44-50**

Twice in his explanation he quotes from the Old Testament first from **Amos 5:25-27** in verses 42-43 and then from **Isaiah 66:1-2** in verses 49-50

It would be easy for us to read through Stephen's speech and miss what he is saying

On the surface it appears to be a long-winded speech about historical matters that have nothing to do with the matter at hand

How many of you have heard of an autostereogram?

Many of you have probably seen them but didn't know they had a name

Back in the early to mid-nineties they were all the rage in books called Magic Eye books

They are the images that look like a random pattern until you look at them just right and then a 3D image would appear to float above the page

To just quickly look at an autostereogram would mean missing the hidden image and the same thing is true of Stephen's speech

We need to approach it with the right kind of eyes to see what Stephen was doing within it –

The speech is a real testament to the wisdom he possessed as he turns the tables on his accusers and clearly shows God's plan of salvation and how his accusers were actually defying God

A. To the Charge of Blasphemy Against the Temple

As we begin to look at his explanation relative to the charge of blasphemy against the temple it will help to understand Stephen's point before we begin to see how he brings it to light – this is something like knowing what 3D image you are trying to see in an autostereogram

The problem the Jews had regarding the temple was that they had begun, over time, to revere it too much

They were convinced that they were special simply because they possessed the dwelling place of God

They had come to think of God only residing and working within the temple

In a sense they had become guilty of temple worship and were very proud and protective of it

What Stephen is going to show through his historical examples is that God is not restricted to any geographical location or any building

God is the living God and he is universally active and he engages his people wherever he desires

In fact, Stephen will show that the majority of pivotal events in Israel's history have happened outside the Promised Land and outside the temple

He is also going to show how God's redemptive plan has been in the works and was there to be seen in all of these historic events but that the Jewish leaders had closed their eyes to it

Beginning with **Abraham**, Stephen shows that long before God designated a holy place he chose a holy people – Israel was God's set-apart people because he chose them not because they had the temple

God first came to Abraham while he was still dwelling in Mesopotamia and compelled him to move to a place Abraham didn't know, to Haran in the upper Euphrates valley

Abraham remained there until his father died and then God led him to Canaan but Abraham still didn't receive any part of the land as a possession of his own –

The land remained a promise to him and his offspring even as he didn't yet have any offspring

And God further revealed to him that his future descendants would only take possession of the promised land after being in exile for 400 years in another land not their own when he would intervene to deliver them from their oppressors

Then God gave Abraham **a visible sign of the covenant** God had made with him and through the covenant of **circumcision** the promise was handed down generationally

Stephen then turns to the patriarchal age and the account of **Joseph** in **verses 9-16**

The scene in this account is clearly **Egypt** as Luke mentions Egypt six (6) times in these eight verses

Joseph's brothers sold him into slavery in Egypt but God was with him there

Not only was God present with him but he was active in Joseph's life

God rescued him, gave him favor and wisdom before Pharaoh, and caused him to be placed in a position of high authority in the Egyptian government

But God was also with Joseph's family in Canaan and he brought them down to Egypt and reunited and preserved them there

The patriarchs died in Egypt far from the promised land but God saw to it that they were brought back and buried in the land

But their children and grandchildren remained in Egypt until the pre-appointed time when God brought them out in fulfillment of his promise

Once more Stephen makes it clear that God was present and active in working his plans far from the land and long before the temple had been constructed

Stephen then turned his attention to the account of **Moses** in **verses 17-43**

The Moses account is divided into three (3) periods of 40 years each

And in each of those periods we first see Moses in Egypt, then in Midian, and then in the wilderness

400 years had passed since God made his promise with Abraham when he provided Moses to deliver the Israelites

The first 40 years related in **verses 17-22** deal with the familiar account of Moses' childhood

Then in verse 23 we read that Moses at age 40 tried to deliver his people in his own way

He killed an Egyptian who was abusing one of his brethren and as a result his own people thrust him aside and denied him as deliverer

Moses fled and **spent the next 40 years in Midian** as a shepherd at which time God appeared and spoke to him from the burning bush

The episode of the burning bush is interesting in what it reveals rather subtly

Look with me at verse 33 where God tells Moses

“Take off the sandals from your feet, for the place where you are standing is holy ground.”

With this statement God showed that **wherever he determines to present himself is holy ground**

Remember, this was in the heart of Midian and nowhere near the land of promise

Contrary to what the Jews had come to believe, holy ground exists outside the temple grounds

So, from this patch of holy ground God commissioned Moses to go to Egypt and deliver his children

And Stephen reminds his accusers that God was with Moses and the children of Israel for the **next 40 years of their desert wanderings**

But the Israelites refused to obey him and thrust him aside turning in their hearts back to Egypt and falling into idolatry

Notice also that Stephen in **verse 37** reminds them that Moses who they now defend told them about the Messiah who they are rejecting

Stephen quotes Moses’ words from **Deuteronomy 18:15**

“God will raise up for you a prophet like me from your brothers”

Stephen’s accusers would have seen the pattern he was establishing through his narrative:

Joseph was God’s chosen man and his brothers rejected him

Moses was God’s chosen man and the Israelites rejected him twice

And now they themselves had rejected Jesus, God’s Messiah

Then in turning to **David and Solomon** in **verses 44-50** the pertinent thing to notice is that God directed the design and construction of the tabernacle and the temple but that God doesn’t dwell in houses made by human hands in a literal sense

Solomon who had built the temple made that clear in **1 Kings 8:27** when he said

But will God indeed dwell on the earth? Behold, heaven and the highest heaven cannot contain you; how much less this house that I have built!

And in **verses 49-40** Stephen quotes from Isaiah 66:1-2 when he quotes God saying

‘Heaven is my throne, and the earth is my footstool.

What kind of house will you build for me, says the Lord, or what is the place of my rest?

Did not my hand make all these things?’

With that Stephen ends his explanation regarding the temple

He has shown that God is present and acting wherever, whenever, and however he chooses to be and where he is present is holy ground

The temple was never meant to stand in the way of God’s plan for his people

The Jews have made it much more than it was ever meant to be

B. To the Charge of Blasphemy Against the Law

In answer to the charge of blasphemy against the Law we have already seen Stephen demonstrate respect for both Moses and the Law

He made it clear in his speech that the Law came from God through Moses as he refers to the tablets of the Law in **verse 38** as “living oracles” that Moses received to pass on to Israel

But Stephen is also quick to show that in the past it was the Israelites who pushed Moses aside and rejected his leadership

It was their forefathers who had refused to obey the Law that Moses brought and turned instead to idols made with human hands as their hearts returned to Egypt

In a round-about way Stephen had shown if anyone was guilty of blasphemy against Moses it was his accusers as they steadfastly refused to accept his prophecy regarding the Messiah

III. Stephen’s Execution (Christ-like Death)

Having made the historic case Stephen then turned to his present-day accusers as he delivers his **summary judgment** of them which proves to be the final straw before his **execution**

A. His Summary Judgment of His Accusers

Follow along as I read **verses 51-53**

“You stiff-necked people, uncircumcised in heart and ears, you always resist the Holy Spirit. As your fathers did, so do you. Which of the prophets did your fathers not persecute? And they killed those who announced beforehand the coming of the Righteous One, whom you have now betrayed and murdered, you who received the law as delivered by angels and did not keep it.”

Stephen lashes out at them as he says that they are stubborn, willful people who refuse to bend

He says that they are heathens at heart and refusing to hear the truth they continue to resist the Holy Spirit

And he accuses them of being just like the ancestors he has just exposed

Their fathers had persecuted and killed God’s prophets

While they had betrayed and murdered the Messiah who those same prophets had foretold

They were standing there accusing Stephen of being against the Law when it was really them who was guilty of disobeying what Moses had taught

In the remaining verses Luke portrays an out of control mob that has been pushed beyond the brink

He says they were enraged and they gnashed their teeth at Stephen like wild animals

They shrieked and plugged their ears to silence Stephen's words as they rushed him
Then taking hold of him they dragged him out of the city and stoned him to death

Whereas they sought to find a legal way to kill and silence Stephen they resorted to mob violence
They were in such frenzy that they lost all sense of legal restraint and propriety – and even any fear of Rome
because the Sanhedrin wasn't allowed to execute criminals on their own at this time in history

Then much the same as he did when he first introduced Stephen earlier, Luke now in **verse 58** casually introduces
arguably the most influential person of the New Testament other than Jesus
And the witnesses laid down their garments at the feet of a young man named Saul.

B. His Last Words

We began this morning talking about revealed character and Stephen's last words reveal a great deal about what
kind of man he was

Stephen makes **three (3) pronouncements** at the end of his life

First he says in **verse 56**

“Behold, I see the heavens opened, and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God.”

Clearly, God gave Stephen a glimpse into glory

Why exactly he saw Jesus standing in heaven and not seated by the Father we aren't told

I like to think it's because Jesus stood up to welcome his first martyr home

Whatever the case, Stephen's pronouncement was more than the Sadducees could bear as they couldn't accept the
idea of the resurrection or of the afterlife

His second utterance was as they began to pelt him with the rocks

Speaking directly to his Lord and Savior Stephen called out

“Lord Jesus, receive my spirit”

One can't help but be reminded of Jesus' words as he was hanging on the cross from **Luke 23:46**

“Father, into your hands I commit my spirit!”

I can't see how Stephen could have pre-planned or successfully delivered this line in light of the fact that the rocks
were beginning to pelt him

I think this is just one more piece of evidence as to how closely he walked with Jesus

As was the **very last thing** he said before he died

“Lord, do not hold this sin against them.”

Once more Stephen's sentiment is the same as Jesus' was at his crucifixion

In **Luke 23:34** we read Jesus saying from the cross

“Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.”

Then Luke closes out the account of Stephen's life with the simple words

“He fell asleep.”

Conclusion

So, what should we take from the account of Stephen's life and death?

First, we should aspire to be like Jesus as Stephen aspired to be like Jesus

He was busy in carrying on Jesus' mission and he was ministering in the way that Jesus did

Which meant that he suffered as Jesus suffered at the hands of the false accusers and executioners

But through it all he maintained the same demeanor as Jesus

He didn't revile or even really answer his accusers – he simply shared the historical, biblical truth of God's redemptive plan in such a way that it should have been especially clear to the religious leaders

Stephen's manner of life and death should serve as an example to us all

Character counts

But then we must also look at what Stephen taught in his speech and allow it to inform our thinking

We need to realize the truth that God is active everywhere he chooses to be

And that wherever he is, is holy ground

God is at work all over the world and in all kinds of places

And his redemptive plan is the same as it has always been

We need to be aware of his working and eager to engage with people wherever they are

And then we need to break out of our holy huddle and take the gospel out into the world

We are God's people simply because he graciously chose to redeem us

And at this Christmas season we need to be busy trying to show people how they too can be saved

As we demonstrate the same Christ-like attitude and effort that Stephen did

Let's pray