

STEPHEN- THE FIRST CHRISTIAN MARTYR

Acts 6 & 7

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During our recent time away, I watched the new Aladdin movie with the grandkids. The story revolves around Aladdin who finds the magic lamp. He has a genie who provides him with three wishes. Aladdin uses them to help him impress the princess. That leads me to tell you the story of an old man who was walking on the beach when he stumbled across a magic lamp. When he rubbed it, a genie appeared. The genie said, 'Because you have freed me, I will grant you a wish.' The man thought about it for a moment and responded: 'My brother and I had a big argument 30 years ago. He hasn't spoken to me since. I wish that he would finally forgive me and love me!' There was a thunderclap, and the genie declared 'Your wish is granted.' Then the genie said 'You know, most people would have asked for other things like wealth or fame. But you only wanted the love of your brother. Is that because you are old and dying?' 'No way!' the man cried. 'But my brother is, and he is worth about \$60 million.' Things are not always what they seem. What seems like a real desire for family unity is just another grab for getting rich and looking good. Why have I brought this up? Well, because it's like someone in our text. It seemed they were after love and unity. But in reality, they were after money and looking good. We have in our text a glaring disparity. We see, in a very beautiful way, what the church should be. And then in stark contrast we see a terribly disturbing development.

To set the context, here in chapter 4 of Acts we read that the church had been persecuted by the Sanhedrin. That's because the apostles healed a crippled man and preached about Jesus' resurrection. In response to the intimidation, when Peter & John were released, we see the church prays. (Acts 4:31) *"After they prayed, the place where they were standing was shaken. And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke the Word of God boldly."* As a result (Acts 4:33) *"With great power the apostles continued to testify to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus and much grace was with them all"*. You see the tremendous sense of power and boldness. We have said all along, that the book of Acts is all about the Holy Spirit. Here we see it again. We see how the church coped with persecution. Being filled with the Spirit their witness goes on and the gospel is declared with great power. Notice what else happens when the church is filled with the Spirit. There is a wonderful sense of unity. (Acts 4:31) *"All the believers were one in heart and mind. No one claimed that any of their possessions were their own, but they shared*

everything they had." Here we get a glimpse of real fellowship. We see what it is like when the church is filled with the Spirit. There is a boldness to witness. And, also, a deep unity, a real caring for each other. If we want to test how genuinely our church is Spirit filled, we look at how we give of what we have to care for each other. Not just a superficial 'niceness'. But a genuine concern for others, that even gives sacrificially.

This is a work of the Spirit. Our natural sinful tendency is to look after our own interests. We naturally want to elevate our own importance. Why do people love to gossip? Because by putting others down they elevate themselves. Honesty has us admit this is often true. Theodore Roosevelt once said, 'No one cares how much you know, until they know how much you care.' Well these early Christians, filled with the Spirit, really cared for each other. (Acts 4:34 &35) *"There were no needy persons among them. For from time to time those who owned lands or houses sold them, brought the money from the sales and put it at the disciples' feet, and it was distributed to anyone who had need."* These actions demonstrated the depth of their care. It was this practical care that gave such credibility and power to the witness of these early believers. Around 200AD Tertullian wrote about the astonishment of the pagans of his day when they witnessed the love and caring among Christians: 'See how these Christians love one another.' That is still the greatest attraction that provides the opportunity for us to witness. Everyone wants to be loved, respected, cared for, having a community to belong to. They want to be given hope.

Here in these few verses, Luke describes the essence of the church. He says they were *"...one in heart and mind"*. They all held to the one great conviction, that Jesus had risen from the dead. It was this one common belief that enabled them to be in deep communion. That oneness of heart and mind expressed itself in how they *"...shared everything they had"*. It wasn't just sharing their material blessings. It was the sharing of their heart, mind that made it so real. It went far beyond just sharing the same theology. They shared their experience of Jesus and his Spirit. They admitted their need of God's grace and the joy of being forgiven. Still today we can only enter this depth of fellowship when we are open and honest with each other. We may try to impress each other we have it all together. We may find it difficult to admit our need for each other. But then we can't be *"...one in heart and mind."* In our small groups have we come to the place where we can really share and pray for each other and provide the support we see here in Acts? Being filled with the Spirit means we are humble, because that is the Spirit's character. It means we are humble enough share our struggles and needs. And we are caring enough to share what we have to support each other.

Luke provides us with an example of what he is describing. (Acts 4:36 &37) *“Joseph, a Levite from Cyprus, whom the apostles called Barnabas (which means “son of encouragement”), sold a field he owned and brought the money and put it at the apostles’ feet.”* This Joseph was such a beautiful example to others, the apostles gave him the nickname ‘Barnabas- son of encouragement’. The Greek means someone who calls others together into closer intimacy and stronger comfort. This wonderfully encouraging man pops up again numerous times in Acts. We always see him acting in a way where he is greatly heartening others. Here in this one inspiring person is the example of what it meant to be a Christian in this Spirit filled community. Here was someone who gave so much joy and reassurance by his generosity.

Now, in this setting of loving unity and concern for each other, there was another chilling factor. Satan was also at work in the church. He hates it when the church is united, filled with the Spirit. Because it is right there that the church is at the cutting edge of the gospel. So, it is right there that Satan is most at work. At this high point we see that Satan tries to upset the church by ruining its love and unity. He does it from within the church, by tempting two of its members. Ananias and Sapphira. We see that, that like Barnabas, they sell land to give to others. (Acts 5:1) *“Now a man named Ananias together with his wife Sapphira also sold a piece of property.”* Who were Ananias and Sapphira? They were part of that caring church. Ananias means “the Lord is gracious” and Sapphira means “beautiful”. But it seems they loved money and wanted the praise of others. They noticed how Barnabas received such an accolade for selling his property. They wanted that acclaim as well. Now, there was no requirement for the early church Christians to sell their houses and land. It was their private property to do with as they wished. As Peter says (Acts 5:4) *“Didn’t it belong to you before it was sold? And after it was sold, wasn’t the money at your disposal?”* So, Ananias and Sapphira were not under any compulsion to give. They loved their money, but also wanted to receive recognition from the church. Be aware, folks. The Holy Spirit is at work in his church. But so is Satan a beguiling influence. Are you aware of that? Do you realise that in the church you are at the cutting edge of the gospel and the kingdom of God? You are a threat to Satan. It is right here he is most active. If we are not tuned into the Spirit and God’s Word we can easily be tempted into wrong directions. Look at Ananias. He loved money and human praise more than God’s approval and glory. See how Satan twists things. Barnabas gives, and brings praise to God. Ananias also wants to give but seeks all the praise for himself. That explains Peter’s remark (Acts 5:3) *“... ‘Ananias, how is it that Satan has so filled your heart that you have lied to the Holy Spirit and have kept for yourself some of the money you received for the land?’”* Note how Peter says, *“kept for yourself”*. The Greek word means ‘to pilfer, to steal’. It’s the same word used in the

Greek translation of the Old Testament in Joshua 7 to describe Achan's action in pilfering what belonged to God in Jericho.

What makes this such a terrible thing is that Ananias was undermining the church. He did not recognise the true nature of the church. The church of Jesus Christ is not just a human society. It is the temple of the living God. The church, God's people, is where the Holy Spirit lives. In other words, Ananias did not recognise that he was standing before God when he put the money before the disciples. When you came to church this morning, what were you thinking? What were your expectations? Did you come to meet up with some family and friends and to listen to Leo preach? Or were you deeply aware that you were coming into the presence of God and so you prepared yourself? Ananias by trying to deceive the apostles, was blaspheming God. He and his wife were belittling God. Their actions denied that God was the eternal, almighty, all-holy, all-seeing God who was present. We who come in worship are exposed before him. God sees into the deepest recesses of our hearts and sees things we want kept buried. We might be tempted to parade a little bit and show how good we are to each other. But God knows everything about us and wants no charade. He wants honest humility before him. To do otherwise is to degrade God. It is to suggest God is blind or deaf, or gullible. Twice Peter says (Acts 5:3&4) *"Ananias how is it that Satan has so filled your heart that you have lied to the Holy Spirit.../ ...You have not lied to men but to God."* Peter's words exposed the real intent of Ananias and Sapphira. He had to do that because they were playing around with God. They were putting God down by acting as if he did not know what they were doing. God was telling Ananias and Sapphira, so called Grace and Beauty, your giving is a sham. You are hypocrites. You are acting in a way that is detrimental to the life and the unity of the church. You are both ugly materialists who love the praise of men more than the praise of God. Their actions were not only a put down of God. Their actions would ruin the witness of the church and with that the hope the gospel brings. Nothing hurts our witness more than for the church to be considered as a bunch of sanctimonious hypocrites.

The punishment for their actions was sudden death (Acts 5:5) *"When Ananias heard this, he fell down and died."* It is a discipline that shocks us. Many will tell you they think it was far too drastic. Some commentators think what happened was only a myth. Surely God would not do that. The problem is that in our culture we have belittled God. He is either seen as a weak doting grandfather figure or doesn't exist at all. There is little respect for the holiness of God. We do so at our peril. If we don't recognise that we all face the judgement of God, we won't see our sin and need for Jesus. If we deny Jesus and his resurrection, we deny the only real hope this world has. God's discipline of Ananias and Sapphira was a word of warning to the church: *"be holy because I am holy"*.

The power of the Spirit that made the church bold to witness was God himself. Belittle God and you deny the power to witness and deny the world of hope. Luke tells us that as a result of what happened to Ananias and Sapphira (Acts 5:11) *"Great fear came upon the whole church and all who heard about these events."* That was the necessary affect. God was protecting his church. The true fear of God is not some purposeless shaking and trembling. True fear of God is about having a great respect for God. It's about a true recognition of his awesome majesty. What was the result? (Acts 5:12) *"The apostles performed many miraculous signs and wonders among the people. And all the believers used to meet together...more and more men and women believed in the Lord and were added to their number..."* Unity was restored. The church was again of one accord, powerful in its unity and witness. Many of us might still struggle with God's swift dealings with this couple. An English preacher said years ago that people often come to church to receive some kind of sweet syrup so they can feel good. But the times of cultural Christianity with a sentimental, sanitised God are over. The church is now facing tough times. What we need is a deep respect for God. We need to recognise the power of the Spirit within to make us bold to witness about Jesus. And we need to allow the Spirit to humble us to deeply care for each other. We do that to bring honour to God. And hope for the community.