

Acts 7:54-60
"A Hard Word"

Nothing feeds the ego like a word of flattery. We all love to hear good things about ourselves. However, we are not so eager to receive a faithful word of criticism. We want to hear a word that will inspire, encourage, and uplift us. We are not so eager to receive a word of correction, a word that convicts and makes known we are wrong or out of order. So much so, that society has become very aggressive at stamping out all speech it deems harmful, even truth. As such, rhetoric like truth is relative; what's true for you is not necessarily true for me. Rhetoric that has led society to believe that the most important thing in life is our individual happiness permeates the culture. So, we are encouraged to live our individual truth. To let no one define us. To let no one tell us how we should live, act, or what we should believe. The end result, we avoid, we resist any word that challenges how we see things. Any word that might compel us to consider if a change is in order. Church, our society loathes a hard word. I am afraid this attitude permeates the church of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, too. If the word of God never convicts you, never makes you feel at least a little uncomfortable. If it never compels you to question your own intentions, then something is wrong, and it is not with God's word.

2 Tim 3:16-17 ¹⁶"All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, ¹⁷that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work."

Heb 4:12-13 “For the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and of spirit, of joints and of marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart. And no creature is hidden from his sight, but all are naked and exposed to the eyes of him to whom we must give account.” A had word is necessary, sometimes, and is good for the soul.

First, I want us to notice their response to Stephen’s message.

V54 “When they heard these things they were cut to the heart, and they gnashed at him with *their* teeth.” They were livid. Why? As I considered Stephen’s message, was it his delivery that garnered their reaction? Could he have said it differently? The answer is no. Truth is truth and the only way for it to be delivered is directly. Church, the truth hurts. But this discomfort caused by truth initially, if received, soon turns to one’s liberation. A member said recently, in sincere desperation, “Why can’t we just love each other with the love of God? That would make things so much easier”. I share this person’s sentiments. But the truth is this, we prefer darkness. We give preference to the lie, because the lie is always easier. It requires no change, no self-reflection. It allows us to keep things the same. Why did they respond this way, sin which only breeds darkness. How do we respond to the truth? If we are men and women of the light, we should relish it. We should want it.

Matt 13:13-15 “¹³This is why I speak to them in parables, because seeing they do not see, and hearing they do not hear, nor do they understand. ¹⁴Indeed, in their case the prophecy of Isaiah is fulfilled that says: ““You will indeed hear but never understand, and you will indeed see but never

perceive.” ¹⁵ For this people's heart has grown dull, and with their ears they can barely hear, and their eyes they have closed, lest they should see with their eyes and hear with their ears and understand with their heart and turn, and I would heal them.’

John 8:31-32 “³¹ So Jesus said to the Jews who had believed him, “If you abide in my word, you are truly my disciples, ³² and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.”

Romans 1:24-25 “²⁴ Therefore God gave them up in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, to the dishonoring of their bodies among themselves, because they exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever! Amen.”

They responded the way they did because they were in darkness, and they did not want to come to light.

This leads us to our second observation. Darkness always resists the light. It does not yield willingly. It is overcome only by the power of the Holy Spirit through the proclaimed word of God. What separated Stephen from his accusers, the Holy Spirit.

V55-58 “⁵⁵ But he, being full of the Holy Spirit, gazed into heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God, ⁵⁶ and said, “Look! I see the heavens opened and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God! ⁵⁷ Then they cried out with a loud voice, stopped their ears, and ran at him with one accord; ⁵⁸ and they cast *him* out of the city and stoned *him*”.

Stephen was having a Holy Spirit moment and shares what he is seeing and these men, fed up, angry beyond measure at the truth, cover their ears and scream charge! Persons who are truly of the Light, that is those who belong to Jesus Christ, do not

respond to the word of God like this. Everybody loves the preacher until the preacher says something they do not like. And many in the role of pastor/preacher/teacher have and do play it safe because the desire to be liked is greater than the desire to be faithful. Stephen told the truth in love. His hope for them was that they would receive the Light, that light being Jesus Christ, just as he did. But in order to receive the Light they had to come to grips with the truth. "How do we respond to the truth?" Do we, too, cover our ears and scream?

John 3:19 "And this is the judgment: the light has come into the world, and people loved the darkness rather than the light because their works were evil."

2 Cor 4:2-4 "2 But we have renounced disgraceful, underhanded ways. We refuse to practice cunning or to tamper with God's word, but by the open statement of the truth we would commend ourselves to everyone's conscience in the sight of God. 3 And even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled to those who are perishing. 4 In their case the god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelievers, to keep them from seeing the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God.

2 Tim 4:2-4 "2 preach the word; be ready in season and out of season; reprove, rebuke, and exhort, with complete patience and teaching. 3 For the time is coming when people will not endure sound teaching, but having itching ears they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own passions, 4 and will turn away from listening to the truth and wander off into myths."

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Finally, we see in Stephen's death that true faith cannot be overcome even by the most extreme circumstance. V59-60

⁵⁹And they stoned Stephen as he was calling on *God* and saying, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit." ⁶⁰Then he knelt down and cried out with a loud voice, "Lord, do not charge them with this sin." And when he had said this, he fell asleep." What faith, what an expression of love and forgiveness in the midst of a horrific unwarranted death. Stephen during his own stoning prays to God on their behalf (expound). What manner of faith and love is this? That which comes when Jesus Christ truly dwells in one's heart. How this challenges me when I consider the little things I've had to endure because of my faith that are minuscule in comparison. Things that I prayed for God to move, for God to avenge. Stephen teaches me otherwise and in doing so convicts me. "Lord, do not charge them with this sin." All I can say is wow! How did Stephen respond to truth. How did he respond to a hard word? He gave his life. In the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit.