

July 14, 2013

# *A Gospel Centered Community*

## *Unto Death a Christian*

Acts 6:8 – 15

### **Video: Unto Death a Christian**

Imagine yourself witnessing to someone like Fatima. A man or a woman whose very identity, familial honor, and social standing are all inextricably intertwined with Islam. As you talk to them, you understand that if they ever leave the faith of Islam, they stand a good chance of losing their lives. If their family ever finds out that they have embraced Christianity, they will kill them without question or hesitation. As you tell them about this God that loved them so much that He sent His only Son to die on the cross for their sins as their Savior, you sense their hearts softening toward the gospel. But at the same time you can feel a trembling about them as they contemplate what it would cost them to follow Jesus. When they finally ask, 'What must I do to follow Jesus?' you have two choices. You can simply tell them how easy it is to become a Christian if they will say yes to certain truths and pray a particular prayer.

Or you can tell them the truth. You can tell them that when Jesus calls someone to follow Him, He calls them to die. Literally. To die to their former life. To die to their family. To die to their friends. To die to their ambitions and dreams. And in dying to live. To live in Jesus. To live as part of a global family that transcends and includes, every ethnic, tribal, cultural and social distinction. To live with power and purpose. To live in a future where joy is everlasting. To live unafraid to say, 'I am unto death a Christian'. Fatima's story, and many thousands of others like it, is a very real reminder that the call to follow Jesus is a call to die. And it has always been that way. From Stephen, here in Jerusalem, to Fatima in Saudi Arabia; and so many thousands more in similar places around the world.

Jesus came to some fishermen on the shore of Galilee, and invited them to follow Him; '*And I will make you fishers of men*' He said. With that, Jesus beckoned them to leave behind their professions, possessions, dreams, ambitions, family, friends, safety and security. And everyone of those He called paid a steep price to follow Him. James was beheaded, Peter and Andrew were crucified, Thomas was pierced to death with a spear, Matthew was killed by the sword, Matthias was burned to death; and everyone of them except John who was merely exiled, saw a life cut short by violent death. But everyone of them believed that following Jesus was worth the cost. Everyone of them would have said, and did say with their lives, '*I am unto death a Christian – a Christ follower*'.

So what does it look like to follow Christ? I believe the text this morning speaks to that very thing; and the first thing is that **followers of Christ are fully engaged**. In this story we have a man named Stephen. *And Stephen, full of grace and power, was doing great wonders and signs among the people. Acts 6:8* He was apparently one of those Hellenistic Jews that had embraced the gospel in those early days of the church in Jerusalem. He wasn't one of the big guns in the church – just a Jew that came to faith in Jesus. But his story was so important that the Holy Spirit chose to highlight his brief, meteoric career in two chapters of this book. And one of the things this tells us is that it isn't the length of our time here on earth that is the most important thing, but rather the way we follow Christ while we are here. Stephen's story is important, not because he did great signs and wonders among the people of Jerusalem, but rather because of his unafraid, no-holds-barred witness to the saving grace of Jesus Christ.

We are going to see in chapter eight that his witness was the catalyst for the spread of the gospel from Jerusalem to the rest of the world. That's why his story is important. Stephen's death at the hands of an angry mob, instead of killing the the message, sent it out to the ends of the earth. And Stephen is not unique in this respect. There are literally hundreds of stories from history that bear this out. I can think of men like Pete Fleming, Nate Saint, Roger Youderian, Ed McCulley and Jim Elliot, whose lives were cut short by the Huaorani Indians of Ecuador, and through their death spread the gospel to a whole people group that were considered unreachable. I think of Alan Gardiner and his companions dying alone on an island at the bottom of the world, and their deaths being the catalyst to bring the gospel to Patagonia. ***Our lives have meaning and significance to the degree they engaged in the redemptive work of Christ through the gospel in the world.*** Jim Elliot and Alan Gardiner were fully engaged. Stephen was fully engaged in the cause for which Christ had called him – and we have to ask ourselves, 'Are we fully engaged?'

A story in the February 1998 edition of Reader's Digest told of a Christian couple who took early retirement from their jobs in the Northeast. He was 59 and she was 51. Now they live in Punta Gorda, Florida, where they putter around the bay in their 30 foot trawler, play softball, and collect sea shells. John Piper writes about this in his book *'Don't Waste Your Life'*. ***'At first, when I read it I thought it might be a joke – a spoof on the American Dream. But it wasn't. Tragically, this was the dream: Come to the end of your life – your life, your one and only precious, God-given life – and let the last great work of your life, before you give an account to your Creator be this: playing softball and collecting shells. Picture them before Christ at the great day of judgment: 'Look, Lord, see my shells.' That is a tragedy.'*** I cannot imagine anything more tragic than to have spent this life in wasteful living, preparing to meet Jesus Christ face to face with thorn-scarred brow and nail-scarred hands and feet, and hear Him say, 'What did you do with your life?'

In Yorkshire, England, during the early 1800s, two sons were born to a family named Taylor. The older one set out to make a name for himself by entering Parliament and gaining public prestige. But the younger son chose the road less travelled. He later recalled, ***"Well do I remember, as in unreserved consecration I put myself, my life, my friends, my all, upon the altar. I felt I was in the presence of God, entering into covenant with the Almighty."*** With that commitment, Hudson Taylor turned his face toward China and obscurity. As a result, he is known and honored on every continent as a faithful missionary and the founder of the China Inland Mission (now known as Overseas Missionary Fellowship). For the other son, however, there is no lasting monument. He became known simply as "the brother of Hudson Taylor."

What I am not saying is that everyone who comes to Christ must engage in some sort of cross-cultural mission. ***What I am saying is that everyone who comes to Christ must be engaged in the cause of Christ somewhere.*** We have not been saved from sin and death and hell to simply bide our time here on earth until we are one day called to glory. We must be engaged as Stephen was engaged – to follow like he followed. What was he doing? Look at verse 9: *Then some of those who belonged to the synagogue of the Freedmen (as it was called), and of the Cyrenians, and of the Alexandrians, and of those from Cilicia and Asia, rose up and disputed with Stephen. But they could not withstand the wisdom and the Spirit with which he was speaking. Acts 6:9-10* What Stephen was doing was spreading the gospel right where he lived. He may even have been a member of the Synagogue of the Freedmen who took issue with his testimony. And the text says that he was literally examining the claims of Christ together with these guys.

When is the last time you have examined the claims of Christ together with an unbeliever? When is the last time you opened your mouth to testify of the saving grace of Jesus? These are hard questions but they need to be asked if we are to live the truth of what we claim. It reminds me of the question Del Tackett asks in the Truth Project: ***Do you really believe that what you believe is really real? Followers of Jesus really believe that what they believe is really real.*** Do you really believe in the existence of an eternal heaven and an eternal hell? Do you really believe that those who belong to Christ will be with Him forever, and those who do not belong to Christ are damned for eternity? Do you really believe the word of God that says: *For "everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved." How then will they call on him in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in him of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone preaching? Romans 10:13-14* Do you really believe that we have been given this mission in the world that defines our existence in the world – ***to take the gospel to the world and make disciples?***

If we have any other concept of what this Christian life is about – we'd better look again at the words of Jesus and the witness of Stephen. You see, Stephen's short life showed a third characteristic of a follower of Christ: that **Jesus is more precious than life** and being a witness to that preciousness was more important to him than anything else. When we come to Christ and we realize that our lives are in His hands and hang by a thread of sovereign grace, the one great passion in our lives will be to magnify Him. **Life** is given to us so that we can magnify Christ. **Possessions** are given to us so that by their use we can magnify Christ. **Money** is given to us so that we can magnify Christ and show by its use that Christ and not money is our treasure. It is a life that uses everything to demonstrate the precious value of knowing Christ Jesus and one in which everything gets its value from its relation to Christ. *"But whatever things were gain to me, these things I have counted as loss for the sake of Christ. More than that, I count all things to be loss on account of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For whom I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ." Philipians 3:7-8*

This is a message that is in direct opposition to the message of the world, and I might add, some pulpits. The message of the world is all about life-enhancement – how to make more money so you can buy more stuff and build bigger homes and have a comfortable retirement. For a Christian, I have to ask, 'How does that demonstrate that Jesus is more precious than life? If the value of knowing and gaining Christ is really 'surpassing', then the food we eat, the cars and land and homes we own, the clothes we wear and the computers we buy are only worthwhile investments if Christ is the center of our passion. The way we demonstrate that Jesus is more precious than life is by treasuring Christ above all these things and making life choices that show that ultimately our greatest joy and our greatest satisfaction is not in things but in Him. And we will say with Paul – *to live is Christ and to die is gain*. In such a life death is gain because death means more, not less, of Christ.

Jim Elliot lived and died demonstrating the precious value of knowing Christ. Before he went as a missionary to those jungles, he wrote in his journal these words: *"He makes His ministers a flame of fire. Am I ignitable? God deliver me from the dread asbestos of 'other things.' Saturate me with the oil of the Spirit that I may be aflame. But flame is transient, often short lived. Canst thou bear this, my soul - short life? ... Make me thy fuel, Flame of God."* He looked at the very real possibility of a life cut short in the service of His king and said, 'It's worth it. Christ is more valuable than life itself. Make me Thy fuel, flame of God!' So I would ask you, are you going to join the rest of the world in the tragic waste of trying to minimize your suffering and maximize your comforts in this life? Will you spend your life building bigger barns, pursuing fleeting pleasures and laying up treasures on earth? Or will you live a life that demonstrates the infinite worth of Jesus Christ and prove that He is more precious than life?

The fourth thing about a real follower of Christ is that **they will be persecuted**. *Then they secretly instigated men who said, "We have heard him speak blasphemous words against Moses and God." And they stirred up the people and the elders and the scribes, and they came upon him and seized him and brought him before the council, and they set up false witnesses who said, "This man never ceases to speak words against this holy place and the law, for we have heard him say that this Jesus of Nazareth will destroy this place and will change the customs that Moses delivered to us."* **Acts 6:11-14** The apostle Paul wrote to Timothy, reminding him of all the persecution he endured and encouraging Timothy that: *Indeed, all who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted.* **2 Timothy 3:12**

All who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus **will be** persecuted. Paul doesn't present this as an option. All. Not some. All. Does that mean that everyone who claims to be a Christian will be persecuted? Not exactly – **just all those who desire to live godly**. If you're a disobedient, weak, unengaged unconcerned, apathetic, inconsequential Christian, you may never be persecuted. You're not a problem. You're out of the game and Satan is not going to waste his time with you, you're not a threat, you're not doing anything. But if you desire to live godly, literally **the willing ones**, the ones willing to live godly, will be persecuted – those willing to be engaged in the global purpose of Christ. What Paul is not saying is that the persecution will be continual. There will be times and seasons and varying degrees of persecution, but anyone who seeks to confront a hostile, God-hating world with a gospel-centered godly life, will suffer opposition. There will be hostility. Jesus tells us in John 15, *If they hated Me they will hate you. In this world you shall have tribulation. Be of good cheer, I have overcome the world.*

And those who live godly in Christ Jesus live a life that embraces the risk of persecution for the cause of Christ. It is not risk in the sense that we stand to lose anything of value; or that in living our lives for the glory of God and the cause of Christ that somehow our lives would be wasted or futile or tragic. **But it is risk in the sense that there is the very real possibility that we will forfeit temporary comfort and security, wealth and prosperity, good health and long lives in the pursuit of the cause of Christ.** It was Jim Elliot again, whose life lit up the sky like a Roman candle who said: *"He is no fool who gives up what he cannot keep, to gain what he cannot lose."* We need to be sold out to the eternal things we cannot lose rather than selling out to the temporary things here that we cannot keep.

This has always been the invitation of Jesus: *'If anyone wishes to come after Me, let him deny himself, take up his cross and follow Me. For whoever wishes to save his life shall lose it; but whoever loses his life for My sake shall find it.'* **Matthew 16:24-25** I cannot tell what this invitation means for each of you. For some, it is a call to stop wasting your lives with trivial pursuits and selfish indulgences. For others it is a call to invest your lives in ministry to the poor and less fortunate among us. For some it is a call to release your tight grip on the money God has given you and to invest your fortune in the cause of Christ both at home and abroad. For still others, this may be a call to spend yourselves to reach one of the unreached people groups in the world. Out of the over 15,000 people groups in the world, nearly 6500 people groups, representing over 2 ½ billion people on this planet, still do not have an indigenous evangelical church among them.

But whatever it means for you, a life that demonstrates the infinite worth of Jesus Christ is one that will embrace risk for the cause of Christ and the glory of God. It was risky for Abram to leave the land he had grown up in to travel to a place he knew nothing about, led by a God he couldn't see and apparently only he could hear. It was risky for Esther to approach the king on behalf of her people – but God had put her there for such a time as that – and her response demonstrated the infinite worth of knowing Him – 'If I perish, I perish!' It was risky for three Hebrew boys to defy the king of the world and refuse to bow down and worship him. It was risky for them to say, 'Our God will save us – **but even if He doesn't**, we still will not bow down, O king!' And for two thousand years, in most places on earth, it has been worth your life to confess Christ – but every real Christian knows that sooner or later he might have to testify to the infinite worth of Jesus Christ with his life, and to boldly say, **I am unto death a Christian.**

This is what Stephen said with his life, because **followers of Jesus are bold witnesses** And make no mistake – his audience recognized it. Luke puts it like this: *And gazing at him, all who sat in the council saw that his face was like the face of an angel.* **Acts 6:15** You might be tempted to think at this point, 'Aw, that's so sweet – the face of an angel. He must have looked like a Hallmark greeting card'. Don't think that. That isn't what Luke meant. If you look at the appearances of angels throughout the Bible, what you don't see is people reacting to angels as if they were sweet, cherubic, little cupids with mischievous smiles on their faces. The appearance of an angel in the Bible was a stunning event. Mostly people were terrified when they saw an angel. What you see when angels show up is people diving face-first to the ground, scared out of their wits. Angels in the Bible are awesome, radiant beings that command authority, attention, respect and honor. In most cases they appear so high and awesome that people are tempted to worship them. So when Luke says that Stephen's face was like the face of an angel to his audience, I believe he was trying to convey some sense of the imposing authority and glory of God radiating from Stephen that compelled his audience to listen.

The call to follow Jesus is a call to die – and a call to glory. It is a call that counts everything else as nothing compared to the joy of knowing Jesus. It is a call to be engaged in God's global purpose on earth – calling men and women from every nation to worship the only One in the universe worth worshiping. It is a call to embrace temporal risk for eternal gain – to say with our lips and with our lives that Jesus is more precious than life – to proclaim with every genuine, engaged lover of Jesus: **I am unto death a Christian.**

*Our gracious Father and Great Redeemer,*

*May we be those who make it our aim in life to demonstrate through our lives that You are the chief object of our affections and more precious than life itself. Forgive us O Lord for spending our days in the futile pursuit of temporary happiness and self-seeking pleasures. We have not seen and savored You as we ought, nor worshiped You with the white-hot affections that You deserve. We confess that we have been lukewarm and half-hearted in carrying out Your Great Commission. Forgive us O Lord, and lead us into everlasting joy in You. Enthral us with Yourself and break the power of all lesser affections. Be gracious to us and bless us and cause Your face to shine upon us so that Your name would be praised and known, honored and worshiped in all the tribes and tongues and peoples and nations of the world. What infinite cost, what great expense by which You made Yourself the treasure of our lives and our glory and our boast. You sent Your Son, so that we might waken to the joy of making much of You through all eternity. Grant Lord, that we might embrace any risk, endure any suffering, and forsake any comfort to make others glad in You as well. May we say with our lives and with our lips, I am a Christian unto death!, we pray in the precious, life-giving name of Jesus Christ our Lord, Amen.*