

Stand Up, Stand Tall

Welcome to Harvest Community Church

Series: Epic Faith

Text: Acts 6:8-15, 7:54-60

~ Action springs not from a thought, but from a readiness for responsibility- Dietrich Bonhoeffer

Faith is never passive or apathetic it comes with the courage to stand up and be counted. Faith never goes looking for a confrontation but it is also not afraid of dealing with confrontation. Today many Christians would rather just be quiet, sit down and stay out of the fray. God does call us to live in peace with all people as much as depends on us. He does exhort us to mind our own business and to live a life of integrity. **Romans 12:18, 1 Thessalonians 4:11-12 (NLT)** We are also called to contend for the faith. **Jude 1:3, 1 Peter 3:15** We are to stand and defend the widows and the orphans.

James 1:27, Psalm 68:5, Isaiah 1:17 (NLT)

God calls us to stand up when we see injustice. Today many Christians do not stand up against injustice for two primary reasons inconvenience and ridicule. Caring for the poor, addicts, sick, homeless, the abused and neglected, the marginalized, mentally ill, immigrants and every kind of category of needy people requires time and effort. Most of us will help for a little while or give money but many of us will not do without our normal pleasures or comforts for very long. Anyone who steps out to help the disadvantaged and disenfranchised will receive criticism and flack for helping people. Taking a stand for Christ will make us vulnerable but, if we really know Jesus, His compassion will rub off on us. When His love captures us we will not be able to turn a blind eye to injustice and hurting people. God is not looking for super Christians in a cape with all the answers. He will use ordinary people who dare to believe that God can work through them. Mother Teresa is a perfect example, she was humble with a tender heart and a backbone of steel.

The very first deacons were needed because, as the early church grew, there were needs to be met. The apostles were in an overwhelming situation, they were trying to meet the spiritual needs and the physical needs of people and some were being neglected. Whether it was purposeful or not is not said. They needed seven people who would stand up and serve. The first thing they looked for was character. The best way to identify the character of someone is to answer the question “what are they full of?” **Acts 6:5 & 8** People can be full of a lot of things; beans, sports, their kids, work, lust, doubt, or greed. Most people are actually full of themselves.

To be full of the Holy Spirit means to be so filled with the love and power of Christ, that His presence overflows from us into the lives of others. Stephen used his role as a deacon to touch people’s lives. He not only met needs, he did great signs and wonders among the people. He saw every contact, every interaction and every circumstance as an opportunity to mend broken lives. The hurting people around him were not a nuisance; they were people who needed the power and compassion of the Holy Spirit.

The people who were most irritated by Stephen’s ministry were the religious leaders. These people argued with him and he boldly shared the gospel with them. They drug him to court and he shared the gospel. When they would not receive his reasoned presentation of God’s plan, he stood tall and presented them with hard truth. **Acts 7:51-53** Stephen shared the truth out of love for the hurting and love for these lost and hostile men. He had never backed down before and he refused to be intimidated now. (In the old west outlaws would ride into town and face off against the sheriff. The sheriff was the only one who stood before wicked men and their prey.) We are those who must stand in our day. Like Stephen it may cost us something. Even as he was being stoned he prayed. **Acts 7:59-60** You can tell a great deal about a person by their last words.

Stephens's story is one of sacrifice. He did not give his life for a cause but for a person, Jesus. He put every resource, every talent, and every relationship at the feet of Jesus. He wanted every minute of every day to honor the One who died for him. That is what it is to be filled with the Holy Spirit.

When Jesus is described after His ascension into heaven, He is pictured seated at the right hand of God. **Mark 16:19** When Stephen was about to be stoned he saw Jesus standing at the right hand of God. **Acts 7:54-56** This is significant because when a highly respected person walks into a room people stand for them. When we take a stand for Jesus, He takes a stand for us. **Luke 12:8-9** Our courage to stand will cost us, but it will earn the applause of Jesus. He will use our love and courage to transform the people who are watching. Remember, it was the apostle Paul who held the coats of those that stoned Stephen.

Key Principles of Faith from Stephen's life

- His faith was a beautiful blend of kindness and courage. He served faithfully and lovingly and was ready to take on an opportunity when it came knocking. He faced opposition and did not back down. He defended Jesus and truth and served those in need. He was humble and bold. There are many people that are humble but lack courage and many that are bold as lions that lack humility. The blend of humility and boldness is rare, even in many Christians. Stephen believed the Gospel- not just in a superficial intellectual way- but so deeply that it transformed his life.
- When we stand up for Christ in our communities there are no guarantees. We will be applauded by some for being faithful and condemned by others for being too narrow minded. When you stand for Christ we can be sure of two things: opposition and glory. Some people teach that if you stand up for Christ all opposition will fall. That is not always so. We are in a war, our enemies do not easily back down. They are strong and smart, as a matter of fact, we are often surprised when they double down. In a war, there are casualties and martyrs. Stephen was stoned and Jesus was crucified. **Matthew 10:22-33** From a human perspective things did not turn out well for either Jesus or Stephen, but from the viewpoint of eternity it was glorious.
- Ultimately, the only thing that is important is the approval of Jesus. It does not matter if people praise us or curse us, it is what Jesus says that counts. **Matthew 25:23** Around the world people are dying for their faith. In America we die a little inside if we are misunderstood when we stand up for truth. Christianity is tolerated in our country as long as we don't stand out. Jesus says let your light so shine. **Matthew 5:16** We are not only called to stand tall and stand out we are to SHINE.
- Expose yourself to real needs. One of the highlights of our year is having the Teen Challenge Women's center with us. This year, as we were baptizing, I noticed on the arms of one of the ladies, the scars left from where she had been cutting herself. I was rejoicing as she went under the water. She has gone from hurt to healing from death to life. When was the last time you were a part of helping those suffering from the injustice, evil and opposition to God's rule on this earth? Most of us have become desensitized to the heartache and needs around us. If we want to be God's people on this earth we must be as vulnerable as Jesus was. Stephen's first job was to care for Greek widows in Jerusalem. These were immigrants in Jerusalem.

It may seem that all the needs you see are overwhelming. God didn't call us to do it all, the way you start is to help just one and, by faith, watch that life change for the glory of God.