

Do Not Hold This Sin against Them  
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First Lesson: Acts 7:55-60

<sup>55</sup>But filled with the Holy Spirit, he gazed into heaven and saw the glory of God and Jesus standing at the right hand of God. <sup>56</sup>‘Look,’ he said, ‘I see the heavens opened and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God!’ <sup>57</sup>But they covered their ears, and with a loud shout all rushed together against him. <sup>58</sup>Then they dragged him out of the city and began to stone him; and the witnesses laid their coats at the feet of a young man named Saul. <sup>59</sup>While they were stoning Stephen, he prayed, ‘Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.’ <sup>60</sup>Then he knelt down and cried out in a loud voice, ‘Lord, do not hold this sin against them.’ When he had said this, he died.

Second Lesson: John 14:1-14

<sup>1</sup> ‘Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in me. <sup>2</sup>In my Father’s house there are many dwelling-places. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? <sup>3</sup>And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, so that where I am, there you may be also. <sup>4</sup>And you know the way to the place where I am going.’ <sup>5</sup>Thomas said to him, ‘Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?’ <sup>6</sup>Jesus said to him, ‘I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. <sup>7</sup>If you know me, you will know my Father also. From now on you do know him and have seen him.’ <sup>8</sup> Philip said to him, ‘Lord, show us the Father, and we will be satisfied.’ <sup>9</sup>Jesus said to him, ‘Have I been with you all this time, Philip, and you still do not know me? Whoever has seen me has seen the Father. How can you say, “Show us the Father”? <sup>10</sup>Do you not believe that I am in the Father and the Father is in me? The words that I say to you I do not speak on my own; but the Father who dwells in me does his works. <sup>11</sup>Believe me that I am in the Father and the Father is in me; but if you do not, then believe me because of the works themselves. <sup>12</sup>Very truly, I tell you, the one who believes in me will also do the works that I do and, in fact, will do greater works than these, because I am going to the Father. <sup>13</sup>I will do whatever you ask in my name, so that the Father may be glorified in the Son. <sup>14</sup>If in my name you ask me for anything, I will do it.

If what we read about Stephen felt familiar, it’s not surprising. Both Stephen and Jesus were brought before the authorities on false charges of blasphemy. Those who accused Stephen said, “This man never stops saying things against this holy place [the synagogue] and the law; for we have heard him say that this Jesus of Nazareth will destroy this place and will change the customs that Moses handed on to us.”<sup>1</sup> Those who accused Jesus said, “We found this man perverting our nation, forbidding us to pay taxes to the emperor, and saying that he himself is the Messiah, a king.”<sup>2</sup> When Stephen was asked if the accusations were true, he declared, “Look, I see the heavens opened and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God.” Asked if he was the Messiah, Jesus replied, “If I tell you, you will

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<sup>1</sup> Acts 6.

<sup>2</sup> Luke 23.

not believe; and if I question you, you will not answer. But from now on the Son of Man will be seated at the right hand of the power of God.”<sup>3</sup> With those parallels we’re just getting started!

As Stephen was being stoned, he prayed, “Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.” You may remember before Jesus breathed his last, he cried out in a loud voice, “Father, into your hands I commend my spirit.”<sup>4</sup> Just before Stephen died, he cried out in a loud voice, “Lord, do not hold this sin against them.” When Jesus was crucified, he prayed, “Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing.”<sup>5</sup> This reading from Acts with this prayer of Stephen’s is wisely paired up with our reading from the gospel of John, which closes with Jesus saying, “If in my name you ask me for anything, I will do it.”

This verse can be so troubling to us when we pray in Jesus’ name and find our prayers seemingly unanswered. We cannot overlook the purpose of our prayers in Jesus’ name, as stated in the verse before in John: “I will do whatever you ask in my name, so that the Father may be glorified in the Son.” Stephen’s prayer is the perfect example, which is not surprising as it follows in the style of the prayer of Jesus. Stephen is asking for nothing for himself, nothing that would benefit him. And asking what he does in Jesus’ name is in itself an act which glorifies God’s name through Christ.

Let me be very clear: it is not wrong to ask prayers on behalf of others in ways that might benefit us, too, like prayers that loved ones would be healed, or to ask for prayers on our own behalf. We know we are encouraged to ask intercessory prayers – Paul does it all the time. We know we are encouraged to pray for ourselves – Jesus says to his disciples: “Be alert at all times, praying that you may have the strength to escape all these things that will take place, and to stand before the Son of Man”<sup>6</sup> and “Pray that you may not come into the time of trial.”<sup>7</sup> On one level, the whole of the Lord’s Prayer is a prayer for our individual selves. Any subject is acceptable for prayer.

For Christ to do as we pray, the intent of a prayer, should it be fulfilled, would cause God’s will to be done. Jesus’ prayers which we are fortunate to overhear serve as our example: “but I have prayed for you [Simon] that your own faith may not fail; and you, when once you have turned back, strengthen your brothers;”<sup>8</sup> “Father, if you are willing, remove this cup from me; yet, not my will but yours be done;”<sup>9</sup> “Father, I thank you for having heard me. I knew that you always hear me, but I have said this

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<sup>3</sup> Luke 22.

<sup>4</sup> Luke 23.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Luke 21:36.

<sup>7</sup> Luke 22:40.

<sup>8</sup> Luke 22:32.

<sup>9</sup> Luke 22:42.

for the sake of the crowd standing here, so that they may believe that you sent me.”<sup>10</sup> If we pray as Christ wills, we pray as God wills. This is what Jesus was trying to teach in our reading from John.

Philip said to Jesus, “Lord, show us the Father, and we will be satisfied.” Jesus replied, “Have I been with you all this time, Philip, and you still do not know me? Whoever has seen me has seen the Father... The words I say to you I do not speak on my own; but the Father who dwells in me does his works.” In all Christ did, he showed God. Jesus loved as God loves, freely and without conditions. Jesus healed as God heals, so that people might be brought back into community with others. Jesus described how and who God was through the parables – a woman who would not let even the smallest coin go lost, a shepherd who would not leave even one sheep of many, a father who would not let a child’s bad behavior stand in the way of loving him thoroughly, deeply, abundantly, extravagantly, just as he was in that very moment. “The words I say to you I do not speak on my own; but the Father who dwells in me does his works.”

If these words were not enough for the disciples to understand that God and Jesus are one, that God is revealed in Jesus, Jesus speaks the words of God to Moses when he tells them, “Do you not believe that **I am** in the Father and the Father is in me?” and “Believe me that **I am** in the Father and the Father is in me.” When Moses asked God what he should tell the people if they ask God’s name, God replied, “I AM WHO I AM... Thus you shall say to the Israelites, ‘I AM has sent me to you.’”<sup>11</sup> Any Jew who knew the story of God rescuing God’s people through Moses, which would be anyone who celebrated the Passover, which would be any Jew, knew that to use “I am” in reference to God could only be a uniting of oneself with God. No one would dare do such a thing. No one but one who truly was one with God. Thus, if we pray as Christ wills, we pray as God wills.

What could be more aligned with Jesus’ will than Stephen’s request in his name? “Lord, do not hold this sin against them.” The primary aim of the biblical witness is not to chastise or demean but to encourage and guide. We might never live up to Stephen’s example but we hold it up, and the example of Jesus, as something toward which to strive, something against which to measure our own actions, not to see how far away we are but how close we have gotten. This past week when Rebekah Circle met we talked about the gifts of longevity. Among those listed were a closer relationship with God and a willingness to let go more and more those things over which we have no control. It seems to me that pleading on behalf of others instead of judging them might come with that territory. We hold up the biblical witness as a source of hope, as a beacon toward which we strive. When we feel persecuted,

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<sup>10</sup> John 11:41-42.

<sup>11</sup> Exodus 3:14.

disappointed, betrayed, hated, let us strive toward Stephen's prayer: Lord, do not hold this sin against them. So may it be for you and for me.

Let us pray: Risen Lord, may our prayers be as yours, ever seeking to bring God's will to this world, ever seeking to glorify God. Amen.