

Stiff-Necked

Acts 7:51-53

Some words just don't need to be defined. They define themselves, having an evident and obvious meaning without any further descriptions needed. Words like stiff-necked. The obvious idea is someone who is unmovable, unchangeable. Intractable. In other words, stubborn. Obstinate. The idea is that you will not budge. You cannot be moved. You will not give up any ground, you will not back down from any decision you have made. You will not admit any error on your part, nor change your mind about anything at all. You are stiff-necked, stubborn.

God frequently rebukes his people for this particularly common form of ungodliness. Do you remember the golden calf?

Ex. 32:7 "And the LORD said to Moses, "Go, get down! For your people whom you brought out of the land of Egypt have corrupted themselves. 8 They have turned aside quickly out of the way which I commanded them. They have made themselves a molded calf, and worshiped it and sacrificed to it, and said, This is your god, O Israel, that brought you out of the land of Egypt!" 9 And the LORD said to Moses, "I have seen this people, and indeed it is a stiff-necked people!"

Thankfully, Moses sought the Lord's forgiveness,

Ex. 34:8 "So Moses made haste and bowed his head toward the earth, and worshiped. 9 Then he said, "If now I have found grace in Your sight, O Lord, let my Lord, I pray, go among us, even though we are a stiff-necked people; and pardon our iniquity and our sin, and take us as Your inheritance."

The Lord also speaks to his people in,

Deut. 9:4 "Do not think in your heart, after the LORD your God has cast them out before you, saying, 'Because of my righteousness the LORD has brought me in to possess this land';

but it is because of the wickedness of these nations that the LORD is driving them out from before you. 5 It is not because of your righteousness or the uprightness of your heart that you go in to possess their land, but because of the wickedness of these nations that the LORD your God drives them out from before you, and that He may fulfill the word which the LORD swore to your fathers, to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. 6 Therefore understand that the LORD your God is not giving you this good land to possess because of your righteousness, for you are a stiff-necked people. 7 "Remember! Do not forget how you provoked the LORD your God to wrath in the wilderness. From the day that you departed from the land of Egypt until you came to this place, you have been rebellious against the LORD."

And then in Nehemiah's prayer of confession, we read,

Neh. 9:16 "But they and our fathers acted proudly, Hardened their necks, And did not heed Your commandments. 17 They refused to obey, And they were not mindful of Your wonders That You did among them. But they hardened their necks, And in their rebellion They appointed a leader To return to their bondage."

That is the language which Stephen uses in his evangelistic rebuke to the Jewish leaders who were opposing him, who ultimately made him the first Christian martyr. Stephen has proclaimed the gospel through the historical details of the Old Testament, declaring that gospel which was preached beforehand to Abraham and then to Joseph, and then also to Moses. Stephen has rebuked the Jewish leaders for rejecting all of the prophets whom God had sent to his people speaking his word. And he rebukes them for their rejection of Jesus, the prophet like Moses. In that context, he rebukes them for clinging to the Old Testament shadows, rather than trusting in Jesus, to whom all those shadows point. He rebukes them for their willingness to worship the false gods of the nations, clinging to that Old

Testament pattern of the temple, clinging to the empty shadows rather than worshipping the true and living God. As we studying last week, with the quotation from,

Is. 66:1 “Heaven is My throne, And earth is My footstool. Where is the house that you will build Me? And where is the place of My rest? 2 For all those things My hand has made, And all those things exist,” Says the LORD. “But on this one will I look: On him who is poor and of a contrite spirit, And who trembles at My word. 3 “He who kills a bull is as if he slays a man; He who sacrifices a lamb, as if he breaks a dog’s neck; He who offers a grain offering, as if he offers swine’s blood; He who burns incense, as if he blesses an idol. Just as they have chosen their own ways, And their soul delights in their abominations, 4 So will I choose their delusions, And bring their fears on them; Because, when I called, no one answered, When I spoke they did not hear; But they did evil before My eyes, And chose that in which I do not delight.”

This morning is the climactic conclusion to Stephen’s defense. And let me say as I often have these past several weeks studying Acts 7, Stephen’s defense is actually a declaration of the gospel. And so we come today to an evangelistic rebuke. That is an important emphasis. Stephen is not speaking as a prophet of God’s judgment, but as an evangelist. He is rebuking them that they might repent. They didn’t, of course, as we read,

v.54 “When they heard these things they were cut to the heart, and they gnashed at him with their teeth...58 and they cast him out of the city and stoned him.”

But Stephen was an evangelist, and he died as an evangelist, rebuking the wicked unbelievers to turn from their wickedness and be saved. With that perspective, let’s look first at,

I. AN EVANGELISTIC REBUKE.

Before we look specifically at this rebuke, let me emphasize two things. First, this is the sort of rebuke which ought to be part of our evangelistic appeals today. Not the self-righteous, condemning or even hypocritical harangues of many preachers, but still the willingness to address matters of the heart. The sinful heart. Evangelism is not merely telling people that “God loves them and has a wonderful plan for their lives,” as a popular evangelistic tract used to begin, but that “man has sinned and fallen short of the glory of God.” The good news of the gospel presupposes the bad news of sin. The invitation to repent requires the identification of that behavior which calls for repentance. And those who think themselves basically good, or perhaps, just needing to be a little bit better, need to realize this truth,

Eph. 2:1 “And you He made alive, who were dead in trespasses and sins, 2 in which you once walked according to the course of this world, according to the prince of the power of the air, the spirit who now works in the sons of disobedience, 3 among whom also we all once conducted ourselves in the lusts of our flesh, fulfilling the desires of the flesh and of the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, just as the others. 4 But God, who is rich in mercy, because of His great love with which He loved us, 5 even when we were dead in trespasses, made us alive together with Christ (by grace you have been saved), 6 and raised us up together, and made us sit together in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, 7 that in the ages to come He might show the exceeding riches of His grace in His kindness toward us in Christ Jesus. 8 For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God, 9 not of works, lest anyone should boast.”

In other words, to understand grace you have to recognize your need for grace. That’s the first thing to note about this rebuke, it’s timeless application to all men in every age. Then

second, beyond the context of evangelism, this warning to unbelievers is a valuable warning to believers also, that we not fall into this same temptation; that we, even as believers, be able to recognize this sin in ourselves, and, then, to repent of it. So this description of unbelieving wickedness that Stephen identifies is, for all of us, something we must continually learn to identify and avoid in ourselves. And that begins with being,

A. Stiff-necked.

Stubborn. I've already read the Bible verses. I could read a lot more, regarding this sin of stubbornness. The unwillingness ever to admit that you were wrong. The Hebrew word has reference to the yoke that oxen would wear when they were laboring. The idea was of a very heavy yoke, an oppressive yoke, and one that the animal could not overcome. The expression came to mean not simply the inability to change course, but the stubborn unwillingness to do so! So a stiff-necked person is defined as one unwilling to change, unwilling to repent, unwilling to admit wrong, unwilling to turn from wrong. In other words, stubborn. Hardened, and this same word is used when we read that God "hardened Pharaoh's heart." Stiff-necked and hard-hearted as synonymous.

Stubborn is a frequent description of our sinful hearts, often as God laments such rebelliousness in his people.

Ps. 81:10 "I am the LORD your God, Who brought you out of the land of Egypt; Open your mouth wide, and I will fill it. 11 "But My people would not heed My voice, And Israel would have none of Me. 12 So I gave them over to their own stubborn heart, To walk in their own counsels. 13 "Oh, that My people would listen to Me, That Israel would walk in My ways!"

Don't miss the connection, either, between being stubborn and being rebellious. The dangerous temptation of being stiff-necked.

So let the prayer of Moses be your own prayer, as you examine your own heart,

Ex. 34:9. "If now I have found grace in Your sight, O Lord, let my Lord, I pray, go among us, even though we are a stiff-necked people; and pardon our iniquity and our sin, and take us as Your inheritance."

Closely related to the rebuke of being stiff-necked is the rebuke of being,

B. Uncircumcised in heart.

I believe the simple rebuke is to recognize and admit that you are unconverted.

v.51 "You stiff-necked and uncircumcised in heart and ears!"

This, too, is a familiar Old Testament refrain, uncircumcised in heart. And the rebuke is particularly pointed because circumcision was so essential in the Old Covenant. It was the necessary sign of the covenant between God and his people. And above all else, whatever else the self-righteous and hypocritical Jewish nation would do, they would be sure to fulfill this outward and external ritual. And they thought that was enough! That danger continue in the New Testament age as well, when those Judaizers, whom Paul was addressing in the book of Galatians, thought that their relationship with God was sufficient as long as they were circumcised. It was the outward ritual that mattered, such that they thought that they were justified before God because of their obedience to this law! And so we read,

Gal. 5:1 "Stand fast therefore in the liberty by which Christ has made us free, and do not be entangled again with a yoke of bondage. 2 Indeed I, Paul, say to you that if you become circumcised, Christ will profit you nothing. 3 And I testify again to every man who becomes circumcised that he is a debtor to keep the whole law. 4 You have become estranged from Christ, you

who attempt to be justified by law; you have fallen from grace. 5 For we through the Spirit eagerly wait for the hope of righteousness by faith. 6 For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision avails anything, but faith working through love...11 And I, brethren, if I still preach circumcision, why do I still suffer persecution? Then the offense of the cross has ceased. 12 I could wish that those who trouble you would even cut themselves off!”

“In Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision avails anything, but faith working through love.” Thus the outward ritual of circumcision, cutting away the foreskin, came to represent the actual work of God in cutting away the old heart of stone. Circumcision of the heart came to represent the very work of God in what we call regeneration, the change of heart by which a person is converted, born again.

Ezek.36:25 “Then I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you shall be clean; I will cleanse you from all your filthiness and from all your idols. 26 I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit within you; I will take the heart of stone out of your flesh and give you a heart of flesh.”

Jesus means the same thing when he declares,

John 3:3 “Most assuredly, I say to you, unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God...5 Most assuredly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God. 6 That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. 7 Do not marvel that I said to you, ‘You must be born again.’”

And so the rebuke to these self-righteous Jews identifies their unbelief. They are trusting in an outward act, and God has not changed their heart. And so we read things like this,

Rom. 2:28 “For he is not a Jew who is one outwardly, nor is

circumcision that which is outward in the flesh; 29 but he is a Jew who is one inwardly; and circumcision is that of the heart, in the Spirit, not in the letter; whose praise is not from men but from God.”

Or,

Phil. 3:2 “Beware of dogs, beware of evil workers, beware of the mutilation! 3 For we are the circumcision, who worship God in the Spirit, rejoice in Christ Jesus, and have no confidence in the flesh, 4 though I also might have confidence in the flesh. If anyone else thinks he may have confidence in the flesh, I more so: 5 circumcised the eighth day, of the stock of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of the Hebrews; concerning the law, a Pharisee; 6 concerning zeal, persecuting the church; concerning the righteousness which is in the law, blameless. 7 But what things were gain to me, these I have counted loss for Christ. 8 Yet indeed I also count all things loss for the excellence of the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord, for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them as rubbish, that I may gain Christ 9 and be found in Him, not having my own righteousness, which is from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness which is from God by faith.”

Again, the two-fold application. If you think that an outward action is sufficient for your salvation, you are sadly mistaken. What is necessary for salvation is the work of God in your heart, giving you a new heart, so that you might gain Christ, that you might be right before God not because you performed some religious ritual, but because you trust in Jesus Christ for your salvation as he is offered to you in the gospel. That’s what matters. That’s what determines life or death. So for you, the believer, this must be your testimony,

Gal. 6:14 “But God forbid that I should boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by whom the world has been

crucified to me, and I to the world. 15 For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision avails anything, but a new creation.”

Back to Stephen’s defense in Acts 7, his evangelistic rebuke of his opponents, who he addresses as unbelievers!

v.51 “You stiff-necked and uncircumcised in heart and ears! You always resist the Holy Spirit; as your fathers did, so do you.”

There we see,

II. THE EVIDENCE OF UNBELIEF.

They resist the Holy Spirit!

A. Resist the Holy Spirit.

Interested phrase, isn’t it, that Stephen introduces, with reference to the Holy Spirit. The obvious connection has to be with the prophets which they persecuted, mentioned in verse 52. The prophets through whom God spoke, the prophets through whom the Holy Spirit spoke, in whose mouth God would put his own words. Go back to,

v.37 “This is that Moses who said to the children of Israel, The LORD your God will raise up for you a Prophet like me from your brethren. Him you shall hear.’ 38 “This is he who was in the congregation in the wilderness with the Angel who spoke to him on Mount Sinai, and with our fathers, the one who received the living oracles to give to us, 39 whom our fathers would not obey, but rejected.”

Stephen’s rebuke is that the people of Israel, past and present, would not receive the word of the Lord spoken by the Holy Spirit through the inspired prophets of God. And so the evidence of their unbelief is that unwillingness to receive from God his inspired word. And that rebuke is so relevant today. If

you are seeking to proclaim the gospel with an unbeliever today, this subject has to come up, that the Bible is the word of God, given to us by inspiration of the Holy Spirit. If a man won’t recognize the word of God for what it is, they cannot believe, they do not have faith. As Peter would put it,

2 Peter 1:20 “...knowing this first, that no prophecy of Scripture is of any private interpretation, 21 for prophecy never came by the will of man, but holy men of God spoke as they were moved by the Holy Spirit.”

If you deny that, you are resisting the Holy Spirit. So an evangelistic rebuke is necessary to those who have this evidence and demonstration of their unbelief. Ultimately, this unbelief would fall under that dreadful description of the unpardonable sin,

Mat. 12:31 “Therefore I say to you, every sin and blasphemy will be forgiven men, but the blasphemy against the Spirit will not be forgiven men. 32 Anyone who speaks a word against the Son of Man, it will be forgiven him; but whoever speaks against the Holy Spirit, it will not be forgiven him, either in this age or in the age to come.”

You can see why Stephen’s rebuke was so deeply resented by his opponents such that “they were cut to the heart, and they gnashed at him with their teeth.”

And we see what they did as a result, a second evidence of unbelief.

B. Murderous rage.

v.52 “Which of the prophets did your fathers not persecute? And they killed those who foretold the coming of the Just One, of whom you now have become the betrayers and murderers.”

Unbelievers aren’t willing to live and let live. They are not

even content to silence their opponents or “cancel” them as we say today with reference to the cancel culture. With Stephen’s opponents, cancelling meant killing! So Stephen makes his opponents recognize the sinful folly and rebellion of their ancestors, their fathers, who persecuted the prophets! We can see plenty of that in the Old Testament. And they “have become the betrayers and murderers.”

There is not compromise to be had here. There is no soft-pedaling the rebuke. Stephen is emphasizing the horrible wickedness of those who are “stiff-necked and uncircumcised in heart and ears.” He identifies them as “betrayers and murderers.” Though his own life is obviously now in danger, he challenges them to believe, to repent. To turn from their sin. And thus to be saved!

And Stephen gets even more specific, identifying their,

C. Rejection of Jesus.

It wasn’t simply that they had rejected all the Old Testament prophets. But rather, those prophets “foretold the coming of the Just One,” Jesus. We saw the same thing in Peter’s preaching after Pentecost,

Acts 3:13 “The God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, the God of our fathers, glorified His Servant Jesus, whom you delivered up and denied in the presence of Pilate, when he was determined to let Him go. 14 But you denied the Holy One and the Just, and asked for a murderer to be granted to you, 15 and killed the Prince of life, whom God raised from the dead, of which we are witnesses.”

So “stiff-necked and rebellious” ultimately means a rejection of Jesus. For which they will be condemned, unless they repent, a judgment they deserve because of their,

D. Disregard for the word of God.

Stephen’s final description of the unbelief of his opponents is in verse 53, where he describes those...

v.53 “who have received the law by the direction of angels and have not kept it.”

They have received the law, here likely a reference to the whole of God’s word. And the direction of angels I believe would have reference to the law’s origin in God himself, being delivered by his servants the angels. And going back to verse 38, the angel refers to the angel of the Lord, who is quite clearly, Jesus himself. And what was rejected was the word of God, living oracles.

v.38 “This is he who was in the congregation in the wilderness with the Angel who spoke to him on Mount Sinai, and with our fathers, the one who received the living oracles to give to us, 39 whom our fathers would not obey, but rejected.”

That’s the judgment, the condemnation. That’s the rebuke, calling for repentance. They have rejected and disregarded the word which God has revealed, the word of God. And unless they repent, and unless they choose to believe and to receive that word, they will remain under the judgment of God for their unbelief.

So, don’t be stiff-necked! Don’t be stubborn in any way, refusing in any way to receive and to believe the word of God, by which we are promised life. Thus the declaration of the gospel is expressed this way by the Apostle John,

1 John 1:1 “That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked upon, and our hands have handled, concerning the Word of life— 2 the life was manifested, and we have seen, and bear witness, and declare to you that eternal life which was with the Father and was manifested to us— 3 that which we have seen

and heard we declare to you, that you also may have fellowship with us; and truly our fellowship is with the Father and with His Son Jesus Christ. 4 And these things we write to you that your joy may be full.”

Even more clearly, perhaps, I proclaim the gospel to you with these words,

John 1:1 “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. 2 He was in the beginning with God. 3 All things were made through Him, and without Him nothing was made that was made. 4 In Him was life, and the life was the light of men.”

And then, that most incredible declaration of Jesus,

John 1:14 “And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we beheld His glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth.”