

Resisting the Holy Spirit

Wait for it...

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You know, I think we'd all have to admit this morning there is just something about the last few minutes and the reason they're just something about it is you may not have realized how many times you just used your own personal pronoun. By your Spirit, I will rise. In his name, I come alive. The resurrection King is resurrecting me. There is nothing that any of us can do to change the fact that the tomb is still empty. It is. The question is: is have you personally responded to that fact? This isn't just a declaration of historical truth, this isn't just a dogma of denominational belief, this is personal, folks. The resurrected King will raise you if you ask him to.

Let's pray.

Lord, as we come to this time of being challenged by your word, Lord, thank you that facts are the facts and truth is the truth, the tomb is empty and we have the opportunity to be raised, we have the opportunity to be resurrected, we have the opportunity to rise from the ashes not because of our deeds, our works, our intentions or our desires, but because you alone conquered death and you declared that you were the firstborn which means there could be many afterward. And God, I pray today that as we study your word, as we investigate your word, it wouldn't be a study in the historical, though it is historical, it wouldn't be a study in a story, even though it is a story, but it would be a study of ourselves and how we either have or have not responded to you. It is in the name of Jesus Christ we pray. Amen.

This morning, I want to encourage you to turn in your Bibles to the book of Acts 7. As you're turning to Acts 7, if you're a guest or visitor with us today, I want to welcome you to kind of a journey that we're taking as a family of faith, walking through not just the book of Acts, but studying who is the person and what is the role of the Holy Spirit in our lives, and as we've made this journey we've talked about the fact that the Lord desires to bestow gifts upon us, he desires to fill us as only he can, and empower us to be all that which we could never be on our own ends and means. The last couple of chapters in the book of Acts, though, we've kind of talked about the other side of the proverbial coin and we've talked about a character or a group, a couple in Acts 5 who decided to quench the Spirit of God. In other words, the Lord was moving, he was active in their life and they decided not to believe, they decided not to trust, they decided to go a different direction.

Last week, we were in Acts 6 and gratefully and thankfully we saw a group of individuals of which one we'll discuss again today who decided not to grieve the Holy Spirit of God, in other words, a consistent, constant rejection and rebellion of his movement in their lives. Today we come to Acts 7 and it's going to feature an individual who will be known historically as the first Christian martyr. He was not one of the apostles, in fact, he was one of the first called deacons of Acts 6, an individual who Acts 6 says that he was full of faith and he was full of the Spirit of God in his life, and he walked boldly in his relationship with the Lord.

Well, as oftentimes in the life of Jesus, those who were of a religious background, those that were opposed to the message of Jesus Christ, the person of Jesus Christ, come in opposition to him and here in Acts 7, as we're going to see in just a moment, we have one of the most unique passages in all of the Bible but particularly today dealing with what does it look like, what does it mean to resist the Spirit of God. Before we get to the words of Stephen, before we get to his message to those who were rejecting the person and the work of Jesus Christ, let me remind you that those in Acts 7 who are resisting the Spirit of God, those who are rejecting the movement of God in their life, they are non-believers. They are those who have no belief in Jesus Christ, no relationship with Jesus Christ. Why is that critical to our understanding today? What we're going to see today is not just a story of a couple of dozen guys on the side of a hill in Jerusalem, today is the story of all of humanity and our propensity to resist the Lord in our life and what we'll see at the end is not just humanity's resisting of the Lord but what is God's eventual response to humanity's resisting.

I want to pick up the story actually in verse 51 of Acts 7. We'll go back to the beginning in just a moment, I promise, but Stephen has been laying out for them the story of and the testimony and the truth of Jesus Christ, and I can only imagine based on what we're about to read, the facial expressions and the body language that Stephen was watching in his audience because in verse 51, notice how he finishes up, notice how he concludes, notice the invitation he gives to the sermon.

51 Ye stiffnecked and uncircumcised in heart and ears, ye do always resist the Holy Ghost: as your fathers did, so do ye. 52 Which of the prophets have not your fathers persecuted? and they have slain them which shewed before of the coming of the Just One; of whom ye have been now the betrayers and murderers: 53 Who have received the law by the disposition of angels, and have not kept it.

Can I stop there just for a moment and say that is not feel-good, make you happy preaching. He is telling them, "Hey, you messed up and you've messed up bad because you have rejected the very God who gave breath in your lungs." I want you to see how they respond in verse 54,

54 When they heard these things, they were cut to the heart, and they gnashed on him with their teeth. 55 But he, being full of the Holy Ghost, looked up stedfastly into heaven, and saw the glory of God, and Jesus

standing on the right hand of God, 56 And said, Behold, I see the heavens opened, and the Son of man standing on the right hand of God. 57 Then they cried out with a loud voice, and stopped their ears, and ran upon him with one accord, 58 And cast him out of the city, and stoned him: and the witnesses laid down their clothes at a young man's feet, whose name was Saul. 59 And they stoned Stephen, calling upon God, and saying, Lord Jesus, receive my spirit. 60 And he kneeled down, and cried with a loud voice, Lord, lay not this sin to their charge. And when he had said this, he fell asleep.

Now at the end of this message in this interaction between Stephen and this group of individuals we have two things taking place: we have their resisting of the Holy Spirit and then we have not only theirs but Stephen and the Lord's response to the resisting. Allow me to remind you again this isn't just the story on the hillside of Jerusalem, this is a greater picture of all of humanity's struggle with resisting the Holy Spirit in their life, but for this particular passage, I want you to notice that it's peculiar, to say the least. In fact, there are some things that take place in this passage of Scripture that are unique not only to Scripture but to the story itself.

The first thing that is peculiar about this passage you'll notice beginning in verse 51 that the plural pronoun is used: you, you collectively; we collectively. What we see is this is not the interaction between Stephen and one other individual. We'll find that next week in chapter 8 where we're going to see Philip interacting with the Ethiopian eunuch. It's a one-on-one conversation. It's about that situation at that time. In Acts 7, the plural is being used and it's beyond just those that are represented. What we see in this story as we'll see in a moment, is this is representative of all of humanity's resisting of the Holy Spirit and how the Lord responds when we do so.

So it's very peculiar because of the plural, it's also peculiar because this is the only time in your Bible where it talks about somebody resisting the Holy Spirit. Now the word "resist" is used like Person A resists Person B, but the idea, the concept of resisting the Holy Spirit is only mentioned here in Acts 7. That is significant to our understanding of this passage because, again, it goes beyond just this local setting. There is a bigger picture taking place here. There's a bigger concept, not just these guys but all of humanity.

There is one other peculiarity that I want you to notice. Go back to verse 1 of chapter 7 and I want you to see what happens in Stephen's presentation that is very peculiar and very unique to Scripture. Verse 1,

1 Then said the high priest, Are these things so? 2 And he said, Men, brethren, and fathers, hearken; The God of glory appeared unto our father Abraham, when he was in Mesopotamia, before he dwelt in Charran,

Now I want to stop there for just a moment. What we saw in Acts 2 when Peter got up before all of the Jews that were representing the world's population, when he went back and talked about Jesus, when he went back and showed how he was the fulfillment of

prophecy, all he did was go back to David. I mean, that's a significant character, don't get me wrong but he was being very strategic that the Messiah that David prophesied, the Messiah that David spoke about, the Messiah that would come from the lineage of Jesus, you have rejected. That's the message of Acts 2. Here in Acts 7, Stephen goes all the way back to Abraham. Why is that important? Because he's going all the way back to the furthest lineage that could be imaginable with the humanity that is before him. He goes all the way back so what he is doing is saying the subject matter we're dealing with here, it's not localized and it's not just you. This is humanity's issue. He goes all the way back to Abraham.

Now verse 8,

8 And he gave him the covenant of circumcision: and so Abraham begat Isaac, and circumcised him the eighth day; and Isaac begat Jacob; and Jacob begat the twelve patriarchs. 9 And the patriarchs, moved with envy, sold Joseph into Egypt: but God was with him,

So we've got Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph. Fast forward to verse 20,

20 In which time Moses was born

For the next about 30 verses Moses is going to be the primary parallel that Stephen is going to use to show, to picture, and to speak of Jesus Christ. Rightly so because in Deuteronomy 18, Moses himself spoke according to the Spirit of God that the Messiah, whom we know as Jesus Christ, would be much like him and after the order of him as a prophet is concerned. But then we move further on to verse 44. Not only is Moses spoken of, verse 45, the last word, David. David finally shows up. Verse 47, and Solomon built him, being the Lord, a house.

Why is this peculiar and why is this important to our understanding? You've got a passage of Scripture here that is using the plural for its audience; you've got a passage of Scripture that uses a phrase that's used nowhere else in the Bible; and you've got a message that's going all the way back thousands of years. The reason that that's peculiar, the reason that is important, this is the story of humanity before us, not just these guys. It's real easy to say, "Well, they resisted the Holy Spirit but I would never do that. They resisted the Holy Spirit but the folks I know would never do that." This story today, their problem wasn't their specific issue, this is humanity's issue and the picture that the Lord gives us in verse 51 is interesting. He says, "You stiffnecked and uncircumcised folks."

Now there's a reason he used the word "stiffnecked" because all the way back in the book of Exodus when Moses was crying out to God saying, "I don't know how much longer I can deal with these people," they were called a stiffnecked people and that's exactly what they were. I mean, think about this: 400 years in the bondage of Egypt, they come across the Red Sea after 400 years and within 11 days they're already griping that they had it better in Egypt. In fact, what you see in their stiffneckedness as you read the Old Testament, the story of humanity, is they would not bend and they would not bow to the

way of God in their life. So when he calls them stiffnecked, the picture he's giving them is, "You refuse to bend. You refuse to bow. You are a stiffnecked proud people who believe that your way is always the best way." Interesting. The story of the garden of Eden continues to propagate itself throughout all of humanity. Adam and Eve thought they knew better than God and oftentimes so do we.

But it's that second picture: uncircumcised. Now, we just read about, you know, So-and-so circumcised So-and-so and such, let me kind of give you a commentary, a Southern commentary here: those are fighting words. That's what that is. He just called them a Philistine is what he did. You remember the Philistines in your Old Testament, they would not believe in God, they're always fighting the people of God, they are the antagonists of everything in the Old Testament. He called them stiffnecked, okay, they're proud, they're not going to bend, they're not going to break, but when he called them uncircumcised, you understand physically every person listening to him had been circumcised. He's calling out their heart. He says, "You will not believe."

Is this not the story of humanity from the garden of Eden? We will not bend, we will not bow, and we will not believe that God's plan is better than ours. That's exactly what Adam and Eve said. They said, "Hey, if we eat of this fruit, it's going to taste good because it looks good and it's going to make us good." And what happened? You saw the rest of the story. They found themselves not only outside of the garden but as we'll see in just a moment, leading out a tradition of rejection of the things of God.

They're pictured as being proud, they're spoken of of being stiffnecked and uncircumcised but I want you to notice the particulars here. Not just stiffnecked and uncircumcised but in their hearts and in their ears following the footsteps of their forefathers. When it speaks about the fact that they were stiffnecked, uncircumcised in their heart, what that meant is it wasn't just an outward problem, this was an inward issue that what they were doing is they did as many of us do, they had the proverbial glasses of life on and what they did is they put those glasses on and that's what they saw everything through. "I don't see it my way or this way or that way, or that's how I would like it to be." When they were uncircumcised in the heart, what they were saying is exactly what the garden of Eden proclaimed, that "we know better than God."

But not only were they so in their heart, it said they were so in their ears. They would not even entertain, they were not even willing to hear the truth about their life and the resisting of the Holy Spirit. I want to share with you somewhat of a humorous anecdote. I know that oftentimes in our culture and in our communities there are certain of us that get accused of having selective hearing. I want to share with you a story of one such couple. They got a little bit older in age and they had passed what we know as the retirement age and at that point the faculties of physically of life just aren't what they used to be, and the wife kept complaining to her husband and said, "You know, you can't hear anything. When I speak to you, you don't respond. I think we have a problem." To which he naturally said, "Honey, I don't have an issue at all. I can hear everything." She said, "Well, we're going to put this to the test."

So they went into their living room, she had her husband sit on kind of a stool or a chair facing the outward wall and here's what she said, she said, "I'm going to go to the other side of the wall and I'm going to ask you a question and I'm going to expect a response and we're going to find out how close I've got to be for you to hear me so we can understand how bad your hearing really is." He said, "Okay."

So she went all the way on the other side of the wall and she said, "Honey, do you hear me?" Silence. She said, "Uh-huh." So she went about halfway across the room and she said, "Honey, can you hear me now?" Nothing. She got about 10 feet away from him and she said, "Honey, can you hear me talking to you?" In a fit of frustration, she got right up in his ear and said, "Honey! Can you hear me?" He said, "For the fourth time, yes!" Guys, y'all can thank me later for that one.

But we do as humanity, we're guilty of selective hearing, are we not? Irrespective of our age, our gender or whatever it may be, we have a horrible habit of hearing what we want to hear and rejecting what we do not. They did not want to hear that they were the problem. They did not want to hear that Jesus was the answer. They did not want to hear that everything they had constructed and built in their life was built on shifting sand and would not last and he said, "This isn't localized to you." He said, "This is even what your fathers were guilty of."

You see, we're talk about the garden of Eden all the time and Adam and Eve and their rejection of the things of God, but it wasn't localized to the garden of Eden. It continues today. You and I are born with a propensity to follow our heart and to selectively hear and where does it get us? Exactly where these guys were. They were resisting the things of God, they were resisting the Holy Spirit in their life because at the end of the day, they didn't want to admit they were the problem and Jesus was the answer. It's a unique story, a unique situation in Scripture but it pictures for us all of humanity and our struggle with Jesus Christ.

Now I want us to look at the responses. Notice what happens in verse 54, "When they heard these things, they were cut to the heart, and they gnashed on him with their teeth." Verse 57, "they cried out with a loud voice, and stopped their ears, and ran upon him with one accord." Those of you that just read verse 54 and you were around in the days, do you remember there was a very famous fight between Tyson and Holyfield where an ear piece came off? That's the picture you get. These guys, I mean, they're completely irrational in their response. They're gnashing with their teeth, they're rebelling, they are physically seeking to end his life.

Do you find it odd or maybe interesting the peculiar phrase "gnashing with teeth"? It's the same phrase that Jesus used multiple times. In Mark 9 he said, "Those who reject me, those who descend in a place the Bible calls hell for all of eternity, there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth." What their response was in this story is the same response of the inhabitants of a place the Bible calls hell for all of eternity. Irrational, gnashing, violent, seeking nothing but death. Now remember, this is a story that gives us a bigger picture than just these 12 or 20 guys on the side of a hill in Jerusalem. What we see here is

exactly what Jesus said in John 8 when those who were rejecting him, he said, "Your father is the devil himself." Their behavior, their mannerisms, their verbal communication was eerily similar and peculiar to the description that Jesus gave of those dwelling in a place the Bible calls hell.

But I want you to notice Stephen's response. There is an interesting picture here. Verse 56, he not only sees the heavens open but verse 59 and 60, "calling upon God, and saying, Lord Jesus, receive my spirit. And he kneeled down, and cried with a loud voice, Lord, lay not this sin to their charge. And when he had said this, he fell asleep." Now for those of you that have been a part of our study on the Holy Spirit all this time, let me go back to the very first week, back to the very beginning. We talked about the fact that the apostles, the first believers in Jesus Christ, that when they received the Holy Spirit in John 20 it was days before they were filled with the Holy Spirit or empowered by the Holy Spirit in an event or an occasion known as Pentecost in Acts 2. Why is that significant? Because there is Jesus after his resurrection before his ascension, he tells those individuals, he breathes on them in John 20 and say, "Receive you the Holy Spirit," and in verse 23 he gives instructions to those first believers that are very picturesque. He says, "Whoever's sins you remit, they will be remitted. Whoever's sins you retain, they shall be retained."

Now unfortunately I believe there are a lot of folks that look at that passage and say, "That's right." There are certain individuals, particularly those who maybe can connect the dots and claim a lineage to those early apostles and believers, that we as representatives on the earth have the ability to absolve somebody of their sin. Nothing could be further from the truth. You don't have the ability to absolve somebody from their sin. You didn't come up from the grace. Only Jesus Christ can forgive somebody of their sins and absolve them of the punishment thereby.

So what did Jesus mean when he said, "Well, whoever's sin you remit or forgive, it will be done so, and whoever's you retain, it will be done so"? Stephen is picturing it here in Acts 7. He says, "Do not let this be laid to their charge." In our language, "Don't put it on their account." He's not saying, "They've done something horrible against me and I'm going to forgive them for doing so because I have the ability to do so." No, he is saying, "God, if it's possible, if there's any way, don't charge them with this crime. Don't charge them. Do not put it on their account, the sin by which they have just committed."

You want to talk about a picture, that is a picture of the unbelievable grace, mercy and love that Jesus Christ has called the church to be. In a world that is living, acting and speaking like the residents of hell, he did not say, "God, get 'em! Get 'em, God!" Hey, I've prayed that prayer, haven't you? Come on, be honest today. How many times has somebody done you wrong and you say, "God, do to them what they did to me"? And then later on hopefully you repented of it, okay? It's true. We're guilty of it. We think, "Well, how dare they?" What did he do? He said, "God, don't let them be accountable for their behavior. If there's any way possible, could you make it to where this one's not charged to them?" You want to talk about the picture of what the word Christian means. You want to talk about the picture of what it means to be a born-again believer in Jesus

Christ, to be treated like this and to say, "I hope the Lord doesn't even hold you accountable for what you've done to me." Wow, what a response.

So not only do we see the rejection of humanity but we see what a picture of a true response of a believer in Jesus Christ should look like in the midst of adversity and persecution, but then there's the response of the Lord himself. Notice verse 56 of Acts 7, Stephen makes this statement, "Behold, I see the heavens opened, and the Son of man standing on the right hand of God." That's an interesting statement. In fact, let me deal with just some of the particulars there as we bring the message to a close because when we go back to Acts 2, remember the other message we alluded to that was to a large audience and even though it only started with David and didn't go all the way back to Abraham, in that message Simon Peter made an interesting statement. Remember this was the man that for 3 ½ years had walked alongside Jesus, this was the man who denied him three times the night of his crucifixion, saw him raised from the dead, and saw him ascend up into heaven. In Acts 2 at the famous Pentecost sermon, he makes this statement in verse 36, that Jesus Christ "ascended and sat down at the right hand of the Father." Then if you fast forward in your New Testament to Hebrews 10:12, it says that Jesus after he ascended, he "sat down at the right hand of the Father to ever make intercession for us."

I know what you may be thinking, "What's the big deal between the seating and the standing?" Did you know that if you were to take verse 56 out of this passage, just pretend it's not there, the only time you see Jesus standing after his resurrection, after his ascension, is when he stands up in the book of Revelation to come back at his second coming. That's it, and by the way, the bumper sticker is right, Jesus is coming back and he's not real happy. In Revelation 19, you see him descend out of the clouds just as was prophesied in Acts 1 and you see humanity who has rejected and resisted not just a few times but for all of millennia continually thumbing their nose at him and his authority in their life.

Why is that particular picture important? Because this isn't just the story of 12 or 14 guys on the backside of a hill in Jerusalem, this is the story of humanity; that we have a propensity to resist the Holy Spirit; we have a propensity to say, "I'm not going to bend and I'm not going to bow." But one day either by his coming or your going, you're going to stand face-to-face with God himself and do you know what the Bible says? The Bible says that every knee will bow and every tongue will confess that Jesus Christ is Lord. You may not want to hear it in your heart, you may not want to hear it in your ears, but there is a day coming for each and every one of us that we will bend and we will bow and whether you do it on this side of death or on the other side of death makes a complete eternal difference. This story isn't just about a few guys who had a bad attitude on the backside of Jerusalem, this is our story. Humanity as a whole consistently resists the Holy Spirit and what has the Lord done? He's extended his arms of grace and mercy and love. You're going to bend, you're going to bow, you're going to confess one day, why don't we make that day this day?

Let's pray with our heads bowed and our eyes closed. You know, maybe you're that person today, you may be in this room physically, you may be on the other side of the cameras, but maybe you're that person, I know your name is not Adam, your name is not Eve, but maybe you're that person just like them that for your entire existence in life you've said that you know better, that you know the best way how to do things, and maybe today the Holy Spirit through his word has finally made you realize that you're the problem and that Jesus Christ is the only answer. Would today be the day that you resist no longer?

If that's who you are and that's the position you find yourself in, you may be saying, "Well, what do I do now?" The Bible says whoever calls on the name of the Lord will be saved. When you call on the name of the Lord, you have a conversation with him, you don't have to do that out loud, in fact you don't even have to say the same words that I might say but maybe at this moment, maybe at this time in life, having resisted the movement of God in your life up until this point, maybe the light bulb has turned on, maybe the Holy Spirit has pricked your heart and maybe today's the day that you say yes to Jesus. Can I encourage you to have a conversation, maybe it would go a little something like this. You don't have to say it out loud. "God, today for the first time in my life I want to confess I'm the problem and I believe that Jesus Christ alone is the answer. I believe that Jesus Christ loved me so much that he was willing to be born on my behalf. I believe that Jesus Christ loved me so much he was willing to live a sinless life on my behalf. I believe that Jesus Christ loved me so much he was willing to pay the price for my sins on the cross and three days later raise from the dead so I could be forgiven and I could be saved. God, today I don't know a whole lot, in fact I don't know how to address half the problems in my life, but I do know that Jesus Christ is the only answer to my sin problem. I'm asking you to forgive me, I'm asking you to save me, in the best way I know how, I just want to turn my life over to you."

With our heads still bowed and our eyes still closed, if that's the conversation you had with the Lord today, we'd love to have a conversation with you. We'd just love to celebrate what the Lord's doing in your life and maybe today is that day that you had that conversation with the Lord and you'd be willing to have a conversation with us. We would encourage you to do so.

Lord, as we come to this time, Lord, as you have utilized your Holy Spirit to move and operate in our life up to this point, thank you. Thank you that even though we have resisted and even though that we have been rebellious and even though we've been stiffnecked, that you haven't given up on us, you haven't pushed us to the side, but you're still extending grace and mercy and love. God, I pray today that we would bend, we would bow and we would believe. It is in the name of Jesus Christ we pray. Amen.

I'm going to ask you to stand with me as our team leads us. Any and all decisions, I'll be right here at the front.