

## STEPHEN'S SERMON: THE ROUTE TO HOLINESS

### INTRODUCTION AND REVIEW

As a child my picture of holiness was related to the picture I had of the pastor of my church. Holiness had to do with being religious. My pastor, by definition, was religious. There was a certain respect that came with that. But in my young mind there was also a little repulsiveness that came along, too. It was a little frightening to be too close to someone who had a special relationship with God. The pastor was just a little different from everybody else. He even dressed differently. He wore black robes on Sunday. More importantly, he didn't seem to have much interest in sports. A man who didn't closely follow the Milwaukee Braves and Green Bay Packers just was not somebody with whom I would want to hang around. I wanted to be holy enough to be OK with God. But I wasn't interested in being too holy, and I certainly wasn't interested in being anything like these pastor-types. ---Who says that the Lord doesn't have a sense of humor?

I suspect that the predominant view of holiness in our culture is similar to the view that I had of holiness as a child. We want a certain degree of holiness. We want enough to be on good terms with God. But we don't want too much of it. That would be a real bore. So as long as we live by the Golden Rule or try to follow the Ten Commandments, we should be OK. As part of the basic package plan we also may need to show up in church or synagogue sometimes. Maybe we need to have some kind of faith in Jesus, or, at least, in God. Maybe we need to go to confession once in a while, or do some other kind of religious duty.

The Bible in both the Old and New Testament does have something to say about the need for holiness. God says in both places that human beings need to be holy. So people of faith have always wanted to do what is required to meet at least the minimum standards.

The conventional wisdom for Jews in the first century was that holiness involved three things: the land, the law, and the temple. If you were a Jew who wanted to be holy, you should live in the land of Israel. You should live by the law of Moses, and you should worship at and, preferably, live near, the temple.

When Jesus came along, he claimed to be a holy man. Yet He shattered the conventional wisdom about holiness. Those popularly regarded as holy found Jesus repulsive. Those popularly regarded as repulsive found Jesus attractive.

In recent weeks we have been studying the beginning of the church as recorded in the Book of Acts. We have seen that the risen Christ was working through the Holy Spirit in the lives of His apostles to build His church. These apostles had God-given ability to perform miracles and preach powerful sermons. Lots of Jews in Jerusalem responded

to this by becoming followers of Jesus. The Jewish leaders tried to stop the Jesus movement, but not with much success.

Nevertheless, the Jewish leaders at first regarded these Christians as being within the scope of traditional Judaism. The first Christians continued their worship at the temple and seemed to observe most of the traditions of the Jewish faith. Over time the Christians began to think through the implications of their Christian faith, and they began to recognize that Jesus had made some of the practices of Judaism obsolete.

One of these guys was Stephen. We saw last time that he had been chosen by the church to help distribute food to widows. In #6 we were told that he was full of faith and of the Holy Spirit. He also had great speaking ability. He apparently presented the truth about Jesus in his synagogue. He also challenged the conventional wisdom about the nature of holiness. He was so effective that the author Luke says that no one could beat him in a debate. The Jewish leaders finally got so ticked off at him that they dragged him before the Sanhedrin, which was the high council of Judaism. As #7 begins, the Jewish political and religious leaders call upon Stephen to defend his views. In his defense he challenges the popular view of holiness. As we look at his attacks on mistaken views of holiness, perhaps we will reexamine our own understanding of holiness, and consider more carefully just what it is that God is looking for from us.

I.

In the first 36 verses of #7 Stephen is going to talk about HOLINESS AND THE LAND. (PROJECTOR ON--- I. HOLINESS AND THE LAND) The Sanhedrin is meeting in the temple compound in Jerusalem. There the high priest gives Stephen a chance to answer the charges against him. We saw last time that the primary complaints against him were that he was blaspheming against Moses, or the law of Moses, and against God, which seemed to involve speaking against the temple of God.

So Stephen starts into a long historical review to challenge the contemporary understanding of holiness. At first glance it might strike us that his speech is a little long and a little boring and doesn't really seem to get to the point. Stephen's approach partly has to do with the style of argument that was popular back in that day. In several places in the Old Testament this kind of approach was used. (Psalms 78 and 106 are examples of this extended historical review to make a point.) A little later in Acts we will see Paul use a similar kind of historical sermon. History can be useful in proving the truth about spiritual matters. A British pastor and scholar by the name of G. Campbell Morgan once said, **"History is His story--- if a man can climb high enough to read it."**

One of the misconceptions that these Jews had was that holiness is related to a land. The rabbis taught that the place to live if you wanted to be holy was Israel. When good Jews came to the border of Israel, they would take off their sandals and shake off the Gentile dust from their shoes. Just being in the land of Israel somehow made one more holy.

What Stephen does in the first part of his speech is talk about how God has historically worked outside the land of Israel. In v. 2 he reminds these Jewish scholars that the “God of glory” appeared to Abraham in Mesopotamia, which was far to the north and east of Israel. In v. 5 he points out that God didn’t even give him any land in what would become Israel, though he promised that it would one day belong to his descendants.

In vv. 9-15 Stephen talks about Abraham’s descendants Jacob and his twelve sons, who became leaders of the twelve tribes of Israel. These guys ended up in Egypt. It was there that they grew into a nation. All of these major events took place outside of the land of Israel.

In Stephen’s description of Joseph, one of the twelve sons of Jacob, there are striking parallels with the life of Jesus, who is really Stephen’s primary concern. He reminds his listeners that Joseph was rejected by his brothers. Jesus was also rejected by His fellow countrymen. In vv. 12 & 13 Stephen mentions that when the brothers first came to Egypt to get food, they didn’t recognize Joseph. On the second visit he did make himself known to his brothers. Jesus also was not recognized in His first appearance before His countrymen. For the most part they failed to receive Him as their messiah. At the Second Coming He will manifest Himself to His Jewish brothers in a much more obvious way.

There are several technical difficulties in this chapter. Some of them have to do with the fact that Stephen, being a Greek-speaking Jew, quotes from the Greek translation of the Old Testament, rather than the original Hebrew. One example of a problem that conservative commentators have struggled with is in v. 16. Stephen says that Abraham bought a tomb in Shechem (SHECHEM HEBRON MAP) in Israel from the sons of Hamor. Genesis 33:19 says that Jacob bought this tomb from the sons of Hamor. Genesis 23:19 says that Abraham bought a tomb in Hebron much further to the south. As with a lot of such difficulties, we just don’t have all the information. There may be a simple explanation to this seeming contradiction. One possibility is that Abraham did indeed buy this tomb. We know that he built an altar in Shechem. Because he didn’t stay there and went on to live in other places, the sons of Hamor may simply have reclaimed it. So one day Abraham’s descendant Jacob bought it again. This is one possible explanation.

The fact that Joseph and his brothers were buried in Shechem has significance in that Shechem was in the land of Samaria and not in Israel. The Samaritans were half Jewish and half Gentile. They were not well thought of by kosher Jews. But again Stephen is pointing out that God’s purposes were accomplished outside the land of Israel.  
(PROJECTOR OFF)

Beginning in v. 20 Stephen starts talking about Moses. Moses was another hero of the Jewish faith. The Jews were accusing Stephen of blaspheming against him. But Moses spent all of his life outside of the land of Israel. As with Joseph, there were Christ-like traits in Moses. In vv. 20-22 mention is made about his upbringing. Moses grew up in the royal household of the most powerful nation on earth at that time. He was raised by

the pharaoh's daughter. In this high position he received the best education possible. Stephen says that he was a man of power and deeds.

According to v. 23 of our text, **“When he was forty years old, it came into his heart to visit his brothers, the children of Israel.”** Stephen describes how he sought to intervene with a fellow Hebrew who was being picked on by an Egyptian. He killed the offender. Despite his efforts, his countrymen rejected his help. Moses had to flee the country because the Egyptians found out about his crime.

The gospel story says that the Son of God likewise left His royal position in heaven to help the Jewish people. But they, too, rejected the one who had come to deliver them. The Sanhedrin that he was addressing was rejecting this messiah right now. A couple of years earlier they had arranged His execution.

Stephen continues his account by remembering the time spent by Moses in Midian, which was also outside the Holy Land. God was still at work. At Mount Sinai the Lord eventually appeared to Moses. According to v. 33, God told Moses to take his shoes off because he was standing on holy ground. This was outside the land of Israel. Yet the Jews' own Scriptures described this territory as holy ground. Stephen is just tearing away at this false standard that the land of Israel is inherently holy and that God is somehow restrained from working anywhere else. He makes his argument by using the very history and the very Scriptures that these Jews revered.

This section ends then with a reminder by Stephen that despite the signs and wonders that Moses performed in leading his people out of Egypt his countrymen still tried to reject him. This was the same pattern that Israel was to follow in rejecting the Messiah, who also performed signs and wonders among them. Through all of this early history of the nation of Israel God's will and God's purposes were accomplished outside of the land of Israel.

Holiness is not primarily confined to a land or a city or a country. Being physically present in the land of Israel did not automatically confer holiness on the Jewish residents. (PROJECTOR ON--- EXODUS 20:24) In Exodus #20 v. 24 the Lord had said, **“...in every place where I cause My name to be remembered, I will come to you and bless you.”**

We generally recognize, at least in our minds, that God is not restricted from working in any territory or country. But I wonder if at times we aren't prone to confuse patriotism with Christian commitment. (PROJECTOR OFF) I wonder if at times we may think that there is something inherently more holy about living in the US than any place else. By virtue of the fact that we are residents of this country God favors us more than people anywhere else. We automatically have an in with God that foreigners do not.

Now there is nothing wrong with having pride in one's country, especially in a nation like ours that has a strong Christian heritage. But there is danger in thinking that we are somehow superior to others because we are Americans. There is danger in assuming

that God is always on our side no matter what policy our country follows. Religious Muslims see our alcoholism and drug problems and sexual immorality and they wonder if this is what Christian holiness is about. It doesn't justify the behavior of the radicals, but they may have a legitimate indictment against us Americans.

II.

In vv. 37-43 then Stephen speaks about HOLINESS AND THE LAW. (PROJECTOR ON--- II. HOLINESS AND THE LAW) The Jews regarded the law as a standard of holiness. The first five books of the Old Testament were commonly referred to simply as "the law." The law of Moses was a big deal to these Jews. It was regarded as a means of holiness. If you wanted to be holy, if you wanted to be accepted by God, you had to follow the law. In the Talmud the Jewish rabbis declared, "**The more study of the Law, the more life.**" (*m. 'Abot 2.7*) God had given them this law. The Law of Moses was intended to teach the Jews about holiness. It did describe the proper way to worship God. It also described how the Lord wanted his people to be organized politically and socially. It was also designed to teach people about their sinfulness.

In #6 we saw that Stephen had been accused of blaspheming Moses and the law. Apparently he had been suggesting that at least some aspects of the law of Moses had been rendered obsolete by the life and death of Jesus. In this section Stephen makes reference to Moses having received the law from God at Mt. Sinai. But in v. 37 he also quotes from the law of Moses a verse that has special significance. (DEUTERONOMY 18:15) He cites Deuteronomy 18:15, which says, "**The Lord your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among you, from your brothers...**"

From the Dead Sea scrolls and other Jewish writings we know that there were some Jews who had a belief that a second Moses was coming. In John #7 there is a discussion among the Jews about the miracles and teachings of Jesus. (JOHN 7:40) Verse 40 says, "**When they heard these words, some of the people said, 'This really is the Prophet.'**"

Moses' point, and Stephen's point, was that the Law of Moses was not the end of revelation from God. A prophet like Moses was coming, and the nation of Israel would have to listen to His words. Jesus was that prophet. (PROJECTOR OFF) But Israel would not listen to him.

That was not a big surprise. For even in the wilderness when Moses received the law from God at Mt. Sinai, the people would not listen to him. This is what Stephen talks about in vv. 39-43. While Moses was getting the law from God on the top of the mountain, the people were making a golden calf to worship down below. Throughout the forty years of wandering in the wilderness the Hebrews were prone to worship idols that they brought with them from Egypt. This problem of idol worship centuries later would result in the judgment of God whereby the Jews were taken captive to Babylon.

The Jews were convinced that if they followed the law of Moses, they would be holy. If you were a Jew, that alone guaranteed that you were going to heaven. The way that

one could be perfectly just was by studying the law diligently and working hard to obey it, especially as it was interpreted by the rabbis. The end result of this system of works righteousness was a system that killed the Messiah, the God-man, when He came to live among them.

The popular view of religion in our country today is similar to that of the Jews of the first century. Pretty much everybody is going to heaven because most Americans have some kind of belief in God. Maybe you do need to be baptized. Maybe not. But the key is to follow some kind of code of conduct, whether it is one of our own making or our understanding or one in the Bible or the Golden Rule. But God is a pretty good God, and He is going to accept pretty much everyone. Certainly He will take me. For I deserve it. I have done what the law requires.

But it is all a lie. The Bible (PROJECTOR ON--- ROMANS 3:20) says, beginning in Romans #3 v. 20, **“For by the works of the Law no human being will be justified in His sight...”** “Justified” means “to be declared righteous.” Why will following the law not make us right with God? **“[for] through the law comes knowledge of sin.”** Obedience to the law cannot make us holy because nobody can follow the law well enough. The law was intended to show man his sinfulness and his own inability. It was intended to point him to the need for a Savior, to the need for grace from God.

(ROMANS 3:21) The passage in Romans continues, **“But now the righteousness of God has been manifested apart from the law, although the Law and the Prophets bear witness to it--- (ROMANS 3:22) the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe. For there is no distinction; (ROMANS 3:23-24) for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus...”**

The way to heaven was not by following the Law of God. It was by faith in God. (GENESIS 15:6) In the Book of Genesis it said that **“And he [Abraham] believed the Lord, and he counted it to him as righteousness.”** Since the coming of Christ the way to heaven also involves faith in Christ, who was God who took on a human body and nature. It is by faith in Jesus Christ for all those who believe. It is this faith in Christ that produces holiness. Stephen was seeking to show these religious leaders from the Scriptures that their trust in their own efforts to live by God’s law was not the route to holiness. It is not by our own work and self-discipline that we become holy either.

### III.

The third standard of holiness of the Jews involved the temple. Thus in vv. 44-50 we encounter the issue of HOLINESS AND THE TEMPLE. (III. HOLINESS AND THE TEMPLE) It was “speaking against the temple” that was one of the serious charges that had been made against Stephen. That was regarded as blasphemy. Jesus had been accused of threatening to tear down the temple. Now the same group is trying to get Stephen on the same charge.

Jews of this time were convinced that just being around the temple made one holy. That is why most of the Hellenistic Jews had moved to Jerusalem, and that is why the Sanhedrin met on the temple compound.

Before there was a temple in Jerusalem, the Jews had a moveable tabernacle. In v. 44 Moses points out that God had told Moses to build this tabernacle according to a divine pattern which He showed him. It was this tabernacle that they had until the time of Solomon. Even then it was David rather than God who initiated the idea of a permanent temple. (2 SAMUEL 7:5) In 2 Samuel #7 the Lord spoke to the prophet Nathan saying, **“Go and tell my servant David, ‘Thus says the Lord: Would you build me a house to dwell in? 6 I have not lived in a house since the day I brought up the people of Israel from Egypt to this day, but I have been moving about in a tent for my dwelling. 7 In all places where I have moved with all the people of Israel, did I speak a word with any of the judges of Israel, whom I commanded to shepherd my people Israel, saying, “Why have you not built me a house of cedar?”””** Only later did the Lord give permission for Solomon to build a temple. (PROJECTOR OFF)

The problem was that possession of the temple and being in it or near it came to be regarded as automatically conferring a certain holiness. Judaism never taught that God was confined to this temple. But in practice the Jews often acted as though their possession of, and presence in, the temple made them holy. They acted as though they could control God.

So in vv. 49 & 50 Stephen quotes Isaiah #66: **“Heaven is my throne,/ and the earth is my footstool./ What kind of house will you build for me, says the Lord,/ or what is the place of my rest?/ 50 Did not my hand make all these things?”** “Because you guys control the temple, you act as though you control God, too. And you think that your association with the temple confers God’s holiness to you. But you are so wrong. The Lord is so much bigger than your conception of Him.”

In Christendom we have often had similar misconceptions about God’s dwelling place. Intellectually, perhaps, Christians have recognized that God is omnipresent. But in practice Christians have too often come to regard God as living in a building. Sometimes there are churches that are named “temples.” That is unfortunate, I think, because it conveys the notion that God somehow has a special presence in a particular building. Evangelical Christians sometimes also refer to a church building as “the house of God.” That also is not really Biblical. It, too, conveys the idea that God lives in a building. The New Testament says that God, by means of His Holy Spirit, lives in every person who has trusted in Christ as his or her Savior. So our bodies are called “temples” in the New Testament. Also the term “church” is never used in the New Testament to describe a building. It always refers to a group of Christians.

The problem that has developed is that places where Christians meet and objects in those buildings have come to be revered as holy. People at least act as though these buildings and these objects are inherently holy. They may act as though simply being in

these buildings or bowing down before these objects conveys some kind of holiness to the worshipper. It is just not true.

IV.

Finally, then, in vv. 51-53, we come to TRUE HOLINESS AND STEPHEN'S INDICTMENT. (PROJECTOR ON--- IV. TRUE HOLINESS AND STEPHEN'S INDICTMENT) Stephen is the one who is on trial here, but at the end of his speech, he is the one who issues the indictment. Stephen seems to have little concern about getting in the good graces of these, his judges. His interest seems only to be in a clear and forceful presentation of the truth.

Look at what he says beginning in v. 51. **“You stiff-necked people, uncircumcised in heart and ears, you always resist the Holy Spirit. As your fathers did, so do you. 52 Which of the prophets did your fathers not persecute? And they killed those who announced beforehand the coming of the Righteous One, whom you have now betrayed and murdered, 53 you who received the law as delivered by angels and did not keep it.”** “You guys claim that Abraham and the patriarchs and Moses and David and the prophets are your fathers. The truth is that your fathers are the guys who rejected Joseph, who resisted Moses, who fell into idol worship, and who killed the prophets. Now when the Messiah Himself came--- God in the flesh--- you killed Him, too.”

So how do you suppose the Sanhedrin is going to respond to this gentle, quiet presentation? Are they going to find Stephen guilty, or innocent? We will find out next week.

Holiness is primarily related to a person rather than a land, a law or a building. In Old Testament times it involved the relationship that one had with YHWH, the God of Israel. Since the coming of Christ holiness involves the relationship that one has with Jesus Christ. (HEBREWS 10:10) In Hebrew #10 v. 10 the author says, **“And by that will we have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all.”** The word “sanctified” means “to be made holy.”

Jesus Christ, because He was both God and man, became the sacrifice who paid the penalty for our sins. When we place our trust in him, then we are made holy. (PROJECTOR OFF) Thus we find several places in the New Testament where Christians are called “saints.” The meaning of the word “saint” in the New Testament is “holy one.” So one who has trusted in Christ as his Savior has become a saint, or holy one.

There is another way in which the term “sanctification,” or “being made holy,” is used in the New Testament. Although we are set apart to God and headed for heaven, we still have a sin nature. The ongoing process of becoming more Christ-like and less sinful is also described in the New Testament as sanctification. (1 THESSALONIANS 5:23) Thus in 1 Thessalonians #5 v. 23 the Apostle Paul prays, **“Now may the God of peace himself sanctify you completely...”**



Most of us Christians here understand that we are positionally sanctified, that we became Christians by receiving salvation as a gift through faith in Jesus. What we sometimes falsely come to think is that the ongoing aspect of progressive sanctification is achieved by works. Like those first century Jews that Stephen was addressing we think that we become more holy by exerting our own energy to live up to a moral or religious code.

That was a problem that the church at Galatia was also facing in the first century. (GALATIANS 2:16) In #2 of Paul's letter to the Galatians he says in v. 16, **"...yet we know that a person is not justified by works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ, so we also have believed in Christ Jesus, in order to be justified by faith in Christ and not by works of the law, because by works of the law no one will be justified.."** "Justified" means "to be declared righteous." Justification is closely related to this idea of positional sanctification, that we are in one sense made holy by simply trusting in Jesus.

Paul then goes on to criticize the Galatians for using a method other than faith in Christ to achieve progressive sanctification, to become more holy in practice. (GALATIANS 3:3-4) Thus he says in #3 vv. 3-5, **"Are you so foolish? Having begun by the Spirit, are you now being perfected by the flesh? 4 Did you suffer so many things in vain—if indeed it was in vain? (GALATIANS 3:5) Does he who supplies the Spirit to you and works miracles among you do so by works of the law, or by hearing with faith—?"**

The route to true holiness does not involve being in a particular land, exerting our energy to live up to a particular moral code, or being in a particular building. The route to true holiness comes from a relationship with a person, the Lord Jesus Christ. The basis of that relationship with Him is faith. As we continue to trust in Him He will produce more of His qualities in us. (PROJECTOR OFF)

Are you trying to live out the Christian life by gutting it out on your own? Are you trying to exert your energy to live up to a moral code? If so, try a different approach. Try the biblical method. Begin to look at your Christian life instead as a relationship with Christ. As you spend time talking to Him and reading His word, ask Him to make you more holy. If you do that, you may experience changes that you never imagined were possible.