

Series: 'Practical Hints from Jesus about submitting to the Kingdom Rule of Heaven'

Message: "Courage and Clarity – Marks of an ever deepening relationship with Jesus" (22nd October 2023)

So ... we've been preaching a series of messages that I have given this working title to, 'Practical Hints from Jesus about submitting to the Kingdom Rule of Heaven', and through the ideas presented from the words and actions of Jesus himself when He walked the earth, we are helping each other to take daily and practical steps out of OBEDIENCE AND TRUST in Christ, as we discover more practical answers to the question, 'what does following Jesus look like ON the earth in light of the revelation we have received about Heaven On Planet Earth.

Today, I'd like to reflect some more on this big idea that we can glean from Jesus' interactions whilst He was on the earth, that relationship is the journey AND the destination, and to do that I'd like to take a small side-step to something I've been praying and meditating on this week.

I'm reading from Acts chapter 7 essentially, but I'll read some verses from chapter 6 for some context.

In those days when the number of disciples was increasing, the Hellenistic Jews among them complained against the Hebraic Jews because their widows were being overlooked in the daily distribution of food. ² So the Twelve gathered all the disciples together and said, "It would not be right for us to neglect the ministry of the word of God in order to wait on tables. ³ Brothers and sisters, choose seven men from among you who are known to be full of the Spirit and wisdom. We will turn this responsibility over to them ⁴ and will give our attention to prayer and the ministry of the word." ⁵ This proposal pleased the whole group. They chose Stephen, a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit; also Philip, Procorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas, and Nicolas from Antioch, a convert to Judaism. ⁶ They presented these men to the apostles, who prayed and laid their hands on them. ⁷ So the word of God spread. The number of disciples in Jerusalem increased rapidly, and a large number of priests became obedient to the faith. ⁸ Now Stephen, a man full of God's grace and power, performed great wonders and signs among the people. ⁹ Opposition arose, however, from members of the Synagogue of the Freedmen (as it was called)—Jews of Cyrene and Alexandria as well as the provinces of Cilicia and Asia—who

began to argue with Stephen. ¹⁰ But they could not stand up against the wisdom the Spirit gave him as he spoke.

Then from verse 12

They seized Stephen and brought him before the Sanhedrin. ¹³ They produced false witnesses, who testified, “This fellow never stops speaking against this holy place and against the law. ¹⁴ For we have heard him say that this Jesus of Nazareth will destroy this place and change the customs Moses handed down to us.” ¹⁵ All who were sitting in the Sanhedrin looked intently at Stephen, and they saw that his face was like the face of an angel.

We pick the story back up in Acts chapter 7 and from verse 44

⁴⁴ “Our ancestors had the tabernacle of the covenant law with them in the wilderness. It had been made as God directed Moses, according to the pattern he had seen. ⁴⁵ After receiving the tabernacle, our ancestors under Joshua brought it with them when they took the land from the nations God drove out before them. It remained in the land until the time of David, ⁴⁶ who enjoyed God’s favour and asked that he might provide a dwelling place for the God of Jacob. ⁴⁷ But it was Solomon who built a house for him.

⁴⁸ “However, the Most High does not live in houses made by human hands. As the prophet says: ⁴⁹ “Heaven is my throne, and the earth is my footstool. What kind of house will you build for me? says the Lord. Or where will my resting place be? ⁵⁰ Has not my hand made all these things?’

⁵¹ “You stiff-necked people! Your hearts and ears are still uncircumcised. You are just like your ancestors: You always resist the Holy Spirit! ⁵² Was there ever a prophet your ancestors did not persecute? They even killed those who predicted the coming of the Righteous One. And now you have betrayed and murdered him— ⁵³ you who have received the law that was given through angels but have not obeyed it.” ⁵⁴ When the members of the Sanhedrin heard this, they were furious and gnashed their teeth at him. ⁵⁵ But Stephen, full of the Holy Spirit, looked up to heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God. ⁵⁶ “Look,” he said, “I see heaven open and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God.” ⁵⁷ At this they covered their ears and, yelling at the top of their voices, they all rushed at him, ⁵⁸ dragged him out of the city and began to stone him. Meanwhile, the witnesses laid their coats at the feet of a young man named Saul. ⁵⁹ While they were stoning him, Stephen prayed, “Lord Jesus,

receive my spirit.”⁶⁰ Then he fell on his knees and cried out, “Lord, do not hold this sin against them.” When he had said this, he fell asleep.

And finally, Chapter 8 and verse 1,

And Saul approved of their killing him. On that day a great persecution broke out against the church in Jerusalem, and all except the apostles were scattered throughout Judea and Samaria.

Alright, here we have one of the greatest speeches of all time which should rightly be included in the book I have on my shelf bearing the same name – but it isn't.

If I was to highlight one common thread that occurs in the speeches that commentators agree are the best or more correctly, the most influential ever (and I'd include Stephen's), that common thread is that they are all delivered without the agreement of speech writers and advisors, every single one of them. In fact, to take this one step further, they were all the result of the speaker, trusting their most trusted relationship and going the way their heart and spirit took them.

In 1963, when Martin Luther King delivered, an Abraham Lincoln level speech, (Abe wrote his own), I have shared with you before, the moment when his declaration shifted. King takes a very noticeable pause for about 15 – 20 seconds just before he launches into the 'I still have a dream' add on. What I haven't mentioned, is what is reliably reported by a number of sources as to what happened during that 20 second gap.

Mahalia Jackson, the epic gospel singer who'd sung to open the rally, was an advisor to King and mentor to Aretha Franklin who was present with her that fateful day, shouts out to King from the row down in front of the podium. 'Tell them about the dream Martin!'

Mahalia had remembered the first time King had used the idea of the dream at the previously biggest rally a couple of months earlier, the Detroit Freedom March (which had been run by Aretha's Baptist Minister Father. She was deeply moved by the idea and in King's speech pause she thought it was the right moment to go there, and King trusted his relationship with Jackson enough to put aside the written words in front of him, words that had been painstakingly pawed over by advisors and speech editors until 4am that morning, and went with his heart, his life experience, his insight and indeed his faith in Christ His Lord.

Stephen, stood before the Jewish council, and I am confident in saying that no speech writer, no advisor nor even an apostolic leader, would have suggested to Stephen that he say what he said in that company.

When thinking about this, I remembered being asked to speak some decades ago now about key moments in the life of the early church at a state youth conference in Victoria and I put together a list of SIX things you should NEVER do whilst being asked to testify on your own behalf before your local meeting of Pharisees, Scribes, and other Teachers of the Law.

It went something like this

1. Never ever allow your face to look like the face of an angel. This can be really off putting to your Sanhedrin audience. People might feel a deep conviction in their soul and get all worked up and frustrated before you even open your mouth. (6:15)
2. Never, use the superheroes of THEIR history, the people they revere and cherish more than anything else in their culture, as examples of God-fearing leaders who were persecuted and killed by the very ancestors of the people in the room in front of you, in the same way that these people you are speaking now, eradicated the Messiah.
3. Never set their hair on fire by telling them that you can clearly see this infidel that you've called the Messiah, the one that they called a servant of the devil, standing in heaven and in glory, at the right side of God. You would do well to keep these sorts of visions to yourself.
4. Never assume that your efforts will have a profound effect on anyone politically useful that might just be skulking around outside.
5. Never ascribe glory to this infidel by simply continuing to place yourself in His sphere of care.
6. Never, never, ever patronize them, or fuel their chagrin, by having enough of the infidel's love within you, to actually forgive them whilst you are dying.

All bad attempts at satire aside, Stephen was used by the Holy Spirit to show those present, what having a vital, deep, intimate relationship with Jesus Christ looks like. And in Stephen's case it turned out to be a clear example of a relationship being his journey and indeed his destination.

When faced with opposition delivering ridiculous odds, people tend to cave-in, not primarily due to lack of courage, but more likely a lack of relationships that can help them stand strong and make a difference.

Stephen was speaking to the authorities in Jewish law and history with the authority that comes from a genuine relationship with Jesus and the supernatural, counterculture rule of the kingdom of heaven, about the history of how the people of God had failed to hear from God again and again. He spoke about the consequences for that and how, like their ancestors who had killed the Prophets who had pointed to the Messiah, the people in the room in front of him rejected the Christ who doesn't live in human created dwellings, but in the hearts of human beings on the earth who have chosen to be in relationship with him.

Some might ask, what the heck was Stephen, this servant set aside by the apostles and the church, to wait on tables and distribute food to widows with equity, doing, being seized for sharing his faith and testifying to his relationship with Jesus to such an auspicious audience.

Well, it depends on the reason, and whether the source of that reason is drawn from the kingdom rule of this world or the kingdom rule of heaven. Whether the source is the human stuff, the whingeing about inequity amongst the widows based on politics and race and all the stuff that is important to the world system OR the reasons are drawn from journeying TOWARDS the righteousness of God based on the kingdom rule of heaven on the earth. You see, there is no appointing without the anointing or as Acts 6 verse 3 and following puts it, choose from among you, people full of the Holy Spirit and wisdom OR full of a relationship with Jesus that provides resources of power, authority, practical skill and common sense (Christ's character and gifts apportioned in a person / or the expression of a growing and deepening relationship with Jesus = anointing).

And why do I know that this appointment of these table waiters was driven by heaven and not something else, because the first thing that the author Luke records after the apostles laid their hands on these guys and prayed for them was

⁷ So the word of God spread. The number of disciples in Jerusalem increased rapidly, and a large number of priests became obedient to the faith.

Relationship gives perspective AND refuge, and the challenge is that we need a greater connection to Jesus for greater clarity in everything we say and do.

It doesn't matter what our responsibility of service is, full of the Holy Spirit and wisdom is the measure, and it firstly indicates the quality of the relationship we have with Jesus.

Stephen and his mates were set aside to be apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors and teachers because in verse 8 we see the evidence of this BEFORE Stephen's episode with the Jewish Council.

⁸ Now Stephen, a man full of God's grace and power, performed great wonders and signs among the people.

Jesus' presence IN and THROUGH us whatever we are doing
And so, Stephen's agenda wasn't to respond to their anger, The thing that makes the difference is a daily testimony that makes known the current purpose of God because of how connected to Jesus we are.
I want people to see more of Jesus when they hang out with me, and not have that messed up by my stuff. Let me finish with how Paul summarized this notion.

⁷ But whatever were gains to me I now consider loss for the sake of Christ.

⁸ What is more, I consider everything a loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things. I consider them garbage, that I may gain Christ ⁹ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ—the righteousness that comes from God on the basis of faith. ¹⁰ I want to know Christ—yes, to know the power of his resurrection and participation in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, ¹¹ and so, somehow, attaining to the resurrection from the dead.

¹² Not that I have already obtained all this, or have already arrived at my goal, but I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me. ¹³ Brothers and sisters, I do not consider myself yet to have taken hold of it. But one thing I do: Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, ¹⁴ I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus. ¹⁵ All of us, then, who are mature should take such a view of things. And if on some point you think differently, that too God will make clear to you. ¹⁶ Only let us live up to what we have already attained.