

Being the Bad Guys

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[0 : 00] One of the things I love about Church of the Advent is that on any given Sunday we have a whole mix of people.

We have a whole mix of people who come from a variety of backgrounds in terms of their faith and who are in a variety of places with regarding their faith.

So we have some long-time believers. We have some people who are struggling in their faith trying to figure out what they believe. And every week, especially taking into account not only those here in person but those joining us online, we have people who wouldn't consider themselves to be Christians trying to figure out what they believe.

And I love that about Advent. I'm interested to know what you would think about this. I just recently read a book called Being the Bad Guys. And one of the things that the author contends, makes a case for, is the changing perspective toward Christianity that has happened in recent history.

A few generations ago, Christianity would have largely be seen as the good guy in Western society. So even if you weren't a Christian personally, most people on the street would have considered Christianity to be generally a good thing for society.

[1 : 18] It's the foundation for our social and moral order. It's the source of our values around human rights and dignity and justice and freedom. So most people would consider Christianity to be a good guy, right?

Your grandfather's grandfather's grandfather would probably think that way. Then Christianity started to become kind of one of the guys. It's one option among many, right?

If Christianity works for you, great. I kind of think of it like cod liver oil, you know? Maybe it's like generally a healthy thing, but I don't like the idea of it. And so it's good for you, great, but I'm just not going to take any, you know?

But since then, things have changed very rapidly. I think when we planted this church back in 2008, we were probably in the state of things where Christianity was seen as just one of the options.

Things have changed. And this author contends that now Christianity is no longer the good guy. It's no longer one of the guys, but it's very clearly become the bad guy. The Christianity has sort of become the villain in the story of history.

[2 : 24] And part of this can be explained. Part of it's, I think, been driven by some of the massive public failures and blind spots of the church in history.

So we think of the complicity of the church in things like slavery or Jim Crow. We think of the sex abuse scandals that have rocked the church in multiple denominations.

And you think about those big, public, spectacular failures, and certainly that has driven this to some extent. But this author says that there's more going on there than those things.

It used to be that when you would go and get a social work degree or a humanities degree, you would sort of be introduced into a particular strain of thought about Christianity in the church.

But now these ideas that used to be in the academy have really become mainstream. It's now mainstream to see Christianity as a central source of oppression. That it's maybe the biggest obstacle to human freedom that there is.

[3 : 29] And so in order to liberate people, in order to politically liberate people, we need to liberate them from the stranglehold of Christianity. And I bring that up because I know just from conversations that there are probably people here who would more or less agree with that way of thinking.

And so what I want to do this morning is to explore that. How and why has Christianity become the bad guy? And then how should Christians respond?

And we're going to do this by looking at the story of Stephen, which we just read about in the book of Acts. Stephen is considered widely to be the first Christian martyr.

And we're going to look at this story and we're going to ask, how and why has Christianity become the bad guy? And then how should Christians respond? Let's pray. Lord, we thank you for your word.

And every week, I come to your word with my own hopes, fears, anxieties, agendas. And Lord, yet you always do your work through your word.

[4 : 33] And so I pray for that, Lord. I think that we all need to hear your word. And we need you to do your work through your word. And so I pray that my heart, that our hearts would be open to what you have to say to us this morning.

And that as we delve into your written word and the power of your spirit, we would come face to face with the living word, Jesus Christ. It's in the hope and the power of his name that we pray.

In your son's name, amen. So first of all, why is Christianity the bad guy? Some of you may agree.

Some of you don't know. Some of you maybe strongly disagree. Why is Christianity the bad guy?

It turns out that there have always been, in every age, people who opposed Christianity in the church. As we saw two weeks ago, Stephen is one of seven men who are chosen to oversee the care of widows and to work for justice and mercy in the church in Jerusalem.

So that's his role in the church. And Stephen's ministry starts to have this profound impact. Stephen is a man of tremendous power and influence.

[5 : 41] So word starts to spread about Stephen's ministry. And Stephen gets the attention of the Jewish leaders who were already opposed to the Christian church. They're already looking for reasons to get rid of this community.

And so some men from a local synagogue, or it may have been several synagogues, we're not quite sure, they come down to shut down Stephen's ministry. They're like, we've got to shut this guy up.

And here's how this happens. First, they begin to debate with Stephen. Open theological debate.

We see that in verse 9. That does not go well. Stephen is a very fierce debater.

So they realize that's not going to work. So then they start an active smear campaign against Stephen. It says they secretly persuaded some men, presumably by bribery, to make false accusations.

We see this in verse 11. We have heard Stephen speak words of blasphemy against Moses and against God. So in this way, they stir up the people and the elders and the teachers of the law.

[6 : 41] We see that in verse 12. And so then in verses 12 and 13, after they have slandered Stephen, they finally seize him and they bring him before the Sanhedrin.

And then they produce false witnesses to testify against him. So here's the progression. They debate against him. Then they slander him. And then they take legal action against him to silence him.

And then finally, when all else fails, they murder him. So he asked, well, why would they be so opposed to this man who is caring for widows and orphans, who is doing the work of justice in ministry, who's literally caring for people who had no recourse, no other people to care for them in the Greco-Roman society?

The church was taking these people in and providing for them. How could anybody be opposed to that kind of thing? Why? Why? Because the Christian community stood in direct opposition to the temple.

The Christian community stood in direct opposition to the temple. For the Jewish cultural elites, even though they aimed at and claimed to worship God subtly and slowly, the temple had displaced God as the center of their worshipping life.

[8 : 05] So in order to have a relationship with God, you had to go through the temple. Because that is where, as it was believed, God dwells. If you want to talk to God, go to God's house.

So, of course, whoever controls the temple has a lot of power. Because they get to decide who gets access to God and who doesn't.

Right? So the temple had become more and more and more a source of identity, a source of influence for the Jewish cultural elites. But then you look at Stephen and the other Christians.

They're not in the temple. They're in the temple courtyard, but they're not really depending on the temple. They're also worshipping God in their homes. Powerful healings and miracles are happening

in people's homes, on the street.

The temple used to be responsible for organizing care for the widows and the orphans. But now this Christian community has organized their own system of provision. It doesn't rely on the temple anymore.

[9 : 09] And all of this is communicating the same message loudly and clearly. The temple is no longer necessary. And as you look at what Stephen is saying in his speech all through chapter 7, God is not bound to a particular people group.

He is not bound to a particular place, temple. He's not bound by geography like so many of the other ancient gods. God is fulfilling His promise, not dwelling in the temple made by human hands, but dwelling in the midst of His people.

We hear that and we think, what a beautiful idea. Most of us do. They heard that as, the temple has been obviated. It's no longer necessary. That's a threat, an existential threat to our way of life.

Here's how this connects to us. We can't probably connect with thinking of a temple that way. But every culture has something sacred at its center.

Every culture, every society, sacred, religious, or secular, has some sacred temple at its center. Something that plays the role of God in people's hearts.

[10 : 27] And you say, well, how can I know what that is in my culture, in this society? How do we know what the sacred temple at the center is? And here's the easiest way to know. Ask this question.

What am I not allowed to question or criticize? Whatever you're not allowed to question, whatever you're not allowed to criticize, in any given culture, chances are that is the sacred temple.

Right? So Stephen is criticizing the temple by saying it's no longer necessary. How do the people respond? They're enraged. They cover their ears.

They grind their teeth. They say, this is blasphemy. That's the sacred temple. In some families, everyone is expected to hold to the same political views.

Right? Everybody's expected to vote the same way. You go to Thanksgiving, you know the conversation is going to go in a very particular political direction. Everybody knows who the good guys are.

[11 : 32] Everybody knows who the bad guys are. And you know, if you were to question that, if you were to vote the other way, blasphemy. It might permanently damage your relationships.

I have relationships in my extended family that have been permanently damaged over this past year, over that very issue. You know, it's funny to think back during, during Trump's presidency when he was in office, I would find myself, at one point, I would be in a group of people and I would absolutely know if I say anything negative or critical about President Trump, that's going to be blasphemy in this group.

And then, maybe the next week, I would find myself in another group of people and I knew, if I say anything positive about Trump's presidency, that's going to be blasphemy. Right? That's how polarizing he was as a president.

And, this helps us answer the question from the beginning of the sermon, how has Christianity become the bad guy in popular imagination in our society?

The reason is because Christianity is a form of blasphemy against the sacred temple in our culture. Over the last few centuries, we've seen the rise of something called expressive individualism.

[12 : 57] It is this idea at the very center of our culture, and I say the center of our culture meaning we are as affected by this as anybody. There is no us and them here. This is all of us who are swimming in this water.

But expressive individualism says, my true self is who I am on the inside. It's who I feel I am. And it says, my freedom and my happiness depend on my ability to express that self to the world.

And anything standing in the way of that, right, traditions, institutions, religions, sexual mores, represent a direct threat to my well-being, and they must be overthrown.

And so that's the general sense that we all have in our culture. And so I would say one of the main sacred temples at the center of modern culture in our society is the temple of expressive individualism.

So think about the relationship there, right? When Christianity says that your true identity is not found by looking within, but by looking outside of yourself to God and to the community of believers, that's a form of blasphemy.

[14:05] When Christianity says that your inner feelings are not always to be trusted, that your desires can easily enslave you, and so we need to cultivate virtues like self-control, that sounds like blasphemy to a culture of expressive individualism.

When Christianity says that the human body is sacred, when human sexuality is layered with spiritual meaning, that's blasphemy. Right? So as long as expressive individualism is the sacred temple of this culture, Christianity will be seen as blasphemy.

It will be the primary obstacle to that way of being human. And this is why Christianity is always going to be the bad guy in every society.

Here's the point. Whenever and wherever Christian communities are publicly worshiping Jesus, they are committing blasphemy against the sacred temples of that culture.

Whenever and wherever Christians are publicly worshiping Jesus, they are committing blasphemy against the sacred temples of that culture. So that begs the question, how should Christians respond if we know this?

[15:21] We have several options. Option number one, retreat. retreat. You know, Monty Python, run away. Keep your faith private.

Move to a place where everyone around you thinks exactly the way you do. Take your kids out of public school. I admit this is a very tempting idea for me many times.

But then I read this and I'm like, that's not what Stephen did. Stephen is boldly proclaiming truth to people who don't want to hear it. The believers are living there in the city in a midst of society that increasingly doesn't want them there.

The poor want them there. The widows want them there. The ex-slaves want them there. The orphans want them there. But the elites don't want them there. They represent an alternative lifestyle that's not built around sex or money or power.

It's built around Jesus. And around his grace and mercy. So they don't retreat. Another option? Rally.

[16:34] Rally around a strong political leader to take back the culture by force if necessary. Now listen, we certainly need Christians involved in politics. Absolutely. And many of you are.

But I think there are a lot of Christians who put all of their hope in politics. If we can get political power then we'll be okay. That's not what Stephen did. Now don't get me wrong, the word power shows up many times in this passage but it's not talking about political power.

Right? The Christians found themselves caught between two great sources of political power.

There were the Jewish cultural elites, the leaders of the temple, the Sanhedrin, and then there was Rome.

And both wanted your ultimate allegiance. The Christians had no political power. They had no influence. But what they did have was tremendous spiritual power.

They were filled with the Holy Spirit. When Stephen spoke the power of his words was evident. This wasn't just good rhetoric. There was spiritual force to his language.

[17:42] So they didn't rally around political leader. They rallied around the power of the Holy Spirit. Third option, revise. Revise the faith.

Revise the faith. Revise the parts of Christianity that don't fit with the current culture. Make sure that we're not saying or doing anything that could ever be conceived as blasphemy against the sacred temple.

You see that in a lot of the more progressive churches. This is not what Stephen did. Stephen actually said the opposite. Instead of revising the culture to fit scripture, or the scripture to fit culture, Stephen said we need to revise the culture to fit scripture.

Right? In chapter 7, Stephen's extended speech, and it's worth reading through this. It's a great source of theology. In his extended speech, he's going back again and again and again to the Old Testament.

He's saying, you know, read this right here. And again and again and again, and he's pointing out ways that they have misinterpreted and thus misapplied scripture in their life.

[18:43] So he's not saying throw it out. He's saying, you need to read it more closely. And this is exactly what we see in the Protestant Reformation. Right? This is exactly what we see again and again and again throughout the history of the church.

They need to constantly go back, look at what we believe, what we're doing, open this book, and say, are we sure that we are lining up with this? And if not, we need reform.

So if these options don't fit with Stephen's example, you know, retreat, rally, revise, what does that leave us?

Only other option, recover a theology of martyrdom. Stephen was the first martyr, and I believe as we enter this era that we are in as the church in the 21st century, there may be no better example for us to follow than the example of Stephen.

And I want to just give you two aspects of Stephen's example that I think are particularly relevant for us. First, there's the example of Stephen's winsome witness.

[19 : 58] His winsome witness. He's described in verses 5 through 8 as a man full of faith. Now, they all had faith, but he had the kind of faith that said, I'm going to risk it all for Jesus.

Right? I'm risking everything believing that what Jesus has promised is true. He's described as a man who's full of the Holy Spirit. Full of the Holy Spirit.

We all receive the Spirit when we're baptized, when we come to faith. faith. But the Bible also talks about a way of being filled with the Spirit, where God's Word just pours out of your mouth, where all you can think about is the kingdom, where you're passionate for the lost.

He's full of the Holy Spirit. He's described in verse 8 as being full of God's grace. And commentators say the use of grace here actually is more akin to winsomeness.

It's graciousness. Now, that's a point worth sitting on for a minute. There are a lot of bold Christian witnesses in the world who are anything but winsome. Right?

[21 : 07] They're smug. They're contemptuous of the surrounding culture. They're cynical. They're accusatory. I feel this tendency in my own heart sometimes. Right?

They're bold, but they are smug and filled with contempt. And that kind of posture, that kind of tone runs completely against the gospel. You know, it's funny.

The gospel is a lot like a song, you know, a really recognizable song like Happy Birthday. It has words and it has a melody. Right? And there was a long time where restaurants weren't allowed to sing the real Happy Birthday because of royalties.

And so they would sing the words Happy Birthday to another song. And you would go in and it's like, yeah, it's the words Happy Birthday, but the way you're singing it, this isn't the right song. You know, it'd be kind of weird.

That's a piddly little example, but apply that to the way we think about the gospel. The gospel has words. Right? There are truths that are proclaimed, but the gospel also has a melody.

[22 : 11] There's a melody to the gospel. There is a tone to the gospel. In other words, when you, when you, when you proclaim the gospel with a tone of smugness or contempt, you may have the right words, but you've got the wrong melody.

You've got the wrong melody. Stephen is so immersed in God's grace that it makes him a gracious person. If you're immersed in God's grace, it means that you live your life fully aware of the fact that God owes you absolutely nothing.

Right? The only reason that you're a Christian at all is because God chose to pour his grace and love into your life even though you didn't earn it, don't deserve it, could never repay it.

And that changes the way you think about yourself and God and other people. It humbles you.

Right? It makes you more charitable. Meaning, you assume the best about other people's motives, other people's intentions.

You don't impute bad motives, you assume the best. You assume that most people are doing the best they can. You're very slow to criticize, very slow to make assumptions.

[23 : 25] It makes you more compassionate toward people who disagree with you because you think, man, I used to be right where you are and sometimes, you know, I still am. It's only because of God's grace that we don't see completely eye to eye on everything.

God. So this is the example of Stephen's winsome witness. He is so immersed in God's grace that he has become a gracious person.

But then there is the equally important example, and this is, I think, where we can often miss it, the example of his dying love. His dying love.

In Stephen's day, there were, by the way, plenty of examples of people dying for their faith. During the Maccabean Revolt back in 167 B.C., so this would have been almost 200 years before Jesus.

During the Maccabean Revolt, there was a well-known story of a family who, because of their faith, refused to eat pork. And so they were tortured and killed by Antiochus. And as they died, and this story was kind of legendary, I'm sure everybody knew about it in Jesus' day, in Stephen's day, as

his family was killed for their faith, they cried out to Antiochus, you accursed fiend, just wait and see how God's great power will torment you and your descendants.

[24 : 48] You wretch, you vilest of men. If somebody was torturing me and killing me for not eating pork, I would probably respond in a similar way. But look at what Stephen does.

Right? As the stones are slamming into and breaking Stephen's body, he cries out in a loud voice, Lord, do not hold this sin against them.

And you say, well, how is that possible? How is it possible to love the very people who are, at that very moment, putting you to death? love? It's only possible because Stephen had encountered this kind of love before.

Jesus Christ, as he hung dying on the cross, as the soldiers were literally dividing up his possessions in front of him, he cries out, Father, forgive them for they do not know what they're doing.

And unlike Stephen, Jesus was truly innocent. Stephen had the face of an angel, he was as blameless probably as a human being could be, but he wasn't innocent.

[26 : 07] He wasn't free from sin, Jesus was. And yet, even in his death, Jesus is only thinking of those whom he loves.

The very same people who had hung in there to die. And on the cross, we need to understand, we see a new kind of love entering the world.

Not a sentimental love, not a virtuous love, a dying love. And it is that love that is now transforming this world.

It's the love that sits at the very heart of what it means to be a follower of Jesus. So I just want to bring all this together. Christians are always going to be the bad guys because our worship of Jesus will always be seen as blasphemy against the sacred temples of the culture.

It's always going to be that way. Sometimes it'll be better, sometimes it'll be worse. The times that it gets better are the times when we are probably not as clear on what those sacred temples are.

[27 : 14] And we're happily worshiping them, maybe without knowing it. That's always going to be true. And the second thing is that knowing this, I believe that we're called to follow Stephen's example and recover a theology of martyrdom, to have a winsome witness and when necessary, a dying love for the world and for the very people who oppose our way of life.

And what this means, friends, is that we need to drastically redefine our view of success. Right? We need to completely rethink how we're defining success.

Stephen speaks with unparalleled winsome wisdom and power. I mean, probably nobody could do a better job than Stephen at being winsome.

and they stone him to death. So how do we define success? Here's how God defines success. They lay the garments at the feet of a man named Saul.

We see a little reference at the end of our passage. It's only later in the book of Acts that we realize the impact of Stephen's death on Saul. And we realize that this event is probably a massive part of what ultimately led Saul to give his life to Jesus, a man who was viciously persecuting the church.

[28 : 38] It was the combination of Stephen's winsome witness but also his dying love, praying for his murderers. You know, later Paul talks about his conversion. He says at one point Jesus says to him, Paul, Paul, it's hard for you to kick against the goads.

You know what a goad is? It's like a cattle prod. So don't think that his conversion happened all at once on that road to Damascus. something had been goading him toward Jesus.

I have a hard time imagining it wasn't this moment right here. That's how God defines success. you know, in the series Band of Brothers, which I've always loved, it's about a company of soldiers in World War II and there's a soldier named Blythe and Blythe is filled with fear and there's a firefight that breaks out and Blythe hides in a foxhole or in a trench the entire time.

He can't stick his head up, he just completely locks up with fear. And there's this other soldier, a guy named Sergeant Spears and Spears is this renowned fearless warrior.

There's one point where they need to send a messenger across enemy lines and Spears runs across and people are so shocked that he's running in the open field that none of the enemies open fire on him.

[30 : 00] They're like this guy's insane. He runs across, he delivers the message and then he runs all the way back and the enemies look around like we gotta kill this guy and they all start shooting and he makes it back alive. And so he's just legendary as this fearless warrior.

And so Blythe tearfully confesses his cowardice to Spears and he says, what's the secret? How are you not afraid? And here's what Spears says, the only hope you have is to accept the fact that you're already dead.

The sooner you accept that, the sooner you'll be able to function as a soldier is supposed to function. accept the fact that you're already dead.

I often think about this scene as I consider what it means to be a Christian in the world right now.

Later today we're going to have some baptisms and we often think of baptism as a symbol of washing people clean, which it is.

But even more than that, baptism is a symbol of death and hope of resurrection. Baptism is a way of us saying, like Paul says in places like Galatians 2, when I go into the water I'm dying.

[31 : 18] When I come out of that water it's no longer I who live but Christ who lives in me. To be baptized is to die to this world. How do you have the kind of courage to face martyrdom?

Realize that you're already dead. God and put your hope in the promise that one day you're going to be resurrected just like Jesus. The most dangerous person on earth is the one who has reckoned with their own death.

The most dangerous person on earth is the person who has reckoned with their own death. Let's pray. Lord, we thank you for your word and we thank you for the power of your Holy Spirit.

We thank you for your son. We thank you that you're present with us. Let these be not mere ideas.

Whatever is of you, we pray that you would impress these things into our hearts.

We pray that we would be people of tremendous faith, filled with the Holy Spirit, gracious winsomeness, who are willing to lay down our lives, if necessary, for the sake of those whom you love.

[32 : 33] That they might one day come to know and love you, to find their home and their wholeness in your arms. We pray this in your son's name.

Amen.