

So as we continue our series on these Peculiar Treasures, and see God's work in the lives of the people that had called him Lord, that called Jesus Lord, there in the New Testament and we think about the amazing things that God did through them, we're going to be looking at Stephen, who was really the first martyr, the first one that was killed for confessing Jesus as Lord.

But before I begin, I have a bit of a confession to make. I am a hypocrite. I'm someone who sometimes says one thing and then does another, who says certain things are the priority in my life. But then when I look back on my day or on my week, I recognize that I've actually placed something else as primary or as the priority in my life.

Now, here's the thing. I'm not alone in this. You are a hypocrite, as well. We might not always be hypocritical and we might not always say one thing and do another. And in fact, often by the grace of God, we're able to follow through on the things that we think are important in our lives. But there are times, sometimes more often than we would like, where we are hypocritical, where we say one thing and we do something else. And I think that one of the reasons, one of the main reasons almost, where Steven was killed is because he revealed the hypocrisy of the religious leaders that were there in Jerusalem, both by what he said in his speech, but also by what he did and the ways that he lived out the things that God had always called his people to, to be a blessing to the nations. He lived that out because he firmly believed Jesus was Lord and Messiah. He was the One that had been promised from of old who had come to reveal God and His people, or God to his people.

So we are hypocrites. And so I think we should recognize ourselves a little bit in those who are accusing Steven, but then also to think through some of the ways that we place different kinds of priorities before what is, should be central to our religion.

Now, a little bit of background before we get started. Stephen's story comes in the middle of some heightened tension within the new community of believers in Jerusalem. In fact, it's a turning point in the story where you have people mostly gathered up until this time in Jerusalem and the church actually at that point counts over 5000 people. You have the church on Pentecost are those believers in Jesus being about 3000 people added to their number on top of the 120 or so who were disciples of Jesus and still a part of this movement, who were hiding together up in that upper room. And now at this point in the story, there's about 5000 of them and they've been experiencing some opposition and some tension both from within the community and from outside the community. The religious leaders in the Sanhedrin have hauled Peter and John before them, put them in prison, and then released them when they realized they couldn't do a whole lot to them. They did the same with all the apostles actually, who were supernaturally released from prison, went back out into the temple and started preaching in Jesus's name. They had them flogged and told them specifically not to continue to preach and they said, 'Well, who should we believe? Should we believe you? Or should we follow God?' And actually, in that time, the believers all came together and they prayed for more boldness to tell the good news of who Jesus was.

But there were also some tensions inside. They tried to sort through what were important and what wasn't. What changed because of Jesus and what would be the defining marks of this community. So you have people sharing of their possessions and of their wealth, which was

amazing. But then you had people saying, 'Well, we want to look like that as well. We want to have that same kind of position and prestige in the community. So we want to pretend like we're giving a lot. We're wanting to pretend like we're generous, even though we're not generous with everything we have.' So you have a story, of Ananais and Sapphira.

You also get this story of Hebraic widows receiving help and Greek widows not receiving help. And so it seems as though there's kind of a cultural, if not a racial division, even in the community of believers. And so the Hellenistic Jews, they come to the disciples and they say, look, this is not fair, which it wasn't. Their minority group was being ignored and passed over by the majority. And rightly so the disciples recognized that this was not a good thing, although the way they go about to solve the problem, I think might be missing a little bit of Jesus' instructions in their lives.

They say, this is in Chapter 6:2: the 12 gathered together all the disciples, and they said, it would not be right for us to neglect the ministry of the Word of God in order to wait on tables. Now, that sounds a little bit arrogant, doesn't it? And I wonder how that fits in with the instructions that Jesus gives to his disciples that the person that wants to be great needs to be the servant of all. This sounds a little bit more like we are too special to go and wait on tables. Let's let's appoint some other people to wait on tables. And not only do they appoint some other people, they appoint some of the people from these Hellenistic Jews. At least it seems so from the names that are there. They seem to be Greek names and whether they do so because well, they're the lowlier class and they're able to serve or they should be able to serve or whether they do so because it makes more sense for people of that particular minority community to look after and to ensure that their community is being cared for. It's hard to know, right?

There's always a generous interpretation and a more negative interpretation. And much like most of humanity, I think it's a little bit of a little bit of both here until the deacons are set aside. And Stephen seems to be the very embodiment of what Jesus proposes as an amazing leader. Not only does he serve and wait on tables, he also seems to know the story of God's plan of redemption inside and out. He knows exactly what God and how Jesus fulfills what God has said in the past. He's able to do amazing miraculous things just like the apostles. He's able to teach and to preach and more people come to faith in Jesus just like the apostles and he's willing to serve. On top of it all. Stephen's presence is a minority and his embodiment of the attitude of Jesus asks his followers to have, starts to create some tension. Like in Chapter 6:8: Stephen, a man full of God's grace and power performed great wonders and signs among the people and opposition arose, however, from the numbers of a synagogue of the freed men. We don't know much about who this synagogue or who these people were. They were Jews of Cyrene and Alexandria, so they were Hellenistic and Egyptian kinds of Jews, or at least they were people from these areas. It seems as though they weren't actually Hellenistic, so they didn't adopt those cultures, they maintained their original or their Hebraic cultural customs. And they opposed those who seems to be accommodating to these things which might be part of the reason why they didn't like Stephen in the first place. On top of this, they started to argue with Stephen but they couldn't stand up against the wisdom the Spirit gave him as he spoke.

So they wanted to limit his influence. So they tried to prove that they were superior. They knew what God really wanted. They knew what the law really said, Yes, Stephen showed time and time again that they didn't, they were wrong and that Jesus's way was the right way. And so instead of admitting their wrong, they again double down, they dig it deep and they they try to

discredit him instead, and so they attack him and they twist some of the things that he said to make it seem as though he's against things that he says he's not against but have been superseded in Jesus.

They secretly persuaded some men or some people to say we have heard Stephen speak blasphemous words against Moses and against God. Now notice the order here. They don't argue that Stephen has been saying words against God and against Moses, they say against Moses and against God. This is the first hint about what is most important to these people. So he stirred up the people in the elders and the teachers of the law of the seized Stephen and brought him before the Sanhedrin. They produce false witnesses who testified, now look closely here. This fellow never stops speaking against this holy place. That may refer to the temple it probably does, but it may also refer to the land of Israel. Remember the people there were expecting Messiah to come who would set them free from Rome and establish an earthly kingdom with Jerusalem as its capital and the temple as central to this holy land that they were living in. And, of course, Steven and the other disciples and the apostles who said, Well, no, actually the Messiah came to be King not just of an earthly kingdom, but the king of the whole world and to gain his kingship by giving his life not by taking life. Against this holy place and against the law, against the instructions that they have been given by Moses in order to live the proper kind of life. For we've heard him say that this Jesus of Nazareth will destroy this place and change the customs that Moses handed down to us.

And we start to see the things that are central to the religious leaders here. And the way that they present their accusation. These things are the Temple, or the land, the law, making sure that people follow the rules that are placed down and the customs that were given them by Moses, the place of worship, instructions on how they were to live a moral life and the customs, the way in which they're used to living their cultural way of life, you might say, these things seem to be the most important to many of the religious leaders are putting these things as central to their religious practice. And these are not supposed to be the central things, Stephen says, and actually, the Bible says, so when you walk through Stephen's argument, and I'd encourage you to do so read through that next chapter.

Read through Stephen's speech to the Sanhedrin see how many times Stephen shows that, that God was with the people of old in other places that, just the Holy Land, how he called them and worked through them in foreign land, if you emphasize the different names or foreign places, it's amazing how many times Stephen says that and how important he shows them to be. So when he talks about Moses, for example, he says that Moses was raised in Egypt, but also raised with all the wisdom of Egypt, who a lot of people and maybe even those Jews from Alexandria would have said, Well, no, there's no wisdom. In Egypt, the only wisdom is in the law. He's challenging these interpretations quite shockingly actually.

And I wonder sometimes how often we do the same, especially when we think about those three things like a place of worship, moral instruction for living, and certain cultural customs are ways of doing things, how often did those three things actually get in the way of how we can pay attention to what God is doing in the world?

It's been interesting for me to reflect on some of the things that I hold to be important in my religious practice, especially as some of the things that we are used to doing have been limited over the last little while, right? We can't gather in large gatherings like we were before and even

now that the restrictions have been lifted in certain ways. There's still certain things that we're we're not able to do and some of the conversations I've been having have been fascinating, mainly because they kind of resonate with my own heart but also because I feel like they, they reveal things that are really interesting about ourselves. So for example, we're allowed to gather according to health regulations with groups of up to 50. And we're able to have worship services that way rather, not just gather but have worship services that way but we're not allowed to have any kind of fellowship before or after we can't sit close to one another or we're supposed to keep some physical distance at least kind of six feet between us and the next person as we're gathered. I mean, we were not supposed to sing because that's something that spreads the disease quite quickly. It turns out, we're not allowed to pass offering plate, we're not allowed to share in communion in certain ways. And so I've heard some people say, well, then what's the point of gathering? Because it seems to reveal certain things that on a negative interpretation might be most important to us. Like, what the most important things about church are seeing my friends or gathering together with other people and singing.

Which makes me wonder, Should those things be most important in our gatherings? Now more generous interpretation would say, Well, look, we're still getting some of these other pieces in certain ways. By having online worship services and some of these other things. We're still able to pray together and also able to encounter the Word together and feel like we're, we're together because we're studying the same kinds of things, but it just makes me wonder, sometimes, these are good things, but are they the most important or maybe we rely on them too much for our religious experience? Like the another way to put it?

And I've been talking to a number of people who find this format of worship to be very difficult, because it doesn't feel the same and it doesn't, totally doesn't. But are our emotions and the way we feel really the best guide of how we connect with God? I'm not not convinced. The essence of Stephen's speech seems to be this to the religious leaders that they're focusing on something that is not primary, to the the overall work of God in the world.

Now picture this for a moment, he's a Hellenistic Jew. So he's a foreigner into the city of Jerusalem. Not only that he hears to this group's identity that says that Jesus was Lord and Messiah and that the religious leaders are responsible for his death. And he stands there in front of this religious leader group and which is kind of a Supreme Court of the land at that point, and lays into them. And by the end of the speech, he basically says, Look, I know the story of God and the history of his people better than you do because of how I see Jesus. He's a member of a minority group following someone crucified for claiming to be the Messiah. And he boldly goes through the history of Israel pointing out that God has been at work in his people in foreign lands all the time. And he points out how God's people have rejected the leaders time and time again, he says that Joseph was rejected that Moses was not only initially rejected before he fled from Egypt, but he was also rejected after he went up to Mount Sinai to receive the law, and how the people and the hearts of those who have tried to follow God continually move away from God to place other things as more important, and how the tabernacle and the temple were not most important. They were actually things that were offered as transitory things and, and the temple was kind of a, an offering that was given in response to a request that came through from David and was later built by Solomon, it's a interesting interpretation of how Steven shows that God was at work in history and that everything came before Jesus was temporary meant to point beyond itself. And then he moves into this direct accusation in verse 51.

You stiff necked people who are stubborn and proud and so smart of your own importance you stiff necked people. He says your hearts and ears are still uncircumcised, even though you're the people that claim inheritance all the way back to Abraham but be marked by God in your flesh. Your hearts are still far from you are just like your ancestors you always resist the Holy Spirit was there ever a prophet your ancestors did not persecute but even killed those who predicted the coming of the righteous one and now You have betrayed and murdered him. So Stephen makes a direct link between the righteous one, the Messiah that wants to come. And Jesus, the one who was crucified you who have received the law the instructions given through Moses and through angels, messengers from heaven but have not obeyed. So Stephen is basically saying because of Jesus, I know the story better than you. Do. Stephen points out that God continually come to his people though and refocuses them.

In some ways, you can see this speech as a call to repentance. He's, he's essentially coming to these religious leaders, and he's saying, look, this is what the story has always pointed towards. Can't you see how amazing it is that Jesus has come? Actually, in a lot of the words of the prophets calling people to repentance, he says your stiff neck you're rebellious. You don't see what God is doing. Please see that he has common believe in him. And there actually are plenty of priests already in the city of Jerusalem at this time, who will have believed that Jesus is the Messiah and they have gone that direction. But again, this group seems to double down because they don't like the mirror that has held up in front of them. They don't like the fact that Steven is saying, look, God has always been at work doing the kinds of things that I am now doing because I've seen Jesus and because Jesus has called me to be his follower. And I think one of the benefits of this time right now with the restrictions of COVID-19 is that we're forced to re examine what is most important to us in our religious life. What is most important to us and how do we maintain those things? I recently saw a cartoon that I'm going to probably put it up here if I can, cartoon which showed Satan and God kind of overlooking the world and Satan says, He says,

You know what? With COVID-19 I've closed down all of your churches all over the world and God looking over the world kind of snickers and he laughs You know what? Because of COVID-19 I've opened up a church in every home. Makes me wonder if we are as intentional about attending church at home as we might be about attending church here. The question that we've been wrestling with as a family the last little while Initially, it was kind of fun to come in your pajamas to sit on your couch to watch TV to watch whatever was going on and to feel as though we've been disconnected. And I noticed some of our worship services have not been asking as much out of you as listeners or as viewers, either. We've kind of moved away from participants to viewers and I've heard from a number of people that want it doesn't really fit

As much and they're not as intentional and they can't watch it when they want to, are we as intentional about coming to worship God in our home. we family actually started, started to dress up again because we realized you know what we don't dress up right in order to to impress anybody else that might gather in a space like this, quite frankly, we don't really care and I don't really care what people that are gathering, think about the way that I dress or the way that my family dresses. So we recognize and many of us say this, we are doing it in order to honor the one that we are coming before and so as a spiritual practice, we as a family are then also dressing up again. Now, we might not dress up the same way as we would come in here.

But by the same token, we're doing something intentionally to set that time aside as a time to worship God.

What is amazing about the way in which God continues to come to his people, and that's what that's what Stephen highlights in the story over and over that God comes to that he shows them, he rescues them, he helps them and God continues to come to us. And you know, we still get to worship together, we still get to pay attention to the Spirit, we still get to hear the same message preach, we still get to encounter the same texts together, we still get to think through together what this might mean for our lives. We still get to pray together and pray about the things that are important for us to pray though not only here, but also around the world, we still are able to engage with things in ways that they will even hadn't before because we don't have to come into one particular space. And now we have the opportunity to invite other people into our homes that maybe have heard Jesus and form a relationship with them without forcing them to come into a large gathering and you have so many opportunities to do so many amazing things with this, we can be reminded still of just how amazing it is that God so loved the world that He gave His one and only Son that whoever believes in Him will not perish but have everlasting life. We have the opportunity still to worship the God who has given his entire life for us. And yes, we do it in ways that we are unaccustomed to. And yes, we do it in ways that just are not the same as they have been before. And yes, we do hope and we long and we pray for the time in which we will be able to do some of those things again, but in the meantime, maybe it can help us see. Help us see that some of the things that we deem to be really important, or maybe a little too important for us. I want us to gather in the ways that helped me remember and understand as well. I love communal singing I love gathering with a large group of people. encountering the spirit together.

But let's not waste this time. Let us listen to the Spirit when it reveals how maybe the building or the fellowship time or the city or our customs, the ways that we normally do things are a little too important to us. That us as the people of God come back to the heart, worship Amen.

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