

Acts 6:1-15: Is It Really Possible To Be Like Jesus (in every way)?

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I. Introduction

You ever wish you could respond like Jesus to every situation? To actually be able to respond with calm and wisdom instead of frustration and anger? To endure under the most trying circumstances even though they look hopeless? What would it take to be like Jesus?

II. Acts 6:1-15: Can We Be as Bold and Effective as Jesus Or Is That Reserved for Spiritual Giants?

6:1, at the end of Acts 5, the apostles were out daily teaching and preaching the message of Christ. In fact, from the beginning, that's what they. Because of this the church was growing tremendously. Conservatively speaking there were over 10,000 people who were now part of the Jerusalem church (3,000 in 2:1, over 5,000 in 4:4, and thousands more in 5:14). As the church grew rapidly, a problem arose. The Hellenist Jews were complaining against the Hebraic Jews because their widows were being neglected in the daily distribution. What's the problem?

If you recall, on the Day of Pentecost (the Jewish Feast of Weeks), thousands of Jews from all over the Greco-Roman world came to Israel to celebrate this feast (Acts 2:1-13). These Jews who didn't live in Israel had adopted the Greek culture. That is, they were Jewish by race, but Greek by language and culture; this is why they were called Hellenists (someone who adopts a Greek way of life). Thousands of them believed in Christ and became part of the Jerusalem church. They haven't (or didn't) return home. Among all these people were those who needed assistance, including widows. This is one reason why the wealthy among them sold their possessions (2:44-45; 4:32-37). And as the poor and needy were taken care of, discrimination took hold: the Hebrew-speaking Jews in charge of the daily distribution were neglecting the Greek-speaking widows. This obviously angered the Hellenist Jews.

Two things to note:

(1) *Discrimination has no place in the church, none!* Whatever you learned/adopted from the world, you're not supposed to bring it into the Body of Christ nor into His Kingdom. You're a new creature (2 Corinthians 5:17) who's been plucked out of this dark world and placed inside Jesus' Kingdom (Colossians 1:13). And precisely because you have now put on Christ, whatever discriminations you held onto before—racial, religious, social, cultural, or economic—they have no place in Christ. Why? Because your identity—racial, religious, social, cultural, or economic—is supposed to come from Christ! (Colossians 3:11).

(2) *You're supposed to treat your fellow Christians like (beloved) blood relatives*, God has always commanded His people to take care of their widows (Deuteronomy 14:29; 24:19; 1 Timothy 5:3-16). And that's what we see the early church doing. Why is this so amazing, isn't that what the church is supposed to do? Yes, it is. But think about what the Church has done with widows and orphans dating back to its inception. It took them in as their own while the rest of society discarded them and treated them as less-than. One of the reasons why Christianity was so attractive to people is because Christians didn't treat you the way the rest of society treated you (2:46-47). If you were a widow, they didn't just feed you. They adopted you into the family and treated you as a sister, mother, grandmother, etc. Because they were now your brothers and sisters in Christ, not in name but in reality. If you need a ride to the doctor, money, a babysitter, to borrow a car, a job, someone to cry with, or whatever else, your church family is supposed to be there for you.

6:2-4, how do the Twelve Apostles fix this serious problem which can easily split the church? They institute the office of deacon. That is, they call the congregation together and inform them that they cannot leave their duty to the Word of God in order to serve tables (“serve” is the verbal form of the word “deacon”). Therefore, they tell them to find seven qualified men who are spoken of highly, full of the Holy Spirit, and wise so that they can appoint them over this business. These qualifications will be necessary to handle this important matter properly, without bias, and with the full confidence of the congregation. As for the apostles, they must focus primarily on continual prayer and the ministry of the Word, i.e., they must focus on opening up the Scriptures to people so that they will understand both what it means and how to live it, so that the Word of God will transform their lives (2:42-47; 4:31-37). (Side note: The apostles are acting as the elders of this church, an office they institute later.)

6:5-6, the congregation loves the idea, so they chose seven men: Stephen, Philip, Prochorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas, and Nicolas, a proselyte from Antioch. More information is given about Stephen—he’s said to be full of faith and the Holy Spirit—because he will play a key role in this and the next chapter. Philip is Philip the Evangelist (Acts 8) not the apostle. Nicolas was a Gentile who’d converted to Judaism. All seven had Greek names; this means they were all Hellenistic Jews, which ensures that the discrimination that took place won’t happen again. But it also shows that the entire congregation, which includes Hebraic Jews, acknowledged the discrimination. Won’t this leave the door open for discrimination again? No, these men will not discriminate; they were chosen precisely because they are godly men and full of the Holy Spirit. They bring the men to the apostles. But before the apostles appoint them to their office of deacon, they confer with God through prayer (as Jesus did, Luke 6:12-16) and then they lay hands on them which signifies God’s will for these men to become deacons (appointing someone to office by the laying on of hands goes back to the time of Moses, Numbers 27:22-23).

6:7, the apostles’ solution worked not only to address the discrimination but to free them to minister God’s Word so effectively that it causes multitudes more to join the church, even a great many of the priests! This is astounding because the priests (Levites) who worked in the temple were Sadducees, the group who led the first two persecutions against the Church. It’s also amazing because for them to not only believe in Jesus as Messiah (Christ) but to openly live out their faith (i.e., they “were obedient to the faith”) would jeopardize their livelihood and/or life.

6:8-10, next we see what Stephen was able to do and why. He was full of faith and power (the Holy Spirit’s power as we were told in his earlier description) and did great miracles among the people. But others didn’t like this and began disputing with him. The ones disputing with him were fellow Hellenized Jews from some of the Hellenized synagogues in Jerusalem. Though they opposed Stephen, they were unable to overcome his wisdom and the Spirit by which he spoke.

6:11-14, since they can’t defeat Stephen, they bribe men to accuse him of blasphemy against Moses and God. These men are so effective that they arouse an angry mob, which included elders and scribes (Pharisees). The mob seizes Stephen and brings him before the Sanhedrin. The original contrarians also set up false witnesses who testify at Stephen’s trial that he spoke against the temple, the Mosaic Law, and that he said that Jesus was going to destroy the temple and change the customs which Moses gave them. These charges are tailor-made for the entire Sanhedrin which was made up of Pharisees and Sadducees. That is, the Sadducees would be offended by Stephen’s comments about the temple (which they ran and controlled) and the Pharisees would be offended by the comments about the Law (of which they were the experts and enforced).

Did Stephen violate any laws? First, these witnesses are liars. Second, Stephen likely repeated Jesus' words of divine judgement on Jerusalem, its leadership, and the temple. When Israel's leaders accused Jesus of performing His miracles by the power of Satan himself, Jesus told them that God was going to judge them, Jerusalem, and destroy the temple (Matthew 12 and 24). And since Stephen was preaching salvation by grace through Jesus Christ instead of the Law and likely implied that the Law had ended, they saw him as speaking against the Law.

6:15, as these false accusations are hurled at Stephen, the 71 judges on the Sanhedrin stared intently at Stephen. But instead of seeing nervousness or worry, they "saw his face as the face of an angel." What does this mean? Angels get to be in God's presence. What happens to your face when you're in God's presence? No need to guess, we know. Your face glows with God's Shekinah glory, as Moses' face did, Exodus 34:29-35. What is God telling us with this comment?

Can you be like Jesus or is that just for the giants of the faith like Moses and Paul? Who was Stephen like? Stephen was not an apostle. He's not even considered a full Jew among his own people because he's a Hellenized Jew. He's no one special; he's just like you and me. But look at what he's able to accomplish! What made him so powerful, so brave, so bold, and so effective? Stephen was like Jesus in every way:

- Like Jesus he went where God the Father sent him even if it meant suffering and death.
- Like Jesus he performed miracles and spoke with the Father's wisdom.
- Like Jesus he stood before the Sanhedrin on trial by the testimony of false witnesses.
- Like Jesus he faced the false accusations without panic or fear.
- Like Jesus he responded to unbelievably stressful situations with calm and grace.
- Like Jesus he walked by the Spirit of God and God's presence was always with him.
- Like Jesus he responded to the ones who hated him and took his life with love and forgiveness.
- Like Jesus he suffered terribly and was unjustly killed.

So why was Stephen so effective? Because he was a man "full of faith and power." Stephen was able to stand before the Supreme Court of Israel without flinching because he knew down to the core of his being that it wasn't him standing there but Christ. It was Christ's Spirit who dwelt inside him and enabled him to preach, perform miracles, and pronounce judgment upon the leaders of Israel (6:8-10). This is why God adds this comment about his face; He's telling you that Stephen is not alone; God is right there with him!

How can we be like Stephen? Are you full of faith and power"? That is, do you believe that you have the capacity to react to every situation the way Jesus did? Do you, like Stephen, know and believe that Jesus dwells inside you and will empower you to be bold when you have to be, to be humble when you need to be, to be calm when things seem to spiral out of control, to suffer wrongly in order to save those around you, to basically submit to God's plan and direction for your life instead of your own? Do you know that Jesus is in you and that you are in Him (Colossians 1:27-28). Don't you know that He will empower you to overcome everything that is before you?

III. Conclusion

And Stephen, full of faith and power, did great wonders and signs among the people. Then there arose some from what is called the Synagogue of the Freedmen (Cyrenians, Alexandrians, and those from Cilicia and Asia), disputing with Stephen. And they were not able to resist the wisdom and the Spirit by which he spoke.....And all who sat in the council, looking steadfastly at him, saw his face as the face of an angel.