

08/14/11

Living Life Together by Facing Pressure Courageously

- If you were a basketball coach, what would you rather have...a team with 1 star player and 4 mediocre ones...or a team with no stars but solid players in all 5 positions?...
 - if you're into sports, you can probably think of teams that fit both descriptions... whether it's high school, or college, or the pros...
 - and there's no question about the answer...it's always better to have a group of solid people across the board than just to have one star...
 - it's more fun to watch a team like that...it's more fun to play on a team like that...when that's the case it's much more likely that they'll win more games...
 - I think we'd all agree with that...

- now let me ask you this – which of those models most closely resembles the church of Jesus Christ?...does the Lord want His mission to be accomplished only by a few people in the church...or by everyone in the church?...

- that's not a heard question to answer, is it?...it's clearly the latter...and you could prove that in a lot of different ways...

- 1. For example, Jesus emphasized this point in His parables...
 - you may remember the story Jesus told in Matthew 25 about a man who was preparing to leave on an extended trip...
 - so he called three of his servants together and he entrusted them with different amounts of money, or in their economy—talents...
 - one was given 5 talents, the next was given 2 and the last was given one...
 - and the Bible tells us that... **Matthew 25:16 - Immediately the one who had received the five talents went and traded with them, and gained five more talents.**
 - notice that he started moving right away...he had a job to do and he got after it...
 - he also was willing to take some risks...Jesus said that this man traded with his talents...he invested them in the marketplace...
 - and the tense of the verb would suggest—not that he made 1 a windfall—it wasn't one investment and he doubled his money...but he invested 5 and built it to 5 ½, etc...
 - what's important to notice though is that the fellow who only had been given two talents took the exact same steps...
 - **Matthew 25:17 - In the same manner the one who had received the two talents gained two more.**
 - and so you start wondering where this story is going...because he started having three less than the 5 talent guy—now he has six less...yes, his became 4 but the 5 talent guy now has 10...
 - then the passage says... Matthew 25:18 - But he who received the one *talent* went away, and dug a *hole* in the ground and hid his master's money.
 - so you think—well, I know where this story is going to go – the 5 talent guy who turned his into 10 is obviously the star...he's the franchise player...he's going to get all the attention and accolades...
 - and the 2 talent guy who turned his into 4 – that's OK...he's not a star but he's a reliable pawn...
 - and then the one talent guy – he'll probably get a pass because after all he was only given a little bit to start with – what should he really be expected to do with that?...

- if you or I drew those conclusions (the 10 talent guy is going to receive the most significant commendation, or the 1 talent guy will get off easy)...we'd be woefully incorrect, wouldn't we?...
 - because the passage makes it clear...both the 5 into 10 talent guy, and the 2 into 4 talent guy...receive exactly the same commendation...
 - **Matthew 25:21 - His master said to him, 'Well done, good and faithful slave. (cf. also 25:23)**
 - and the point is obvious – the 4 talent guy pleased his master every bit as much as the 10 talent guy...the words of encouragement are identical...as is the future responsibility that was given...
 - **Matthew 25:21b - You were faithful with a few things, I will put you in charge of many things; enter into the joy of your master. (cf. also 25:3b).**
 - and the principle is clear – God's work is not to be carried out by a few stars...every person on the team has an important role to play...
 - now you might say – what about the one talent guy?...since he wasn't entrusted with much to start with, did he just get a pass?...not even close...he even came up with an excuse... **Matthew 25:24-25 - And the one also who had received the one talent came up and said, 'Master, I knew you to be a hard man, reaping where you did not sow and gathering where you scattered no seed. And I was afraid, and went away and hid your talent in the ground. See, you have what is yours.'**
 - and how far did that get him?...
 - **Matthew 25:26-27 - But his master answered and said to him, 'You wicked, lazy slave, you knew that I reap where I did not sow and gather where I scattered no seed. Then you ought to have put my money in the bank, and on my arrival I would have received my *money* back with interest.**
 - in other words – your excuse isn't true, but it doesn't even make sense...if I was the way you say I am – that would have been even greater motivation to do something with what was given to you...
 - so on the one hand – the man who went from 2 to 4 was commended every bit as much as the one who went from 5 to 10...
 - but the fellow who was just given one who hid it and did nothing with it received severe condemnation...because he was expected to do his part too...
 - God's work isn't to be done by a few stars...but by a team of people who have been gifted in all sorts of ways and will some day be judged, not how they compare to someone else, but how faithful they were with what was given to them...
 - and even if your skills and abilities are less pronounced in comparison to others, you are still required by the Lord to invest them in kingdom work...
 - God's accomplishes His work through teams of people working together...where everyone has his/her hand on the plow...
- 2. The apostle Paul made a very similar statement in Ephesians 4 when he was explaining the roles of people in the church...
- and he said that... **Ephesians 4:11-12 - And He gave some as apostles, and some as prophets, and some as evangelists, and some as pastors and teachers, for the equipping of the saints for the work of service, to the building up of the body of Christ;**
 - and then he explained the goal... **Ephesians 4:16 - from whom the whole body, being fitted and held together by what every joint supplies, according to the**

proper working of each individual part, causes the growth of the body for the building up of itself in love.

- so, is the church supposed to be led by a few star performers...or comprised of a group of solid players at all positions?...it's the latter...
- and my question for you would be – what evidence in your life that you understand that, and that you are joyfully and effectively fulfilling the role you were given on Christ's team here?...
- with that in mind, please open your Bible to Acts 6....page 96 of the back section of the Bible under the chair in front of you...
- we're working our way through the book of Acts as part of our emphasis this year on **Living Life Together...**
- this is the first written history of the early church and we believe that by studying they lived life together then...we can learn important lessons about how we should live life together now...
- last Sunday we learned that a problem arose in the church...their number was growing dramatically...perhaps as many as 20,000 believers at this point...and a dispute occurred because the Hellenistic Jews believed their widows were being neglected in the daily administration of food...
- so the apostles brought the congregation together, and clearly stated the problem, and the suggested a solution...
 - in this case, instituting the office of deacon...and so the church selected 7 men who met the qualification the apostles laid out...and one of those selected was a man named Stephen...
 - now we're going to see that the story of the church isn't just about the apostles...it's also about the incredibly effective ministry of laypersons in the church...
- **read Acts 6:7-15, 51-60...**
- this morning we're talking about **Living Life Together by Facing the Pressure that Sometimes Comes with Ministry**
- and with the time we have remaining, let's look for **5 principles to handling opposition while living and ministering for Christ.**

I. God Wants to Use Lay-persons in Significant Positions of Ministry.

- it's important to think about...

A. How this passage fits into the overall message of Acts

1. There is a sense in which this is part of the fulfillment of the promise made in Acts 1:8.

- **Acts 1:8 - But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be My witnesses both in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and even to the remotest part of the earth.**
- well, what would you expect to see happen as the apostles began this task of witnessing to the power of God to forgive men and women of their sin and then begin to change them into the image of His resurrected Son?...
- you would expect to see fruit...to see men and women who placed their faith and trust in the witness they were given...and as a result begin changing...
- that's exactly what's happening here...
- and as their produces more and more fruit...the story is not going to just be about what the apostles are doing...but this is...

2. A story of what happened to one of the first deacons.

- and right off the bat we're seeing – the church isn't just about a few stars...it's a family of transformed people serving God together...
- now what can we learn from the way Stephen is described in this text?...

B. The Holy Spirit can make you into a person who is “full of grace and power.”

- v. 8 – “full of grace and power”

- the word **full** is the Greek word “**pleres**” – and it means just that – **to be filled up**
- he was controlled by grace and therefore his life was inherently powerful...
- if you know your Bible, there's probably a verse screaming out at you right now...
- **John 1:14 - And the Word became flesh, and dwelt among us, and we saw His glory, glory as of the only begotten from the Father, full of grace and truth.**
- it doesn't matter about a person's natural giftedness...this is what can happen to anyone who allows the Holy Spirit's fruit to be developed in his/her life...

C. The Holy Spirit can empower you to do extraordinary things.

- v. 8 – was performing great wonders and signs among the people

- we've already discussed the issue of sign gifts earlier in our study...and you and I may not be able to do the exact kinds of things Stephen did...but we can live in a way that is markedly different than those who don't know the Lord...
- just learning how to communicate well would be a sign and wonder in many settings...
- or choosing to love your spouse and speak well of that person behind his/her back...
- or trying to raise your kids in the nurture and admonition of the Lord...
- or trying to give your boss an honest day's work whether you're being directly supervised or not...
- it doesn't take much in the godless culture in which we live to stand out as someone who has grace and power and is living in ways that are unusual and extraordinary...

- now let's just stop right there and ask this...is there evidence in your life that you understand that the ministry of a church family is to be accomplished by everyone?...
- the deacons can have ministries that are every bit as effective as a pastor's (just like in this case?...), etc?
- we had some great testimonies last night at our Church Family Night...(that's one of the many reasons you ought to make that a regular part of your worship/ministry habits...)
 - one man talked about how he was out with some friends and they came across another young man who was very vocal about what Jesus meant to him...
 - and it wasn't in a pious way – a super-spiritual way...but this fellow was telling us last Sunday night that he couldn't get this young man's words out of his head...and he eventually came to Christ as a result...and the point is – there wasn't a pastor in sight...
 - we had a couple of people talk about coming to Christ during Vacation Bible School...and you can just picture these dear VBS workers patiently working with kids having no idea if anyone is even listening, much less will there be any eternal fruit...yet, we heard the answer last Sunday night in a big way (and again, no pastor in sight...)
- let me ask you to think about this – how does God want to use you in the ministry of the family?...and are you taking steps in that direction?...maybe you're the next Stephen...)

II. Don't Be Surprised if Your Ministry for Christ is Not Universally Accepted.

- you would think that if a man was living like this, his life would be smooth sailing...
- his words are full of grace and power...who wouldn't like that?...

- the same people who don't like the God who gave him that power...
- (here's yet another example of the historicity of the Bible – God practices full disclosure about what might be involved in becoming a follower of Christ...)

A. For Stephen

1. People arguing with him.

- **Acts 6:9 - But some men from what was called the Synagogue of the Freedmen, including both Cyrenians and Alexandrians, and some from Cilicia and Asia, rose up and argued with Stephen.**
- Scripture is clear that part of God's judgment on men and women who refuse to glorify Him as their Creator God is that He gives them up to a depraved mind that can longer discern truth...
- and so instead of accepting God's Word, they are arguing with it...

2. People lying about him

- **Acts 6:11-12 - Then they secretly induced men to say, "We have heard him speak blasphemous words against Moses and against God." And they stirred up the people, the elders and the scribes, and they came up to him and dragged him away and brought him before the Council.**
- the lesson there is – just because someone says it certainly doesn't make it so...
- there are a few around our town who might slander our church, or one of our pastors, or deacons, or members...and that doesn't make it so...
- some people think because they tweeted it or posted it on FB...that makes them an authority on the subject or a reliable witness...
- not exactly...and that doesn't mean we won't take our critics seriously or investigate reports that need to be handled – but here's a man who is faithfully serving as a layman and he's receiving anything but thanks and commendation for his efforts...

B. For you.

- this rejection could take all sorts of forms...

1. Being misunderstood

2. Being falsely accused

3. Being harshly criticized

- I learned all of this very early in my ministry life...
- when I was a sophomore in college, one of my professors starting serving as the part-time pastor at a church that was having serious financial trouble...
- they had started constructing a new auditorium and then the former pastor had a heart attack and had to resign in the middle of the project...
- so the building sat there as an empty shell...and people started bailing on the church and those who remained were under tremendous financial pressure...
- then this professor of mine went down on the weekends to serve as their pastor but they didn't have any kind of formal youth ministry and no means to pay for it...and so I started traveling to NJ on the weekends with him to be his part time youth pastor...
- and I remember that first year taking a group of kids down to the shore for a retreat...and it was an incredible amount of work and what I heard afterwards wasn't thanks from anyone from the congregation for the work I had done...but instead criticism about how the food wasn't just right...or I hadn't left the trash in the right place...
- and I was 19 years old at the time thinking – I'm doing this as a volunteer and this is the thanks you get?...

- and I learned a very important lesson...and that is – you better be sure you're serving Christ for the joy of pleasing Him...not serving people for the kind of treatment you may or may not receive at that given moment...
- sometimes you can live and serve like Stephen...and end up being treated like Stephen...
- by the way, there's an important lesson there when it comes to living life together...
- and that is – looking for as many ways to encourage one another and build each other up as possible...
 - you may be sitting next to someone who has been trying to live for God all week and they are taking a ton of guff from their co-workers as a result...
 - or their family is giving them fits...
 - and when they walk into the church house – a friendly greeting or a pat on the back or a word of encouragement could have a tremendous impact in their souls right now...
 - since it's true that God wants everyone on the team taking part in ministry, and sometimes those are hard ministry assignments...let's be sure we're encouraging one another on the team...

III. Be Prepared to Speak Lovingly and Forcefully.

- we skipped the bulk of Stephen's sermon for sake of time...
- it would be very good to go back and read it this afternoon or sometime this week because it is a marvelous review of OT history...
- but here's what we need to remember...

A. It is possible to be full of grace, and still speak the truth in a firm and direct fashion when necessary.

- Acts 7:51-53 - You men who are stiff-necked and uncircumcised in heart and ears are always resisting the Holy Spirit; you are doing just as your fathers did. Which one of the prophets did your fathers not persecute? They killed those who had previously announced the coming of the Righteous One, whose betrayers and murderers you have now become; you who received the law as ordained by angels, and yet did not keep it.

- it took some courage to let that one fly.
- and yes it requires the wisdom of Solomon to know when and how to do that...

B. The more you know the truth, the more confidence you will have to speak it when appropriate.

- if you just glance over chapter 7, you find yourself wondering...where did Stephen learn all of this?...
- it is incredible how well he knew the OT...
- and that is part of what put him in the position to be able to serve as effectively as the apostles...
- well, the take away for that one is rather obvious, isn't it?...
- is it possible that in order to be best prepared for whatever ministry "Stephen like ministry" God has for you in the future, that you need to learn more of the Word now? (you can't speak something you don't know --- hit ABF's, FCI, etc)

IV. Believe that God Can Help You Be Like Christ Even in Severe Circumstances

- I realize some might say – I hear what you’re saying, and you’ve just given me some really good reasons why I don’t want to be on the ministry team...
- there is a clear theme running through this entire passage about how Stephen was like so much like His Savior...

A. Stephen’s wisdom was apparent and overwhelming to those who opposed him.

- **Acts 7:10** - and rescued him from all his afflictions, and granted him favor and wisdom in the sight of Pharaoh, king of Egypt, and he made him governor over Egypt and all his household.
- **Matthew 7:28-29** - When Jesus had finished these words, the crowds were amazed at His teaching; for He was teaching them as *one* having authority, and not as their scribes.

B. His godly character was even apparent on his countenance.

- **Acts 6:15** - And fixing their gaze on him, all who were sitting in the Council saw his face like the face of an angel.
 - how could that possibly be?...the answer is that Stephen put himself in a position where he could only respond properly if he was allowing Christ to work in and through him...
- **Colossians 1:27** - to whom God willed to make known what is the riches of the glory of this mystery among the Gentiles, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory.
- **Galatians 2:20** - I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me; and the *life* which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself up for me.

- and of course the most prominent example of this is...

C. Even in the way he died.

- **Acts 7:60** - Then falling on his knees, he cried out with a loud voice, “Lord, do not hold this sin against them!” Having said this, he fell asleep.
- you don’t have to know much about the Bible to recognize those words...
- **Luke 23:34** - But Jesus was saying, “Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing.”

- there’s one more detail we can’t miss...and I realize some might say, but this story has such a sad ending...not exactly...

V. Don’t Stop Believing that God Can Use Your Ministry in Unbelievable Ways.

- **Acts 8:1** – Saul was in hearty agreement with putting him to death.