

Imitate the man who imitates Jesus

At the end of the 19th century, one of the most famous evangelists in church history, DL Moody, was told, "The world has not yet seen what God could do by means of a man who is totally devoted to him". And that sentence ate away at Moody so much that he thought to himself: I want to be that man, totally devoted to God. I won't hold back anything. I give everything. And it is estimated that God used Moody in the conversion of over a million people. "The world has not yet seen what God could do by means of a man who is totally devoted to him." A beautiful sentence but, in my opinion, it was wrong. It was wrong because the world had already seen men and women totally devoted to God. And the story of Stephen, a man totally devoted to God, is found in chapters 6 and 7 of the book of Acts. We will spend two weeks studying Stephen's character and testimony. And I give this sermon the title: "Imitate the man who imitated Jesus".

In chapter 6 verses 3, 5 and 8 there are descriptions of Stephen's character. 5 times Luke tells us that Stephen is a man filled. V3 - He is one of the 7 men "filled with the Spirit and with wisdom" V5 - Stephen, full of faith and the Holy Spirit V8 - Stephen, full of grace and power. Luc talks about the constant qualities that are present all the time in Stephen. These qualities are always evident in his life, things are always true of him. Let's look at these 5 qualities together.

A man filled with the Holy Spirit- I start with this quality because it is the only one that is mentioned twice. What does it mean to be filled with the Holy Spirit? It is true that every Christian has the Holy Spirit who lives in him or in her. In Romans 8: 9 the apostle Paul writes: "As for you, you are not in the flesh but in the Spirit, if at least the Spirit of God dwells in you". The Holy Spirit inhabits all believers, not just an elite group. He is given to all believers without exception.

But the book of Acts and other passages in the New Testament speak of those who are filled with the Spirit. Paul exhorts Christians in Ephesus by telling them, "Be filled with the Spirit." The Christian has the Spirit of God living in him, but he must also seek to be filled with the Spirit. Stephen is filled with the Holy Spirit. We saw the same thing of Peter in Acts 4: 8 when he preached before the Sanhedrin. So what does this mean? The Christian who is filled with the Holy Spirit submits to the Holy Spirit, to the point of letting him control him completely and thus fill him. To be filled with the Spirit means to let Him fully occupy every part of our life, our actions, our thoughts and our deepest motives.

You are filled with the Holy Spirit when you are filled with his Word, when you submit to it in every part of your life. We cannot know the fullness of the Spirit if we refuse to submit and obey his Word. Through our sin we grieve the Spirit. We quench him. We cannot be filled with the Spirit if we continue in disobedience to God in our lives.

And since each day we grieve the Spirit, we must come each day to ask God to fill us with his Spirit. We identify the parts of our life where we grieve Him, we repent, and ask Him to refill us. We pray, "Lord, fill me with your Spirit. Let him guide me. Let him shape me. May he work in me to produce fruit. May he help me fight against sin, against doubt, against my old nature. Fill me up today for this day." And we must recognize that in the Christian life we can do nothing without the fullness of the Spirit. Never think that we can do anything in the service of God without relying on the Holy Spirit. Certainly, it is possible to fill one's life with activity, even within the church, but one's life has no power, no effect without the fullness of the Spirit. What enables us to bear witness to Jesus? It is the Holy Spirit in us. This is certainly the case for Stephen here. What makes us resist temptation? It is the Holy Spirit in us. What enables us to persevere in prayer? It is the Holy Spirit in us. What is it that enables us to see spiritual fruit in our life? The Holy Spirit in us. Stephen is filled with the Spirit. Let us strive day by day to be filled with the Spirit. Let's make this the priority of our life. Let us ask God to make us a Spirit-filled church. And I believe that it is because of the fullness of the Spirit in Stephen that all the other qualities are present as well. It is the Spirit that produces these qualities in him.

A man full of faith. - In the Bible we see people of little faith. This is what Jesus calls his disciples in the sermon on the mount. And then we also see people who have strong faith. Jesus said about the Roman soldier in Luke 7: "even in Israel I did not find such great faith". Stephen is a man of great faith, of strong faith. And that just means he believed in God, his Word, his promises. He trusts God in the most difficult circumstances.

In these chapters, Stephen's faith is put to the test. His faith is under tremendous pressure. People he knows stand up to argue with him. Verse 9 says that they "began to argue with Stephen." It's a debate. They try to convince him that he is wrong about Jesus. They use their best arguments to show that Stephen's faith is misplaced. But he's full of faith. His faith is strong. And when the serious accusations are made against him in verse 11, Stephen understands where these accusations might take him. His enemies stir up the people in verse 12. It is clear that things are going to end badly for Stephen. In verse 13 "they produce false witnesses". The pressure on him escalates. But is his faith faltering? No! His faith does not budge. Everyone seems to be against him, but he believes in God's promise to never give up on him. He believes in Jesus' promise in Matthew 5 where he says: "Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness, for the kingdom of heaven is theirs!" Blessed will you be when people insult you, persecute you, and say all kinds of bad things about you falsely because of me. Rejoice and be glad, because your reward will be great in heaven" Stephen believes in this. And at the end of chapter 7 we see that his faith was strong, until the time of his death. 7.59, Stephen prays: "Lord Jesus receive my spirit". He firmly believed that at the time of his death he would be received by the Lord Jesus. No doubt, no fear. He is filled with strong faith. One commentator writes: "Stephen obeys Jesus and joyfully leaves the consequences in the hands of the God in whom his faith is placed."

What encouragement for us in our faith. At home, at work, at school, do not falter in your faith when you find yourself alone in front of a hostile crowd. God is worthy of all your trust. His Word is worthy of all your trust. Know that all his promises are reliable, worthy of your trust. Stephen knows his God. He knows the Word of his God and he believes it. Stephen is a man full of faith.

A man full of wisdom - Verse 3. All the men chosen to attend to the needs of widows were "filled with the Spirit and with Wisdom." In verse 10, speaking of those who oppose Stephen, Luke writes: "They were not able to resist the wisdom and the Spirit by which he spoke." We see in chapter 7 that Stephen is a man who knows the Word of God very well. But knowing the Bible does not necessarily mean being wise. You can have a lot of knowledge without having wisdom. Stephen has both. And what does that mean concretely? How do we define his wisdom? Stephen knows the Scriptures but he understands their meaning. He understands the implications for his life, for the lives of his people. He knows how to apply his knowledge. In 1 Chronicles 12:32 we read of wise leaders of God's people. The text tells us that these men: "knew how to discern the times to understand what Israel should do." In chapter 7, Stephen will show that he knows the Scriptures but knows how to interpret them. This is wisdom. It is knowing how to apply the Word to life, to the world in which we live. Wisdom is knowing that God is speaking to me and that God is asking me to listen and apply his word in my life. Foolishness is the opposite of wisdom. Foolishness is knowing that God speaks, knowing what he says but not putting it into practice. Foolishness is knowing that God is speaking to you,

understanding what God is saying but continuing with your life as if you had heard nothing. Stephen looks at everything he knows about the Old Testament, everything he knows about Jesus, and he sees that this has huge consequences for the temple, for the ceremonial law. Looks like it's foolishness for Stephen to preach Jesus when he knows it could cost him his life. It is not foolishness because Stephen knows that Jesus died for him. He knows that Jesus is risen. He knows that Jesus ascended to heaven. He knows Jesus is alive. He knows that Jesus reigns. He knows that Jesus is watching over him. For Stephen, it is not foolishness to preach Jesus. It would be foolish not to preach him. It would be folly not to preach Jesus. When we understand the Word of God. When you know what it means, you recognize the consequences for your life. You understand that things have to change, that is wisdom.

Examine your life this morning. Not to find out if you have any knowledge of the Bible. Not whether you can quote verses or even whole chapters. Not to know how many times you have read the Bible. But are you wise to put it into practice. Are you putting into practice the Word that you know so well? How foolish to know that God is talking to you and to do nothing. What wisdom, to build your life on the Word of God. A man full of wisdom.

A man full of grace. - The grace of God is something that we receive in salvation. God chooses to give us what we don't deserve. We deserve his judgment against sin, but he chooses to bring his judgment down on Jesus and forgive us, to give us eternal life in Jesus. That is grace, to receive what you don't deserve. But God continues to give us of his grace day after day, every day of our life. It is the grace to live the life that God calls us to. And this saving grace and this grace for life, Stephen is filled with it.

He finds himself in an extremely complicated situation here. It starts with a debate, then his opponents get angry with him. They accuse him falsely. He stands before the tribunal of the Sanhedrin, the most powerful men in the land. The high priest asks him questions. In chapter 7.54 his opponents gnash their teeth at him. Verse 58, they drive him out of the city to stone him. How does Stephen react? Does he fight to get away? Does he cry out against his accusers? He receives grace from God. He receives grace in order to be able to give grace to others. Grace is seen even in his face. In verse 15, the Sanhedrin looks at him, and what do they see? Anger, the desire for revenge? "They saw his face like that of an angel." He is not dominated by hate or fear. He is full of grace. God gives him the grace to endure anything. He gives him the grace not to get angry, not to return evil with evil. There is a gentleness in him towards his adversaries. Even when telling them a truth they will have a hard time accepting, he does so with respect. Chapter 7.2: "You brothers and fathers". He identifies with them. Later in his speech he speaks of "our fathers". These people are clearly hostile to him, but he is forgiving them.

And then his grace is seen supremely in his prayer in chapter 7.59. God gives him the grace to pray for his killers: "He knelt down and cried with a loud voice: Lord, do not hold this sin against them". While their stones are raining down on him, Stephen prays for the forgiveness of his killers. This is grace. Kindness, benevolence, love towards those who deserve the opposite.

Stephen himself had experienced the grace of God in his life and this grace received overflows towards others.

And I would like to tell you that the grace of God in Stephen's life is both a comfort and a challenge for us. It is a comfort because it reminds us that in every situation God says to his children: "My grace is sufficient for you". In all trials, God says: "my grace is sufficient for you". In solitude, God says: "my grace is sufficient for you". In sickness, God says: "my grace is sufficient for you". When you are insulted and persecuted for believing in me, my grace is sufficient for you. When you have no more strength, my grace, says God, is enough for you. When the temptation seems to be too strong, my grace is enough for you. Faced with an uncertain future, my grace will be enough for you. My grace is inexhaustible. Grace in Stephen's life is a comfort.

But the grace in Stephen's life is also a challenge. His grace towards others, towards those who wrong him, is a challenge for all of us. Those who call themselves Christians and refuse to be gracious to others, who refuse to forgive, who refuse to love even their enemies, what have they understood about grace? What have they experienced of grace? With all the grace that we have received from God, how can we lack grace towards others. How can we refuse to forgive? How can we hold a grudge against someone, sometimes for years? With all the grace we have received, how do we stay angry with a brother or sister in the church, your husband, your wife? Where is the grace? If we have received God's grace, we **must** be gracious to others. God asks us to do it and Stephen shows us that it is possible.

A man full of power. - This word "power", you know the Greek word. This is the word "Dynamis", the word that gives us the word dynamic or even the word dynamite. Stephen's life, Stephen's testimony, Stephen's impact, is dynamite. Dynamite has an impact. Dynamite changes things forever. Few can withstand the force of dynamite. And it's the same for Stephen. The power of God in him enables him to work great wonders and signs. In the New Testament church, only the apostles, Stephen, Philip, and Barnabas performed miracles. But apart from his miracles, we see that he is a powerful man. Even though he's nice, he's not soft. He preaches with courage and power. He is telling the truth, a strong, powerful truth. His power is evident to all.

But where is his power most visible? It is in his weakness, in his helplessness that the power of God is seen in him. When the stones rain down on him, when he is weakened by the blows, that is where his testimony is most powerful. When he is powerless to save himself from stones, powerless to defend himself against murderous hands, here is the real power of his testimony.

Chapter 7.58 tells us that a young man by the name of Saul is there when Stephen is stoned. His killers lay their clothes at his feet. Chapter 8.1 tells us that Saul approves of the murder. But what impact did Stephen's death have on Saul? When he sees Stephen's faith, grace, serenity, when he hears him pray, what impact do Stephen's face, Stephen's prayer have on him? Years later, in Acts 22, Saul or Paul speaks of his conversion and he still speaks of that day when he saw Stephen's powerful testimony. And I want to tell you that our testimony is seldom more powerful than in times of our helplessness. It is in our helplessness, in our weakness that we see the Spirit of God and the grace of God at work. When we are weak we see the power of God at work in us. On the day Stephen died, Saul and the others saw something of Jesus in him. And that's no wonder because there are all kinds of similarities between the two. Both are judged by the Sanhedrin. Both are falsely accused. Both are accused of blasphemy, questioned by the high priest. Both Jesus and Stephen commit their spirit into the hands of God, they pray for their enemies and they cry out with a loud voice. And everything we said about Stephen this morning, you could say about Jesus: filled with the Holy Spirit, filled with faith, grace, wisdom and power. And it's in the moment he looks most helpless that his power is really evident. It was in his death that Jesus did his greatest work. It is in his death that we see his faith, his grace, his wisdom, his power. So this passage does not direct us to Stephen as a model, it directs us to Jesus as the Savior.

You must not close your Bible this morning saying: "I want to be like Stephen". You have to close it saying: I want to know the one Stephen is imitating. I want to know Jesus as Stephen knew him. I want to be filled with the Spirit of Jesus. I want faith in Jesus. I want his grace, his wisdom, his power. I've seen Jesus this morning and I want this Jesus. I want to do like Stephen, take up my cross to follow Jesus, to imitate him, to bear witness to Jesus.

We saw this morning a life dominated by Jesus, fully consecrated to Jesus. Isn't that what we want, a life where Jesus reigns, where everything is his. Do you see the beauty of such a life, the strength, the testimony, the impact? Stephen is speaking to us this morning to tell us to let Jesus fill us with his Spirit, faith, grace, wisdom, and power. It will not be a wasted life.