

GOD'S SAVING PURPOSES PREVAIL OVER HUMAN HATRED

Acts 6:8-15

INTRODUCTION

C.S. Lewis the late British professor of Medieval Literature at Oxford University and apologist for the Christian faith has somewhere written that if Satan cannot make you licentious he will make religious. That is, Satan's goal of keeping humans from embracing Christ as he is presented in the gospel is accomplished either by enslaving us to our passions, that is, to sex or food or drink or possessions or entertainment or hunting or scrapbooking or other earthly pleasures or he enslaves us by making us religious people, that is people who are confident of our own righteousness because we follow some religious law.

Eugene Peterson describes how this works as he reflects on religious leaders. He says, "Deception is nowhere more common than in religion. And the persons most easily and damningly deceived are the leaders. Those who deceive others are first themselves deceived, for not many, I think, begin with evil intent. The devil, after all is a spiritual being. His usual mode of temptation is not to an obvious evil but to an apparent good. The commonest forms of devil-inspired worship do not take place furtively at black masses with decapitated cats but under the bright lights of acclaim and glory, in a swirl of organ music (or in our day to the music of a worship band.)..."

In the record of Jesus' life contained in the gospels and in the record of the advance of the early church in Acts, the people most fiercely opposed to Christ and to his gospel are the religious people, most often, Jewish religious people but also idol worshipping religious people. When I say religious people I mean people who profess faith in and love for God, who pray and study the tenants of their religion, who gather together with other believers to worship and learn together, who do good works because of their religious convictions and who hold to a lifestyle that conforms to the teaching of their religion. In other words, I'm talking about people who look and sound and act a lot like us.

In our text this morning we are looking at how very religious, law-abiding, Bible believing, Yahweh worshipping people hate and thus oppose the gospel of Jesus and therefore seek to shut the mouth of one of its spokespersons. We have here the beginning of the story describing the martyrdom of Stephen. Stephen, if you will remember, is one of the seven men chosen by the 10,000 members of the congregation of the 1st church of Jerusalem and ordained by the apostles to oversee the daily distribution of food to the poor, especially making sure that the Greek speaking, ethnically Jewish, Christian widows were not overlooked. This man, as we learn in our text today, in addition to his duties of overseeing the fair distribution of aid was also engaged in proclaiming the gospel among the Greek speaking Jews in Jerusalem and like the apostles, confirming the truthfulness of that gospel by performing signs and wonders. The religious people to whom Stephen is speaking seek to overcome him first by debate and when that fails by slander and finally by arresting him and putting him on trial with the use of false witnesses. What I aim for us to see in this text is the pattern of hatred and opposition that characterizes religious people when they are confronted with the gospel. It is a fact that throughout the last 2000 years of church history the most sustained persecution of the gospel centered church of Jesus has been from the most religiously committed communities and often from those religious communities who profess adherence to the same Bible and the same Christ that the true church embraces. As religious people we need to evaluate our own response to this gospel in order to discern whether or not we have truly embraced the true gospel or are "holding to a form of godliness while denying its power", to quote the apostle Paul. As we consider the hatred of these religious people I aim for us to look at ourselves to find out if we are trusting Jesus as he is revealed in the gospel or if we are trusting our religious way of life.

MAIN POINT

The gospel is hated by religious, law-abiding people because...

I. The gospel is about God's work (vv. 8-10)

The first thing I want you to see is how carefully Luke, as he records this historical event, shows that the hero here is not Stephen but the Triune God. Luke wants us to know that this boldness and courage and miracle working power and wisdom does not come from Stephen and is not given to Stephen because of who he is or what he has done or decided. The first indication of this is in v. 8 where we are told that he is a man full of grace and power. Stephen's ability to perform signs and wonders and to boldly preach the gospel is first attributed to God's grace. This means that God has freely, contrary to what Stephen deserves and without regard for anything he has done or decided given to Stephen the abilities by which he does what he does. The power he exercises in healing people and driving out demons is not due to his faith, nor his godliness or his disciplined prayer but rather due entirely to God's free gift. Remember how Peter and John responded to the crowd that came running after they healed the crippled man sitting at the entry to the temple? They said, "Why do you stare at us as if by our own power or godliness we had made this man walk?" Peter and John knew that all that they did came from God as a free gift and was not a response of God to something they were or did.

The second indication that all that Stephen does is not Stephen's work but God's work is to be seen in v. 10. The Greek speaking, law-abiding Jewish people who were arguing and debating with Stephen were unable to overcome him but were instead silenced by his arguments because of the wisdom and Spirit by which he spoke. The way Luke describes this is a direct recalling of what Jesus promised the apostles in Luke 21 when he told them that they would be hated and persecuted and brought before courts and kings and governors because of his name. He told them "not to worry beforehand how you will defend yourselves. For I will give you words and wisdom that none of your adversaries will be able to resist or contradict." Stephen does not silence his opponents because he is so smart or he has prayed and fasted or because of anything in him but entirely because Jesus, by his HS, has given him the ability to do so. This way of salvation that has come to us through Christ's death and resurrection and the life that flows from it is entirely a work of God and not a work of man.

The apostle Paul says this most forcefully in 1 Corinthians 15:10 where he says, "But by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace to me was not without effect. No, I worked harder than all of them—yet not I, but the grace of God that was with me." What Paul says here is the same thing that Luke is showing us in his historical account of Stephen. Paul saw that Jesus is the long awaited Messiah and that he, Paul was fighting against him by his persecution of the church because God graciously chose to enable Paul to see this. If God had not chosen to reveal this to Paul but had simply left him in the hardness of his heart Paul would have justly been sent to hell for his persecution of the church. But Paul received from God repentance, that is a recognition of the horror of his sin and of the just wrath of God against his sin and so, like a man fleeing from the fire he fled out of his sin and he fled into the safety of Christ. He trusted that Jesus' obedient life, willing death, powerful resurrection and present intercession was the reason that God was not going to send him to hell. Paul knows that his faith in Christ is not due to anything in him but is a free gift from God to him. It is an undeserved gift. He didn't do or decide anything that obligated God to give him the gift of faith. It goes on. Paul is a slave of Jesus and his apostle because God freely chose to make him so, not because Paul was so godly or had so much faith. Paul has joyfully endured all the suffering and loss that was the result of his preaching of the gospel because God enabled him to do so. He worked hard because God freely, in spite of his wickedness, enabled him to work.

Religious people hate the "gospel of God's grace" because they are taken up with their work, not God's work, their goodness, not God's goodness. Religious people are not depending upon and do not want to depend upon God's work but only upon their own work. They complain when they hear this gospel of free and sovereign grace that it's not fair that God forgives and uses bad people or that it creates passive people who refuse to work for God. Salvation from beginning to end is a work of God and not in any part the work of men. God freely and graciously chooses and saves and equips and enables hell-deserving sinners to do good works only because God works in them contrary to what they deserve. Is this the gospel you have embraced? Do you know that the only reason you have repented of your sins and trusted in Christ is because God graciously enabled you to do so? Do you know that the only reason you ever love your wife or respect your husband or obey your parents or train your children or restrain your sexual appetites or have courage to share the gospel or pray is because God,

contrary to what you deserve has chosen to give you the desire and ability to do so? Is this the gospel in which you rejoice?

The gospel is hated by religious, law-abiding people because...

- *The gospel is about God's work*
- *And because...*

II. The gospel condemns human work and pretension (vv. 11-14)

When these people could not overcome Stephen by argumentation but rather were overcome by his argumentation, they resorted to slander and false testimony. This is exactly what happened to Jesus. The Jewish leaders repeatedly sought to trap him in what he was saying so they could condemn him but at the end, after he silenced the Sadducees with their absurd question regarding marriage at the resurrection Luke tells us, "And no one dared to ask him any more questions (Luke 20:40)." In this story we see Jesus again silencing the religious but now through the mouth of Stephen and so these religious people resort to the same tactics they resorted to in the case of Jesus. They stirred up the Jewish people and their leadership by stating that Stephen had blasphemed Moses and God. So they ambushed Stephen and dragged him before the Sanhedrin, that same body of Jewish religious leaders who had condemned Jesus to death and threatened and beaten the apostles.

The opponents of the gospel produce false witnesses to condemn Stephen in front of the Jewish ruling council. They accuse him of continually speaking against the temple and against the customs that Moses handed down to them. Specifically they accuse Stephen of saying that Jesus is going to destroy the temple and change those customs, that tradition that came from Moses. It is quite certain that the substance of their accusation is indeed what Stephen was teaching in exactly the same way that Jesus taught these things. As the entire NT makes clear, Jesus is the fulfillment of the entire OT Law of Moses. The physical temple is but a shadow, a type, an illustration of the true, heavenly temple, where God lives. It is a symbol of Jesus' physical body in which the fullness of God dwells in bodily form. It is a symbol of that temple where he now lives on this earth, the church. Indeed the entire Law of Moses is a revelation of our Lord Jesus Christ and his salvation and so with the coming of Christ the physical temple and the law associated with it has ended. Stephen never spoke contemptuously of the Law of Moses but always reverently and respectfully. However, he did not hesitate to prove from the OT law that salvation cannot be found in anyone or anything apart from Christ who is the fulfillment of that law. The false witness that these religious people bear against Stephen is in knowingly twisting the meaning of what he was saying, again, just like those who bore false witness against Christ.

However, these religious people will not listen to Stephen's explanation of how Jesus is the subject of the law because they view their relationship to God as being determined by the fact that because of whom they are--the descendants of Abraham and what they have done, obeyed the law, God loves them. They are confident that God will accept them because they go to the temple and they follow the customs that Moses prescribes in the law. They view the law as God's instructions on how to live so that he will reward them with heaven. They do not view themselves as sinful people but as righteous people. Luke shows in his narrative the fatal flaw in this sort of human religious pretension. In their supposed zeal for God's law they break the law by bearing false witness against Stephen. The ninth commandment of the Ten Commandments says, "You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor." Luke uses the exact same words to explain what they are doing and thus shows human inability to obey God.

The gospel of Jesus Christ, the gospel of God's grace is fierce in its denunciation of the ability of human beings to do anything that can gain right standing with God. It insists that there is nothing **in** human beings and nothing that human beings can **do or decide** that in any way draws forth God's love and favor. The reason for this is seen right here. The most zealous and best of human efforts are always riddled with sin. Just like these religious folks who are condemning Stephen for blasphemy are at the very same time breaking God's law by bearing false witness, so it is with every human being. Paul says it this way in Romans 2:1-3, "You then have no excuse, you who pass judgment on someone else because at whatever point you judge the other you

condemn yourself because you who pass judgment do the same thing. Now we know that God's judgment against those who do such things is based on truth but when you, a mere man pass judgment on them and yet do the same things, do you think you will escape God's judgment?" Think about this: every time you or I pass judgment on another person we condemn ourselves because we do the very thing we condemn others for doing.

All humans do this but especially we religious humans do this. Parents scream at their children for screaming at one another. We condemn sexual perverts or homosexuals while we look at pornography or harbor lustful thoughts in our hearts. We shake our head at Bernard Madoff while we steal time and supplies from our employers or download music and videos from the internet without paying or don't report all our income on our tax forms. We look down our noses at scantily clad women while we flirt with the married man in our Bible study. The gospel declares that there is no one righteous, not even one. There is no one who understands, no one who seeks God. All have turned away, they have together become worthless. There is no one who does good, not even one." We are all by nature dead in our trespasses and sins. All of us, apart from God's grace in the gospel are hostile to God. For all our protesting to the contrary we do not submit to God's law because we are unable to submit to what we hate.

How often have I heard religious sinners, when told these things protest that they have never hated God. They have always believed in God. They have always wanted to know God. Friends, that is just not true. Every human being from the moment of conception is a determined enemy of God because we each want to be enemies of God. Our rebellion is seen in exactly the same way the rebellion of these religious people is seen, while flaunting our moral goodness we break the standard of goodness, the law of God. We betray ourselves when we shake our head in disbelief at the behavior of others and say things like, "How can they act like that?" "I would never do that." We show that we have not really learned the gospel when we wonder how it is that people don't believe in Christ or God. The chief evidence that a person has been conquered by the gospel of Jesus is true humility, an openness to acknowledge our own sins and a truly gracious way of dealing with other people. People who are conquered by the gospel are not preoccupied with their own behavior as much as they are preoccupied with the person and work of Jesus. Gospel conquered people think much of Jesus and think very little of themselves. Gospel conquered people are fixated upon the moral performance of Jesus, not their own moral performance. Gospel conquered people are offended by their own sins, not the sins of others. Gospel conquered people are stunned by the suffering and death of Jesus for their sins, not their failures or the failures of others.

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- *The gospel is about God's work*
- *The gospel condemns human work and pretension*
- *And because...*

III. The gospel is the only way to know God and be loved by him (vv. 13-15)

It is pretty obvious that the heart of the controversy between these religious people and Stephen is who has the correct answer to this question: how are human beings made right with God? What are the conditions upon which God welcomes a human being into his presence, into fellowship with himself? The religious leaders would give one answer and Stephen and the church would give another answer. Both would claim that their answer comes from God through the Law of Moses. So how do we know which one is correct? What is fascinating in this historical narrative is how Luke points towards the answer of who is correct in their understanding of the OT law, the Jewish leaders or Stephen? In v. 15 Luke reports that while Stephen stands in front of the Sanhedrin, after the prosecution's case was presented and prior to his giving his defense and while everyone stares at him intently, his face took on the appearance of an angel. Commentators are divided over whether this was an actual, supernatural glow that came upon Stephen or simply Luke using a metaphor to describe the sort of confident, calm, determined appearance that Stephen had. It is not important that we know which it is, what is important is the image that Luke draws for us. Angels are often characterized as "shining

ones". In Revelation 10:1 an angel is said to have a face like the sun. The image Luke paints for us is that of Stephen's face shining. Can you think of any other human's face that was shining in the Bible? There is only one and his name is Moses as he comes down from Mt. Sinai, from being in the presence of God, receiving the very law that is at the heart of this controversy. By adding this little descriptive detail, Luke is showing God's confirmation that Stephen is the one who correctly understands Moses, not the Jewish leaders. It is his face that shines, like Moses' face, not their face.

The answer that these religious people would give to the question of how to be made right with God is that you have to go to the temple and offer the sacrifices. You have to follow the Law of Moses, keep the commandments. Their answer is the one that religious people always give, though the details of the answer may vary. Religious people answer that it is my behavior, my decisions, my actions, my faith that determine whether or not God accepts me and/or is happy with me. God accepts good, obedient, faithful people and he condemns the disobedient. I have no doubt that if we took a survey at the mall here in Janesville and asked 100 people how it is that people go to heaven the vast majority of the people will say that God accepts good people into heaven. If you were to ask, "what does it mean to be good?"—they would then give you the details of which religious and/or moral behaviors you need in order to make the cut. The answer that Stephen, the apostles and the true church of Jesus would give is this: you must acknowledge that you are a hell-deserving sinner and enemy of God. You must turn away from your sins and self-sufficiency and place your faith in Jesus, the Messiah, the Son of God who perfectly obeyed God's law and who willingly died on the cross and whom God raised from the dead and who now sits at God's right hand interceding for his people until the day he returns to finish what he started. You must believe that you are loved and accepted by God not because of anything you ever did or will do or decided but because of what Jesus did and decided on your behalf. The only people who will be in heaven are those who are united to Jesus and his saving work through the life giving work of the Holy Spirit who gives us that faith which unites us to him.

All of us are religious people. We all perform religious actions; we come to church, read our Bibles, pray, go to Bible studies, try to live moral lives. All who truly trust in Jesus will do religious things. Thus, we are all confronted with this same question: is it my work or the work of Jesus alone by which I am accepted by God? Am I saved by free grace or by grace plus my decision to accept Jesus or plus my obedience to God's law or plus my reading the Bible or plus whatever? Is the life I live the fruit of, the result of this gospel of grace or is my lifestyle the reason that God loves and accepts me? The only explanation for the courage, the power, the boldness, the wisdom, the holiness of Stephen is the life giving good news of Jesus Christ who is the fulfillment of God's Law. We will live like Stephen only to the degree that we embrace and depend upon and are conquered by this same gospel. The grace and power of God only accompany this gospel and so I urge you to learn and depend upon this gospel alone. May our faces shine with the glory of Christ because we are consumed with his glory in this gospel.

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