

THE PATH OF FORGIVENESS:

## Personal and Corporate Forgiveness

Acts 7:51--8:1

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**AUDIO:** [www.buzzsprout.com/admin/episodes/362249-the-path-of-forgiveness-personal-and-corporate-forgiveness](http://www.buzzsprout.com/admin/episodes/362249-the-path-of-forgiveness-personal-and-corporate-forgiveness)

Think of this story in Acts as a movie and Luke's narration of it as the film director's use of the camera. In vv. 54-60, note how the camera swings back and forth between Stephen and the enraged crowd, contrasting love and hate. So great was the rage, that the people stoned Stephen to death, thus becoming (as far as we know) the first Christian martyr. Yet, Stephen found it in his heart to forgive. He repeated Jesus' words on the Cross, "Father, forgive them..." (v. 60, cf. Luke 23:34). We are never more like Jesus than when we forgive.

This story reminds us that sin is never merely individual. It is corporate. We live in this web of relationships and like dried omelet in a skillet, sin sticks to systems, structures and institutions. Stephen was telling the truth about how the Temple had become corrupt. Instead of helping people, it was devouring and using people. So, mark it down. Individuals can wound you; so can institutions. The path of forgiveness is learning to forgive individuals and systems.

I was privileged to attend the Baptist World Congress in Durban, South Africa last summer. At the conference, I listened to the man who had directed the Truth and Reconciliation Commission after apartheid ended. South Africa aimed at restorative justice, not punitive justice. They chose not to imprison or punish oppressors. The condition for amnesty? The punishment for taking part in mass killings and brutality? Simply tell the truth! That was the punishment, the shame, of saying so publicly. The confession had to be made in public, in front of the victims and their families. What's more, family members and victims could cross examine them. In some instances, family members were shocked to learn that their dad or spouse had been party to rape, torture, beatings and killings of others. Yet reconciliation, not retribution, was the direction of this country. One black woman, whose father had been killed, said, "I would love to know who killed my father, so I could forgive him" [*The Book of Forgiving*, Desmond and Mpho Tutu, p. 34].

Now you tell me. Considering the level of hatred, violence and division in our own nation, are these words we need to hear? Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote: "...a church that calls a nation to faith in Christ must itself be the burning fire of love in this nation, the driving force for reconciliation, the place in which all the fires of hatred are extinguished and prideful, hate-filled people are turned into people who love."

When I invited people on Facebook to comment on their greatest struggles or victories related to forgiving others, I had some interesting responses. One person's granddaughter was attacked and the victim of attempted murder. This grandmother said that the stages of forgiveness are like the stages of grief. She also said that certain details would trigger more

grief and anger. Another person commented on FB that she had decided to forgive, "because I don't want that cancer loose in my soul."

A few questions to bring this all together. 1) Who was dead and who was alive in this Acts 7 story? Who was enslaved and who was free? Perhaps Stephen was more alive than his attackers, who were dead on the inside. 2) Who will be influenced for Christ by the way we forgive? A young man named Saul was holding the coats of the ones killing Stephen. He no doubt heard Stephen's prayer of forgiveness. The seed of salvation was sown in Saul's heart that day, and he became the Apostle Paul, the greatest evangelist the Church has ever known. We had better think through how our forgiveness (or lack of) impacts others.

3) Who wants to leave this world and face God with gunk on your soul? Scripture says that Stephen died (v. 60). How many here this morning want to die with our slates clean, all accounts settled? 4) Why did the glorified Christ stand to receive Stephen when Stephen died? Christ in his glorified state is usually described as sitting. But here he stands. Some say he stood to honor the Church's first martyr. But what about this? What if Jesus was standing and clapping to say, "Way to live--way to die--forgiving those cruel people, forgiving that godless institution!" Way to go...you're never more like Jesus than when you forgive. And Jesus stands and claps.