

Expect Opposition
Acts 6:8-15
Rev. Brian Bill
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Play Clip from “Bible Project”

That clip comes from “The Bible Project.” If you’d like to watch the entire video covering the first twelve chapters of Acts, you can find it on Sermon Extras on our app.

Have you ever been unfairly criticized or judged by someone? Me, too.

Recently, I was in Chicago and came across two guys holding signs attacking some Christian leaders I respect. The words on the signs were in black capital letters and were caustic and unkind. At first, I just walked by but I couldn’t get these angry guys out of my mind. After lunch, I circled back and engaged one of them in conversation.

After asking him why he was holding his sign, he went into a diatribe calling these leaders liars and Satanists, questioning their salvation and motives. I listened politely and then asked a few questions. As far as I could tell, my motives were good, as I engaged respectfully. The longer we talked however, the more I felt myself getting enraged. When I asked him why he was being so unkind, he called me a liar and told me I wasn’t saved! I’m not sure if it was righteous anger rising within me or if my flesh was getting ready for a fight. I tried to defend myself but disengaged before it got ugly.

A couple days later someone told me a person who visited Edgewood accused us of preaching the prosperity gospel. When I heard this, I laughed because it’s so far from the truth. If anything, we preach the persecution gospel, just like Jesus did.

How do you handle unfair accusations? What’s your response when someone attacks your faith or questions your motives? Do you get livid or do you laugh it off?

Let’s listen to how Stephen responded when something worse happened to him. Grab your Bible and meet me in Acts 6:8-15. This text is found on page 914 in the Bible located in the rack in front of you: ***“And Stephen, full of grace and power, was doing great wonders and signs among the people. Then some of those who***

belonged to the synagogue of the Freedmen (as it was called), and of the Cyrenians, and of the Alexandrians, and of those from Cilicia and Asia, rose up and disputed with Stephen. But they could not withstand the wisdom and the Spirit with which he was speaking. Then they secretly instigated men who said, ‘We have heard him speak blasphemous words against Moses and God.’ And they stirred up the people and the elders and the scribes, and they came upon him and seized him and brought him before the council, and they set up false witnesses who said, ‘This man never ceases to speak words against this holy place and the law, for we have heard him say that this Jesus of Nazareth will destroy this place and will change the customs that Moses delivered to us.’ And gazing at him, all who sat in the council saw that his face was like the face of an angel.”

Here’s what I want us to get today: *Don’t be surprised when people push back.* Last weekend Pastor Tim did a super job unpacking the opening verses of Acts 6 to help us see that *Spirit-filled servants seek godly solutions to conflict.*

1. We learned about different **factors that led to conflict** within the early church – rapid change, grumbling, discrimination, blind spots and unmet needs.
2. Then he walked us through a **process for resolving conflict** – keep godly priorities, enlist the help of others, choose a spiritual servanthood mentality and create a workable godly solution. Among the seven deacons selected was a servant named Stephen. BTW, our EBC deacons are true servants as well. Let me share an example. A couple months ago, they surprised me by gifting me with a sabbatical for the month of March. You’re in for a treat when I’m gone because the following men will be preaching – Ray Pritchard, EBC missionary Mike Hillhouse, Jason Crosby, Pastor Kyle Parks, and Cisco Cotto.
3. Pastor Tim concluded by pointing out **three results** – servants were empowered, the Word of God was elevated, and discipleship increased.

As we dive into the second half of Acts 6, we’ll see a fourth result – opposition from the enemies of the gospel. After being a key player in resolving internal conflict in the church, Stephen is about to find himself in severe opposition with those outside the church.

The first thing to learn from Stephen’s example is to...

1. Cultivate your character. We see in verse 8 some of his distinctive character qualities: ***“And Stephen, full of grace and power...”*** The word **“full”** means, *“complete and filled with abundance.”* This word is also used in verse 3 to describe all the deacons who were: ***“full of the Spirit and of wisdom”*** and in verse 5 to describe Stephen in particular: ***“...and they chose Stephen, a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit.”*** Again, Acts 7:55 tells us Stephen was ***“full of the Holy Spirit.”***

In these descriptions we see that Stephen was a “full” man. He was not half-hearted or double-minded or trying to ride the fence. He was fully and completely devoted to Christ.

- **Full of the Holy Spirit.** This means Stephen was surrendered completely to the Holy Spirit and under His control. Three times the Bible says Stephen was filled with the Holy Spirit. We’re also called to be ***“filled with the Holy Spirit”*** according to Ephesians 5:18. One way you know you’re filled with the Spirit is when you see the Fruit of the Spirit in your life – love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control as spelled out in Galatians 5:22.
- **Full of wisdom.** It’s not enough simply to be educated and have knowledge, as important as education is. We also need wisdom, which is the ability to use the knowledge we have. In the Old Testament, the Hebrew word for ***“wise”*** is used to describe people who are adept at working with their hands. Wisdom is the ability to take God’s precepts and put them into practice. Stephen was skilled at living out God’s Word.
- **Full of faith.** Hebrews 11:1 tells us that faith is ***“the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.”*** Hebrews 11:6 tells us that faith is so important that, without it, we have no place with God, and it is impossible to please Him.
- **Full of grace.** Grace is God’s unmerited favor bestowed upon those whom He loves. I like what Jared Wilson writes: ***“The grace the Bible talks about is power not just for justification but also for transformation.”***
- **Full of power.** Because he was filled with the Holy Spirit, Stephen had been granted wisdom, faith and grace, which led to power. This is exhibited in the last part of verse 8: ***“...was doing great wonders and signs among the apostles.”***

When D.L. Moody was a struggling shoe salesman, he heard his friend Henry Varley make this challenge: ***“The world has yet to see what God can do with, and***

for, and through, and in a man, who is fully and wholly consecrated to Him.”
Later, Moody declared, *“I aim to be that man.”*

What about you? Are you filled with the Holy Spirit, filled with wisdom, filled with faith, filled with grace and filled with power? Will you do whatever it takes to be faithful and fruitful like Stephen was? Will you cultivate your character through the regular reading and heeding of God’s Word? Will you be that man or woman or teen who is fully and wholly consecrated to Christ?

Carey Neiuwhof said something this week that is worth pondering: *“Competency can’t compensate for lack of character.”*

The first thing to work on is to cultivate your character.

When you do, *don’t be surprised when people push back.*

2. Choose courage. Stephen’s character is about to be tested as we see in verse 9: *“Then some of those who belonged to the synagogue of the Freedmen (as it was called), and of the Cyrenians, and of the Alexandrians, and of those from Cilicia and Asia, rose up and disputed with Stephen.”* Go back and consider the word *“then”* because it connects us to verse 8. Stephen is being used by God and *then* push back comes. It’s no surprise that opposition arises after this display of amazing signs and wonders.

- Decide to get baptized, *then* the evil one will blast you with doubts.
- Prioritize your weekends so you’ll gather with God’s people, *then* your schedule changes.
- Decide to grow by reading your Bible every day, *then* your alarm doesn’t go off.
- Surrender fully to Christ, *then* the tempter will spring something on you.
- Be a bold witness by going with the gospel, *then* the devil will try to silence you.
- Commit to give 10% of your income, *then* an unexpected bill will come.
- Be willing to stand against culture, *then* the devil will urge you to cave.
- Choose to walk in joy, *then* a bad diagnosis comes your way.
- Strive to live in peace, *then* someone stops talking to you.
- Stand for sexual purity, *then* your boyfriend or girlfriend dumps you.

Craig Groeschel writes: *“When you live boldly for Christ, you will face opposition. Don’t let opposition discourage you. Let the trials strengthen your faith and draw you closer to Christ...if you’re not ready to face opposition for your obedience to God, you’re not ready to be used by God.”*

According to the Talmud, Jerusalem had 480 synagogues at that time. Most of them were filled with native Jews but there were others for Greek-speaking Jews. The **“synagogue of the Freedmen”** was made up of descendants of the Jews who had been taken as slaves by Pompey to Rome and were now free. They were threatened by what they perceived as preaching against Judaism.

The **“Cyrenians and Alexandrians”** were from Northern Africa. Incidentally, the man who carried Christ’s cross was from Cyrene and Apollos, who we will meet later in Acts, was from Alexandria. **“Cecilia and Asia”** made up the area we know today as Turkey. Interestingly, the Apostle Paul may have been a member of the synagogue in Cecilia, because of what we read in Acts 21:39: **“I am a Jew from Tarsus in Cecilia.”** This might explain why Paul was so zealous to stone Stephen.

They all **“rose up and disputed with Stephen.”** The phrase **“rose up”** means they were **“enraged,”** and the word **“dispute”** means to interrupt and argue, like in a debate. Instead of arguing the issues, they used an *ad hominem* argument, one that is common today in politics, when they attacked him as a person, not his position. This tactic is often employed by people who are losing an argument.

Amazingly, no matter how hard they tried to trip Stephen up, they couldn’t do it. Check out verse 10: **“But they could not withstand the wisdom and the Spirit with which he was speaking.”** They had no answers to Stephen’s sermon because of the Spirit who was leading him and his skillful tact. This echoes what Gamaliel said in Acts 5:39: **“But if it is of God, you will not be able to overthrow them.”** I’m reminded of what God said to Moses in Exodus 4:12: **“Now therefore go, and I will be with your mouth and teach you what you shall speak.”**

What Stephen experienced is actually a direct fulfillment of what Jesus predicted in Luke 21:12-15: **“But before all this they will lay their hands on you and persecute you, delivering you up to the synagogues and prisons, and you will be brought before kings and governors for my name’s sake. This will be your opportunity to bear witness. Settle it therefore in your minds not to meditate beforehand how to answer, for I will give you a mouth and wisdom, which none of your adversaries will be able to withstand or contradict.”**

Because they couldn't withstand Stephen's wisdom or contradict what the Spirit was saying through him, they resorted to slander in verse 11: ***“Then they secretly instigated men who said, ‘We have heard him speak blasphemous words against Moses and God.’”*** It's as if they were holding up signs with these made-up charges on them.

The word ***“instigated”*** means they *“put forward those who would swear falsely.”* This is very similar to what the religious leaders did to our Lord in Matthew 26:59: ***“Now the chief priests and the whole council were seeking false testimony against Jesus that they might put Him to death.”*** In Matthew 28:11-12, they gave shekels to the soldiers so they would lie: ***“And when they had assembled with the elders and taken counsel, they gave a sufficient sum of money to the soldiers and said, ‘Tell people, his disciples came by night and stole him away while we were asleep.’”***

If you are serious about following Christ, you must learn to put up with lies and half-truths because Satan is a liar, a thief and a murderer. Jesus said it like this in John 8:44: ***“He was a murderer from the beginning, and does not stand in the truth, because there is no truth in him. When he lies, he speaks out of his own character, for he is a liar and the father of lies.”***

To blaspheme is to speak with contempt about God or to be defiantly irreverent. One commentator writes, *“Blasphemy is verbal or written reproach of God's name, character, work, or attributes.”* Incredibly, they charge Stephen with blasphemy against the words of Moses found in the Torah and against God Himself. Leviticus 24:16 says the punishment for blasphemy is stoning: ***“Whoever blasphemes the name of the LORD shall surely be put to death. All the congregation shall stone him”***

In verse 12, the leaders seek to rile up the crowds to turn on Stephen: ***“And they stirred up the people and the elders and the scribes, and they came upon him and seized him and brought him before the council.”*** The word ***“stirred”*** means, *“to incite, to shake like in an earthquake.”* The word ***“came”*** has the idea of rushing upon Stephen and ***“seizing”*** refers to grabbing him suddenly.

As a way to bolster their case, we're told what they did next in verses 13-14: ***“And they set up false witnesses who said, ‘This man never ceases to speak words against this holy place and the law, for we have heard him say that this Jesus of Nazareth will destroy this place and will change the customs that Moses***

delivered to us.” The phrase **“never ceases to speak”** is the idea of *“incessantly and never pausing.”*

In short, they’re charging Stephen with speaking against the holy land, the law of Moses, and the temple. We’ll see this fleshed out more in Stephen’s sermon as recorded in Acts 7 but suffice it to say that he wasn’t preaching against the land, the law or the temple but was rather pointing out that Jesus fulfilled all of these things through the New Covenant.

Jesus put it like this in Matthew 5:17: **“Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them.”** Because Jesus lived out the law of Moses perfectly, we are no longer under the law.

The temple sacrifices are no longer needed because Jesus is the full and final sacrifice for sins. Jesus Himself is the meeting place of God as we read in John 1:14: **“And the Word became flesh and dwelt [tabernacled] among us, and we have seen His glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth.”** Jesus is the tabernacle and the new temple of God and now through His Holy Spirit, He dwells within the temple of the church body and the body of Christians according to 1 Corinthians 3:16: **“Do you not know that you are God’s temple and that God’s Spirit dwells in you?”**

The temple in Jerusalem was destroyed in A.D. 70, fulfilling what Jesus declared in Matthew 24:2: **“Truly, I say to you, there will not be left here one stone upon another that will not be thrown down.”**

Jesus Christ is the fulfillment of all that Judaism teaches. What they had always longed for has now come to pass, if they would but believe Jesus as Messiah and receive Him as Lord of their lives.

I want to address a teaching that has been gaining momentum among Christians. Often called the Hebrew Roots movement, some are emphasizing the recovery of the “original” Jewishness of Christianity. While not all adherents believe the same way, most in this movement advocate the need for every believer to walk a Torah-observant life (the first five books of the Bible), including Sabbath-keeping, celebrating the Jewish feasts and festivals, not recognizing Easter or Christmas as holidays, keeping the dietary laws and learning to approach Scripture with a Hebrew mindset.

Interestingly, these assemblies are often made up of a majority of Gentiles, including Gentile rabbis. Many have concluded God has called them to be Jewish and believe the Old Testament law is equally binding on Gentiles and Jews. Often the Torah is elevated as the foundational teaching for the church, resulting in a demotion of the New Testament, especially the letters of Paul.

Let me make five quick points.

- **The Old Testament dietary laws, festivals and Sabbath-keeping are shadows pointing to the substance found in Christ.** Colossians 2:16-17: *“Therefore let no one pass judgment on you in questions of food and drink, or with regard to a festival or a new moon or a Sabbath. These are a shadow of the things to come, but the substance belongs to Christ.”*
- **The gospel teaches we are saved by grace, not by works of the law.** Galatians 1:6: *“I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting him who called you in the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel.”*
- **We’re called to walk by faith, not by works of the flesh.** Galatians 3:1-3: *“O foolish Galatians! Who has bewitched you? It was before your eyes that Jesus Christ was publicly portrayed as crucified. Let me ask you only this: Did you receive the Spirit by works of the law or by hearing with faith? Are you so foolish? Having begun by the Spirit, are you now being perfected by the flesh?”*
- **The law of Moses leads to bondage, while faith in Jesus leads to freedom.** Galatians 3:23-25: *“Now before faith came, we were held captive under the law, imprisoned until the coming faith would be revealed. So then, the law was our guardian until Christ came, in order that we might be justified by faith. But now that faith has come, we are no longer under a guardian.”*
- **Jesus has fully fulfilled the requirements of the law so we can be declared righteous.** Romans 10:4: *“For Christ is the end of the law for righteousness to everyone who believes.”*

Like Stephen, we are not speaking against Moses. Rather, we believe that Jesus has fulfilled everything taught by Moses.

In order for us not to be surprised when people push back, let's *cultivate our character and choose courage.*

There's one more thing we can learn from Stephen.

3. Consider your countenance. Hebrews 11:38 says there have always been men and women of whom it can be said ***“that this world was not worthy of them.”*** Stephen was certainly one of these people. He did not strike back or raise his voice even though the accusations against him were false. He didn't get livid or just laugh it off.

Look at verse 15: ***“And gazing at him, all who sat in the council saw that his face was like the face of an angel.”*** The word for “gazing” has the idea of “*straining intently to get a good look.*” Note that ***“all who sat in the council”*** did this – that's 71 judges who were judging him and waiting for Stephen to say something they could pounce on. Here's a picture of how intimidating this must have been (show slide of Sanhedrin).

When they gazed at Stephen it was as if they saw the Shekinah glory of God glowing on his face! This happened to Moses as well when he came down from the mountain after seeing the majesty of God in Exodus 34:29: ***“...Moses did not know that the skin of his face shone because he had been talking with God.”*** We read in Matthew 17:2 that Jesus ***“was transfigured before them, and his face shone like the sun, and his clothes became white as light.”***

How ironic that they had charged Stephen with blasphemy against Moses and now his face glowed like his face did. John Stott comments, ***“In this way God was showing that both Moses' ministry of the law and Stephen's interpretation of it had His approval.”***

This week I read a news story about the oldest living man in the world. He's 112-years-old and recently shared his secret to a long life: ***“Don't get angry and keep smiling.”*** Stephen won't make 112 years, but he would say life is all about serving His Savior, sharing, suffering, smiling and shining!

Brothers and sisters, let's consider our countenance. Some of us look like we've been weaned on dill pickles! Charles Spurgeon gave this advice to young ministers: ***“When you talk about Heaven let your face light up with a heavenly glory. When you talk about Hell, your everyday face will do.”***

If we want to glow with God's glory, we must spend time in the presence of God as Psalm 34:5 says: ***“Those who look to Him are radiant, and their faces shall never be ashamed.”*** Ecclesiastes 8:1 says, ***“A man's wisdom makes his face shine, and the hardness of his face is changed.”*** Jesus said in Matthew 13:43: ***“Then the righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father.”*** Philippians 2:15 calls us to live on mission in a messed-up world, reflecting the light of our Lord to those living in darkness: ***“...in the midst of a crooked and twisted generation, among whom you shine as lights in the world.”***

In the 1850s, several explorers discovered a tremendous amount of gold in a riverbed in Montana. Because they didn't have any tools and some members of their team were sick, they had to go back to town for supplies and to rest up. Before they left, they made a pact by promising not to tell anyone where the gold was.

After being in town for a couple weeks, they decided to leave early the next morning. As they headed out, over 50 of the townspeople walked out of town with them. They nervously asked each other, *“‘Did you tell them about the gold?’ ‘No, did you?’ ‘It wasn't me.’”* They finally asked the people why they were following them. This is what they said: *“We knew you found gold by the smiles on your faces.”*

Here's a question. Do your neighbors, co-workers or classmates know you've found gold? I wonder if too many of us have drifted into sin ourselves and our faces are no longer shining.

I'm reminded of the old joke where someone goes up to a friend and says, *“You seem sad today.”* The friend responds, *“I'm actually happy.”* To which the first guy says, *“Well, tell that to your face!”*

Can people tell you've found gold in Jesus just by looking at your face? Do they see a bit of heaven when they look at you? If so, they're going to want what you have. Are you ready to tell them?

I wasn't at my best on a street corner in Chicago, but I want to learn how to embrace opposition like Stephen did. Who's with me?

We can do that by...

- Cultivating our character

- Choosing courage
- Considering our countenance

Action Steps

Here are a few ways we can put this preaching into practice.

1. If you've not been saved yet, it's time to trust the finished work of Christ on your behalf.

2. If you're born again, it's time to get baptized. We have openings next weekend.

3. Take advantage of some growth opportunities coming up.

- The Women's Learning Lab is this next Saturday.
- The Men's Iron Sharpens Iron Conference will take place in Davenport on Saturday, March 28.
- The Student Ministry Open House is after each service this weekend. Check it out to see if God might want you to begin serving in this ministry.
- Mainspring, our ministry for college and young adults is holding a film premiere on Sunday night, February 23.
- Take advantage of one of our new Growth Group electives for March. Spiritually Influencing as Grandparents at 9 am; Christianity and Islam at 10:45 am.

4. Please read Acts 7 before next weekend. We're going to cover this entire chapter of 60 verses so it would be helpful if you read it ahead of time.

Closing Song: "Our God"

New Members – Saturday night (Leonard and Jean Chard)