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FORGIVENESS: Today we are talking about someone in scripture called Stephen and the power of forgiveness that he demonstrated in the Book of Acts.

Perhaps you didn't know that **Stephen was the first deacon** ever.

Deacons are the people in our church who do the hands on ministry here. They bring food and they make phone calls and they send cards and they visit the sick. Who has ever received a card from a deacon, or a casserole, or a phone call?

At first, the early church didn't have deacons.

What happened to make Stephen the first deacon ever?

Well let me ask you a TRUE/FALSE question first.

The great thing about working in a church is that people who know the Lord never complain.

People are so grateful for their salvation, and filled with joy that they never think to grumble or make any negative comments in churches, and that's what's so great about church.

TRUE/FALSE?

We all know that though we try our best, complaining is part of the human race. We do it almost without thinking about it. I know I do.

If it makes you feel any better complaining happened in the early church too

It is in chapter 6

Things were going great. The church was in a good place. The disciples were increasing in number...

AND IT SAYS

“the Hellenists complained”...(the Greek Jews in the church in Jerusalem complained)”

Why?

Because they said (and I paraphrase but this is the gist”) “You think your Jewish widows are better than our Greek widows. When you give out food to them you don't distribute it evenly. You give more to the Jewish widows than to the Greek widows.

(and remember folks the early church was the only place that cared about widows and orphans; it was the only place that took care of the diseased and infirmed and fed the

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poor. No one else cared back then; now, in our culture, we all care about the disadvantaged – its socially acceptable to do food drives, and back pack collections and sponsorships – part of our culture to help the poor. Back then it was just the opposite. Help those who were lowly and you became low.)

But the early church did it anyway. It was counter-cultural but they stuck their necks out and did it anyway.

And the truth was that this neglect of the Gentile widows was an honest oversight in the church; so the disciples gathered everyone together and chose 7 people “**full of the Holy Spirit and wisdom**” (those were the requirements for the job) to wait the tables, and oversee the hands on ministry to the poor.

The church laid their hands on these 7 and commissioned them to do this ministry, just like we do here.

And Stephen is the first one mentioned of those 7. He is the first deacon we really get to know in scripture.

Who is a deacon here today? Stand up. We want to thank you for the hands on ministry you do. (clap) These are people who do background ministry all the time; We have many Stephens among us. Thank you so much.

Well it just so happens that Stephen makes some of the religious rulers in the synagogue upset –

He is so good at what he does,

He not only waits tables; he does wonders and signs – prays and the sick get better - and he defends the faith so well.

He is full of the Holy Spirit and wisdom – a wonderful person.

But those in the synagogue get jealous of Stephen and they stir up the people and falsely accuse Stephen, of saying bad things about God and Moses. (kind of like they did to Jesus)

Actually what was Stephen preaching about that they didn't like?

He was saying you can worship God anywhere; God doesn't live in buildings made by people – God lives in human hearts.

Why would this have made the leaders of the temple upset?

The temple was the center of commerce at that time. I mean if you could worship God anywhere, then all the workers of the temple would be unemployed – you wouldn't have to buy animals to sacrifice, or buy tokens to put in the offering, and no one could make money...

So they hated what Stephen was telling the people. They wanted job security.

So they drag Stephen before the council. He testifies to Jesus beautifully in chapter 7. But he tells them to their face – what prophet did God send to you that you did not persecute? You are betrayers and murderers of the Righteous One – Jesus.

And they get so angry at him, they stone him.

The usual method for stoning is you bring the person out of the town throw him down into a pit or a ditch...and drop a large rock on top of his chest. If he doesn't die you start firing rocks at him until he does.

Extremely painful way to die...of course. ...and Stephen does die. But not before he does something very important first...

Stephen utters 8 words that make all the difference. Those eight words were these: **Lord, do not hold this sin against them.**

Words of forgiveness. Who is he forgiving? Who is in that mob who rush at Stephen with stones in their hand...Well..

In **Acts 8:1** there is this little line that packs a punch... And 8:1 says... **Saul approved of their killing him.**

Saul led this troop of angry religious people and approved of their killing Stephen!

Saul is the St Paul we talk about today in such lofty terms. In **Acts 7:58** scripture says **the religious leaders “put their cloaks down at the feet of a young man named Saul”.**

Do you get that?

Saul – was a cold blooded murderer.

A murderer of a person – Stephen – who was full of the Holy Spirit who was helping the poor on the streets, helping widows and orphans waiting on tables. Its like killing Mother Teresa.

Saul approved and led that mob to kill Stephen.

This does not mean by the way that if you volunteer to be a deacon you have to eventually be stoned. That's not a Presbyterian thing that we do here just in case anyone was worried about that.

Now when Saul is converted later in Acts.

Saul changes his name. He changes his name from Saul, to Paul.

It's a great story and we'll be talking about that in a few Sundays from now.

It assures all of us that no matter where we've been or what we've done Jesus forgiveness is there for us too...

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And because of that conversion experience that so changed him **Saul changes his name from Saul to Paul.**

Do you know what the name Paul means? (It's a Greek name...because God sends Paul to minister to the Gentiles)

The name Paul means "small one".

It's a play on the name Saul.

Saul was a good Jewish name.. He'd been trained in the best Jewish schools and named accordingly by his parents;

Saul was named after King Saul who you can read about in the Old Testament – a great and mighty King...King Saul it says in scripture was handsome and head and shoulders above the rest –

But after Jesus gets ahold of Saul...Saul becomes Paul...small one...and Paul becomes a champion of Jesus...who says, "**It's not me but, it's Christ in me**", the small one who says, "**I am the very least of all the saints.**" Cause I murdered all these Christians.

Talk about change. Stephens eight words did that. **Lord, do not hold this sin against him.**

Think what would have happened if Saul hadn't changed...Saul become Paul, having come to Jesus, wrote half of our New Testament. Can you imagine if our NT didn't have Romans in it? Or Galatians? Or Philippians? I couldn't live without Philippians! St Paul wrote all that and also spread Christianity all over the known world at the time – half of Acts is about Paul's journeys creating church after church.

Eight life saving words...gave us 50% of our NT. Pummeled by stones, with pain searing through his body, Stephen cries out...Lord do not hold this sin against them.

How do you say that when you are being stoned? How do you hold onto forgiveness when you are suffering so badly.

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How do you forgive your accusers? It's only by the Holy Spirit.

Stephen had a vision as he was being stoned.

It was a beautiful vision of Jesus.

When we look to Jesus in the midst of our trials and sufferings its much easier to forgive, because what we see is someone so much more beautiful and so much more transcendent then the meager sufferings of this life.

So with that vision before him Stephen uttered those eight life saving words...

You get where I am going with this. See I believe Stephen's forgiveness of Saul, opened the way for Saul's conversion later on

Its very popular to say nowadays that we should forgive because it does us a favor. That unforgiveness is like drinking poison and thinking the other person will die. And that's true. Thats sort of the self-help mantra...

All that bitterness and resentment builds up us and weighs us down...and when we forgive we let that go and it frees us up.

I agree with that wholeheartedly.
Forgiving is a release for us.

But think about it. **Stephen was going to be with Jesus. Why was his forgiveness of Saul the last thing he said if it was just for him?**

To make him feel better – he didn't need to feel better he was going to heaven.

You see, I think something else happens when we forgive, in addition to us relieving ourselves of our own resentment...

I think that when we hold a grudge, or don't forgive another we keep that person, our accuser, the one who hurt or offended us in the bondage of sin as well, and makes it harder for God to work in their life

Its like our resentment affects them too; it holds them back from being healed and receptive to God's grace –
It blocks the Holy Spirit from being able to work transformation in their life...

Jesus said once as he was teaching about forgiveness **“whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven; and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.”**

We actually have the power to bind people in darkness by our own refusal to forgive them...think about that...

Our resentment is a bondage not just for us, but for them as well.
It blocks the Holy Spirit from being able to work on their behalf

By saying “Lord Jesus do not hold this sin against them” Stephen, that powerful Holy Spirit filled deacon, was doing exactly what Jesus did on the cross.

Father, forgive them. They don't know what they are doing. I release them to you. Work your transforming power on them.

Stephen sees Jesus in glory. His last words on earth are words that leave a blessing for his accusers and open the way for the Holy Spirit to work on Saul the murderer.

Saul has no idea that Stephen has just made a way for his salvation. All Saul does is continue on his way murdering more Christians. He doesn't change until later in Acts. Someone read the first part of Acts 9 – "**Saul, still breathing threats and murder against the disciples....**" He hasn't changed.

This is what is so hard about forgiveness. **We don't always see the results of forgiving someone. We don't immediately see them transformed.**

Those we forgive sometimes seem to just keep going about their business and hurting more people – just like Saul did murdering more Christians, right after he murdered Stephen.

But just because we don't see it right away, doesn't mean it didn't make a difference for the person we forgave.

I often think that **Forgiveness is like priming the pump.** Anybody ever prime a water pump like this one?

Who here had a water pump when they were young. I didn't so I am asking you.

When you went out to the water pump first thing in the AM and lifted the handle of the pump up and down did you see water right away? No.

But the physics of the pump works this way... AS you begin to pump the pump fluid begins to fill the inside of that pump that you don't see. - you do not see any results in terms of water coming out of the pump.

During this time the pump is being primed meaning the water level inside the pump is being built up so that eventually water can come out of the pump.

The problem arises when you stop pumping the pump because you are not seeing any results.

And so much of Christianity is this way, isn't it? We don't always see results right away.

When we pray, when we forgive, when we faithfully serve....we often don't see the benefits coming to us, and we get discouraged.

But the problem is that...Once you stop priming...because you say to yourself..."well this isn't amounting to anything"... the internal fluid level of the pump decreases and you will have to re-prime the pump if you are ever to see any results.

If you are hoping to continue to get water out of the pump, you have to continue to prime it. And eventually...that's when the water starts to flow...

The same is true of forgiveness. **As hard as it is to do, and keep doing, forgiveness primes the pump. It primes the pump for God to be able act in us, and in the person we have forgiven.**

Stephen never saw Saul converted in this life, but he primed the pump...so that when the time was right God's power – his living water - could overflow and change Saul to Paul.

Never doubt it. Forgiveness is one of the most powerful things in the world – it changes people and it brings healing again and again.

It releases us from the bondage of holding onto resentment – it frees us up

But...

It also sets God free to act on the person's behalf whom we have forgiven. It opens the way...it primes the pump for change and transformation

Forgiveness is one of the few things Jesus says we must do – forgiveness is mandatory for the Christian – no way around it; and it takes us our lifetime or more to master it.

Jesus said, “Bless those who persecute you. Pray for those who treat you wrong.” And then he said, **”Forgive, 70 X 7”** ...in other words...keep at it...don't stop...keep priming that pump...So then...

How do we know when we have forgiven someone? Someone once said to me “I can't ever forget what she did to me”. Jesus never coined the phrase “forgive and forget”. That isn't in scripture. That's a Hallmark card.

You know you have forgiven when you can remember the incident but not relive the feelings.

From a more theological perspective...using more spiritual language we might put it this way...

You know you have forgiven someone when you are able to bless the incident.

What do I mean by that? Well...

It is easy to bless the good things in life, but when I remember the times I have been hurt and am able to see the blessing that came from it, I know I have been healed.

It's like Stephen seeing Jesus in the midst of the pain of being stoned.

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It is in the blessing that the pain we've experienced from the other person becomes a gift, in some way. It doesn't mean we condone or excuse what happened. We simply are able to see it differently through the lenses of the Holy Spirit.

Its not always easy to forgive and often it's a process to get there.

But with the Holy Spirit everything is possible. Stephen was filled with the Holy Spirit – and so are you if you love Jesus.

Sometimes I think maybe St Paul was able to forgive himself for massacring Christians in his early years because he knew that Stephen had forgiven him that day; and because of that and Jesus' ultimate forgiveness he could be, as he calls himself, **“the very least of all the saints”**.

We have a story for you today on video on forgiveness. I liked it because it goes both ways – forgiveness released the person who forgave, but also healed the perpetrator. Changed his life.

Let God minister to you as you watch...and ask yourself, is there anyone I need to forgive? Or maybe I need to forgive myself? Ask the Holy Spirit to give you the power to forgive ...

VIDEO (<https://youtu.be/n9J6xOT3Ldw>)
From 0:08 – 2:47

Lets pray.