

Kids Lesson: Play-Do. Make it smooth. Sin is like when people hit it, put marks in it, disfigure it. Forgiveness erases all the marks and makes it new again.

If you could choose the top 5 people from the Bible you could talk to, who would you choose? I'm sure all of us would put Jesus at #1. So, let's go with 2-5. [Ask a few people]. Elijah is on my list (explain why). Enoch too. But the other two are part of our sermon reading today. My namesake St. Paul is mentioned as Saul. We won't say much about him now. The other is Stephen. Who, you say? Stephen!

He was only tasked with being part of the church council, helping with food distribution and community relations. But he became so much more. Note the description used four times of Stephen: ***"known to be full of the Spirit and wisdom" (v. 4); "a man full of faith and the Holy Spirit" (v. 8); "a man full of Grace and God's power" (v. 52); and "Full of the Holy Spirit" (v. 57).*** Quite a remarkable guy, wouldn't you say? I would love to talk with him!

The power of the Holy Spirit in Stephen led to some amazing things, chief of which is this statement: ***I See Heaven Open!*** Because he saw Heaven open and Jesus standing there, he could actually forgive the angry mob throwing stone projectiles which would agonizingly take Stephen's life! But they could never take his place in Heaven. This martyr was the first of the Christian Memorial Day of the faithful who would give their lives for their Lord. Stephen took the words of Jesus seriously ***"If you would come after me, you must take up your cross and follow me."***

Stephen preached the longest sermon in the Bible. The majority is not part of our reading cuz it is so long. It was a very strongly worded sermon. ***"You stiff-necked people! You always resist the Holy Spirit. You killed the righteous One."*** It was harsh not cuz he was angry or mean-spirited or looking for vengeance. He cared about the Phar and this was the only way to get them to see the seriousness of their sin. It was the only way to reach their souls to save them from Satan.

We need to hear the law too, loud and clear. Our sinful nature is in the same boat: proud, self-seeking, arrogant etc. If we aren't led to sorrow over sin, we cannot rejoice over salvation. Be it foul language, on-line pornography, gossip, anger, prejudice (like in our reading today), uncaring attitudes or just plain selfishness, each of us is guilty. We each need to come to the foot of the cross in sorrow over sin, in humility over wrongs we have done, in despair over disappointing God.

Only then will we receive the uplifting, soul-cleansing, forgiveness only Jesus can offer and provide. Only then can we feel Jesus lifting us from the muddy dirt of iniquity, hosing us off with his love, making us clean again. Like a movie scene, we feel the wind in our face, the breeze in our hair. Oh, what a feeling!

In a perfect world, the Phar and the rest would join the faithful, fall on their knees and be welcomed into God's kingdom. But we don't live in a perfect world! In a perfect world I would feel as good at 68 as I did at 28 and be as smart as I thought I was at 17. In a perfect world ice cream would still have calories but chocolate syrup would counter-act them. But we don't live in a perfect world.

Instead of repentance there was repulsion. They didn't want their sin thrown in their face so they decided to throw stones instead. Can you imagine being so angry at someone that you would do that? We have all been angry, but to stone someone to death?! Wow. I had two brothers growing up. We had our spats but I never even came close to wanting them dead! Yet, I must admit a few 'choice expressions' came out of my mouth from my mad heart.

Unlike Stephen. Even as he was dying, Stephen cried out ***"I see Heaven Open!"*** and Jesus was extending his hand to him. What great faith! So much so that he could even ask God the Father to ***"not hold their sin against them"***. Double wow! He asked God not to get even with them—again because he cared about their souls. Julie and I were watching a cop show the other day. A lady was kidnapped, raped, choked, stabbed, had bleach poured on her—and

still survived. The docs have no idea how. Her speech is very slow but what makes her extremely unique is that she forgave the guy! I pray that God give us such a loving spirit.

Compare that to a friend of mine at the Seminary. He worked at a bookstore. One female customer was notorious for being cranky. The owner knew my friend was studying to be a pastor. The owner thought my friend needed to learn how to deal with nasty people so that lady became his personal customer. She was frequently bitter, complaining about nearly everything. One day my friend nearly lost it. She yelled that the book she wanted 'How to remain young and beautiful' was not there as she had ordered. My friend replied-with tenseness-Don't worry mam, I'll mark it 'urgent', no, 'extremely urgent'.

Did Stephen get a raw deal from God? Martyrdom for Ministry? Not at all. Jesus said to each of his disciples, ***'Take up your cross and follow me and I will give you a crown of life.'*** It is not easy being a Christian but the rewards are literally 'out of this world'. Following Jesus is not only the best thing to do, it is the only thing to do—if we see Heaven open, as Stephen did.

Do we see Heaven open as Stephen did, no matter who we're dealing with? Will you serve others as Stephen and the other six did? Will the Holy Spirit fill your life too? Will you forgive others their trespasses as God has forgiven us? Will you remain faithful to God's Word no matter who or what teaches or lives contrary to the Bible? Will you continue to put your faith in Jesus as your personal Lord and Savior? Will you see Heaven open? God grant us that beautiful vision! And when we get there, by the grace of God through faith, maybe Stephen will look us up?