

## Choosing Sides

(Acts 6:8-15)

### Introduction

1. Theme: Jesus accelerates us by the Holy Spirit to grow deeper through His family, wider in our impact for the gospel.
2. Background: [Acts 5] In opposition, we experience the unstoppable life of Jesus' Kingdom gospel in us & through us.
  - a. As the church grows/changes, they overcome potential division by focusing on the primacy of God's Word about Jesus, organize leaders to do the ministry of the Word & meet practical needs, and experience the Spirit's power to work in them & through them to heal & save people.
3. Religion in the New Testament
  - a. Definition: External practices of faith (cf. Jas 1:26-27).
  - b. Can become self-made external practices that appear godly (cf. Col 2:23)
  - c. Religious People
    - i. Not people who love & worship Jesus, and live it out practically.
    - ii. System of personal merit through additional man-made rules/regulations to earn righteousness.

### How to share Jesus with "religious" people [Acts 6:8-10]

1. An in-depth look at Stephen.
  - a. [8] His spiritual character: He is filled with the grace of Jesus & the power of the Holy Spirit.
  - b. His ministry isn't just serving tables, but also performing miraculous signs (like the apostles, cf. 2:43) as a demonstration of the truth about Jesus, the God who heals/saves.
  - c. [9] He goes to local synagogues to share what he's learned/experienced about Jesus.
    - i. Synagogue of prior slaves, now freed.
    - ii. Like Stephen, not native to Palestine that speak Aramaic, but Hellenistic Jews that speak Greek.
      1. They hail from North Africa, Egypt, Northeast Mediterranean, Asia Minor.
    - iii. They are "religious" people, bound by man-made rules/traditions to merit salvation.
    - iv. They grow angry with Stephen & argue with him.
  - d. Application: Stephen is a role model to go out into our personal contexts/spheres of influence to share Jesus.
2. [10] Stephen overwhelms the religious people with his words.
  - a. They can't stand up against God's wisdom or the power of God's Spirit spoken through Stephen.
    - i. Not because of the volume of his words (how loud or how many).
    - ii. He responds with respectful, searing truth (cf. Luke 21:14-15)
  - b. How is he able to share about Jesus & respond to their attacks/criticisms so powerfully?
    - i. [6:3] He was selected to serve as one full of God's Spirit & wisdom.
    - ii. [6:5] He was chosen because he was full of faith & God's Spirit.
  - c. Before he disputed with these people, he was already full of God's Spirit & wisdom.
    - i. He has wisdom/the Spirit because he regularly nurtured his relationship with Jesus (cf. John 7:37-39).
3. Application: When Jesus prompts you to speak up for Him, are you already filled with God's Spirit & wisdom?
  - a. Are you in prayer regularly so that you're covered in His voice/presence daily?
  - b. Are you in His Word so that you're saturated with His wisdom/Spirit?
  - c. Stephen is not an apostle or pastor, but God empowers this faithful follower to say/do great things for Jesus.

### What to share with "religious" people [Acts 6:11-14]

1. [11-12] The charge against Stephen

- a. [11] Stephen is accused of blasphemy against Moses & God.
  - b. [12] The angry mob & religious leaders violently seize him & bring him before the Sanhedrin.
    - i. The Sanhedrin meet in the Temple, & have a vested economic & political interest in it.
2. [13-14] What did Stephen say about Jesus?
- a. [13] Their conclusion: Stephen speaks against the Temple & the Law.
  - b. [14] Their basis: Stephen said Jesus will destroy the Temple & change Moses' Law customs.
  - c. Temple: Where God's presence dwelt, people met with God & worship Him, sacrifices made to atone for sin.
  - d. Law: God's instructions/covenant for Israel to obey to be His people, receive His blessing, bless the nations.
3. Does Jesus' coming cause the destruction of the Temple? Yes.
- a. He prophesied its destruction (cf. Luke 21:5-9)
  - b. He equated it with the destruction of His body (cf. John 2:19-21)
  - c. [John Piper] *"When I [Jesus] die, the Temple dies. This whole system of sacrifices, blood flowing for atonement of sin, priestly activity... it all ends when I die."*
4. Does Jesus' coming change customs of the Law? Yes.
- a. Male followers of God would no longer need to be circumcised (cf. Acts 15:1-11; Gal 2:7-10).
  - b. Followers of God would no longer have dietary restrictions (cf. Acts 10:13-15).
  - c. The customs were valuable in defining Israel's uniqueness among the nations as holy/set apart for God, but were no longer valid & would make it hard for the gospel to spread to unreached peoples/nations.
5. How were the accusers false witnesses? By drawing a false conclusion about true statements.
- a. Stephen isn't speaking against the Temple/Law, but unveiling the true Temple/Law: Jesus.
  - b. Jesus' coming destroys the Temple/customs not to abolish them, but to fulfill them (cf. Matt 5:17-19).
    - i. [Rev 21:22-23] Jesus replaces the physical Temple.
    - ii. The Temple remains destroyed because it has served its purpose once Jesus came.
    - iii. In Jesus dwells the fullness of God's presence; we come to Jesus to meet with & worship God, to be washed clean from sin, to receive God's righteousness.
    - iv. As true Light of the world, His coming destroys the need for its shadow (Temple/Law; cf. Heb 10:1-3).
  - c. We are no longer bound by customs of the Old Testament Law & Temple.
  - d. Religion can become an idol.
    - i. The Law/Temple do not bring life or draw us close to God, only Jesus does (cf. 1 Tim 2:5).
    - ii. It's easy to live by rules, keeping score, counting our own righteousness by human effort, performance & works vs. by the gifting/imputation of Jesus by grace.
6. Application: What are you using as the temple/law instead of Jesus?
- a. What idol do you use to draw close to God & meet with Him instead of Jesus?
    - i. What do you use to atone for sin instead of Jesus? Guilt, sacrifice, "be good", make a deal with God?
  - b. What minimum standard of external activity do you use to draw close to God?
    - i. Church attendance at church, baptism equated with salvation.
  - c. What maximum standard of external activity do you use to draw close to God?
    - i. Serving too much, staying busy "for God", but not actually in a relationship with Jesus (cf. Matt 7:23).
  - d. Church, baptism, prayer, Bible reading, etc are all good things, but are an external response to Jesus' love, not a way to earn religious brownie points
    - i. It's not about what we do or don't do (external practices); only Jesus makes us closer to God.

### **Conclusion [Acts 6:15]**

1. [15] As Stephen is scrutinized & judged, his appearance is like that of an angel.
  - a. This describes the glory of God's presence in God's messengers, emanating the truth/power of Christ.
  - b. He's made his choice, chosen Jesus' side, though it will cost his life; it's that important.
  - c. Application: What about you? What would you die for?
2. Stephen shared the truth about Jesus by being filled with God's wisdom/Spirit through relationship with Jesus.
  - a. He shared that Jesus destroys/fulfills every limited religious system; this is the truth he's willing to die for.
  - b. We must cherish Jesus more than anything, as our Temple/Law, High Priest/sacrificial lamb, righteousness.
  - c. Like the people in this account, we have to choose a side; we cannot sit on the fence.
    - i. Either put God in a box of external practices in a manageable, comfortable, mediocre life on our own terms & self-made rules, but never really know Jesus.
    - ii. Or Jesus is true God, everything I need/long for, & I'll follow Him, no matter the cost.