

Acts 6:8-15

Outward Church: The Way of Jesus

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What does it mean to **follow Jesus**? The early Christians in the book of Acts identifies themselves as “the way” (Acts 9:2).¹ It sounds kind of mystical—“the way...” They were following “the way” of Jesus, who identified himself as the way, the truth, and the life (John 14:6). Jesus tells us what his way is like:

Luke 9:23 (NIV) Then he said to them all: “Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me.

The way of Jesus requires us to deny our **flesh, passions, and desires**, pick up our **crosses** each day, and follow him (Gal 5:24). To follow him **means to trust and obey** him no matter what. A man named **Stephen** is a member of “the way.” He’s one of its leaders tasked with taking care of the **Greek-speaking widows**. He is daily walking the way of Jesus and it costs him **everything**.

Tomorrow is **Memorial Day**, which is a day we honor the **soldiers** who have **died serving** in our **military**. It’s a **solemn day** to remember those who gave up their lives **on our behalf**. Today is a bit of a Memorial Day for our church as we remember the **first Christian Soldier** to give up his life on our behalf, Stephen. He died unarmed and defenseless but waging a **battle** between heaven and earth by **preaching the gospel of Jesus Christ**. Stephen **denied himself**, picked up his cross, and followed Jesus.

Following Jesus means giving our everything to him.

Stephen becomes the **first martyr** in the Bible. The **word** martyr actually comes from the Greek word for “**witness**” (“**martys**”). Remember when Jesus told his disciples the plan he had for them?

Acts 1:8 (NIV) But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses (my “**martys**”) in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.”

It’s here in Stephen’s story that the “**witness**” begins to turn violent, not by the Christians, never by the Christians, but by the ones who persecute them.

Acts 6:8-9 (NIV) Now Stephen, a man full of God’s grace and power, performed great wonders and signs among the people. ⁹ Opposition arose, however, from members of the Synagogue of the Freedmen (as it was called)—Jews of Cyrene and Alexandria as well as the provinces of Cilicia and Asia—who began to argue with Stephen.

God’s grace enables Stephen to persevere when fellow Jews from all over the ancient world begin to oppose him. Can you imagine what that must have felt like? Being **opposed** and **ostracized** by your community? Here is performing signs and wonders, doing miracles, and instead of believing they argue with him. Stephen pays a **high price** to follow Jesus.

1) He sacrifices his social support to follow Jesus.

When he heard the gospel, believed, and began to tell others about Christ, he **lost his Jewish community**. He lost the **entire support system**. As a Hellenist, a Greek-speaking Jew, he probably depended on people like

the “**Synagogue of the Freedmen**” for **social and economic help**. The Synagogue of the Freedmen was made up of Jews who had been taken into captivity and slavery, likely in Rome, managed to get free, and then came back to Jerusalem. They probably **spoke Greek** like Stephen. *The first cost he paid was social.*

Back when I worked in DC one of my coworkers who was around my age was a **Jewish man**. We were talking about our beliefs over lunch and I mentioned that **Messianic Jews** are Jewish people who believe in Jesus. **How** he responded has really **influenced** my understanding of what it means for someone who is Jewish to become Christian. He said something like, “You can’t be a Jew and Christian. You’re not a Jew.” There was simply **no room** for the **concept**. As a **white American** descended from **German roots**, I don’t understand the **social cost** many people pay to follow Christ. If they’re born **Jewish, Muslim, Buddhist**, or a part of another religious community with strong **ties to family**, it’s **incredibly costly** to come to Christ. Your family may **ostracize** or **disown** you. You may lose your whole community.

Maybe you’re thinking about **believing in Jesus** but you’re **afraid** of your **family**. That’s why we need to experience **grace**. Stephen experienced the **grace of Jesus** and it transformed him. He was **forgiven** and you can be too. Where we lose our family Jesus will give us a **new community**, your **church family** that loves you. God’s grace can give you the courage you need to pay the **social cost**. But it costs even more.

2) He experiences great injustice as he follows Jesus.

Stephen experienced injustice as he was wrongly and unfairly accused.

Acts 6:11-14 (NIV) Then they secretly persuaded some men to say, “We have heard Stephen speak blasphemous words against Moses and against God.”

12 So they stirred up the people and the elders and the teachers of the law. They seized Stephen and brought him before the Sanhedrin. 13 They produced false witnesses, who testified, “This fellow never stops speaking against this holy place and against the law. 14 For we have heard him say that this Jesus of Nazareth will destroy this place and change the customs Moses handed down to us.”

What are all the **injustices** we see Stephen experiencing?

- a. v11. Stephen is falsely accused of **blasphemy** - denying the one true God.
- b. v12. Stephen is wrongly dragged before the **Sanhedrin** - the **Supreme Court** of Jerusalem.
- c. v13. Stephen is wrongly accused by **false witnesses**.
- d. v.13-14. Stephen is wrongly accused of wanting to **destroy the temple and Moses’ law**.

Can you imagine how easy it would have been to feel angry over the “**unfairness**” of the situation? Stephen is about to be treated not just **unfairly**, but **cruelly**. He’ll be **stoned to death without a fair trial**. I think Stephen’s story **can give us a greater capacity to empathize** with the **unjust suffering of others, no matter their situation**. As we think of **Memorial Day** and those who have **died in war** or as **prisoners of war**, **Stephen’s death** can give us a **greater empathy** for the **horrible suffering they** and **so many** have experienced in **wartime**. Stephen’s **unjust suffering** can also give us **greater empathy** for the **injustice in our society**, for the families of **Ahmaud Arbery** and **Breonna Taylor**, an **unarmed black man shot dead while jogging** and an unarmed black woman shot dead while **sleeping in her own home**. How about all **wrongdoing** and **suffering Jewish people** face? We remember the **Pittsburgh synagogue shooting** in 2018. You cannot be **anti-semitic** and **pro Jesus**. As Christians we **especially remember** how Stephen has gone before all the **martyrs** who were **persecuted** and **unjustly killed** to **share the name of Jesus**. *Stephen experienced great injustice to follow Jesus.*

Following Jesus means giving our everything to him. Jesus may ask us to give up our social support to him, or to even be treated unjustly, but we will never have to give up Jesus.

3) Stephen gives up everything but Jesus.

Have you ever heard that phrase, “**W.W.J.D. What would Jesus do?**” When I was growing up it was popular to have **W.W.J.D. bracelets**, so that if you get into a **situation** that was **morally ambiguous** you just have to look down at your **wrist** and you’d know what to do. Should I **speed** on the way to church? Should I eat **another cookie**? Should I ask that girl to **prom**? What would Jesus do? It’s kind of a **silly question**, isn’t it? Well, Stephen **literally did what Jesus did**.

- e. Matt 26:59 - Jesus was dragged before the **Sanhedrin** for an **unfair trial**. So is Stephen.²
- f. Matt 26:60 - Jesus was accused by **false witnesses**. So is Stephen.
- g. Matt 26:61 - Jesus was falsely accused of wanting to **destroy the temple**.³ So is Stephen.
- h. Matt 26:65 - Jesus was was charged with **blasphemy**. So is Stephen.

Stephen **really did** what **Jesus did**. Look at **how closely** Stephen **imitates Jesus**.⁴

Acts 7:59-60 (NIV) While they were stoning him, Stephen prayed, “Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.”
60 Then he fell on his knees and cried out, “Lord, do not hold this sin against them.” When he had said this, he fell asleep.

Stephen commits his spirit to the Lord and asks the Lord to not hold their sin against them before dying. Now look at Jesus as he hung on the cross.

Luke 23:34a, 46 (NIV) Jesus said, “Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing.” ... 46 Jesus called out with a loud voice, “Father, into your hands I commit my spirit.” When he had said this, he breathed his last.

Stephen gives up everything but Jesus. Jesus calls us to the **same thing**. Maybe your **family treats you poorly** because you **love Jesus**. You too can cry out, “**Father forgive them**, for they do not know what they are doing.” Following Jesus might **not look exactly like** Stephen today. But how can we really follow Jesus **so that when people look at us they take Jesus seriously**? When people look at us and the way we live our lives and the way we talk about Jesus, wouldn’t it be amazing if they thought, “It’s not just a religious game. They really take following Jesus seriously. They really love God. They really love the poor and needy.” That **doesn’t mean** we are **somber** or **sad**. Stephen wasn’t. He was **powerful** and **full** of the **Holy Spirit**. Let’s pick up our crosses and follow Jesus like him.

But this is far too big a task in our **own power**. In our own power we’ll get caught up in a **performance**, in looking good to **impress** others. They’ll **sniff it out** and we’ll know it’s not true. We need it to be real.

The Holy Spirit makes following Jesus possible.

Do you remember why the people chose Stephen to be a leader in the early church? Because he was **full of faith and the Holy Spirit**.

Acts 6:5 (NIV) This proposal pleased the whole group. They chose Stephen, a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit;

Verse 8 says he was full of grace and the Spirit’s power.

Acts 6:8 (NIV) Now Stephen, a man full of God's grace and power, performed great wonders and signs among the people.

This tells us Stephen **wasn't just a good or noble man**. He was **filled** with the **Holy Spirit**, he **believed in Christ Jesus**, and he was a **man marked by grace**. All these things **enabled him to walk the path of Jesus**.

I recently read an **picture** of the **Holy Spirit** I think is worth sharing. In *The Art of Pastoring*, David Hansen talks of his time pastoring in **Montana**. From his **kitchen window** he could see **birds flying**. He saw how **geese** fly differently than **birds of prey** like **eagles** and **hawks**. Geese have to flap their wings to fly but birds of prey find a **current of hot air** and let it carry them up. The hot air lifts them to new heights where they can hunt and soar.⁵ That's why he spends **fifteen minutes** in prayer every morning. He wants to catch the hot air. He wants to soar upward with the power of the Holy Spirit. We need the Holy Spirit to carry us upward. This is why we pray. *The Holy Spirit makes following Jesus possible*.

Following Jesus will change you.

Following Jesus changes Stephen.

Acts 6:15 (NIV) All who were sitting in the Sanhedrin looked intently at Stephen, and they saw that his face was like the face of an angel.

Stephen **experiences God** in such a way that it **changes** how **others see him**. His **face lit up** in a way that had only been **recorded twice** before in the **entire Bible**. The first time was when Moses was on **Mount Sinai talking with God** after leading the people out of captivity in Egypt (Exod 34:6-7).

Exodus 34:29 (NIV) When Moses came down from Mount Sinai with the two tablets of the covenant law in his hands, he was not aware that his face was radiant because he had spoken with the Lord.

Following God changed Moses. God's relationship with Moses so **transformed Moses** that he had to cover his face with a **veil**. The only other person to have a face like **Moses** and **Stephen** is **Jesus**.

Luke 9:29 (NIV) As [Jesus] was praying, the appearance of his face changed, and his clothes became as bright as a flash of lightning.

I'm **not saying** that if you follow Jesus your **face will change**, but **something will change**. You might begin to reflect the **glory of God** and to have an **inner peace** that **others can see**. I can tell you one day our faces will **light up forever** when we come into the presence of Christ. Here's our **guarantee**:

Jesus gives himself to any who follow him.

I'd like you to **answer** this **question**, "**What does it mean** for you to **deny yourself**, take up your **cross daily**, and **follow Jesus**?" The **WWII martyr Dietrich Bonhoeffer** says, "When Christ calls a man, he bids him come and die." Jesus asks us to follow him with **everything we have**. **How** can he ask this of us? Because **he bears the true** burden. We carry a cross because he carried a cross first. He bore it to **Golgotha**, the place of the **skull**. There he **bore the full weight of God's wrath** so that you and I can be **forgiven** and **renewed**. He gave up everything for you. He asks you to **repent**, **believe**, and pick up your **cross** and follow him. The **Holy Spirit** will help you. You're **not alone**. We're in this together. *Let's just follow Jesus one day at a time*.

Numbers 6:24-26 (ESV)

24 The Lord bless you and keep you;

25 the Lord make his face to shine upon you and be gracious to you;
26 the Lord lift up his countenance upon you and give you peace.

Pastor [Jonathan Romig](#) preached this message on Facebook Live during the 2020 COVID-19 (Coronavirus) lockdown in Massachusetts. You can download a PDF copy of this sermon above, which includes endnotes and references, or share it through [Apple podcasts](#) or [Google Play Music](#). Read the [story of our church here](#).

Discussion Questions

1. What does it mean for you to deny yourself, take up your cross daily, and follow Jesus?
2. What social costs might you have to pay for following Jesus?
3. What injustices might you experience for following Christ?
4. What type of wrongs did Stephen and Jesus experience?
5. How does the Holy Spirit empower us to follow Jesus?
6. What does it mean to be full of the Holy Spirit?
7. How can we seek more of the Holy Spirit?
8. How can you deepen your prayer life?
9. How might Jesus change you as you follow him?
10. Will you follow Jesus?

¹ The way - Acts 9:2; 19:9, 23; 22:4; 24:14, 22

² Kevin DeYoung; Chris Ranson. *Acts: A Visual Guide*. Christian Focus Publications. Scotland. 2018. See “When Angels Prepare to Die - Acts 6:8-15.”

³ c.f., Mark 13:2; John 2:19

⁴ John 18:19 - Jesus was questioned by the **high priest**. So is Stephen (Acts 7:1).

⁵ David J. Hansen. *The Art of Pastoring: Ministry Without All the Answers* (Kindle Locations 501-505). Kindle Edition.