

The Gospel of Martyrdom vs. the Gospel of Success

by Michael L. Brown

The gospel of martyrdom is a call to live for God and please Him, even if it means suffering or death, while the gospel of success focuses on earthly priorities and self-preservation.

Topics: "Martyrdom And Persecution", "Self Denial"

Description

Michael L. Brown delivers a powerful sermon on the life and martyrdom of Stephen, the Church's first martyr, who stood firm in his faith and commitment to be a witness for Jesus, even at the cost of his own life. Brown challenges the congregation to consider the true meaning of being a witness for Christ, emphasizing the call to lose our lives for Jesus in order to find true life in Him. He contrasts the gospel of success with the gospel of martyrdom, highlighting the eternal perspective and self-denial required in following Jesus, as seen in the lives of biblical figures like Stephen, Paul, and C. T. Studd.

Transcript

Stephen stood before the Sanhedrin. The appointed Jewish leadership confronted this anointed Jewish believer. They glared; he glowed. They were enraged; he was enraptured. Their faces were contorted with anger; his was like the countenance of an angel. "Men and brothers," he said, "listen to me."

He rehearsed the history of Israel, from Abraham to Moses to David, the faithfulness of God in spite of the unfaithfulness of the people. But Stephen was not there that day merely to recite the lessons of history. He was there to be a witness, and as a faithful witness he spoke. His words turned to piercing rebuke:

You stiff-necked people, with uncircumcised hearts and ears! You are just like your fathers: You always resist the Holy Spirit! Was there ever a prophet your fathers did not persecute? They even killed those who predicted the coming of the Righteous One. And now you have betrayed and murdered Him -- you who have received the law that was put into effect through angels but have not obeyed it (7:51-53).

Soon his body lay battered and bloody, a mangled, motionless mass. He had not backed down. He had not compromised. He had not omitted a word. He was a witness and a prophetic voice. And that day he became the Church's first martyr -- the first, but not the last. Hundreds of thousands have followed in his path. Being a witness for Jesus could cost you your life.

In the early Church, witnessing and martyrdom quickly became associated: The Greek word for "witness" is martyros. Witnesses testify with their lives and often seal their words with their own blood. Have you done any "witnessing" lately?

It's one thing to read the Word and be stirred by the examples of men like Stephen. But this was real life! He was probably a young man with a wife and children. His whole future lay before him. His family was dependent on him. There may have been a toddler waiting to greet him that day when he came home. But he never came home!

And then there was his ministry. He was a powerful preacher, anointed to heal the sick and perform miracles. Think of all the lives he could touch! Think of all the good he could do for the kingdom of God.

Why didn't Stephen simply deny the false charges? "Men and brothers, the accusations are not true." Why didn't he politely dismiss their questions and calm their anger? Why did he continue to stand up and speak out? The answer challenges us all: He was not seeking to save his life; he was seeking to be a witness.

For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for Me will find it (Matt. 16:25).

This is the story of the true Church in every nation and in every age:

You did not renounce your faith in Me, even in the days of Antipas, My faithful witness, who was put to death in your city--where Satan lives (Rev 2:13b).

This is the gospel of martyrdom, the gospel of Jesus. It is the gospel that Paul preached and lived:

I consider my life worth nothing to me, if only I may finish the race and complete the task the Lord Jesus has given me--the task of testifying to the gospel of God's grace (Acts 20:24).

That is why he could say:

I eagerly expect and hope that I will in no way be ashamed, but will have sufficient courage so that now as always Christ will be exalted in my body, whether by life or by death. For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain (Phil 1:20-21).

As Leonard Ravenhill observed in *Why Revival Tarrys*, Paul didn't mind if the cost of his obedience was prison, for it were better that he should be "the prisoner of the Lord for a few years than that his fellow men should be the devil's prisoners in hell forever.

How different this is from the philosophy that rules in today's luxury-soaked America. How different this is from the modern gospel of success! Jesus cut to the very core of the issue. When Peter told the Lord in no uncertain terms that He was not to go the way of suffering, rejection, and death ("Never, Lord!" he said. "This shall never happen to you!"), Jesus identified Peter's words as satanic.

Get behind Me, Satan! [Jesus said to Peter.] You are a stumbling block to Me; you do not have in mind the things of God, but the things of men. (Matt. 16:23)

What was at the root of this satanically inspired theology? What fueled Peter's opposition to the cross? It was a different set of values, a different perspective, a different viewpoint, a different understanding: "you do not have in mind the things of God, but the things of men." Now we're getting down to the basics!

One "gospel" is interested in the things of this world, the things of men. The other gospel is interested in eternal things, the things of God. One message cultivates preservation of self; the other cultivates denial of self. One says, "Add to your life!" The other says, "Lose your life!" One message encourages self-satisfaction, the other encourages self-denial. One message tells carnally minded people "what their itching ears want to hear" (2 Tim 4:3); the other message tells the truth.

Whether or not we have much in this world is not the central issue. (Most of us in America have an incredible abundance, dozens of times what we actually need to live.) What matters is our attitude towards our what we have. And we who have an abundance must guard our hearts. Riches are deceitful!

Jesus rebuked the church of Laodicea: You say, "I am rich; I have acquired wealth and do not need a thing." But you do not realize that you are wretched, pitiful poor, blind and naked (Rev 3:17).

But Jesus commended the church of Smyrna:

I know your afflictions and your poverty--yet you are rich. . . . Do not be afraid of what you are about to suffer. I tell you, the devil will put some of you into prison to test you, and you will suffer persecution ten days. Be faithful to the point of death, and I will give you the crown of life (Rev 2:9-10).

We must see how tragically earthly the gospel of success really is. It still stands in the way of the cross. It still rebukes Jesus for promising suffering and death. In fact, it actually calls the path to Calvary "religious"--meaning traditional, unanointed, and fruitless.

It is no overstatement to say that there is no cross in the gospel of success. In its most extreme modern forms, it originates from the pit. (Remember, it was Satan whom Jesus rebuked for trying to keep Him from going to the cross.) The gospel of success criticizes the message of the cross because it leads to "death." But the true gospel must lead to death--death to the flesh, death to the will of man, death to this world's priorities. Only through death can there be resurrection. Only through the cross can there be abundant life. In fact, if you want what some teachers call "the God kind of life" you're going to have to experience "the Jesus kind of death." Which path will you take?

The last generation taught what is often called "pie in the sky" theology--and this theology certainly had its problems! There were plenty of negative distortions in the message. But we have substituted something worse. We now have the theology of "have your cake and eat it too." The first message starved its hearers, depriving them of the blessings of life in the Spirit in this world. The second message engorges them, robbing them of the light of eternity.

People of God, we are not to center our lives around eating and drinking, gaining and possessing, having more and being merry, because tomorrow we do not die. No. We live forever! How foolish that we conduct ourselves as if this world were our lasting home. We're just passing through!

When Jacob was a frail old man he said to Pharaoh:

The years of my pilgrimage are a hundred and thirty. My years have been few and difficult, and they do not equal the years of pilgrimage of my fathers (Gen 47:9).

King David, in spite of the equivalent of billions of dollars of riches, could say at the end of his life:

We are aliens and strangers in Your sight, as were all our forefathers. Our days on earth are like a shadow, without hope (1 Chr 29:15).

Hebrews 11 commends Abraham--certainly a prosperous and influential man--because,

By faith he made his home in the promised land like a stranger in a foreign country; he lived in tents as did Isaac and Jacob, who were heirs with him of the same promise. For he was looking forward to the city with foundations, whose architect and builder is God. . . . [All of them] admitted that they were aliens and strangers on earth. People who say such things show that they are looking for a country of their own ... a heavenly one (11:9-10, 13-14, 16).

How much more does the New Testament call us to live in the light of eternity!

Jesus told His disciples to rejoice when they were persecuted and rejected, "because great is your reward in heaven ..." (Matt 5:12). He told them--and us!--to store up treasures in heaven (Matt 6:19-21), and Peter reminds us that we have a heavenly inheritance "that can never perish, spoil or fade" (1 Pet 1:4). That's why we who suffer for Jesus now will be "overjoyed" when His glory will be revealed at His return (1 Pet 4:13). There is great joy now because there will be endless joy then!

You sympathized with those in prison [for the faith] and joyfully accepted the confiscation of your property, because you knew that you yourselves had better and lasting possessions (Heb 10:34).

Consider the example of C. T. Studd. Raised in a wealthy, aristocratic home in England last century, he became a national celebrity as a sensational cricket player at Cambridge. (He could have become the "Michael Jordan" of his generation.) But through the preaching of D. L. Moody, he experienced a deep transformation and left everything to go to the mission field.

Was he wrong for abandoning a phenomenal sports career in England in order to preach the Word in China and Africa? Was he "religious" because he chose to forsake fame, fortune, and comfort to live sacrificially among the heathen? The decisions he made and the path he chose make one thing perfectly clear: He was not seeking to get ahead in this world. He was seeking to please the Lord. There is a difference!

On judgment day, and throughout eternity, men and women like C. T. Studd will be accounted wise. They will have our admiration and God's commendation. Does anything stop us from following their lead? It will mean going against the grain!

Our country is saturated with a "save your life, improve your life" mentality--from health clubs to exercise videos, from savings plans to retirement funds, from insurance policies to computer programs guaranteed to put you "in control of your life." Be successful! Live in greater security and ease! Enjoy the American dream! Jesus says, "Follow Me -- even to the point of death."

After His resurrection, He told Peter the kind of death by which he would glorify God (John 21:19). What a concept! Think of a discussion among the first eleven disciples: "Matthew, Bartholomew, Thomas, by what kind of death are you going to glorify Him?" For these men, this would not have been idle talk: According to tradition, all the first apostles, with the exception of John, died a martyr's death. (John was reportedly boiled in oil twice -- and survived.) For them, the issue was not, "Will we be called to die for the glory of God?" But rather, "By what kind of death will we glorify Him?"

What about us? Is the call any different today? By what kind of death are we called to glorify God? Death to our reputation? Death to human opinion? Death to our careers? Death to our plans and goals? Or maybe the literal death of a martyr? Savonarola, the prophetic priest in the fifteenth century Catholic Church understood the cost of fidelity to the Lord. When offered the red hat of a cardinal, he replied: "No hat will I have but that of a martyr, reddened with my own blood."

The fatal flaw of the modern, carnal prosperity message is that it encourages us to set our eyes on the things of this world. It makes it harder for us to leave all, lose self, and follow Jesus. It eliminates the call to take up our cross. (Remember, Jesus was not the only One called to carry the cross. Read Luke 9:23 several times out loud, and digest each word slowly: "If anyone would come after Me, he must deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow Me.")

The gospel of success says, "Jesus died for you so you could prosper and succeed in this world." (Of course, there is some truth to the prosperity message, but its emphasis is way off.) The biblical message says, "Live so as to lose your life for the Lord"--meaning go anywhere, do anything, make any sacrifice--as long as souls are saved, lives are changed, the kingdom is extended, and Jesus is exalted. As children of God, we now make our decisions based on entirely different priorities. We are already subjects of the heavenly kingdom. We have already died to this world!

Of course, there are things in this present age that are important. Justice in our society is important. Compassionate action on behalf of the poor and hurting is important. Righteousness and integrity are important. Morality and family values are important. But only those whose lives are given over to a higher--and eternal--purpose can radically change things here. As C. S. Lewis said:

It is since Christians have largely ceased to think of the other world that they have become so ineffective in this one.

Can we be honest with ourselves? A major reason why we don't take a stand against godless laws is because we don't want to risk our lives. We're not willing to suffer the consequences. A key reason why we don't share our faith more clearly and -- in love -- more aggressively is because we don't want to experience rejection. We don't want to lose our friends, or our jobs, or our ease. One major factor that keeps many of us from the mission field is that we're too comfortable here and now. (Let's face it: Here and now is where it's at for most of us. There's only one way you can prove me wrong: Live differently!)

It's time for the old spirit of martyrdom to enter the church of America. (Much of the Church worldwide has no choice in the matter. Christianity for them is synonymous with suffering. Just ask the families of the Christian men in Sudan or Ethiopia who were crucified for their faith -- in the last few months.) It's time that we do God's will, and God's will alone.

I once heard Richard Wurmbrand ask why, when the Supreme Court passed the law removing public prayer from our schools, American Christians chose to comply. What would have happened if we simply refused to obey? The whole thing probably would have been turned around overnight. And if it wasn't turned around? Then at least the church, through her biblical obedience, would have been turned around!

If only we would value obedience to the Lord more highly than we value self-preservation! If only the favor of God were more meaningful to us than the opinions of people! If only we would count suffering for Jesus to be a privilege! What could stop us then? This country boasts of 50-70 million born-again Christians. (Of course, that figure is preposterous.) But what if just 1 million true believers here (just twenty thousand from

each state!) decided to obey God and stand up for what is right, regardless of the cost? Our nation would be absolutely shaken. Now is the time to awake!

In 1984, after hearing K. P. Yohannan of Gospel for Asia preach a challenging message, a Christian man named Samuel gave up his good job in South India and moved with his family to the region of Karnataka. There he began preaching to unreached Hindus, known for their hostility to the gospel. The Lord blessed the work, and even a Hindu priest was born again.

This was more than the extremists could take. They burst into a meeting one Sunday and severely beat Samuel with iron rods, breaking his hand, arm, leg, and collar bone. When his seven year old son ran up and cried out, "Please don't kill our daddy!" they struck the boy on the spine, breaking his back. Then they left, warning Samuel that if he ever preached there again, they would kill him. The beating was so severe that Samuel and his son were hospitalized for several months.

After his release, Samuel attended a workers' meeting with K. P. Yohannan. The first night, during a time of prayer, his arm was supernaturally healed of paralysis he was suffering as a result of his beating. The next night he testified of the things he had recently experienced for the Lord.

K. P. asked Samuel, "What are you going to do now?" With a peaceful determination, the young man replied: "I am going back. Even if I am killed, my blood will be the foundation for many more churches." He returned and has continued to preach. His son is back in school and is also doing well. And Samuel has baptized many more converts--and has been beaten again.

Would we have gone back and preached? K. P. was honest enough to admit that his own reaction might have been different. First he would have come up with lots of good scriptures to justify not going back. And then he would have used his best argument:

I'm only 40-some years old! God wants me to use my brain for His kingdom. With all the investment He has made in my life since I was sixteen, would it be right for me to be killed by some fanatics next week? Don't be stupid! I am going to leave this place so I will have another forty years of my life to invest in and build God's kingdom (Living in the Light of Eternity, 159-60).

Samuel thought differently. He was not out to save his life, he was out to save sinners. With such resolve how could he be defeated? His life is not his own! In past centuries, missionaries endued with the same spirit sailed off to far away lands with their belongings packed in caskets. They were making a one way trip!

A few years ago, a young evangelist moved into an area in Asia famous for its violent resistance to Jesus. The radical religious opposition immediately came to his apartment, making their intentions clear: "We'll kill you if you stay here and preach!" The evangelist only smiled. "I came to die," he replied. Today his church has 200 members. That is the power of the gospel of martyrdom. That is true success.

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