



+ **YOU**

Sermon Series: How to Avoid Life's Pitfalls
To be used with: The Pitfall of Injustice
Sermon Title Possibilities: That's Not Fair
Scripture: Acts 7:54-60

Connection with Unit Theme: To complement the small group study "*The Pitfall of Injustice*," this sermon will explore an example of amazing injustice that a faithful follower of Christ encountered. The sermon will look at the actions of Stephen, and how others responded to his faithful obedience.

Introduction: "That's not fair!" It is difficult to say this without sounding like a five-year-old. We are all guilty of making this statement. The amazing thing is that we can find multiple examples in the Bible of something not being fair. Joseph in Genesis is a classic case. He was falsely accused by Potiphar's wife and then forgotten in jail as a result. Today's sermon is looking at a New Testament example, Stephen. We will look at his actions and then expound upon the reactions of others to his faithfulness.

1. Stephen's actions

a. He proclaimed the truth (7:1-53)

A quick study of Acts 7 shows that Stephen proclaimed a message to a group of religious fanatics that had a strong knowledge of the Old Testament. He started with Abraham, dealt with Moses, he handled the nation of Israel's rebellion and showed how all of this pointed to the fact that Christ is alive and the long-awaited Messiah.

All of us would be wise to learn from Stephen's faithful obedience. We know that his message was not received well, and Stephen probably knew that it would not be received well. But, the receptivity, or lack thereof, did not stop Stephen. It should not stop us either. No matter if we are blue collar or white collar, rich or poor, educated or uneducated, we all have a message to proclaim. The way the message is received might not be positive, but this should not stop us from faithfully proclaiming it.

b. He gazed into heaven (v. 55)

Verse 54 shows us that the message was not received with open arms. We will look at this in more detail shortly. What we do see in verse 55, however, is another action that Stephen embraces from which we can learn. Stephen gazed into heaven. The word gazed means to focus one's eyes and attention intently and continually upon something or someone.

How many of us focus upon the negative circumstance that we are facing when we have determined that something is not fair? I know that I am guilty as charged. I find myself in something that I have determined is not fair and this circumstance gets my full attention. Stephen proclaimed the good news of the gospel and was

getting stoned for this. He could have pitched a fit while so called religious folks were pitching rocks at him. His attention, however, was heavenward and what awaited him. I know that I have a great deal to learn from Stephen's actions.

c. He prayed for others (v. 59)

Jesus said in the Sermon on the Mount, "I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you" (Matt. 5:43). Let's be honest, that command is not an easy one. If an enemy is truly an enemy, we probably struggle to like them much less love them. Jesus calls us not only to love them but also pray for them.

Stephen, who was described as full of the Holy Spirit, prayed that the Lord would forgive his enemies who were in the process of killing him. Might the key to this be that he was full of the Holy Spirit? This phrase reveals that he was actively living in submission to the Spirit leadership. The only way to pray for those who are mistreating you is to be filled with the Spirit. When we are filled, our focus is more apt to be on His will for our lives and not our negative circumstances.

2. The reactions to Stephen's actions

a. They were enraged (v. 54 & 58)

To say that the group got rather upset is an extreme understatement. The Bible says that they were enraged and gnashed their teeth at him. Both of these actions communicate extreme hostility and it was directed at Stephen.

To make matters worse, they began to act upon their rage. They drug Stephen outside of town and began to stone him. This was their form of capital punishment; and they were taking justice into their own hands. Talk about something not being fair. Stephen speaks the truth and he gets killed for this. We often ask where God is in the middle of something like this. We will find the answer to this soon.

b. He saw the risen Savior (v. 56)

The religious elite did not care for the sermon, but it seems that Jesus did. As Stephen was being led to his execution, he looked up and saw Jesus standing at the right hand of God. This is the only account in the Bible of someone seeing Jesus standing in glory. Many have said that He was giving Stephen a standing ovation for his faithfulness. The Bible does not indicate that this is why He was standing. No matter the reason, Stephen saw Jesus in glory. The question for us: would my actions be such that I would catch His attention in a similar manner to that of Stephen.

c. He went home (v. 59-60)

Modern day hymn writer Chris Tomlin has a song entitled *Home*. The first verse says:

“This world is not what it was meant to be,
All this pain, all this suffering.
There’s a better place waiting for me, In Heaven”.

We would all confess that his words are accurate. Stephen knew that this world was not his home and because of this he asked Jesus to receive his spirit as he died. What Stephen was going through was not fair, but the story ends well. He got to go home to heaven, and he is there today celebrating the truth of the gospel message that he proclaimed that day.

Conclusion: Let’s conclude this sermon with the greatest example of something not being fair. It is not fair that Jesus would come to this earth, live a perfect life, offer love and healing to many, and yet die a horrible death on a cross. While He was dying on the cross, He too asked the Father to forgive those who crucified Him. Can you and I take a moment to not focus on the circumstances that we feel are not fair and focus on the gift that Christ is offering us today? We need not leave here today without accepting His gift of salvation.

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