

Sermon Notes of Rev.Dr.I.J.W.Oakley (10-7-94 Guisborough Evangelical Church)

Stephen
Acts 6:5,8

Additional Bible Reading: Acts 7:54-60

Introduction

A character study of Stephen will be helpful and instructive. Previously we saw how seven men were appointed from the Greek speaking Jews to look after the administration of the church in taking care of the widows. Although it was a practical task, men full of wisdom and the Holy Spirit were selected. Stephen was one of these, probably the most outstanding. He later went on to be the first Christian to give his life for the Gospel.

In the verses we read, Stephen is described as being full of four things – full of faith and Holy Spirit (Acts 6:5) and full of God’s grace (A.V. translates this faith) and power (Acts 6:8). The word πληπης, translated “full of” is frequently used when describing the Early Church. They did not just possess certain qualities, but they were full of them. These qualities dominated their whole character.

The Christian life is a life of fullness. **From the fullness of his grace we have all received one blessing after another** (John 1:16). **Your joy will be complete** (John 16:24). **You yourselves are full of goodness, complete in knowledge** (Romans 15:14). **You may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God** (Ephesians 3:19). And here we have full of faith, Holy Spirit, grace and power. Abundance, richness, overflow, plenty excess in the Christian life. C.f. Jesus speaking of rivers of living water – not a dribble, brook or stream, but rivers.

We are going to look in reverse order at the qualities Stephen was full of, from the ones that everyone knew and saw, and work backwards and inwards till we find the secret of his life.

Stephen was - full of power in his service

This must have been evident to those around, not only in the great wonders and signs, but also in the way Stephen carried out his work as a deacon, caring for widows, serving tables, and administering the benevolent fund. Christian character and service are most tested in obscurity and in menial and distasteful tasks.

When men disputed with him, they could not answer him. His wisdom and spirit was too great for them. So they had to resort to false witnesses who told lies about him. He was not cowed or browbeaten by all the pressure and opposition. His face was like an angel’s face. The power of God was evident in his spiritual grasp of the Old Testament scriptures in chapter 7. He understood God’s dealings with Israel and the root reason for the failure of God’s people in rebellion and disobedience.

Power was seen in his bold and fearless preaching. He reached the heart and conscience of his hearers. He spoke about sin and righteousness, even though he was facing learned and influential people in the church. This produced a hostile reaction.

As stones and rocks rained down on him, his faith was triumphant to the end, and his Christian faith and character held fast as he prayed for his enemies.

God's will and purposes for lives vary. But wherever He directs and leads us, the power of God should be evident in our lives. There should be power in our service – steadfastness, self-control, perseverance, stability, Godliness. These things are so needed in the church as well as in the world. Marks of the present day are instability, lack of commitment, doubt or certainty. The quality of our service ought to be based on a grasp of God's Word, demonstrated in faithful, bold, dependable, wise, discerning, love of Scripture outworking in lives.

Our service should be selfless, ready to sacrifice everything for Christ's sake. This is the kind of Christian service which marks, stands out, makes an impact. The test of the church is not the quantity but the quality of service. Service marked by the power of God. Live and die as Stephen did – in such a way as brings glory to God. Sadly, this is in short supply in the Christian church.

Full of grace in his character

Stephen was full of the love of God and love for His truth, and love for people who don't deserve it. Stephen had a gracious, Christ-like character. He was devoted to God. The quality of service is determined by the quality of the servant. You cannot divorce the man from the message. What we are and say must be all of a piece. It has been said of some ministers, that when in the pulpit, it is a pity they ever get out of it. And when they get out of it, it's a pity they ever get into it again!

R.M.McCheyne, speaking of the ministry, but true of all forms of Christian service, wrote: "It is not great talents that God blesses so much as great likeness to Jesus. A holy minister is an awful weapon in the hand of God. A word spoken by you when your conscience is clear and your heart if full of God's spirit is worth 10,000 spoken in sin and unbelief." Andrew Bonar, McCheyne's biographer, wrote: "God works most by holy instruments. I am more than ever convinced that unholiness lies at the root of our little success."

These are words that need to be taken to heart by every Christian, but above all by every Christian minister. We are full of power when we are full of grace. But how can we be full of grace? How did Stephen manage it?

Full of the Holy Spirit in his heart

We have already noted this characteristic of the New Testament church. Again and again we read of them being "filled with the Holy Spirit". It means they were completely controlled by the Spirit, under His authority, clothed with His Spirit. Since He is a person and not a thing, the Holy Spirit takes over personalities. He permeates through the whole being so that we are under His constraint and restraint. So that we bring to every situation the spiritual power and blessing of Another.

Not a once for all experience, not a second blessing, but a continuous infilling of the Holy Spirit. **Be continuously filled with the Spirit** (Ephesians 5:18). It is meant to be a continuing and growing thing. Our spirits are capable of expansion, our vessels are

elastic, the walls of the cup of our spirit into which the wine of the Holy Spirit is poured can widen to the capacity of the divine life we possess. He can continuously flow in, fill and fit us. The more we possess, the more we can receive. Being filled does not mean a little drop in the bottom of a cup and the rest gaping emptiness. Yet, regrettably, this is the condition of so many Christians.

It is impossible to be a Christian and not to have the Holy Spirit. **If anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, he does not belong to Christ** (Romans 8:9). But that is not the same thing as being filled with the Spirit; we have only as much as we claim by faith. Our having the Spirit is not the same as Him having us. We can be born of the Spirit, but not filled with the Spirit. He can indwell us, but not be in control of us. It is possible to be sealed by the Spirit (Ephesians 4:30), have witness of the Spirit (Acts 5:32), be baptized by the Spirit into one body (1 Corinthians 12:13), and still not to be filled with the Spirit.

Someone once said of D.L.Moody, “That man has the monopoly of the Holy Spirit”, to which the reply was, “Not at all. The Holy Spirit has a monopoly of him.”

We can be very orthodox about the Holy Spirit, assert His deity and personality etc. It is not the same as being submissive to His divine person. One minister once testified: “When I began my ministry, I was very concerned to preach an orthodox message. I still am. But I am also beginning to learn something that is equally important – that by the infinite grace of God I shall carry with me into my ministry a presence which, when the Word is preached, permeates all that is said and done.” Here is God’s norm for service, character, home, work place and the daily routine.

We are not promised a bed of roses henceforth. When Stephen was filled with the Holy Spirit, the result was opposition, anger and death. But in every situation to which God calls – controlled and possessed by Him – we are totally adequate for all that life brings, and have the enjoyment of the peace of God.

We need to possess our possessions in order to be complete in Christ. Appropriate what is ours. The source of the fullness of the Holy Spirit is found in a right relationship with God. Hence:

Full of faith in his attitude

Stephen had the right attitude to his Lord, the Lord’s will, Lordship and authority. He took his hands off his own life and yielded himself without reserve to Him. Faith means having a desire for Him, a longing for Him, trusting self to Him, and expecting Him to fill us with the Holy Spirit. It requires a realization of personal bankruptcy, helplessness, poverty and need without Him, i.e. being at an end of our resources and also desperate. That is where we begin. Only when we are helpless, will the Holy Spirit take full possession.

The promise is that if we hunger and thirst for God, we will be filled. Do I know this longing, desiring, craving, hunger for God? Have I yielded myself entirely to Him? Have I removed the clutter from out of my life, which prevents Him filling me with Himself? Have I removed all that quenches the Spirit and grieves the Spirit?

I have to go to God with an empty hand, totally submitted to His will, and willing to abandon anything I know is contrary to His will. I must clear out every rival allegiance to His will and everything that challenges His claim over my life. I must mean business with God. Then I can step forward in faith and obedience and in the attitude of constantly appropriating a supply of His grace from Christ Himself. I need to keep in touch with the source of power, ensuring that nothing hinders that contact. Maintain moment-by-moment contact with the risen Christ. As long as we keep on believing, we will keep on receiving.

Conclusion

Stephen was full of power because he was full of grace, because he was full of the Holy Spirit, because he was full of faith. What controls your life? Self or the Lord? God will fill only what is empty.

Is there something else in control in your life? Self, comfort, ambition, reputation, loyalty to this one or that sin in thought or word or deed? Bring it to the Cross and ask the Lord to deal with it. While self is on the throne, Christ is on the Cross. When self is on the Cross, then Christ is on the throne.