



The Fear of God – Part 6 And Our Champions Pastor Mike Fabarez

Well, if we got to know each other well, we became friends and I said to you at some point, "Any friend of yours is a friend of mine." I think you'd know that grammatically I'm saying something about you, I mean, me and your friends, but in reality, I'm actually saying something about you and me. I'm saying something about what I think of you, what I think about your judgment, how much I think of our relationship. I'm making a statement about how much I respect the people who you have chosen to respect. That's a statement of my friendship with you. Which, by the way, if you've ever said that to someone, I think I tried to make that commitment a few times in my life, and say, "Hey, any friend of yours, friend of mine." But then I met their friends. And that can be a challenge, right? A lot of things about your friends I may not like, but you understand the commitment, right?

I'm saying any group of people that you've chosen to say, I have a special esteem and honor for this special group of people, it makes sense if I care about you, if I love you, if I'm your close friend, to say, well, then I'm going to respect that in you and I will honor you by honoring and esteeming them.

There's a special group of people, obviously, in the book of Acts that we've been studying that God in a special way affirms and he esteems. We've been introduced to them even in the title, "The Acts of the Apostles." We've gotten to know them in the four gospels and we've learned, though they're not perfect, they are certainly esteemed and put in a particular place in the Church that's quite significant and important.

Last week we met a particular person who was distinguished among the people in this megachurch in Jerusalem named Stephen. He is a servant. He is wise enough to be entrusted with leadership in a ministry overseeing how they were going to serve these Greek widows who were not being served the way that they ought to. He was administrating in a part of the Church, but came out of the rank and file, if you will, of the Church. And in Chapter 6 verses 8 through 15 what we see here today as we continue our verse by verse study is the way that God, through the pen of Dr. Luke, puts him on a pedestal, speaks in glowing terms about Stephen. And in a way, you can say, well, clearly God is admiring and esteeming him in a distinctive way. So if we esteem and admire and respect God, then of course, we're going to see those people the way that God does. It says something about my relationship with God, depending on how I see the people that he says, I distinctly and specially affirm and honor and esteem this particular person.

And you say, well, I know you're going with this, I'm fine with Stephen, and I think it's cool and it's great and if God's up on him, any friend of God, friend of mine. That's cool. But, well, you don't know Stephen. I mean, all you know is a few things we see in the Bible where he is put on a pedestal and seen as this great man. But had you been there in the 1st-century, maybe you were part of his ministry, you might have a different opinion because we know no one's perfect but God and we know that only Christ lived an absolutely perfect life.



So we've got a man with feet of clay and he's got his issues. Perhaps the tables that he's assigned you to serve are not the ones you wanted to serve. "I got people over here I want to be a part of and I can't believe he made that decision. And not only that, I don't like how he curtailed the hours for serving these widows to the afternoons. I thought we usually do this in the morning. And not only that, I don't like where he's getting all the food and spending the church's money on that. I got a cousin who is in the marketplace here. I've told him they got better prices. I think the quality's better. I can't believe he made that decision. He kind of blew me off when I gave him that suggestion. I was walking up the southern steps to the Temple Mount last week and there he was surrounded by his buddies who are making so much of Stephen like he's some hotshot now that he's in charge of this ministry and, you know, he didn't even say hi to me. I mean, just like I was nobody."

"I invited him to my kid's birthday party last week. He didn't show up. I heard he went to, you know, Alex's party, but not my kid's. I don't understand. You know, who is he anyway? Why is he, I mean, he's not perfect. I mean, I've heard his wife say a few things about him, I think. I mean, he has problems at home, I'm sure. And I mean, come on, he puts his sandals on one strap at a time just like I do. And I don't know why everyone's making so much of Stephen. He's, you know, he's not, he's not all of that."

Well, there's one problem with us quickly, saying, "Whoever God thinks is special, I would think they're special," because we learn enough about the apostles in the gospels to see that if I really was someone standing there listening to all that Jesus said about Peter and reading all the narratives as though I lived in all those narratives, I'm thinking the guy who did all the things in the gospels is now the senior preaching pastor of the church in Jerusalem. I don't know that I'm going to have the same kind of esteem and respect that God has for him.

That's one problem with saying any friend of God is a friend of mine. He's a special person in a special group. Well, he's going to be in a special place in my mind. The other problem is that this principle in the Scripture is not just something we're trying to make historical estimations about figures in the Bible. God in the New Testament says they will continue to be people who he especially gives a prominent position to in some way to do something that is to be distinguished in the Church of Christ and you ought to have a distinguished kind of attitude and respect for them. That's not easy for us to do. Because the real challenge of looking at this text and trying to reflect it in a godly way in our lives is the challenge is now and you do know these people. Matter of fact, I don't want you to get through the first five minutes of this sermon without you thinking of some of these people.

Let's read, first of all, the description of him in Acts Chapter 6 verses 8 through 15. Then I want to press you as uncomfortable as it is to see if there's someone that I'm thinking, yeah, I know that there are people like this in our church, in a ministry I've encountered and in my life. So, OK, what am I supposed to learn and how can I really step up to the challenge of what God expects us to do when God especially and distinctively set some people in positions that I see he counts as special? Should I really adjust the way I interact with them?



Let's take a look at this beginning in Acts Chapter 6. Please take your Bibles and turn there. Acts Chapter 6, if you haven't already, verses 8 through 15. And let's see how Dr. Luke driven, of course, carried along by God's Spirit to write these words down, describes Stephen, the man who is as human as you and I are.

Let's put it this way, verse 8. "And Stephen, full of grace." Let's stop there. Would his wife really, really say that? "Full of grace, full?" I mean, he has grace. Sometimes he's gracious. I mean, Stephen, yes, he's a good husband and all that. But full of grace, Dr. Luke? I mean, that's over the top. Full? Full of grace? Like completely full to the top, like brimming over the top? Full of grace? I don't think that's fair.

Now, I understand this is rhetorical, superlative language that obviously we don't take in an absolute objective sense that, I mean, every single thing he did his whole life or everything he was doing in his Christian life was absolutely full of perfected grace. Of course not. But what's described here are the highlights of a man you could say, listen, this is a distinctive kind of grace in his life. He's a man of grace. He's "full of grace and he's full of power." Look at the next phrase here, it says that power is demonstrated by what he was doing. "He was doing great wonders and signs among the people." Was everyone doing great wonders and signs? No, not everyone. I mean, the apostles, they were doing great wonders and signs. But here's someone distinctive from the rank and file, if you will, who's from the rank and file and he's doing great signs and wonders among the people.

Well, anytime there's a distinctiveness of a kind of effectiveness or a fruitfulness or a productivity in someone's life spiritually, you're going to get what comes next in verse 9. It says, "Then some of those who belong to the synagogue of the Freedmen," I love the way parenthetically Luke puts, "(as it was called)," because, you know, they're not really freed in the sense that they need to be freed from their sins and they need to be right with God in the redemption of Christ. I mean, they were they're objecting to that. So they're not free. But that's what they were called this Jewish synagogue called the Synagogue of the Freedmen "and the Cyrenians, and the Alexandrians and those from Cilicia and Asia." I mean, this is all over.

This is way out west, both to the north in Asia Minor, modern-day Turkey. And then all the way along, of course, the delta of the Nile in Alexandria, in Egypt. And then all the way over here, out in Africa, all the way toward the Straits of Gibraltar. I mean, this is way out there. I mean, these are people from everywhere and they are all, what does it say next? I mean, they're all rising up. "They rose up and disputed with Stephen."

Now, anytime if you get someone who starts to make a difference in a way that is spiritually productive and fruitful, there's going to be this opposition. Satan's going to ensure that that will happen and so it does. There is opposition. But look at the glowing words from Luke. "They could not withstand the wisdom in the Spirit with which he was speaking." I mean, they couldn't make any progress. Now, would everyone there hearing the speech every time he tries to stand up? Do you think everyone from Alexandria would say, "Oh, yeah, totally. He wins every debate he has with us"? No, they wouldn't say that. I bet they got a lot of friends saying, you know, we were part of the Synagogue of the Freedmen. I don't think Stephen won

every debate. But here is a summary. I mean, rhetorical kind of even hyperbole, no one could even get any wins, there are no points in the debate here against Stephen.

Well, when you're making good progress that people can see in terms of standing your ground, fighting the good fight of faith and being productive and being a good evangelist, an apologist, well, verse 11 says, well, then they're going to ramp it up, hit the turbo charge, they're going to secretly now, look what they do. "They secretly instigated men who said, "We've heard him speak blasphemous words against Moses and God." Now, that's not true, but that's what they were saying. They were lying about Stephen. "And they stirred up the people," they were gossiping about him and passing these ideas about him, "and the elders and scribes, they came upon him and they seized him and they brought him before the council.

Remember the council is the Sanhedrin. They've had a lot of encounters with the biblical characters now, starting with Christ. Right? He stood before the Sanhedrin, this 70 group of like the Supreme Court of Israel, the Jewish people led by the chief priest. I mean, they'd already condemned Christ and Jesus stood silent before the Sanhedrin. And we've already seen Peter dragged in and arrested. And he has to answer to the Sanhedrin. Now it's Stephen and Stephen is there and we're going to read all about it. We're going to study this. That's the plan. The next eight weeks, we're going to deal with his speech in Chapter 7.

But they drag him in before the council and they keep lying. They set up false witnesses. They have people put their hands, so to speak, on the scrolls and raise their right hand and promised to tell the truth, the whole truth, nothing but the truth. What are you going to say? Well, they're lying. "False witnesses saying, 'This man, Stephen, never ceases to speak words against this holy place and the law.'" And they're speaking in superlative hyperbole. Right? Just "Everything he says is against us." Well, that's not true. And the counter, as we saw in verse 8, was Luke saying just the opposite in superlative hyperboles terms. He's "full of grace" and verse 10, "No one could withstand," what he was saying, "the wisdom in the Spirit with which he spoke."

Well, "We've heard him....," it says he's speaking against this holy place, against the temple, which he's going to deal with a lot of in his speech, which we'll see. Verse 14, "And we've heard him say that this Jesus of Nazareth will destroy this place and change the customs that Moses delivered to us." So they were laying it thick. And he's always saying this and he's blaspheming God. But of course, he wasn't. And then look at what Luke says about him in verse 15, "And gazing at him," everyone sitting there with crinkled brow, except for the Christians who were on the edge of all this. This is a somewhat a public forum here with the 70 being the judges of what Stephen was saying. Well, "All who sat on the council they saw his face and it was like the face of an angel." Well, what in the world does that mean? Face of an angel? None of you have even seen angels. No one's seen an angel. What are you talking about?

Angel, I hope you know, is a transliterated word from Greek "Angelos." Angelos is the Greek word for a messenger, a messenger. And of course, there are these figures, they are very



rare in the Bible, they show up every now and then in these huge events in Scripture and they bring a message to the people. Like when Christ was born, the angels showed up and they said, here he is, born of David. This is the fulfillment of the Davidic promise. They give a message from heaven. It's a big deal.

Well, here's Stephen, a guy who's in charge of the hospitality ministry serving tables at the Caring Ministry, serving the widows. What happens? He's there dragged before the highest court in the land. And he's giving his defense and I guess a lot like verse 10, he must be having such a great defense that here's Luke going, man, this guy was like an angel showed up speaking to them, bringing the mouthpiece and the truth and the defense of the gospel to this court. It reminds me of First Peter Chapter 5, when it talks about those who are speaking, the ought to speak as, as it were, the oracles of God. It's like heaven's peeling back its information and here it comes through the teacher. It was like that's what was happening. Stephen was just preaching this amazing sermon. His face must have been so confident. It must have been just so persuasive and so compelling. And it was the rhetoric, the argumentation. Wow!

Now look at those, verse 8, verse 10, verse 15. I mean, Luke is laying it on thick here, Stephen, and we'll see that there's something to that, obviously. I mean, there's obviously something to it, it's truthful. And we'll see how he defends the truth in Chapter 7.

But I want to show you how high Luke puts him in the verbiage that he chooses to use. Not only that, we know that he didn't get into this position unless the people there who needed those widows served didn't think that he was a man of, as it says, good repute. They put him on a pedestal and now he got his hands laid on him by the apostles and he has this important ministry that was commissioned to him. So everyone holds him in high esteem. All I'm trying to say this morning is we ought to follow that example, because not only is it an example in Scripture, it is commanded in Scripture that we ought to see those people and know who they are, those productive people who are being used of God and we ought to respect them because there's a lot of that differentiated respect in Scripture.

If you're taking notes and I hope that you would, jot down a few things this morning. Number one, jot this down. We need to "Respect Fruitful Christians." We need to respect productive servants. We need to respect the people. By that I mean we need to identify who these productive Christians are in our lives. I'm not talking even about Peter. And I'm not even wanting you to go all the way to like these national figures who stand up and fight the good fight of faith on a national level, although I couldn't get through the study of this passage without the few people that I know in those kinds of positions, I have their phone numbers. I couldn't help but, you know, say, wow, I just want to affirm that I have great respect for you and I'm so thankful for you.

I want to have respect for them but I want to have respect, first and foremost, for the people right here who are productively used by God to affect my life in a positive way and I need you to identify who those are. I hope a few names are coming to your mind, and if they're not right now, I hope you go home and cogitate, digest this sermon and say I need to figure out who



are those productive servants? Is there somebody in our ministry of high school, junior high and they have stepped into my student, my teenager's life, and they've been productive? A lot of people try to speak to them about Christ and about the truth, but they've really gotten through. God has used that person to be productive in my teenager's life. Maybe it's someone like that.

Maybe it's someone who even objectively hasn't directly affected you, but in your small group, they talk about the fact that they share the gospel again with another coworker. And then last month, they talked about leading someone to Christ at work. And then they said they were sharing the gospel with someone they had met when they were out walking their dog. And it's like, wow, that guy's being used by God in a productive and a fruitful way. I mean, there ought to be some differentiated respect in that regard. We need to respect them.

Now, I know right away you're going, "This sounds like it's just wrong. It's just wrong. Pastor Mike is wrong. I mean, there's something about God kind of loving us all the same. And we're all on the same kind of even footing at the foot of the cross. We're all on the same level. And, you know, we're all, you know, just privates in the army of the Lord. And we have no captains or generals. That's just not right."

Turn with me, if you would, to First Corinthians Chapter 16, First Corinthians 16. I need to dispel a few myths. The first one is that you think that God does not differentiate between the people in our church or the people who serve the Lord across our country or around the world. As you're turning there, I want to remind you of this text, if you're a copious note-taker you might want to jot down Numbers, the book of Numbers Chapter 14 verse 24. Numbers 14:24. I love the way it's put because God is speaking here to Moses and he says something about someone in this band of workers. They were spies who went in to spy out the land.

And God says, I want to talk to you Moses about Caleb. Listen carefully to this phrase. He says, "Caleb has a different spirit," has a different spirit. Now, if God makes differentiations between us and he certainly does, and he says to Moses, so I want you to do certain things for Caleb because he's different. Right? He's not different in a bad way, he's different in a good way. Matter of fact, the next phrase is "he followed me fully." Of course, he went in and spied out the land and came back and said we can take it. He's not like everyone. He's got a kind of faith other people don't have. He's kind of got a productivity. He's got this optimism and this trust in the Lord. He's doing things among the people of God. It is different. And God says this guy is different.

Now, just because you look in the Bible and see a big difference categorically between non-Christians and Christians, you go, "Well, we're all in this camp. We're all the same." God does not view it that way. Oh, are we all saved on the same basis? Of course. Are we all justified by faith and all equal in value? Of course we are. But there should not be equal esteem and equal honor and equal respect. God says there are some people, although you respect everyone, you should honor everyone. I'm quoting now First Peter, honor everyone. Sure. But then there's a special honor you give to certain people and some of us don't think in those terms. And we need to.



First Corinthians 16, take a look at this text. First Corinthians Chapter 16. Drop down to verse 15. "Now I urge you brothers..." Of course, talking to the church here at Corinth. And he starts now, you've got to dash there in the text, he's going to start talking about some people. He says, "You know the household of Stephanus, they were the first converts in Achaia," in this region of Asia Minor, modern-day Turkey, he says they were the first ones to come to Christ. "And they have," listen to this, "devoted themselves to the service of the saints." Isn't that what Stephen did, devoted himself to the service of the saints? And was recognized by the leaders in the Church saying, "Hey, this is a guy, set apart along with six other guys." They had a distinctiveness about the way that they served, the extent to which they served, the selflessness to which they served. And it says, "Be subject to such as these." Now you know others like the household of Stephanus and you need to think about people like that, who are devoted to the service of the saints, the productive servants of Christ, they're fruitful Christians. "Be subject to them and to every fellow worker and laborer." We're not talking about someone who does great at his, you know, reshoeing horses. Right? He's talking about people who are working and serving and productively, fruitfully serving the body of Christ, serving the gospel in this world. He says you ought to be subject to them.

He says, "I rejoice at the coming of Stephanus and Fortunatus and Achaicus because they have made up for your absence." Now, you were doing some good things in my life, but here were guys like this and I'm going to name them, Stephanus, Fortunatus, Achaicus. They're different. They stand out. "For they refreshed my spirit and," I know when they were among you, "they refreshed yours as well." Here comes five words, "Give recognition to such people." Give recognition to such people. That is an imperative. Give recognition... Here's a question. Here's a clear teaching of God's word, a direct command of Scripture. Have you obeyed that this week? Have you done what this says? "Well, I didn't think about it last week." Well, now you got to think about it this week. Right? Here it is, "Give recognition to such people."

That means you've got to think through in this passage who are the workers, the laborers devoted to the service of the saints? They're doing something among us. They've ministered to my kids or my teens or they've done something well in visiting us when our parents were sick or they walked us through this issue or I see them there in our small group doing something distinctive for the Lord. I need to know who those workers are. So identify them and then the Bible would say you respect them. And here's a great line from First Thessalonians Chapter 5. "You should respect them," and it says "and esteem them highly in love because of their work." You need to think of those laborers, those workers and say, I'm going to make a decision to esteem them.

"You mean you're going to play favorites?" Yep, I'm going to play favorites in my mind regarding how I give this excellent kind of respect and honor and esteem. I'm going to do that. Why? Because the Bible says I must. The distinctiveness in Scripture, it's so clear. Does God make that distinction among the people of God? Sure he does. We read in our Daily Bible Reading this week in Abraham's life, it says this about Abraham. He calls him out. He's special. He didn't say this about all the people in the book of Genesis. He says, you know



what? "Those who bless you, Abraham, I'm going to personally bless." Did he say that about all of us? No. "Those who curse you, I'm going to curse them and dishonor them." I mean, that's like you're playing special people. I mean, you've got favorites.

We don't want to parent our kids that way. We don't want to treat people at church that way. Well, I'm not saying that we despise people who are children of God and honor people. I'm saying we honor everyone and then we give special honor. We give special recognition to people. In my mind, I have to think that way. Job 42, at the end of the story, you remember the three friends of Job made God mad, and it says that the anger of the Lord it burned against Eliphaz and Eliphaz was the target now of God's frustration. And he says, you know what? Here's what you need to do. Bring a sacrifice and here's what happens. "If Job prays for you, I'll let it pass." What? Job now, it's about Job's prayer? I mean, at that point, by the way, you know, if you're dealing with God, you're not going to say, "Well, that's not fair." No, no, you better say, "Job, Job, you pray for me, please. I don't want to get in trouble with God." God differentiates like that? All the time.

I think of the psalms so often talking about David. "For the sake of David, do not disregard us." I mean, we don't think that way. God, we know you have a special relationship with David. We know he had a special relationship with Noah. We know he had a special kind of affirmation for these people in the Scripture all the way back to Caleb, because you say, "A different kind of spirit and therefore different kind of honor." And if they're a special servant of the Lord to God, well, then they're going to be special servants in my mind. We have to respect those who are fruitful Christians among us. You say, "Well... I don't like that." OK, yeah, OK.

I know one guy who doesn't like the sermon. He's going to sit back with his arms crossed, leaning back in his chair, he's not going to open his Bible, he's not listening, he checked out in this sermon a long time ago. Do you know what his name is? He does not like what I'm preaching. And he thinks it's wrong. He will not do it. And he's got all kinds of spiritual reasons not to recognize distinctions among us. I learned his name in Third John verse 9, his name is Diotrephes. Diotrephes will not recognize authority. He's talking about in the Church. He says it as a personal pronoun, he says, John says, "Our authority will, he will not recognize our authority." He won't play favorites. He won't distinguish in the sense that I'm going to give you special honor.

Do you remember why? What was the explanation about Diotrephes? "Because he always wants to be first." And see, I can't give someone special honor because that'll take the spotlight off of me. I don't want to give you honor I'm not getting. A lot of us struggle with this at the level of our flesh. We don't want to do this. And I'm saying, whatever your excuse is, whatever your reason is, whatever your theological... "You got Scripture like First Corinthians Chapter 16 that says "recognize them." First Thessalonians 5, "hold them in high esteem." Well, you got to do that. That's a differentiation. God makes the differentiation. We dare not disregard or treat the same the servants of the Lord who God has distinguished. We just shouldn't. We can't. It may be a hard issue for you, maybe some theological excuse, but we got to get over it.



Back to our text now, Acts Chapter 6. Again, can you just glance at verse 8, verse 10, and verse 15? Verse 8, just the way that that's put and I kind of try to point that out as I read it, "full of grace." Verse 10, they "could not withstand the wisdom." "Face like an angel," verse 15. I mean that's a lot of words there. And I'm thinking to myself, well, that's kind of putting him on this pedestal. And how did he do it? Not by couching some kind of personal thought about, "Yeah, I admire that person." That's not what Luke does. He writes it. He puts it down in print and he puts it in his words and he says it.

Number two, if you're taking notes, that's a good example and the Bible would tell us elsewhere, this is what we ought to do. We have to "Honor Them With Our Words." Number two, honor them with your words. And that is what the Scripture would call to in recognizing them. That's not just in our minds esteeming them, it's being able to say I need to express my esteem FOR them by the things that I say. Is it superlative language? I've already told you his wife may object to "full of grace," full seems like, you know, can't be any more than it is. "Not withstand," they're going to be people that argue with that. "Face like an angel," like I don't even know what that means. I don't think he has a face like an angel. Well, yeah, I understand he's praising him in words that are big. You say, "Well, now I know it's an unbiblical sermon because you praise... We don't praise anybody but God. Yeah."

If that's your objection, by the way, can I respond to that really quickly? I mean, there are so many passages that could turn you to but one, I know that you know by heart, especially if you're a female here, you know this one by heart. Right? Proverbs Chapter 31. "Oh, I know what that's about." Right? Verse 30 and 31. And I'll quote it for you. You can finish it, you know the verse, verse 30 says, "Beauty is vain and charm is deceitful. But a woman who fears the Lord is to be praised." Praised? That's blasphemy. No, no, no, no. Praise, that means I'm going to say things. Matter of fact, the next verse, verse 31 says, yeah, "Let the works of her hands praise her in the gates," the things that she does. And what is that? What's it preceded by? Well, ten verses of verbal praise. He's honoring this woman because of what she does. And you know why? Because it's praiseworthy.

Paul says, you ought to be thinking about praiseworthy things and then do what? Well, then cover your mouth. No, no, no. When it's praiseworthy, you need to praise it. And there's much more praiseworthy that God is doing in this world, the grace that he demonstrates through people in your life who you know by name. But you're going to have to humble yourself enough to say, I'm going to do what the Bible says. I'm going to count them, to quote another text here from Philippians, as more significant than myself. And that's what it... I mean. Diotrephes needs to learn that and then to know it's not heresy to say I'm going to praise them with my words. You need to praise them. You need to give them honor with the words that you speak, words that at least give me some sense, like we have in verses 8, 10 and 15 that are big words. Right?

Now, I know that every word that you write isn't going to be in an absolute sense true. But it is in a relative sense. Right? Because that's the point. They're distinguished in the way that they serve. They're distinguished in the way that they've been fruitful. And if it's touched your life in



any way, even just by way of example, as a spectator. "Yeah, look at them. Wow. It's something. Look at how they stand up for Christ. Look at how they do their work. Look at how they come early. Stay late." Yeah. Praise them, honor them with your words. That's what praise is, and those who fear the Lord will do this and they'll do it to people who fear the Lord.

I said this, your friends, my friends. If I said that to you, I'm saying something about you. If I fear the Lord, then I dare not disregard things that God sees as important and the Bible says to quote Psalm 15 verse 4, it says, If I'm a godly person, I'm going to have a tight relation with God. If I fear him, then it says this: that I'm going to have in my mind "a vile person is going to be despised." And then it says, and those who fear the Lord I'm going to honor, "I will honor people who fear the Lord." And I'm hoping you see that Stephen's doing all this ministry all the way to the end, we'll see it in Chapter 7, because he fears the Lord. He's doing this all for God. And there are a lot of people in your life and you say, "Well, I know their motives can't be perfect, but their motives sure look good." It seems like there's a praiseworthy kind of service that they're giving. There's a praiseworthy kind of sacrifice. I mean, I get that.

So give them your words. And they can be so helpful. To quote Proverbs 25, and it's true, maybe you've experienced it, it says "like apples of gold in settings of silver." Right? So are these aptly spoken words, words that are just the right, the right, edifying words.

There's so much vitriol spilt today. Everyone's tearing everyone down. We can all be critics all week long. For the next seven days, we can criticize, you can post it on your social media. We can talk about the bad in this world. Or you can do what the Bible says, and that is "Let no unwholesome word come out of your mouths, but only such a word as is good for edification," gives grace to those who hear it. I don't know how much of that's happening in your life, but let's start with this message and that is you need to find those fruitful, productive Christians and you need to honor them with your words, because I respect them in my heart.

That's a good thing. And if you can't identify with the jewelry metaphor of Proverbs 25, how about Proverbs 16:24? I can certainly think all of us can identify with, "Gracious words are like a honeycomb, sweetness to the soul and health to the body." That's a candy reference. And I can identify with that, especially after December. Man some of the fudge and the cookies that you guys made me, just like, oh, that's so good.

And the Bible says that's what words can be to servants like Stephen, and though he didn't live long enough to read these, at least not in the flesh, verses 8, 10 and 15, I mean, he has to stand back and say, "that's good to hear the people of God say that about me." Now, all glory goes to God, I get that, but these people are being obedient by praising the praiseworthy, honoring the servants of God who are faithful in sacrificial gracious words.

Why do they need that? Are you still there in Chapter 6? Look at verse 9. Here's why they need it because everyone who distinguishes himself in service to the Lord is going to get knocked in the head, verse 9. "Then some of those who belong to the Synagogue of the Freedmen, as it was called, and those of the Cyrenians and the Alexandrians and those from Cilicia and Asia, they rose up and disputed with Steve." There's going to be opposition.



Number three. If you are going to learn to honor and then respect these people, well then you're going to have to sympathize with their battles because that's going to help fuel this and keep it in place. Number three, "Sympathize With Their Battles." There's nobody who distinguishes himself in service to your life in a positive way, even in any way, without them paying a price for that. Everybody who serves and anyone who is fruitful, they become distinguished, first of all, among Satan and the demons. Right? I just think we're going to get to this. The Seven Sons of Seva. It's a trippy story. We'll get to this in the book of Acts. But when the demons speak in that passage, they say, "We know Jesus and we know Paul, but who are you?" It's like you're no one of distinguished, you know, esteem in the body of Christ. "But, Paul, we know."

Now I'm thinking that's kind of a frightening thought. Why did the demons know about Paul? I mean, I bet you could say, "How about Stephen, you know about Stephen?" They'd go, "Yeah, we know about Stephen." Right. Why? Because they don't like what we do. The more you do productively for the Lord, guess what? The more opposition you're going to get. Now, how do they do it? Well, they accuse, the demons accuse. Quoting Revelation 12 now, it talks about Satan being the "accuser of our brothers, ... who accuses them day and night." Day and night. They always want to accuse and how do they do that? Much like in this passage. I mean, they like to attack. They like to lie. They like to instigate against the servants of God.

I mean, John Chapter 8 verse 44 talks about Satan being a liar. And here were the leaders of Israel lying about Christ, a blasphemer. Right? You're saying things just like they're accusing of Stephen. All these bad things that you're going to do and you're against God, you blaspheme God. And none of that was true. But Satan loves to lie. And you know that he finds people like the Alexandrians and the Asians and all the people all over, are going to come from far and wide, as tools in the hands of Satan to oppose. And so here's the thing. I just need you to think if there is someone who's investing in your kids or your teens or doing something productive and refreshing you in some spiritual way, I just need to let you know they're encountering a kind of spiritual opposition that you need to start to empathize with. It doesn't come without cost, personal cost to them. And it's more than the fatigue of going home late after the service. Right?

It's a kind of spiritual opposition that you and I need to start to think about what it costs. Sympathize with their battles. The enemy is out certainly to oppose anyone productive, and that's the whole point, trying to get them to stop. There are people who are used to serve in our church who had so much criticism and the people of God did not help to counteract that with the honor of their words and the admiration and respect they should have gotten and so they bailed out. I mean, I'm not saying, you know, feed them enough praise and they'll stay. But there is something to be said about how we need the honeycomb and the apples of gold in settings of silver when we're struggling and there's always a struggle in ministry. Anyone who's affecting you positively, you need to know how important that is because Satan wants them to stop doing that good work.



Two men in the Old Testament, Sanballat and Tobiah. Does that ring a bell in the book of Nehemiah? They were the instigators against Nehemiah and the work. Nehemiah had to say, you know, they're just lying. And he finally just gives this almost comical retort to their accusations and he says, "You guys are just making this up in your heads. It's all just a lie, what you're saying." And then it says they did this so that, and here's the Nehemiah's estimate, so that we will stop this good work. Right? You're just trying to get us to stop.

And here's the thing Satan would love for anyone who's been productive spiritually in your life to stop. And all I'm telling you is sometimes it's our words that will help, it will help them through that spiritual battle. But you need to learn to empathize and then sympathize. Empathy, I can understand their pain and you should understand their pain. There's a cost involved. Then you need to sympathize. So much so as it says in Romans, it says, we ought to learn to "weep with those who weep." Now, hopefully your people who are affecting you positively for the Lord aren't going home weeping every time they encounter, you know, their ministries, but you got to know that there's some struggle there.

In the book of Hebrews, the writer of Hebrews says, you know, there's a kind of payment that people who stand up distinguished in their commitment to the Lord they pay it. It says some of them have been put in prison, they've had their property confiscated. He says you had that sense of empathy with them. You felt for them. You had compassion on those who were in prison. And then two chapters later, it says in Hebrews Chapter 13, it says you need to, now it's commanded, "Remember those in prison as though you yourself were in prison." I just want you to think a little bit more about what the people who have positively impacted your life for the Lord, what they go through.

And if you don't know what that's like, just pick someone on a national level who's got a big Twitter following and say, here's a guy standing for the truth. Here's a guy preaching the gospel. Here's a guy engaged in apologetics. Here's a guy trying to do what's right for the Lord biblically. Let's see what kind of response he gets from people. Then think, what if I were this guy's kid or this guy's wife. Right? How would that feel? Right? Sometimes we're so dispassionate and detached thinking, "Wow, I'm glad he's doing the good work, I'm glad she's doing that great work for the Lord." Think about just even the opposition. Think about, as it says here, the people who rise up in dispute with them. That's hard.

I don't want any of the servants of the Lord, at least those who impact us personally, to feel like they're alone, I want them to feel like Philippians Chapter 1 verses 27 and 28 that we are striving side by side with them. Yeah, you may not be in that position doing the work they're doing, but I hope that they feel like you are there. Paul says, "Standing firm in one spirit, with one mind striving side by side for the faith of the gospel." I love the next verse, "Do not be frightened by anything by your opponents." And you're going to have opponents and they're going to have opponents. Respect fruitful Christians, honor them with your words, sympathize with their battles.

You're still in Acts 6 six? Look at verses 11 through 14. This is when the slander ramps up, "they secretly instigated." They couldn't do it publicly because we have to insidiously now



attack Stephen, we need to now call him a blasphemer. "We've heard him speak," verse 11, "blasphemous words against Moses and God." Was that true? No, it wasn't true. We know in verse 13, they set up false witnesses. Verse 12, "They stirred up the people." They're lying about him and they're attacking him and they're saying things about him in verse 14 that if that were true, you'd go, this guy's terrible. "We heard him say that this Jesus of Nazareth will destroy this place and will change the customs that Moses delivered us." He's just blaspheming God, disregarding the Old Testament.

That's an attack personally upon Stephen. Blasphemy is a capital offense in Israel, and that was the worst kind of vitriol against someone's reputation you could have. Now, again, you can look through a different lens at verses 8, 10 and 15 and be able to say, "That's not what Luke believed." Matter of fact, we have the longest recorded message in Acts being Acts Chapter 7. Longer than Paul's, longer than Peter's. Here's all of this. And Luke is here to carefully say a lot of people were attacking Stephen, but I want to tell you, Stephen was doing the right thing. We're not going to believe the lies about Stephen. That's a good thing to do.

I'd like you to put it down this way. You need to with those people who are being effective and fruitful in your life, you need to "Guard Their Reputations." Number four. Guard their reputations. You may feel like that's not how it works. It is how it works. Let me show you. Go back to First Corinthians 16 once you write that down, First Corinthians Chapter 16. In First Corinthians Chapter 16, there is a grammatical third-person imperative, and that's an important thing for us to recognize. Imperatives, you know, are commands. Commands are second-person most of the time. "You guys do this" or "you guys don't do that." Right? A negative imperative, a positive imperative. "Don't do this or do that."

Here's a third-person imperative and that's usually grammatically in English turns out this way, "don't let this happen" or "make sure this happens in their lives." Third-person imperative. Those are hard because then you've got to get involved. It's like you're getting in the middle of things. Look at how it's put, First Corinthians Chapter 16 beginning in verse 10. This is about Timothy. It's important to look at. First Corinthians 16:10. "When Timothy comes," talking to the Corinthians, "see that you put him at ease among you." Right? Get him his lemonade, put his feet up. Why? "For he's doing the work of the Lord as I am now."

I just want to ask you, is he doing the work of the Lord as well as Paul was? Was he? You've read the pastoral epistles, right? No. No. Was he as courageous as Paul? No. Did Paul struggle with the kind of timidity that Timothy had? No. I'm not saying that he was as productive, not even as stellar in his ministry as Paul, but Paul's putting him in a category and the category is "he's working for me, man, he's working for the Lord." I mean, this is a son in the faith. And, yeah, he's got his foibles and his problems, but he's doing the work of the Lord, therefore, serve him.

Now, it gets really interesting. If I see him in that category, here's the third person imperative, "So," because of that, "let no one despise him." Can you see the way that that kind of gives you this position? Wait, now, you guys don't do that. Don't do that. That means when I see someone despising him I'm going say, "No, no, don't do that." Does that mean we have a



blind allegiance to anyone who makes some kind of fruitful contribution to my spiritual life? The answer is no, clearly. Right? When the facts are the facts and it says in the pastoral epistle, we get two or three witnesses and it's clear and objective and it's something you should despise them for, well, then fine, then they're in a different category. I get that.

But because the Bible raises the level of what you should have in terms of evidence when you're dealing with people who are spiritually productive in your life, that shows me that there's always going to be this battle. There's always going to be a tattered reputation among the people who serve God because they're getting beat up all the time. They're always engaged in the battle. And my job is to say I'm not going to let anybody despise Timothy. Why? Because he's a great, stellar apostle? No, no, no. He's an understudy of Paul and he's got a long way to go but we're not going to let him be despised. We're going to protect his reputation. Matter of fact, we're going to positively, bottom of verse 11, "Help him on his way in peace." I want him to come back to me not having any hassle from you guys. "That he may return to me, I'm expecting him with the brothers," and I don't want him coming not having had a good, respectful time with you, where you treated him well, put him at ease and defended his reputation. That's our responsibility, guarding their reputations.

It's not a blind allegiance to people, but it is understanding the battle. It does mean that their, you know, reputational clothing is going to be grass-stained, let's put it that way. You got a sixth-grader and he gets grass stains all over his pants. If he's at a wedding, you're going to have one response. If he's just come home from a football game at the park, you're going to have a different response. At a wedding, all you got to do is sit there, sit up straight, sit there, don't spill things on you. Just sit there. But your job, if it's to go out there and move the football down the field, well, then I know you're going to get knocked down, you're going to be attacked.

I want you to have that kind of graciousness about people when they get their clothes tattered reputationally, because there's going to be that constant vitriol of the demonic level pressing through individuals to tear those people down. I'm saying that we need to be the kinds of Christians who say I get there are going to be grass stains there. But I'm going to defend. I'm going to make sure we don't despise. If I hear people despise them, I'm going to stand up. Is that a blind allegiance to people? I said that, you don't give people to pass. But I am saying that the threshold is high and we recognize the battle they're in and they're in a category of serving the Lord and laboring for the Lord. Therefore, there is a kind of honor and esteem that I have for them that pushes me to a kind of defense of them that I wouldn't have for the average person. Guard their reputations.

Acts Chapter 6 verse 10 and verse 15, look at these verses again, "They could not withstand the wisdom in the Spirit with which he was speaking." That's a statement of Stephen having great success here in his ministry in Jerusalem. And then he gets dragged before the Sanhedrin in verse 15 again, you couldn't say it in any more of a flowery and superlative way. "His face was like that of an angel as he was defending the truth of the gospel." So this seems like from Luke's perspective and the Church's perspective that Stephen was being successful.



Now he dies, he gets killed as a martyr. So it doesn't end well for him, but it ended well for him defending the truth and in that sense there was success. I would say when you think about people who you've identified that are fruitful Christians in your life and you say, I am going to respect them in my mind, I'm going to honor them with my words, I'm going to sympathize with the battle they're in, I'm going to protect and defend their reputations. Then I would say this, the thing that you need to do always for them is you need to, number five, you need to "Pray For Their Success." What are they doing? Well, they're helping. They're serving. They're giving. They're sacrificing. They're engaging in spiritual battle. And all I'm saying is I want them to win. And if they've won in my life, I want them to win in even more people's lives. If they've been good at helping my students through their high school years, I want them to do that even more in other people's lives. If they've made church a good and great, helpful place for me and my family to be, I want them to do that with more and more people. Pray for their success.

I'd like you to be able to say of those people who are positively impacting your life, man, no one could withstand their ministry. Do you know what it was like? God was working through them. That's the First Peter 5 thing. No matter. if they're serving, it's like they got the strength of God. If they're speaking, it's like the oracles of God. What an amazingly successful ministry. That's what we ought to be praying for.

One last text I'd like to turn you to as I think about praying for the success of those who are being fruitful in our lives. I use the verb "pray" there. We need to pray, and I think that's the number one way we do this after we encourage them and honor them with our words and feel and sympathize and guard and protect, well, then I want to pray and pray for them. So often we see that Colossians 4 and Ephesians 6, Hebrews 13. When you talk about leaders and all the things that go with that, then it says if they've been fruitful and productive to pray, pray, pray.

Well, the way Paul turns this in Second Thessalonians, is that what I said? Second Thessalonians. Second Thessalonians Chapter 3. I just think it's so helpful, it's so perfect for what we want to see. We want to see our Stephens in our lives multiply their success in ministry. Read along as I read it for you, follow along, verse 1, "Finally, brothers," it's like the apex of this short little book, "pray for us." Pray for what? "That the word of the Lord," that's their ministry right there, they're missionaries, "may speed ahead and be honored, as it happened among you." It was good. It was productive among you. And I just pray that it would do that more and more, that we'd be multiplying exponentially the ministry that we're having.

And by the way, don't ever forget the battles that were in. Verse 2, "and that we may be delivered from wicked and evil men." Paul knows it's not a battle ultimately against flesh and blood. It's all the principalities and powers behind it. "For not all have faith." Matter of fact, they're opposed to what we're doing. Every open door of ministry, there are a million adversaries behind that doorway. But then look at the positive sense here, he turns it on them, he can't help but minister and think about them, but this is what they should be praying for Paul. "But the Lord is faithful. He will establish you and guard you against the evil one. We



have confidence in the Lord about you, that you are doing and will do the things that we command." Right? You're going to be obedient. "May the Lord direct your hearts to the love of God and the steadfastness of Christ." Don't give up. There's our great word "hypomone." You're going to hang in there, you're going to bear up, you're going to finish well.

Stephen finished well. We're going to get the last things that he said in the next eight weeks as we move through his sermon. But I hope you're praying for everyone who's touched your life in a positive, spiritual, fruitful, productive way that you're saying, I want them to keep ongoing. I want them to be successful. Of course, we don't mean that in worldly terms, we mean that in the way Psalm 118 says that the Lord would grant us success in the spiritual things that God has laid out before us, as Paul said. The word of God can continue to be honored through us, the service of God, the care of God, the love of God, the prayers of God.

If you're a parent, you got young kids and they come back from that flag football game or that soccer game or whatever, and they do something good, something distinctively well. Piano recital, whatever it is. I hope you're quick to praise them. We seem to have no problems with that, we heap praise on them. That's a good thing. Our parents, I mean, that's what our job is to do that.

If you're a parent, I hope you know, no one has to tell you, it's almost reflexive if you're a real Christian, you can't but pray for them, you pray for them all the time. I mean, I'm assuming you pray for your kids probably more than anyone else. You pray, pray, pray, pray for them. And if someone starts to disparage your kid, you're giving your kid a sense of defense and protection, you're thinking, OK, well, if it's true, OK, then I'll be convinced. But I mean, if it's just people talking about my kid and it's not true, I'm going to defend their reputation. Because we naturally have this honor that we bestow on our kids.

But, you know, it's the way it is when we're parents and they're kids... I just hate to say it, but that's easy. It's hard when that authority structure is flipped over, isn't it? It's hard to go up that chain and say, I am going to honor and respect you enough to say I am going to praise you, I'm going to pray for you and I'm going to protect you. And that's hard because there's a lot of flesh that gets in the way of that. But that's what we ought to do. Scripture is very clear about that.

Luke, by the Spirit's power did that in writing about Stephen. There are Stephens in your life. You need to identify them. Respect them, honor them, sympathize with them, guard them and pray for them. It's a straight-ahead sermon. It's not hard to understand. It just might be a challenge for all of us to put into practice. But I pray that God will give you success this week in doing just that.

Let's pray. God, help us to be humble enough to consider others. as the English Standard Version translates it, as more significant than ourselves. That we're not threatened by praising praiseworthy things that are done. That we care enough about people to pray for them and protect them. It all comes from a sympathy that we have for the struggles that are involved in the kinds of things that servants among us are doing.



As I briefly mentioned, God, our world is filled with so much negativity, so many horrifically negative, caustic words will be thrown about this week. May it be that when people encounter people of Compass Bible Church, that we'd be the light in the middle of that darkness.

Yeah, there's a time to call out sin, but God help us to praise and honor and respect. And give recognition to people around us that have done good things, good things for the Lord, good things to us, we know it's all for the glory of God, but we want to take seriously your word in giving honoring recognition to those people. So let us identify them, let us get to work at putting words to that and showing our respect in a way that pleases you. Thanks for this reminder from your word today. Give us the power to obey you in responding to it.

In Jesus name. Amen.