

What Are You Looking at?! (Part 1)

Introduction

The Text

⁸ And Stephen, full of grace and power, was doing great wonders and signs among the people. ⁹ Then some of those who belonged to the synagogue of the Freedmen (as it was called), and of the Cyrenians, and of the Alexandrians, and of those from Cilicia and Asia, rose up and disputed with Stephen. ¹⁰ But they could not withstand the wisdom and the Spirit with which he was speaking. ¹¹ Then they secretly instigated men who said, “We have heard him speak blasphemous words against Moses and God.” ¹² And they stirred up the people and the elders and the scribes, and they came upon him and seized him and brought him before the council, ¹³ and they set up false witnesses who said, “This man never ceases to speak words against this holy place and the law, ¹⁴ for we have heard him say that this Jesus of Nazareth will destroy this place and will change the customs that Moses delivered to us.” ¹⁵ And gazing at him, all who sat in the council saw that his face was like the face of an angel. (Acts 6:8–15)

How Do I Know That I’m Really Walking with God?

A. If you’re a Christian in this place this morning, I’m curious, have you ever wondered:

1. How do I know that I’m really walking with God?
2. How do I know that I’m growing as a Christian, as a Christ-follower, as a disciple?
3. How do I know I’m pleasing the Lord and living in the way that I ought to?
4. Are there any metrics for this sort of thing, any evaluative grids?

a. Because I want to know. But how do I know?

B. We all inevitably try to answer this question in our own way, I think . . .

1. For some of us, we go back to when we were baptized. “I heard and believed, I went under and came up, I was baptized in the name of the Father, Son, and Spirit. What more do you need? That’s how I know!”
2. For others, we measure it by how we’re doing in our personal Bible study. If I’ve “been in the Word” every morning this week, then I’m doing great, but if not, then I’m not.
3. Others of us feel better or worse depending on our church attendance.
4. Some consider the number of people we’ve evangelized and led to Christ.
5. Some base it on the warm tingly feeling in our heart when we go to pray, or the tears that form in our eyes when, in worship, we begin to sing.
6. Some take confidence in the fact that they can speak in tongues. “See, I’ve got evidence of the Spirit! Why don’t you? Something must be off.”
7. Others feel themselves in a healthy place because they can’t speak in tongues: “I’m not out of control and unchained like those hyper-charismatics, always chasing the next experience of ‘the Spirit.’”

- a. If you're a Christian, you ought to care about this matter, deeply. How do I know I'm really walking with God and heading in the right direction with Jesus?
 - i. So how do you answer it?

We Start to Look Like Him

A. I think there's some legitimacy to all that I've mentioned thus far—and truth be told there are many ways we could come at an answer to this—but the simplest way to answer it I think is this: We know we're on the right track in following Jesus when we actually start to look like him.

1. Our lives should bear a striking resemblance to his, not just externally, but internally as well.
2. And if they don't, something's wrong.

- a. I don't care how many Bible verses I've memorized.
- b. I don't care how perfect my church attendance is.
- c. I don't care how many Sunday Serve Teams I'm a part of.
- d. I don't care if I can or can't speak in tongues, or prophesy, or whatever.
- e. I just want to know: Does my life look like Jesus . . . through and through? Do you look at me and see him? Is the overall shape of my life cruciform? Have I been marked by the cross to such a degree that I'm no longer merely talking about it, I'm starting to look like it?
 - i. As Paul says at the end of his letter to the Galatians: ["I bear on my body the marks of Jesus" \(Gal. 6:17\)](#).
 - ii. Can you read the gospel off of my thoughts and feelings, words and deeds? Do I look like Jesus? Do you?

B. Because that's the point! That's where our redemption and our discipleship is intended to go.

1. Back when I preached on DNA Groups here at Mercy Hill, I tried to make this point abundantly clear (we're actually looking to get these groups rolling more and more in the coming weeks). We looked at all these places in Scripture where we see, unmistakably, the goal of your redemption is renewal in God's image, being formed in and conformed to the likeness of Jesus.

- a. So, in [1 Cor. 15:49](#), Paul writes: ["\[J\]ust as we have borne the image of the man of dust \[Adam\], we shall also bear the image of the man of heaven \[Jesus\]."](#)
- b. Or later in [Rom. 8:29](#), he puts it this way: ["\[T\]hose whom \[God\] foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he \[Jesus\] might be the firstborn among many brothers."](#)
- c. That's the goal, that's the point, to be conformed to Jesus' image. And we're to be growing towards that little by little. Which is why Paul later exhorts the Ephesian Christians to: [" 22 put off your old self, which belongs to your former manner of life and is corrupt through deceitful desires, 23 and . . . be renewed in the spirit of your](#)

minds,²⁴ and . . . put on the new self, created after the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness” (Eph. 4:22-24).

- C. I love how C.S. Lewis puts it in his famous work, *Mere Christianity*: “Now the whole offer which Christianity makes is this: that we can, if we let God have His way, come to share in the life of Christ. If we do, we shall then be sharing a life which was begotten, not made, which always existed and always will exist. Christ is the Son of God. If we share in this kind of life we also shall be sons of God. We shall love the Father as He does and the Holy Ghost will arise in us. He came to this world and became a man in order to spread to other men the kind of life He has — by what I call ‘good infection.’ Every Christian is to become a little Christ. The whole purpose of becoming a Christian is simply nothing else” (177).

Later, speaking of the church’s mission, he puts it similarly: “[T]he Church exists for nothing else but to draw men into Christ, to make them little Christs. If they are not doing that, all the cathedrals, clergy, missions, sermons, even the Bible itself, are simply a waste of time. God became Man for no other purpose” (199). So if, as your pastor, I don’t have it as my primary task to help you look more like Jesus, I am failing.

1. Jesus spreads the “good infection.” We come down with Christ-likeness. We contract the plague of his personality. We become “little Christs.” We look like him. That’s the point!

- D. And that’s what this story with Stephen puts on technicolor display for us. There are striking similarities between what we see of him here and what we saw of Jesus who came before him and now lives in and through him by way of the Spirit.

1. Luke wants the connection to be undeniably plain so that we might be sure: those who claim Christ must increasingly look like him.

- E. So, we see that Stephen looks like his Lord in three distinct ways. He looks like him: (1) In the Way He Serves; (2) In the Way He Suffers; and (3) In the Way He Speaks. And, you know, we should look like him in these three ways as well.

1. We’re going to take the first two this morning.
2. The third we’ll take up next week when we come to [Acts 7](#) and look at what Stephen says in response to all this. (We’ll dip into the end of Acts 7 a little today, but we’ll deal with it in full next week.) So let’s go!

(1) In the Way He Serves

- A. First, we see that Stephen looks like Jesus in the way he serves.

With Humility And Compassion

Stephen

- A. For this, we can’t forget the broader context. Remember, we’ve already been introduced to this man named Stephen. I know it’s been a few weeks because of Missions Emphasis Week and Easter and all this, but, we looked at [Acts 6:1-7](#) a while back, and it’s there, actually that Stephen first makes his appearance.

1. And what is he doing?

a. He's serving. He's serving tables to be precise. To get even more specific: He's serving tables for the needy, the vulnerable, the overlooked among the fledgling church there in Jerusalem.

i. He's serving tables for these Hellenistic widows, who due to language and cultural barriers it seems, were being neglected in the daily benevolence distributions.

B. So we have to be immediately struck with the pronounced humility of this man. And the compassion he has for those in place of hardship. His heart is warm and tender with affection for others.

Jesus

A. All of this bears striking resemblance to his and our Lord, does it not? In fact, we could rightly say, it seems to me, that Jesus himself is the first and quintessential table-server.

1. “²³ [T]he Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed took bread,²⁴ and when he had given thanks, he broke it, and said, ‘This is my body, which is for you. Do this in remembrance of me.’²⁵ In the same way also he took the cup, after supper, saying, ‘This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me’” (1 Cor. 11:23–25).

2. And he did more than just serve tables that night, if you recall. He went even lower. He got down on his knees and washed his disciples' dust-coated, fungus-riddled, foul-smelling feet (John 13).

a. This is a servant's job. It's no task fit for a king, let alone the King of kings. And yet there he is, on the ground, leading from down low.

B. And all of this stuff, as great and amazing as it is to consider, it is just emblematic, just a little picture, a little teaser or appetizer—it's just a foreshadow of what he was preparing to do for us on the cross.

1. As he himself told his disciples: “[T]he Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many” (Mark 10:45).

You and I

A. And he calls us to the same.

B. In fact, if you know the context of the verse I just read in Mark, then you know Jesus is actually there challenging his disciples to not just receive from him, but to go and do likewise: “⁴² You know that those who are considered rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones exercise authority over them.⁴³ But it shall not be so among you. But whoever would be great among you must be your servant,⁴⁴ and whoever would be first among you must be slave of all. [And then

comes . . .]⁴⁵ For even the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many” (Mark 10:42–45).

C. I wonder . . .

1. Do you look like Jesus in the way you serve with humility and concern for those in hard places . . . or do you walk around looking for people to serve you?
2. Are you willing to do anything to help . . . or are some tasks “beneath you”?
3. Are you willing to get dirty in love for people in your life . . . or do you pass on that stuff and try to keep your keep your hands clean?
4. Have you been more like a servant lately with the people in your life . . . or more like a master?

With Power (“Wonders and Signs”)

Stephen

A. Now, returning to our text in [Acts 6](#), we see that Stephen’s service here is not just marked by humility and compassion, there’s also a power to it. Did you notice that?

1. I think that’s what Luke is highlighting for us when he opens there in [v. 8](#) saying: “[Stephen, full of grace and power, was doing great wonders and signs among the people.](#)”

B. When we hear of this idea of “[wonders and signs](#)” we might think of something like a magic show or fireworks display or something like this—some great spectacle with entertainment value. People gather around to watch the “wonders and signs” as the magnificent Stephen takes the stage.

1. But that’s never what “[wonders and signs](#)” mean in the Bible.
 - a. These are never random acts done to wow a crowd.
 - b. They’re always redemptive acts of God done in mercy to bless a person or people in need.

C. Even in the book of Acts itself, already we’ve seen this:

1. So the healing of that man born lame who was laid to beg in the dirt out in front of temple, in [Acts 4:22](#) it’s called a “[sign of healing](#).”
2. And later, as the disciples are praying, they ask God to “[stretch out \[his\] hand to heal](#)” and refer to such healing activity as “[signs and wonders \[being\] performed through the name of \[his\] holy servant Jesus](#)” ([Acts 4:30](#)).
 - a. So this isn’t just a magic show.
 - b. It’s God coming to heal and bless and serve.
 - i. And he’s using Stephen to do it.

Jesus

- A. And, of course, again, this is just following the pattern of Jesus' own life and ministry—where his wonders and signs are always performed to bless and serve others (cf. [Acts 2:22](#)). Every one of them had a gracious purpose (healing the sick, casting out demons, feeding the 5000, raising the dead, etc.).

You and I

- A. And, you know, I think the same can happen with us today as we pray, and we ask God to intervene and help and heal and provide for folks in need. Do we believe that? Do we call on God for that? God just might show up in power.
- B. If I could bring all we've been saying thus far together here . . .
 - 1. It seems to me, we should pursue and pray for the miracle.
 - 2. But, you know, we don't just pray and then go our way. We roll up our sleeves and get busy helping as well. We don't just say: "Be warm and be filled, I'm praying for you." We wrap the blanket around the person. We deliver the bowl of soup. It's both!
 - a. We ask God to come in power, and sometimes he does.
 - b. But, even if he doesn't do the miracle in the more extraordinary way, we recognize sometimes he wants to do the miracle through more "ordinary" means—through people who, because of Jesus, now no longer care just for themselves and their agendas, their desires, their comforts, but they care for others.
 - i. That's no less a miracle.
 - ii. In fact, Paul, if I'm following his logic in [1 Cor. 12-14](#), it seems he would say, that's the greater miracle. Love.
- C. But, whatever the case, in it all, we serve . . . we look like Jesus.

(2) In the Way He Suffers

Explicit Parallels

- A. But now we must consider the fact that Stephen looks like Jesus, not just in the way he serves, but also in the way he suffers. And here is where, so far as I can tell, the parallels between Stephen and Jesus actually get even more explicit.

Parallel #1: Same "Holy" Players

- A. First, we see that it's very same players involved.
 - 1. You remember that, for Jesus, it was the Jews in general, and the Jewish leadership in particular, the Sanhedrin, that was coming after Jesus.
 - 2. And so it is here again with Stephen. He's dragged "[before the \[very same\] council](#)" ([v. 12](#)).

Parallel #2: Same Dirty Deeds

- A. But, then second, we see that they do the very same sorts of things to Stephen that they did to Jesus.
1. You remember, with Jesus, they seized him in the garden, brought him in before the high priest and others, sought to stir up false testimony against him, and ultimately charged him with “blasphemy” (Matt. 26:65) because of what he said about the temple and about himself.
 - a. And what do they want to do as judgment? “He deserves death,” they say (v. 66).
 2. Well, so it is here again with Stephen. It’s almost a carbon copy. Look at vv. 9-14 again now with this in mind: “⁹ Then some of those who belonged to the synagogue of the Freedmen (as it was called), and of the Cyrenians, and of the Alexandrians, and of those from Cilicia and Asia, rose up and disputed with Stephen. ¹⁰ But they could not withstand the wisdom and the Spirit with which he was speaking. ¹¹ Then they secretly instigated men who said, ‘We have heard him speak blasphemous words against Moses and God.’ ¹² And they stirred up the people and the elders and the scribes, and they came upon him and seized him and brought him before the council, ¹³ and they set up false witnesses who said, ‘This man never ceases to speak words against this holy place and the law, ¹⁴ for we have heard him say that this Jesus of Nazareth will destroy this place and will change the customs that Moses delivered to us.’”
 - a. And what do they end up doing to him? Well, here is where we start to dip into Acts 7, as I said. They kill him. Acts 7:58: “[T]hey cast him out of the city and stoned him.”
 - i. He becomes the first Christian martyr—following, in a very literal sense, the path paved by his Master, who himself was also put to death outside the city gates in brutal fashion.

Parallel #3: Same Surprising Response

- A. But the parallels are most striking of all when now, in the third place, we consider how Stephen responds to all this.
1. So, in Acts 7:59, we read this: “And as they were stoning Stephen, he called out, ‘Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.’”
 2. This clearly echoes Jesus’ words from the cross in Luke 23:46: “Then Jesus, calling out with a loud voice, said, ‘Father, into your hands I commit my spirit!’ And having said this he breathed his last.”
 3. And then, in Acts 7:60, we read of Stephen: “And falling to his knees he cried out with a loud voice, ‘Lord, do not hold this sin against them.’ And when he had said this, he fell asleep.”
 4. Such a surprising and gracious prayer for his enemies, for the very ones who are bashing his face in with rocks, echoes unmistakably the prayer of Jesus from the cross in Luke 23:34: “Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.”

- B. The parallels are unequivocal, clear as noonday, too obvious to be denied or ignored. But what does all this mean?
1. It means, as I've said, that Christians, that followers of Jesus, are to look like him not just in the way that they serve, but also in the way that they suffer.

He Suffered So That I Don't Have to?

- A. In our day, there are some professed Christians who like to let themselves off the hook in all this by claiming that surely Jesus suffered the way he did so that we don't have to. "He gets the death, I get the life. Isn't that the gospel?"
1. And, the tricky thing is, in one sense, of course, this is true and accurate and good.
 - a. Jesus suffered on that cross, under the wrath of God, for our sin, in our place, in our stead. He died in that way so that I don't have to. Yes and amen!
 2. But in another sense, we could say, he suffered the way he did precisely so I could and would suffer in a like manner.
 - a. Here now I'm not talking about suffering under the wrath of God, suffering for sin—he's taken that once and for all for me.
 - b. No, now we're talking about suffering in love, for Jesus and others. It's quite a profound and mysterious truth that one of the ways you know you're truly alive in Jesus is you're ready to die in love for him and others. You'll take up your cross and follow him (cf. [Luke 9:23](#); [14:27](#)).
- B. So, in one sense, we say, then: "He died so I don't have to." But, in another sense, we say: "He died so that I can too!"

1. "¹²This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. ¹³Greater love has no one than this, that someone lay down his life for [them]" ([John 15:12–13](#)).

- C. And you've got to just stop and consider this for a moment. Put yourself in Stephen's place.
1. They are burying him under boulders and with his last breath he is asking God to be kind to them?!
 2. When you are hurt, when you are mistreated, when you are suffering at the hands of someone else, unfairly, unjustly, how do you respond? Does it even begin to approach this?
 - a. Where does such a thing come from for Stephen? How can we ever hope to see something like this in our own lives? What enables Stephen to look like Jesus the way that he does?

But How?!

What Are You Looking at?!

- A. Well, to put simply: He's looking like Jesus . . . because he's looking at him!
- B. Here's where we come to make sense of the title of this sermon, if you noticed it: **What Are You Looking at?!**
 - 1. Out on the streets, in common vernacular, this is an expression of irritation, intended to provoke. "What are you looking at?!"—meaning: either you step up if you got something to say or you step down and go mind your own business.
 - 2. But here in the church, this question is not meant to express irritation, but love and concern. "What are you looking at?!"

You Look Like What You Look at

- A. Because, you see, there's this principle that runs all through all the Bible, and we could put it like this: whatever you're looking at, that's what you start to look like. Or we've said it like this before: you become what you behold.
- B. We can get this in a general sense, I think. It's not hard to see it happening, especially if you have kids. They do this in obvious ways, all the time.
 - 1. So my son, Levi, for example, he got into the Golden State Warriors with me last year and he would watch the games and the highlights and things. And in doing so he beheld Steph Curry, an amazing player, the best shooter of all time, if you know anything about him. And one of the things Curry will do, he has this celebration he does, when the game's on the line and he hits a shot that really serves as the final dagger, there's no hope for the other team anymore, he'll run off to the other side of the court and do what's been called the "night-night"—meaning: he just put the other team and the game to rest. It's over.
 - 2. And so Levi sees this, he beholds this, and what does he do? Well, when he's out for his little YMCA games or he's practicing with the hoop out in our street, and he makes a big shot, what does he do? Night-night. Sometimes, it's not a big shot at all, if the ball even goes through the hoop, it's a big deal to him, it's worthy of a celebration, the other team could creaming them, but if he makes it, night-night. Why? He's been looking at Steph Curry, he's starting to look like Steph Curry—his jump shot needs a little work, but we'll get there.

Put Negatively: Psalm 135

- A. We see the principle put negatively often in the psalms and the prophets especially, when they're talking about the deadening effects of idolatry.
 - 1. **Ps. 135:15-18** is particularly forceful on this point: "¹⁵ The idols of the nations are silver and gold, the work of human hands. ¹⁶ They have mouths, but do not speak; they have eyes, but do not see; ¹⁷ they have ears, but do not hear, nor is there any breath in their mouths. ¹⁸ Those who make them become like them, so do all who trust in them."

- a. If you look to them, you start to look like them. You no longer have insightful, wise things to say. You stop seeing things clearly. You stop hearing what's true. You go dumb, blind, and deaf. But beyond all this, you're spiritually dead. There's no breath in your soul. It's just flatlined on the table.

Put Positively: Stephen

- A. But here in our text, with Stephen, we see this principle in its positive form. Stephen is able to look like Jesus because he's looking at him.
- B. Now, admittedly, this isn't entirely clear within the boundaries of our little text. But it's hinted at in that last verse of [Acts 6](#) there, where we're told that, even while all these guys are falsely accusing him and hating on him, when they "[gaze] at him, all who sat in the council saw that his face was like the face of an angel" (v. 15).
 1. One would think, given the circumstances, he'd be downcast and in the dumps.
 2. But he's shining.
 - a. It's meant to be an ironic echo, I think, of the way Moses' face was said to have shone in the OT. In other words, while these guys are claiming Stephen is "speak[ing] blasphemous words against Moses" ([Acts 6:11](#)), Stephen's face is actually shining out in a similar manner to Moses.
 - b. And how did this happen for Moses? Well, we're told in [Exod. 34:29](#): "the skin of his face shone because he had been talking with God."
 - i. Here is where the connection starts to become more plain. When you spend time with God it transforms you. When you look at God, you start to look like him.
- C. But this is made especially clear when we drop back into the end of [Acts 7](#). As they're all grinding their teeth at Stephen, driving him out, encircling him to stone him, what is he doing?
 1. Well we know the things he says, we just looked at that.
 2. But before he says such things, we're told what enables him to do it in the first place: he's looking at Jesus, [vv. 55-56](#): " ⁵⁵ But he, full of the Holy Spirit, gazed into heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God. ⁵⁶ And he said, 'Behold, I see the heavens opened, and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God.'"
 - a. He sees him, and that's why he's shining. He's looking at him, and that's why he's starting to look more like him in the way he serves and the way he suffers, in the way he prays, in the way he dies.
 - b. "I see his glory. I see his grace. I see him standing in my defense. I know that he is my advocate. I know that I go to be at home with the Lord because of the cross, because of the resurrection, because of his ongoing intercession for me."

- i. That changes everything. Even when everyone is against you, you can still know that God is for you.
- ii. And that's how he's able to pray in love for these people even while they're killing them. Because their hate doesn't have the final word over Stephen's life. Jesus' grace and love do.

D. This is the sort of thing Paul is talking about in [2 Cor. 3](#).

1. He references the shining of Moses' face, when he writes in [vv. 7-8](#): “⁷ Now if the ministry of death, carved in letters on stone, came with such glory that the Israelites could not gaze at Moses' face because of its glory, which was being brought to an end,⁸ will not the ministry of the Spirit have even more glory?”
2. And with that he anticipates the even greater transformation that comes for those who now look upon Jesus. So he goes on in [v. 18](#) to write that “we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord [esp. ‘in the face of Jesus Christ’ (2 Cor. 4:6)], are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another. For this comes from the Lord who is the Spirit.” We become what we behold. We look like what we look at.

What About You?

A. So, I've got to ask: What are you looking at?! Has the gaze of your heart lately been set upon Jesus or something else?

1. Whatever your answer might be, it's going to shape you for better or for worse.

B. Let me just give you a couple examples so you can begin to see how this works and then we'll close . . .

1. If you're looking at all the ways a person has hurt you or taken advantage of you or let you down, if that's what you see more than anything else, then it will shape you.
 - a. You'll want to get vengeance, make them hurt, or you'll go more passive-aggressive and hint at things with your loaded remarks and rolling eyes, or you'll just cut them out of your life. I don't want to deal with you.
2. But if you're looking at Jesus, if you see the one who died for you and for them, the one who moved towards you at great cost to himself, even when he knew you were just going to let him down, turn on him, hurt him, that shapes you in the other direction, doesn't it? If he's the one you see more than this other person?
 - a. You can forgive as you have been forgiven, love you as you have been loved, you can move towards in kindness and bless your enemy.
 - i. Because you're looking at Jesus, you start to look more like him. Your life starts to glow with a bit more of that glory.

3. If the thing that's really capturing your gaze these days is the idea of saving up for that dream house, or car, or some vacation, or getting that nest egg a little bigger for an even more lax retirement, then it's going to shape you.
 - a. You're going to have money on the mind. You're going to snap at your spouse when they spend on something you don't think is worth it. You're going to tighten the fist when someone comes asking for financial help. You're going to look with jealousy and even disdain at those who have more and maybe already have what you want. You're going to cut corners to save just a little for yourself.
 4. But if you're looking at Jesus, if he's captured your gaze, when see what he gave up for you—he traded the riches of glory with his Father to come dwell in the dumpster with you; when you realize what he's secured for you in his death and resurrection, the eternal inheritance that's being kept in heaven for you, it's going to shape you.
 - a. Yeah okay, you might still save up for a house, or for retirement, or whatever, but it doesn't matter as much. And you're able to open that fist and give generously. And you can celebrate when someone else gets their thing and you don't. Because you have Jesus.
 - i. Again, because you're looking at Jesus, you start to look more like him. Your life starts to glow with a bit more of that glory.
- C. You'll catch the "good infection." You'll be a "little Christ." And you can know, and others will know, you're walking with God, you've been with Jesus!