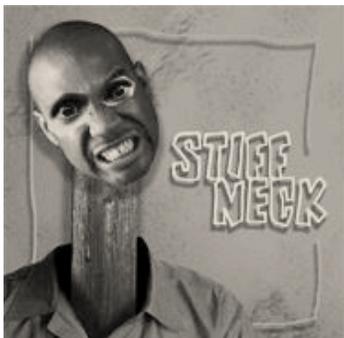


The Acts of the Holy Spirit and the early church

June 22nd, 2014 Stephen's message, Part 13

Dealing with the prideful people of God



Acts 7:51-52 (NIV)

You stiff-necked people! Your hearts and ears are still uncircumcised. You are just like your ancestors: You always resist the Holy Spirit! 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—

Stephen was going on in his discourse to show that, as the temple, so the temple-service must come to an end, and it would be the glory of both to give way to that worship of the Father in spirit and in truth which was to be established in the kingdom of Jesus, the Messiah. Therefore they need to have stripped of the pompous ceremonies of the old law, and so Stephen was going to apply all this which he had previously said.

We see that they could patiently hear the history of the Old Testament, for it was a piece of learning which they themselves had much to do with, but if Stephen continued to go about to tell them that their power and tyranny must come down, and that the church must be governed by a spirit of holiness and love, you know that they will not so much as give him the time for his speech. That is why he saves the best for last, knowing that if they will not admit the testimony of the gospel to them, it shall become a testimony against them.

Stiff-necked people:

From the earliest days when there was a large group of people, there were often those who would want to go against the leadership and seek out others to do the same thus encouraging the mob mentality. Often these people were corrected by God, however they continued to show little or no permanent change of heart, and were referred to by God as being *(((stiff necked)))*

Exodus 33:2-3 (NIV)

I will send an angel before you and drive out the Canaanites, Amorites, Hittites, Perizzites, Hivites and Jebusites. Go up to the land flowing with milk and honey. But I will not go with you, because you are a stiff-necked people and I might destroy you on the way.”

Stephen, finding by a getting louder by the moment and somewhat confused murmur in the place, understood that his lengthy discourse had started to sink in on the ones actually paying attention. Furthermore, he perceived by the fanaticism of their expressions that they would soon interrupt him with a cruel finality.

Stephen under the direction of the Holy Spirit used a very unflattering term relating to stubborn livestock, not a nice way to win friends and influence people. By calling these people **((Stiff-Necked))** Stephen was likening them to livestock that would not obey and do what they should. The great theologian from years ago, **Dr. Albert Barnes** writes the following on this prideful stubbornness:

Stiff Necked, is a figurative expression taken from oxen that are refractory, and that will not submit to be yoked. Applied to people, it means that they are stubborn, contumacious, and unwilling to submit to the restraints of Law. Stephens audience were Inflexible and obstinate sinners, not bowing your necks to God’s yoke; and uncircumcised in heart and ears — So that you will not hearken to instruction, or be seriously affected with it.

The base definition of this phrase found in the dictionary is someone either individual or as a group that is very proud and formal in their thinking. Other terms are haughty and stubborn. **King Solomon**, the son of the infamous relationship of King David & Bathsheba, writes the following in our Bible’s wisdom literature, the book of Proverbs.

Proverbs 29:1 (NIV)

Whoever remains stiff-necked after many rebukes will suddenly be destroyed—without remedy.

When the Lord promised judgment on Jerusalem, he said it was coming according to Jeremiah because “they were stiff-necked and would not listen to my words”. They had an attitude problem. Pride keeps us from hearing what God is saying. **Dr. Ray Pritchard** notes the following marks of these stiff-necked people?

- 1. Certainty that you are right.**
- 2. Refusal to listen to anyone else.**
- 3. Defensive when criticized.**
- 4. Making excuses for your shortcomings.**
- 5. Lashing out at others.**
- 6. No desire to examine your own life.**
- 7. Repeated pattern of misbehavior.**
- 8. Prayer without repentance.**

This can happen to any of us when we become hardened in our ways and so certain of ourselves that no one can reach us. We don’t realize what has happened until judgment comes.

Uncircumcised in their heart and ears:

Although the men that Stephen was speaking to without a doubt had the mark of circumcision in their flesh, of which they boasted, to the chagrin of the Gentiles, yet the idea is that they did not have the true circumcision of the heart.

Romans 2:28-29 (NIV)

A person is not a Jew who is one only outwardly, nor is circumcision merely outward and physical. No, a person is a Jew who is one inwardly; and circumcision is circumcision of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the written code. Such a person's praise is not from other people, but from God.

Now we know that Circumcision was a sign of being a Jew - of acknowledging the authority of the laws of God given by Moses. It was also emblematic of purity, and of submission to the Law of God.

The expression "**uncircumcised in heart**" denotes those who were not willing to acknowledge that Law, and submit to it. They had hearts filled with vicious and unsubdued affections and desires, not at all keeping the greatest commandment of the law, while holding everyone else accountable to all 627 of the other laws.

Galatians 5:6 (NIV)

For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision has any value. The only thing that counts is faith expressing itself through love.

Uncircumcised in heart; such as had still depraved affections, which they ought to have put away rather than the foreskin of their flesh. God previously in the book at all good Jewish boys knew, that being Deuteronomy had previously commanded them to circumcise their hearts, for Scripture is clear that God always looked to the inward part of His own ordinances, and the fact that obedience is better than sacrifice.

1 Corinthians 7:19 (NIV)

Circumcision is nothing and uncircumcision is nothing. Keeping God's commands is what counts

The great historian **John Gill** who was also an **English Baptist pastor and Biblical scholar** Of the mid 1700's. Mr. Gill also wrote a very extensive and well thought out commentary on every chapter of the entire Holy Scripture, notes the following on this idea of hearts and ears:

Their hearts were not circumcised to fear and love the Lord, nor their ears to hear the word of the Lord and the Gospel of Christ; so that notwithstanding their confidence in carnal privileges, they were uncircumcised persons.

The comment by Stephen about these Jewish leaders and their auditory ability to discern God, shows that they were not even willing to listen to what God (Jesus) had to say.

John 8:42-47 (NIV)

Jesus said to them, "If God were your Father, you would love me, for I have come here from God. I have not come on my own; God sent me. Why is my language not clear to you? Because you are unable to hear what I say. You belong to your father, the devil, and you want to carry out your father's desires.

He was a murderer from the beginning, not holding to the truth, for there is no truth in him. When he lies, he speaks his native language, for he is a liar and the father of lies. Yet because I tell the truth, you do not believe me! Can any of you prove me guilty of sin? If I am telling the truth, why don't you believe me? Whoever belongs to God hears what God says. The reason you do not hear is that you do not belong to God."

Their opposition to the Holy Spirit:

The resistance made by these leaders of the Jewish way, was not to the Spirit of God in them, for it will soon be obvious that they don't even have the Lord in their lives. Rather their resistance is specifically to the Spirit of God in His ministers, in His apostles, and particularly to the Holy Spirit in Stephen.

We see in this confrontation that Stephen told them point blank, that they opposed the message which was brought to you by the authority of God and the inspiration of his Spirit. The message brought by Moses; by the prophets; by the Savior, Jesus; and by the apostles - all by the infallible direction of the Holy Spirit.

Not only had they been and still were opposing anything to do with either the Son of God or the Holy Spirit, they were acting just like their ancestral fathers who also objected to following God, the way He said to follow Him. This aspect of neglecting to do what you should do is implying a consistent and active resistance presently. The term actually carries with it the idea of enemies in war with one falling upon the other to stop them.

Which of the prophets did your father's not persecute?

The interrogative form here is a strong mode of saying that they had persecuted "all" the prophets. It was the characteristic of the Jewish nation" to persecute the messengers of God.

This is not to be taken as literally and universally true; but it was a general truth; it was unfortunately the national characteristic.

Matthew 21:31-32b (NIV)

Jesus said to them, “Truly I tell you, the tax collectors and the prostitutes are entering the kingdom of God ahead of you. For John came to you to show you the way of righteousness, and you did not believe him, but the tax collectors and the prostitutes did. And even after you saw this, you did not repent and believe him.

Some historians have inferred that many writings containing the history of these persecutions by the Jewish leadership against verified prophets of God have been destroyed by the Jews. But it seems more natural to understand the words in a limited sense, as only intimating that most of the prophets had suffered much at the hands of God’s chosen people. If we would study Israel's history and see just how the Jewish leaders treated the prophets sent by God, it really is heartbreaking at just how they were treated and then some even killed.

The great prophet of God, **Jeremiah** was eventually stoned to death for his message of God: The great prophet of God, **Isaiah** was according to Jewish tradition cut in half with a saw at the insistence of King Manasseh, who was the son of the greatest king of all Israel, Hezekiah.

2 Chronicles 36:15-17 (NIV)

The Lord, the God of their ancestors, sent word to them through his messengers again and again, because he had pity on his people and on his dwelling place. But they mocked God’s messengers, despised his words and scoffed at his prophets until the wrath of the Lord was aroused against his people and there was no remedy. He brought up against them the king of the Babylonians, who killed their young men with the sword in the sanctuary, and did not spare young men or young women, the elderly or the infirm. God gave them all into the hands of Nebuchadnezzar.

Stephen now gets to the heart of the matter by informing them that their fathers had revealed what was in their uncircumcised hearts by persecuting the prophets sent by God. Indeed, they had bared their hearts by even killing some who had proclaimed beforehand the coming of the Righteous One. They had revealed that they had not wanted the Righteous One to come if He was as the prophets had said, so after waking with Jesus for almost 3 years, Judas who had witnessed miracle after miracle still did not want Jesus to be the promised one.

Luke 13:34 (NIV)

Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who kill the prophets and stone those sent to you, how often I have longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, and you were not willing.

Now some believe that it must be seen as quite possible at this point that Stephen in his faith and enthusiasm still hoped that they would repent if he pressed them hard enough. It was a great aggravation of their offence that they put to death the very messengers which foretold the long awaited and greatest blessing that the nation could receive.

In Closing:

In going through this wonderful and lengthy speech of the first Deacon of the Christian age, we see an entire history of the Jewish nation and their constant aversion to someone stepping in and telling them that they were the fulfillment of the precious Law that God gave to Israel. Here we see the culmination in this discourse the person of Jesus the Messiah whose character in the prophecies of the Old Testament is righteous servant, righteous branch, just, and having salvation; and whom Stephen styles so partly on account of the holiness of his nature, and the innocence and harmlessness of his life.

Matthew 23:29-36 (NIV)

Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You build tombs for the prophets and decorate the graves of the righteous. And you say, 'If we had lived in the days of our ancestors, we would not have taken part with them in shedding the blood of the prophets.' So you testify against yourselves that you are the descendants of those who murdered the prophets. Go ahead, then, and complete what your ancestors started!

You snakes! You brood of vipers! How will you escape being condemned to hell? Therefore I am sending you prophets and sages and teachers. Some of them you will kill and crucify; others you will flog in your synagogues and pursue from town to town. And so upon you will come all the righteous blood that has been shed on earth, from the blood of righteous Abel to the blood of Zechariah son of Berekiah, whom you murdered between the temple and the altar. Truly I tell you, all this will come on this generation.

Our closing thought today comes from the pen of Professor **Charles Briggs** of the Union Theological Seminary NY, written during the late 1800's in his book "**The Messiah of the Apostles**"

Many writers have maintained that St. Stephen's sharp and abrupt declaration marks the increasing impatience of his hearers at this point, as if Stephen felt that the murmurs of his audience would not allow him much more speech. But on the other hand St. Stephen's whole speech led up to this point, and his words were not so much an interruption, but a continuance and a summary of what had gone before. No doubt the speech was left unfinished since in His rejection the obstinacy of the people which had marked and marred their history had reached its climax.