September 30, 2018

Acts 6:7 – 7:60 & Business Meeting

Brody Holloway

We are going to spend a few minutes—we warned you about this, we prepared you, or we gave you a heads up—and we are going to talk a little bit about vision and the direction of Red Oak Church. Do you like the new structure to worship? Did you notice it? We are going to try to make sure that as a body of believers that we publicly confess together, that we worship through confession of who God is, and that we pray together. One of the things that we would be hypocritical to do would be to study through books of the Bible together as a church and expect individuals to respond to that teaching but not to corporately, as a body of believers, respond to that teaching. And the book of Acts is teaching us some things about how we need to view our Sunday evening, corporate worship service[[1]](#footnote-1). We’ve repeatedly said we don’t live in first century Jerusalem or Palestine and so we’re not going to try to completely emulate and mirror what was going on there but there were certain components and elements in the New Testament Church that we, as your pastors, have realized have been somewhat lacking in our corporate worship; prayer, and confession, and more time spent reflecting on God’s Word, and not just singing some songs and hearing the Word, but that everybody is involved and that we do this together. So, are excited about that. Subtle changes that I think are going to have a dynamic and powerful effect on our church.

Additionally, as we look outside of the walls, the last two weeks you’ve heard bits and pieces during the sermons, as we’ve talked about things we think God is leading us to as a church. The earliest roots of Red Oak Church were when Little, and I, and Shawn Clark, and six high school kids were meeting in our living room and having a Bible study. That went on for several years. There were no churches at the time with an actual youth group in the community and we were doing that on Monday nights. That was many years ago and eventually that grew into a Bible study and those six high school students became adults, got married, things snowballed, and we kept doing this on Monday nights. Bo Gray, who is actually here with us worshipping, came to me one time and said, “Either you’re a church or you’re not. You’ve got to pick a team.” Do you remember that? He came to me and he said, “You’ve got to pick a team. You can’t do a Monday night Bible study and function as a church but not call yourself a church.” We are talking about a local body of believers when we talk about the Church, the *ekklesia*. There is the big “C” Church and then there’s the local church, so the Lord started to impress on us to form and develop a team and start an actual church, with the church being a local body of believers that has clear identity, clear vision, and clear distinctives. We laid that out and mapped that out and it took us several years[[2]](#footnote-2). We moved so slowly because most of us have been through bad situations, and church splits, and ugly scenarios, and we wanted to lay out a biblical foundation. So, we’ve now done that and God has blessed the church, and grown the church, and it’s continuing to grow in a small community.

What’s happened is that for years I’ve said to people, “We’re a church of 150 people in a community of 1,500 people, so that’s pretty cool.” But we’re a church of people who come from Bryson City, and all across Graham County, and all throughout the lower end of Cherokee County, and Murphy, and beyond, and even some out of Clay County. We’ve had people attend regularly from as far away as Georgia and Tennessee. If you draw a circle around the homes of the members of Red Oak Church, we would encompass about 40,000 people; so we are not doing all that we could do to reach our communities with the Gospel. Now, we don’t want to grow to just numerically be able to have numbers but we want to impact more people with the Gospel and we need to understand that there are about 25,000 people in Cherokee County alone. Bring in Graham County and bring in at least this end of Swain County and those numbers grow drastically and dramatically. So, what are we doing and how are we going to engage communities around us? Where’s the vision? There has to be vision for this church to not be a status quo, go-through-the-motions, let’s-just-do-Sunday, and move on kind of church.

So, there are several things that are on the table. One is that we’re beginning the process of praying, and we are asking you now to pray with us and to get excited with us, because we really feel like God is compelling us to purchase land and to have our own place. For those of you who may not even know this, this building doesn’t belong to Red Oak Church. This is a leased or rented building and it’s a really good deal we’ve got on it because I know a guy. We have had free rent. You might ask why we need to move outside of this building and there are several reasons. There is restriction in programming. During the wintertime or when it’s raining, we’ve got kids in a different building, small children. Also, when Snowbird Outfitters is in full swing and functioning you have students all over this place that are not connected to Red Oak. You guys have been here and it’s just a little bit of a difficult situation. We need a building where our children and our children’s programs are all there. We need a building where people in the community identify Red Oak Church autonomously or separately and distinctively from Snowbird Wilderness Outfitters. That’s very important. Because I’m involved in both ministries, it is so rare that somebody identifies me with Red Oak Church and not Snowbird Wilderness Outfitters. So, this church has a clear and defined identity but having our own location is important also. You guys know the old business slogan, “Location, location, location,” right? Well, we are tucked out here kind of out of the way and the land we are praying about—we’re not ready to roll that out just yet because we are going to go speak to the man this week. Just pray for favor and hopefully we will be able to give a report on that next week. It would be in a much higher trafficked area where several thousand people pass per day, so it would give us a good avenue to minister in the town of Andrews, to local people within that community, but where people from other communities could also get to us relatively quickly. So, pray with us on that. Because what we would do is we would buy the land and pay for it debt free and then we would then save the money and build a church building and pay for it debt free. We are not going to go into debt over any of this. We are not going to do it.

God has blessed us and we are in a very gracious situation where, right now, we have no paid staff. We’ve never had a paid staff member. That’s phenomenal. That’s incredible. It’s not a point of being able to boast as a ministry but it’s a very unique situation where God has provided in other ways for those who are in leadership in this church. But that leads me to my next point of vision. We are going to hire a fulltime staff member, a children and youth pastor. We are going to hire him. We believe that as Pinwheel continues to grow, and blossom, and explode. We feel that the areas of ministry concerning family counseling, addiction ministry, teaching ministry, and worship ministry, that there are people in positions to handle that right now and be in leadership over those areas and we don’t need to bring somebody in to do any of that. But right now, the area that is exploding is ministry in the community to young children, both through Pinwheel, and I don’t know if you’ve looked around. Somebody asked me one time, “How many folks are at Red Oak on a Sunday?” While I was thinking about it, he said, “Not counting kids.” I said, “Oh, actually, we count them at Red Oak. They’re humans.” We count people. We have a bunch of kids. Literally, I’ve joked a lot and you’ve heard me say this through the years, we’re trying to outbreed the Muslims and we’re on our way. So, if we are going to train up children in the way they should go we believe that needs to happen in the home, first and foremost, but God is starting to bring in kids who are not from Gospel-centered homes. Pinwheel is exploding and the next thing we’re going to talk about is Pinwheel but we feel like we need a guy here, or maybe a guy and a gal, a couple, who could come in and oversee our children’s ministry. Right now, we are doing all of that with lay leaders. We would continue to use them. Nobody is going to get less responsibility but we just need somebody to oversee it and we need somebody who has a mind for vision and a heart for kids and families. We need to be in the homes of families and it’s very difficult. We are spread thin. The elders and deacons are spread thin.

Then, with the student ministry, I love what we are doing with our youth. We have a very discipleship focus. It’s not programmatic. We study the Bible. Right now, our youth meet on Wednesdays. It’s called ROY—Red Oak Youth. It’s a fantastic acrostic. We’re studying through the book of Ecclesiastes and it’s been phenomenal. Our kids are eating it up and they’re responding well and bringing friends. We’re encouraging them to bring more friends. We want to see our student ministry grow. We want to see kids from surrounding communities and the schools here on Wednesday nights hearing the Word and then, hopefully, that becomes a corridor to get them and their families into Red Oak. We believe that the first ever, fulltime staff position that we will need at Red Oak is going to be a children and youth pastor. No church, I guarantee you, has ever done that, where that was the first guy they hired. It’s never been done. We like to do things differently, but not just for the sake of doing it differently; we really do feel like that’s the direction God is calling us.

The next position that we feel like God is preparing us to fill would be in the next three to five years, to bring on a fulltime family/marriage/addiction counselor; someone who wears that counseling hat. Right now, Shawn Clark and I primarily handle those responsibilities and there is a lot of that. Shawn stays extremely busy. We outsource a lot of that right now. We do a ton of work with an organization, a counseling center, in Knoxville. Many of you have been there. We trust them and they’re great. They’re Gospel-centered but we need to be able to do that in our own community with our people, so that will be the next step. That’s down the road a little bit. So, pray with us as we seek who God would have to fill that role. We have names, and we’ve put some things on the table, and we are praying specifically for some people, and we are going to be approaching people and having conversations in the next two weeks. We will be revealing more of that as the Lord progresses it and moves us forward.

We talked about the Pinwheel program and the children’s program a couple of weeks ago. The after-school tutoring program that God has given us a vision to go to the town and ask if we could get the old Power Partners’ building. Judy Corn, for years, ran that program. Actually, probably the first ministry opportunity that Little and I had in this community was with Judy at Power Partners. Those are our oldest memories. It goes back to the 1997-98 school year. What a cool thing. Judy poured her soul into that ministry. And when we walked into that building the other day there were Bible verses up from those years ago. But that building has been abandoned for years. That was an after-school, middle school program that has long since ended. The town owns the building. I mentioned this two weeks ago but since then they have verbally agreed and committed to give us the building for $1200 a year. One of our Red Oak families has asked if they could pay the entire $1200 and I said, “Let me think about it…yes.” So, praise the Lord for that. The first year is covered but we are going to need you to get physically dirty because we are going to have workdays in that building and it’s a train wreck. It’s structurally sound but it’s a train wreck, so we have to get a lot of work done. We want to do it sooner rather than later and we would love to have that building ready to go for the second semester, and that’s going to come fast. We haven’t set any goals and we are not freaking out but we’re going to make it happen. What that’s going to do is enable us to not have to get kids on a bus, drive them here, and when we’re done drive them back to the school. We are going to be able to walk from the elementary school less than a hundred yards and into the Power Partner’s building and roll right into our tutoring program. We have the elementary school playground there and it’s going to be awesome. So, be in prayer for that, that it would go smoothly, and be prepared when we call on you to get ready to work. We are going to have to clean, and paint, and there is going to be a lot of work to be done, but it’s a really cool building, so that’s a really big step for us.

Two more things that have to do with individuals and families in the church. The first one is, and you heard during our prayer time, Josh Graham’s name was mentioned. Josh is with us and this will be his last Sunday night with us. He is headed to training at FPO in Richmond on October 22. Make sure you speak to Josh. He can’t tell you a whole lot about what he’s going to be doing or he’d have to kill you. It’s classified information. But once he’s gone we’ll tell you behind his back. Actually, Josh is going to be going into an area and doing some really neat work to advance the Gospel. We want to be praying for him. He’s going as another one of our Red Oak people going out. God has given us, per capita, a phenomenal number of people who have gone out of this church and who are serving the nations. Josh is next to go, so be in prayer for him.

Now, as we turn to our text in Acts 6. This is the text that’s going to address the martyrdom of Stephen but let me go ahead and give you a heads up. This is going to be a shorter sermon than normal in time, because of all that we’ve just walked through, and we are going to roll a lot more of this out over the next few weeks, in detail. We are going to be talking about it in discipleship groups on Tuesdays and Wednesdays. There is going to be conversation and dialogue and, by the way, if you have questions, comments, or input about any of the stuff that we just talked about, speak to one of your deacons, an elder, or bring it up in discipleship groups on Tuesdays or Wednesdays. We want church dialogue concerning all of this and we are going to start rolling out specific plans in keeping everybody on board, but we wanted to give you the details of where we’re going.

So, this will be a short sermon timewise. It’s normal compared to most churches, probably, but short for us. But it’s a long text, a long passage. We are going to do something tonight that we never do at Red Oak; we are not going to read the entire passage. We encourage you to read it if you haven’t already. You should have, but if you haven’t already, read it. It will be discussed in D groups this week. It’s a lengthy text and there is a section of it that we’re going to highlight but not actually read. But, we’re going to stop short of the martyrdom of Stephen, and next week we’re going to look at Stephen’s murder and we are going to specifically focus on the persecution of the global Church today. I think it’s critical that we understand, as a church that lives in a free place, worshipping freely, where there is absolutely no threat of police or military coming through our doors with guns drawn, and no chance that the church is going to get bombed. Could some radicals come in? Yeah, but I’m talking about from a governmental standpoint or a radical group of terrorists. That’s not likely to happen in our lifetime, probably, but it’s happening today elsewhere.

I had a family member text me earlier today and say, “I need you to pray for me,” and he shared a prayer burden that had to do with physical pain, emotional pain, and some anxiety and emotional trauma. I felt the weight of that. If you love somebody and you find that out, don’t you feel the weight of that? Do you hurt when others hurt? Do you grieve when others grieve? Do you feel the weight of others’ pain? The persecuted Church is a reality today, and our brothers and our sisters are persecuted for the Gospel, globally, and we want to look at that next week as we look at Stephen’s martyrdom.

So, today, we’re going to look at Stephen’s testimony and defense. Let’s pick up in Acts 6 and we’re going to begin at verse 8.

And Stephen, full of grace and power, was doing great wonders and signs among the people.

Now, we learned a few verses earlier last week that he was a man, in verse 5, full of faith and the Holy Spirit. So, Stephen’s full of a lot of good stuff—faith, the Holy Spirit, wisdom, and power. These are things that, as a believer, we have the opportunity to be filled with. These are the things that, as a believer, if you are filled with them then life is going to be easier for you, even in the most difficult, trying, or persecuting times. If you are full of these characteristics then life is going to be easier, even in the difficult times. So, Stephen is doing wonders and signs.

We learned last week that Stephen is one of the first deacons. There were sort of these proto-deacons, these seven guys, who were serving and preparing meals. We learned that those guys didn’t really run in their lane. They were preaching the Gospel and doing missionary work. They were gunslingers. It’s a good reminder that, as Christians, God will call us to do specific tasks but He’s called all of us to proclaim the Gospel. Stephen was doing that.

I’ll tell you this, we are blessed to be a church where, as far as I’ve ever had a church experience I’ve never seen more faithful deacons than the deacons we have at Red Oak Church. I’ve never witnessed it. I work with between 400-500 churches per year in my day job and I’ve never seen deacons more faithful in executing biblically the office of deacon than the four men and their wives who serve and labor at Red Oak. So, the office and the role of deacon, oftentimes, in the church is just sort of speed bump or it’s a formality, or there is an unbalance of power where deacons govern in a way that’s not biblical. So, we have a picture of what a biblical deacon looks like and functions like in Stephen. He’s doing wonders and signs among the people; we don’t know exactly what but we know that all the disciples, the Apostles, were doing incredible work. So, Stephen is preaching and proclaiming the Gospel and then he all of sudden gets dragged by a group of people in front of the Sanhedrin at the synagogue.

Verse 9,

Then some of those who belonged to the synagogue of the Freedmen (as it was called), and of the Cyrenians, and of the Alexandrians, and of those from Cilicia and Asia, rose up and disputed with Stephen. 10 But they could not withstand the wisdom and the Spirit with which he was speaking.

These were Jews who had been set free under Roman slave laws and had returned to Jerusalem. These were pious, dogmatic Jews, so they confronted and brought Stephen into confrontation but they couldn’t handle his wisdom. He was full of wisdom. Where did his wisdom come from? The Holy Spirit. Where does your wisdom come from? The Holy Spirit. Or it comes from the world, because there’s earthly wisdom and there’s godly wisdom. We want to function with godly wisdom. That’s the way we want to live our lives and Stephen’s living his life with godly wisdom.

So, they couldn’t handle him. So, what do you do when you can’t win fairly? You cheat. Some of you are really good at that practice. Be honest with yourselves. Some of you cheaters? A card game? You don’t have to raise your hand but I know a few of you that do. I will admit that I do. If I can’t win at a card game I will do my best to figure out a way to tip the odds in my favor. So, these guys are trying to figure out, “How can we beat this guy at his own game?” so they secretly instigated men. Who else does that sound like? Who else did they do that to? Jesus, yeah. They got false witnesses, which was a punishable crime by Old Testament Law. These men were supposed to be experts in the Law.

Then they secretly instigated men who said, “We have heard him speak blasphemous words against Moses and God.” 12 And they stirred up the people and the elders and the scribes, and they came upon him and seized him and brought him before the council,

So, they get him, the grab him, and they bring him to the synagogue, which would have been like a central location. The synagogue was a place of education, it was a place of social discussions in the Jewish culture, and it was a place where they would have debates over politics and things like that. They would discuss the Law and it was also where they did their weekly, corporate worship service. It was a central location.

… and they set up false witnesses…

Now, listen to what these false witnesses are going to say.

This man never ceases to speak words against this holy place and the law.

So, the two accusations are that he speaks against the Temple and he speaks against the Law.

“For we have heard him say that this Jesus of Nazareth will destroy this place and will change the customs that Moses delivered to us.” 15 And gazing at him, all who sat in the council saw that his face was like the face of an angel.

So, here’s Stephen. He’s sitting there and they are saying, “Here’s what this guy is doing and we need to punish him for it. He’s speaking against the Temple,” which was central and sacred to Jewish worship, “and he’s speaking against the Law,” which was their Scripture. They are saying that he’s speaking against the Word of God.

Now, this is kind of trick that you see in political circles today, where someone will take someone else’s words and twist them. So, for instance, I’m not going to talk about political parties but let’s say that someone says, “I think we should come up with a better plan for Social Security.” What his opponent is going to say is, “He doesn’t like old people. He wants to do away with Social Security.” Have you ever seen that? So, maybe in the debate he would say, “Did you say you want to do away with Social Security?” and try to get him into a position where he’s not able to say, “I have a better plan for it.” Rather, it’s, “I think it’s a bad system. I think we should do away with it.” So, they say, “You don’t like old people.” Have you seen that tactic in politics? Both sides do it. Both sides of the aisle do it.

So, what these men are doing is they are saying, “You are saying that because of Jesus there needs to be no Temple and there needs to be no Law.” Now, had Stephen preached that? Yes, in fact, later in his sermon he’s going to say, “God doesn’t dwell in temples made by human hands.” Jesus would say, “I didn’t come to abolish the Law but to fulfill the Law.” Stephen hasn’t said that the Law is bad and the Temple should be burned to the ground. He said that Jesus has somewhat rendered them obsolete. They are good in their context, they are good in the place that God intended them to be good, but they are no longer what they once were. Jesus has completed and fulfilled the office of the high priest and the work of the Temple is no longer needed, because the Spirit of God dwells in the hearts of man. Paul will later write to the Corinthians that we are the temple of God. We are the dwelling place of the Spirit of God. So, Stephen’s in this situation where it’s like, “I said that but I’m not blaspheming God.” Stephen doesn’t back up and start wiggling and squirming; he goes on the offensive but it’s very eloquent what he does.

So, beginning in Acts 7:1, it says,

And the high priest said, “Are these things so?”

“What say you, Stephen? How are you going to answer for yourself?” And watch what Stephen does. He’s going to walk them through their biblical history, which is God’s redemptive history. So, Stephen is going to answer, and what he does is he goes back in time and he begins with Abraham, and in verses 2-47 he is going to walk through the most beloved of all Jewish ancestry.

So, from 7:2-47 he is going to walk through the giants of their faith and he’s going to say, “You guys are attacking me but do you know Abraham?” Of course, they knew Abraham. Abraham was the guy. He was their patriarch and the father of their faith. He was called righteous because of his faith and they loved Abraham. In fact, here’s what they did. They identified with Abraham. They’d say, “Abraham is our father. We’re like Abraham.” So, then what Stephen does is he says, “Okay, here are a couple of things. Abraham was a pagan Gentile who did not have a temple and did not have the Law. Did God save Abraham? Yes, He did. The problem is that you are not like Abraham; you’re like the pagans that God brought Abraham out of. You’re like that.” So, he’s saying that they shouldn’t identify with Abraham.

We do this. We watch a story and we’re like, “I identify with the hero,” when, maybe, sometimes we should identify with the bad guy. That’s what the Jews are doing. They’re saying, “Abraham is our father,” and Stephen is saying, “Okay, Abraham is your father. There was no Temple. Abraham was saved by God, by grace through faith. He was saved in a Gentile land where there was no Temple.” In fact, Abraham never inhabited Jewish territory. He was just a Gentile. He was the father of the Jews. He was called by God, as a Gentile, outside of Jerusalem, before the Law had even been given.

That’s in verses 2-8, and in verses 9-19 he shifts to Joseph, who was a grandson of Abraham. You might remember the story of Joseph. This is where Stephen starts getting real personal. What he’s going to do is build up. He’s going to go through Abraham, Joseph, Moses, and David, and he’s going to build on these guys. He’s like, “Abraham was a Gentile saved outside of the Temple, called by God with no Temple and no Law.” So, there’s that. Then, he says, “He had a grandson named Joseph. Joseph was sold by his brothers who were the Jewish elite. They sold Joseph to the pagan Egyptians. You have the Jewish elite, still in Canaan, whose brother has been sold into pagan slavery, and God meets him in Egypt, and shows him favor, and raises him up, while these Jewish men are living in rebellion against God. The Temple doesn’t matter in that story. The Law doesn’t matter in that story. In fact, we could even make the case that Joseph married a pagan woman, in a pagan temple, in a pagan land. It’s like Stephen is saying, “You guys remember Joseph? You like him? Okay, you’re not Joseph; you’re the twelve brothers who sold him. Good job.” He’s setting them up.

Keep going. In verses 20-45 he moves from Joseph to Moses and he says that Moses was the deliverer that God raised up out of Egypt and watch this—God raised Moses up and Moses is a type of Christ. We learned this in our study of Exodus. “God raised Moses up but your people, your fathers, your ancestors rejected Moses. They rejected him in Egypt and then when he came out of Egypt they rejected him in the wilderness. In fact, they rejected him so badly that they worshipped idols and golden calves and rejected the very Law that you are now saying you believe in. You and your ancestors, and you in your ancestors, rejected that Law and rejected Moses.” So, what he’s doing is he’s saying, “You guys want to associate with the Christ-types through history? No, no—you need to associate with the ones who rejected them. You rejected Jesus just like your fathers have been rejecting Jesus, in Moses, in Joseph, and in Abraham.” He is really coming at them aggressively.

Get down to verse 45 and watch what he says.

Our fathers in turn brought it in with Joshua when they dispossessed the nations that God drove out before our fathers. So it was until the days of David, 46 who found favor in the sight of God and asked to find a dwelling place for the God of Jacob.

He’s talking about the Temple, and the ark, and the time when David was king. So, now he’s going to go to their favorite king, David, and he’s going to say, “David didn’t worship God in a temple. God didn’t even let him build the Temple. His son built it. And you identify with David.” It’s like he would say, “Let me tell you who you should identify with in the story of David. You should identify with the scared Israelites when David, by faith, went out and fought Goliath. You’re not David, you’re Saul. You’re not David, you’re his brothers, huddling in fear on the mountain and refusing to go fight the giant.” Jesus is David. Jesus is Moses. Jesus is Joseph. Jesus is Abraham. And you are those who rejected all of those men and you rejected Jesus. The only time that Jesus is referred to by a preacher, he says, “You rejected and put to death the Righteous One. But why wouldn’t you do that? Your ancestors have been doing it since the beginning of Jewish history.”

What Stephen has done now is they have said, “You hate the Temple and you hate the Law,” and he’s been like, “No, no, no. You hate the Temple and you hate the Law because you hate the prophets and every type of Christ that’s ever come.” He puts them in a position where not only can they not handle his wisdom but now they have to give an account and a defense of themselves.

Verse 46 brings it to David and in verse 48, watch this.

Yet the Most High does not dwell in houses made by hands, as the prophet says,

49 “‘Heaven is my throne,

and the earth is my footstool.

What kind of house will you build for me, says the Lord,

or what is the place of my rest?

50 Did not my hand make all these things?’

He’s like, “God doesn’t dwell in houses built by hands. You say that I reject the Temple. I don’t reject the Temple; I accept Jesus. I don’t reject the Law; I receive the righteousness fulfilled in the Law by Jesus.” See, what happens is that the Law exposes man’s sin, so the Law satisfies the justice of God one way or another.

I’ll give you an example. We’ll use a stop sign. Let’s say you pull up to a stop sign. The law is satisfied in one of two ways. If you stop at the stop sign, the law has been satisfied. Good job. Well done. You should stop at stop signs. All you teenagers who are just getting your license or anybody else, really, who drives a car, you are supposed to stop at the stop sign. Or, you can roll through the stop sign, and get a ticket, and have to go to court, and pay your fine. In both instances the law has been satisfied. It’s either satisfied by adherence or it’s satisfied for you paying for breaking it. Right?

So, what Stephen is doing is he’s reminding us that in Christ the Law is satisfied by perfect obedience and adherence, and we can be in Christ and the Law is satisfied. Or, we can pay for our own infraction of the Law, because we’ve all broken it. He’s going to remind them, now, in verse 51, that “You guys killed Jesus for doing successfully what you have failed to do, though you’ve tried with all your might.”

Do you know what it took to be in the Sanhedrin? You had to perfectly adhere to the Law. You had to obey the Law. “I want to be in the Sanhedrin?” “Okay, you’ve got to go through all these steps and one of the things you have to do is fulfill the Law.” Remember Jesus and the rich young ruler? The man was like, “What must I do to be saved?” “Well, what do you think it takes to be saved?” “Well, I’ve obeyed the Law.” That was his go-to answer. That was the go-to answer of someone in the Sanhedrin, or in the religious elite, or someone who worked in the Temple. “I’ve obeyed the Law so I should be good.” Jesus would expose his failure to obey the Law. But Jesus obeyed the Law perfectly so, in Christ, He is our representative and we get perfect obedience.

So, look at what he says in verse 51,

You stiff-necked people,…

When else were they called that? God called them that in Exodus when they rejected Moses. This is very personal. He’s identifying them with the rebellious nation of Israel, under Moses, when they worshipped a golden calf.

You stiff-necked people…uncircumcised in heart…

Scripture says that circumcision is abolished. We’ve addressed this thoroughly in our study of the book of Galatians. But the heart has to be circumcised. Listen, the Gospel of Jesus Christ is never good news when it is initially heard. It cuts and circumcises the heart of man. It’s painful and it inflicts in us the realization that we are desperate sinners who stand in need of either rescue or condemnation. That’s not necessarily good news—until you hear that Christ has provided it. Until you hear that Christ has provided it—that’s when the good news comes in. The Gospel first cuts before it heals. So, what happens is that when the truth of the Gospel cuts these people, rather than allowing their hearts to be circumcised, they reject it and they stiffen their necks. This is what God called them in Exodus. He is basically saying, “You’ve never kept the Law.” This is what they boasted in but he says, “You’ve never kept the Law.” He’s saying to them, “Jesus actually did keep the Law so you killed Him. You killed Him for actually doing what you only pretend to do.” Isn’t that ironic? “You killed Jesus for doing what you pretend to do.” The Gospel always hurts before it helps and saves. The good news is initially not good news. It first cuts, circumcising our hearts.

Now, watch this. Verse 52,

Which of the prophets did your fathers not persecute? And they killed those who announced beforehand the coming of the Righteous One, whom you have now betrayed and murdered.

He’s saying, “All through history—Abraham, Joseph, Moses, David—your fathers were killing God’s prophets. You’ve done the same thing—you’ve killed the Righteous One. You’ve killed Jesus. You’ve betrayed Him and you’ve murdered Him.”

“You who received the law as delivered by angels and did not keep it.”

These men were not spiritual because God had changed their hearts; they were simply religious by practice. And here’s a warning and a practical application of a danger for us, as parents. You cannot raise children religiously and make it stick. All these men had been raised in religious Law. They had been raised in pious Judaism. They had been raised in the Church and had it shoved down their throats. They’d been taught from a young age and groomed for the priesthood and groomed for the Sanhedrin. We live in a society where it is accepted in the Bible-belt, particularly in this part of the country, that you are a Christian defacto, or you are a Christian by default, because your grandmother and your mother made professions of faith and you made a profession of faith. But the Scripture teaches that all who abide in God’s Word—these are the sons and daughters of God. God doesn’t have spiritual grandchildren. He doesn’t. Let that sink in. God doesn’t have spiritual grandchildren.

Now, we are to raise our kids in the nurture and the admonition of the Lord. We are to raise them, then, to love Jesus and love people…to love Jesus and love people. Not to love the rules of church, the regulations of legalism, or the piety of religious living. We are to show them what it looks like to love Jesus. We are to show them what it looks like to love people. We are to show them what it looks like to worship and to be men and women of grace. When we show them that and teach them that it will stick. If we just raise them religiously, they’ll become like the Sanhedrin, and God doesn’t have grandchildren. That is true adherence to the commands of Scripture.

So, when Stephen confronts this in their lives and calls them out as religious fanatics but not men who have been saved by the Gospel, they lose it completely. Verse 54,

Now when they heard these things they were enraged, and they ground their teeth at him. 55 But he, full of the Holy Spirit, gazed into heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God. 56 And he said, “Behold, I see the heavens opened, and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God.”

Let me just give you something to think about as we land this. Any time in Scripture, particularly in the book of Hebrews, when we see Jesus, He is seated. Do you know why He’s seated? Because conquering kings are always seen seated on thrones and because a high priest, when he has completed and finished his work, sits down. He sits down. Jesus has completed and finished the work of the High Priest. Now, the earthly role of the high priest is that he would stand to execute his duties. The writer of Hebrews says that Jesus fulfilled the office of High Priest and then went and sat down at the right hand of the Father. See, that sitting down of Jesus signifies that there is no more work for Him to be done in providing salvation for us. There is nothing else He has to do and there is nothing we do to add to it. Conquering kings sit down. Why would Jesus be standing? He’s standing because, as Stephen’s feet are planted in an earthly courtroom, where he is being wrongly accused and unjustly judged, his face is in a heavenly courtroom where Jesus stands as his advocate before the throne of God, as Stephen’s representative. And in the greatest contradiction of scenes in all of history, Stephen is wrongly judged before men and rightly judged before God, because the Bible teaches us that Christ is our representative. Christ is our Advocate. Christ stands before the Father on our behalf. And Stephen gazes at that and in that moment he will take whatever the earthly court can throw at him, because he sees Jesus standing on his behalf before the Father.

Church, Jesus is standing on your behalf before the Father, if you’re a child of God. He has seated himself as a conquering King. He has seated himself as a High Priest whose work is done. There’s nothing to be added to it; it is finished. But, He stands before the throne of God, saying, “Don’t condemn Brody. I’ve got him. He’s got my righteousness.” They are going to kill Stephen, next. That’s what’s happening. But Jesus says, “He’s with me. We are going to bring him on in.” When Jesus stands as your Advocate, it doesn’t really matter what the world says to you, for you, about you, against you. If God is for you, what could ever, who could ever, what does it matter who stands against you. But the reality is that in most of our lives we aren’t there theologically, because we care too much about our comfort, and we care too much about our lives, if we face it. I’m preaching to you and I’m listening with you. We want to be vindicated. If we’re wrong, we want revenge or vindication. But Stephen, I have to think, as a human he probably would have wanted revenge and vindication—he’s not perfect—but he gets to see the Advocate standing before the Father. And all of that vengeful vindication goes away, if it was there to begin with. He’s full of power and grace—I don’t know—maybe before it ever started God prepared his heart and his mind.

But tonight, I think the message for us as a church is that we tend to identify with Abraham when we are reading that story. We tend to identify with David in the story of Goliath. We tend to identify with the hero of the story and we need to examine our own lives and say, “How am I like the Israelites? How am I like the Sanhedrin? How am I like the rich young ruler?” We need to examine our hearts and examine our salvation and make sure we understand our only hope is in Christ as our Advocate, as our Mediator, as the go-between who gives us His righteousness because of what He’s done. Amen?

If you are here tonight and you don’t know that in a personal way, call on the name of the Lord and He will become your Mediator. Paul tells Timothy that there is “one Mediator between God and man, the man Christ Jesus.” Stephen saw it, he got it, and we can get it, and we can live it.

Let’s pray.

Lord, I pray that as you open our hearts now to worship through song, to finish our time together, that we would do so with joyful hearts, hearts of conviction, and repentance where needed. God, I thank you for the church and what you are doing in our lives and for the vision you’re giving us and the direction you’re taking us. I pray that you wouldn’t remove your good hand of grace and favor. I pray that would reach this community and I pray that we would have the faith of a man like Stephen. I pray that we would be reminded of our Advocate and that we would see that you don’t dwell in temples made by hands but you dwell in the hearts of your people; those whom you have given your righteousness to and who you advocate for. Thank you for Stephen and what we can learn from him and for our brother who teaches us so much. We love you and we sing to you now songs of praise because you are worthy. In Jesus’ name, Amen.

(Zach Mabry)

As our benediction, I’m going to read in 2 Corinthians 3:12-18. It’s talking about the hope that we have, not like what Moses had. It says,

Since we have such a hope, we are very bold, 13 not like Moses, who would put a veil over his face so that the Israelites might not gaze at the outcome of what was being brought to an end. 14 But their minds were hardened. For to this day, when they read the old covenant, that same veil remains unlifted, because only through Christ is it taken away. 15 Yes, to this day whenever Moses is read a veil lies over their hearts. 16 But when one turns to the Lord, the veil is removed. 17 Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom. 18 And we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another. For this comes from the Lord who is the Spirit.

Y’all have an awesome week.

1. Red Oak Church currently only conducts Sunday evening services. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. See sermons on distinctives, March-May 2014. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)