

Expand Your Vision

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[0 : 00] Well, what's up Table Church? This is your boy, Pastor Ramon, aka Pastor Ray. And as always, I'm excited to be back with you. I have missed you. I've tried to tune in as much as I could. But I love, I love, love, love my Table family. And I'm excited to be with you on this Sunday in April. And listen, I have a sermon that I want to present to you. I want to just give a moment to take a moment to thank Pastor Anthony for the invite to preach today. And also a shout out to the Table Band, Jordan, and all of those who are part of the band. I miss you all, love you all, and hope to be with you and worshiping with you again soon. For those who do know me, it's good to see you again. For those who don't know me, I've been with the Table for a couple of years now. And I do a couple of other ministries, but I'm always, always happy to be with a part of the church family that I help to do. And it's always great to be with you. I'm going to read from a scripture today. That scripture is from Acts chapter 7. And I'm going to do verses 51 through 59. And then we're going to dig in to a conversation between us. All right. So Acts verse 7, starting at 51, says this. And this is Stephen, just to, we'll give a little history a little bit later. But this is Stephen, who is now in front of the courts, the Sanhedrin. And he is giving the last part of this defense, if you will. And then it goes into a little bit more of the story of what happens. So we'll start at verse 51 from Acts chapter 7. And Stephen says this.

You stiff-necked people. Your hearts and ears are still uncircumcised. You're just like your ancestors. You always resist the Holy Spirit. Was there ever a prophet your ancestors 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 given through angels but have not obeyed it.

Verse 54. When the members of the Sanhedrin heard this, they were furious. They gnashed their teeth at him. But Stephen, full of the Holy Spirit, looked up to heaven and saw the glory of God and Jesus standing at the right hand of God. Look, he said. I see heaven open and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God.

[3 : 04] At this, they covered their ears. They did not want to hear this. And so, and yelling, verse 57, and yelling at the top of their voices, they all rushed at him. They dragged him out of the city, and they began to stone him. Meanwhile, the witnesses laid their coats at the feet of a young man named Saul.

Verse 59. While they were stoning him. While they were shooting him. I'm sorry. While they were putting their knees on his neck. I'm sorry. While they were killing him. While they were brutally destroying him.

While they were stoning him. Stephen prayed. Lord Jesus, receive my spirit. Then he fell to his knees and he cried out. Lord, do not hold this sin against him.

When he had said this. He fell asleep. Won't you pray with me?

Oh, God, your spirit is amazing. God, I am in awe of who you are. I am blessed by you.

[4 : 30] I am blessed just because of the fact that you thought about me. And not only did you think about me, but you thought about me and created me in the image of you.

It is a matter of fact, God, you created all of us. And you created all of us in the image of you. Wow. God, to create such a vast family.

To think that we are all brothers and sisters. Yet, God, sometimes we don't get it right. God, I ask now that you remove me in this moment and allow nothing but your spirit to pierce through.

Touch every heart, every mind, every soul that is with us both on today and even in the future. God, we yield right now to your spirit.

Speak and speak clearly. Thank you, God. Be with us. In the name of Jesus. Amen. So, I thought about the questions that I get asked so frequently lately.

[5 : 44] Pastor Ray, should we in the church be talking about politics? Should we address social issues? As a matter of fact, last week on our Well Encounter, we talked a good bit about has the church become a voice of hatred?

There are so many different sides. The conservative church, the liberal church, the non-LGBT inclusive church, the white church, the black church, the Hispanic church, the Asian church. There are so many different separations. people have asked, should we even address the issue of racism or discrimination or intrinsic bias?

Why can't we just be about the church? I think about it from a black man's point of view. Do I feel like preaching yet another sermon to folks about how it feels to be black?

About how it feels to be the minority? Praying, hoping my voice would be heard? wondering if I will die a senseless death like George Floyd, Rihanna Teller, Dante Wright, Tamir Rice, Emmett Till.

[6 : 56] But, and I'd probably be fooling myself if I didn't tell you that I'm tired of it. Definitely tired of it. But I, I realize that it's necessary if we are to get to the place where we love like God and each one of us have to matter.

Now, I'm aware of the majority of who my audience is right now. So, I'm not going to proceed to act like I'm about to convince anybody of anything new. I think the majority of the table's audience knows or at least has figured out to some extent that we are seeing amounts of racial disparity and discrimination and segregation all throughout this country and even throughout the world.

But instead, I'd like to use the story of Stephen to talk about what it looks like to be an outcast no matter where you're from, no matter what your background is.

I'd like to talk about Stephen to help those of us who are family figure out what it means to claim and worship the same God.

But what it means to worship that God even when you are cast out, even when your present adversity towards the current comfort of privilege is being removed, what it might be like to serve God and be an ally to those who are not as privileged to your fullest capability.

[8 : 34] And listen, I believe that most of us have some form of privilege. So privilege should not totally be a word that makes you feel all the way uncomfortable because to some degree we all have privilege.

But what does it mean when you have privilege and in any sort of way and you are called to be an advocate for those who have less privilege? What does it look like to serve with all you have for the sake of all and not give in and not give up and not give out because it is a constant fight?

So in today's sermon, I want to work with you and I want to walk with you down a road to ask you a couple of questions because I don't have all the answers and I won't pretend to be a person with all the answers.

The best thing that I can offer is questions or questions that will help you to find your own answers, do some internal work and if I'm honest with you, I have work to do as well. And so as we start, I also want to note that I am wearing a hoodie that I don't normally wear when I'm preaching but I feel like the best way to tackle the images that we often see on display of young black men in hoodies is to be one in a hoodie who displays something different.

I don't act like I'm perfect but I am a pastor and perhaps this is an image that we don't see much of and it is my buddy's hoodie that represents his nonprofit Project Goodman which is a male mentoring program specifically directed, mostly directed to the African American community and I want to invite you also to check out his website Minister LeVar Jones and it's projectgoodman.org Now that we've got all of that out of the way I have a first question for you.

[10 : 29] My first question for you is who are you right now? Who are you right now? So one of the greatest inspirational people of all time taught me one of the greatest lessons of my life.

She said your name means everything. It's the one thing that no one can take away from you. It's what speaks for you in rooms without your presence.

Your name is what endorses your respect. Your name precedes you into every circumstance. dance. And I have to say the person I first heard that from that truly inspirational sensation was one of the smartest cookies I know.

My mama taught me a powerful life lesson. Hey mom if you're watching. But this thing about your name being the most important thing that you can have it works both in the positive and the

negative.

So I'm going to throw out a few examples. I'll throw out a few names and I want you to either think about those names and reflect on the uh reflect on the feelings that they bring the emotions that they invoke or you can even type it in if you're even that daring you can type it in the chat and and say what those names are in the chat.

[11 : 55] So let's start. First name Oprah Winfrey. What does that name mean to you? You can write it or you can just think it.

And I'm hoping that somebody is actually writing. The second one is Pastor Anthony. Pastor Anthony.

What does that name mean to you? Another name is Jesus. What does the name Jesus bring in bring up in you?

I've got two more. If you're writing thank you for writing and if you're thinking thank you for thinking. The one more two more names. One Adolf Hitler.

Adolf Hitler. What does that name mean to you? And last Saddam Hussein.

[13 : 01] The name Saddam Hussein. I believe that our historical biblical character for today the person who's the focus of our text and if you played along thank you for playing along by the way but the person who's the focus of our text today Stephen I think Stephen understood my mother's philosophy.

I think he understands this from the introduction to him in Acts chapter 6 all the way until he's martyred in Acts chapter 7. Let me paint the picture.

So in the text that I read for you Stephen is actually being murdered for what his name represents. Now before you interpret that as a bad thing let's develop a little more of his story you get that his story history boom boom okay okay I'm sorry all right historically the already before pre this moment in Acts the crucifixion and the resurrection has already happened.

Jesus has already died. Jesus has already returned. The day of Pentecost has already taken place and the Holy Spirit has already descended upon God's people. Jesus says wait as I leave I will send the Holy Spirit for you.

If this is all happening the apostles and the disciples of Christ are meeting together and living with one another and they are bringing everything that they have so they can be evenly yoked they can live a life that is even and even killed to each other.

[14 : 37] They're all taking care of each other they're all loving each other. Christianity is growing amongst both the Hebraic Jews and the Hellenistic Jews. The Hebraic Jews are those that were already Jewish by foundation.

The Hellenistic Jews are those that have grown accustomed to the Greek way of life and so you would say that the Hebraic Jews are more of the dominant culture of this time and the Hellenistic Jews are those that are subculture.

They are the less dominant culture, the minority if you will, even though they are all in this Christianity is new and so it by itself is a more less dominant culture but even in the less dominant culture the Hebraic Jews are the more dominant and the Hellenistic are those that are less dominant.

But then what we find in Acts right before this in chapter 6 especially is that there is this tension between the two cultures both the Hebraic and Hellenistic Jews.

The Hebraic Jews seem to be a little bit above the Hellenistic Jews and moreover the tension arises in the care that is given to the widows of both cultures.

[15 : 50] Now traditionally most of the women of that day were taken care of by their spouses and unfortunately if your spouse, if you as a woman, your spouse died then it usually left the woman to be taken care of by the town's system.

Perhaps when you think about it that way it's like a former version of our current system of welfare. The town's people all bring their things and they give what they don't need to the town and then to the leaders and then the leaders they provide the necessary meals and whatnot for those widows that are left and they provide the things and resources that they need.

Some would call this serving tables, serving the tables. The people are serving the tables for the widows and feeding them what they don't have. there's this privilege because the Hebraic Jews, because they are people that are just naturally from that town, they're still a part of the dominant culture even though they are choosing to have a religiously belief in Jesus that is a little different

from those that practice the older way and traditions, they are still part of the dominating culture. whereas the Hellenistic Jews are the folks that are like, you know, I'm still trying to get with this Jesus thing, I'm still trying to grow in this Jesus walk, but for some reason I still feel as though we don't have the same type of resources.

Maybe you recognize this as a person whose skin is darker than those who are lighter. My skin is darker, so even though I'm a part of the same culture, I feel like I'm looked at a little lesser than.

[17 : 40] Because I grew up in a different economic bracket, I looked at as if I'm a little less than. Perhaps because I have dreads or because I am black or because I'm Asian, I don't look or think.

Because I'm a white person who was born in the lower class system, I don't have the same privileges as those in the upper class system. This is how the Hellenistic Jews are feeling about the Hebraic Jews.

And so the Hellenistic Jews begin to complain. They should. Some would argue that they shouldn't have. Some would argue that they should. But if you're living beneath the poverty line of what is normal, then you feel some sort of way and upset.

And so they do. And so they take this argument to the apostles and they say, listen, we feel as though we're not being treated the same as those that are with us.

And how do we make this work? How do we make this better? And so the apostles, they hear this argument and here's how they decide to settle it. They decide to say, look, here's the deal.

[18 : 44] I don't know. I don't know. We don't have time to be bothered with these frivolous things. They are beneath us. Wow. The apostles of Christ are saying this is beneath us to handle this type of problem because we're not meant to serve.

We're meant to preach. preach. The dominant culture of a lower culture is saying we don't have the time to deal with that of the lower of the lower culture because we have to preach as if service is not anywhere near the same type of ministry level as preaching is and praying is.

And so their suggestion is that they, those folks in the lower culture, go and find seven people that they respect, seven people that they believe are good people, are anointed people, are holy ghost filled people.

Find those folks, bring them, and then they will, they will appoint them to be the table waiters. And so they do. And once they go find these folks, they find seven folks, they bring them back to the apostles, the apostles pray over them, and then they're appointed to serve the tables because the apostles are too good.

to serve tables. And this, one of those seven, is how Stephen is chosen. Stephen is a person who the people have found some trust in.

[20 : 09] Stephen is a person that people have found some honor and some integrity in. Stephen is a person who has already created a name for himself. He has displayed leadership skills.

They trust Stephen's name. My first point to those who are in tune with us today is you have to, in order to be an ally, in order to work well, in order to lead, in order to fight for justice, you have got to own up to you.

Point one, own up to you. Stephen had owned up to himself. He knew who he was. Stephen was a leader. Stephen projected a personality and a being that was able and capable to lead.

They trusted him. Do people trust you? What does your name mean to people? What are you currently doing in your life that allows others to see the heart in you?

Who's in your network? Are you already surrounded by diversity? Are you already in places that prove that you're willing to do the hard work? Are you already around people who are challenging you, not just holding you comfortable?

[21 : 20] Are you around people? Are you enlarging your surroundings and your family and your friendship and your community? Are you speaking to those that don't look like you, that don't think like you? Are you doing the work to present yourself and your name?

Does your name speak to people who you would want to have the quality that you have? My second question is this.

Are you ready for the next level? Stephen is chosen to wait tables, not as a preacher, not as a teacher, not as an apostle, not as a prayer warrior, but to wait tables.

Stephen is anointed. He's respected, but he's brought down to a lower, he's brought up to a lower level position than what he's worth. I'm sure some of you all right now can relate.

You're probably qualified to do greater things, bigger things. You're probably qualified to reach the masses. You're probably qualified to have a better job, but instead you have been appointed to do the thing that is less than in this society.

[22 : 31] The apostles have stated, they say, it would not be right for us to neglect the ministry of the word of God in order to wait tables.

In other words, this is not worthy enough of our attention. Again, it's as if the service of people is less than preaching. Oh, come on, you all know.

It's as if being a part of a church and serving people, volunteering and do the free things is less than somehow being in the government and working for the politicians.

That's the mind frame that this has. You all know what this mind frame is at. I know what it's like because I see it every day. It's as if working around people who are speaking proper English, the king's English, people who know how to talk well, not Ebonics, people who are not begging for change but can afford their, it's like hanging with them is better than hanging with them that don't have.

But soon, after the seven are chosen, and as Stephen is chosen, we see perhaps an unexpected, an elaborate outcome.

[23 : 42] Verse number seven says, So the word of God spread. The number of the disciples in Jerusalem increased rapidly, and a large number of priests become obedient to the faith.

Stephen seems to have more effect than what was assumed about him or expected. P.S. I don't know who needs to hear this on this service, but you've been appointed in a place and a position that you don't quite think is worthy enough of your calling.

God says, don't give up. I'm telling you, because God has something better for you, and this is what happens with Stephen. Although Stephen is appointed to a lower level of ministry, God sees what he is worth, and God still uses him abundantly.

My second point to you is armor up. Armor up. I have a best friend and a colleague who started out as a mentee of mine.

He wanted badly to excel in ministry, and he kept saying, Ramon, what do I have to do to find myself in better places of ministry? He always said, listen, it's like so many of my young colleagues and friends, they're doing so much.

[24 : 55] I just want to be able to be where they are. And I would always say to him, Best Black, you have to do the work. Dean Kراسيassi, a well-known and self-made millionaire, writes in his book, Millionaire Success Habits.

He says, successful people, whether they're working for somebody else or working for themselves, do whatever they do to the best of their ability, is if the boss is watching them every minute of the day.

Stephen understands this concept. Stephen understands that it's not about the people. It never was about the apostles pulling him to a higher level. Stephen understands that I've got to be armored up and ready for the opportunity that my boss, that God gives me, and when God presents it to me, I need to be ready.

God uses him. But when God uses him, Stephen was already ripe for the using. He was already armored up. It's not to be confused with cockiness or privilege.

He was already knowledgeable and wise. Family, are you armored up for your opportunity? Are you armored up to fight for justice? Are you armored up to build for equality?

[26 : 12] Are you armored up for the next level? Have you already read the books that help you to understand our history and understand how you might help change go in the future? Are you already armored up by watching documentaries, documentaries like the 13th?

Are you about Juneteenth? Are you already armored up by placing yourselves around people who don't look like you or think like you in order to understand how complex we as humans are, that we have differences of opinions?

Are you armored up? Are you armored up? Stephen was armored up. I was, I love Becky who plays with us in the bass in our band.

I recently asked her and approached her about being a guest on the well. She couldn't do it because she was going out of town. Shout out to Becky if you're watching. And one of the things that she said to me, and she said it in a loving way, and I know that she knew that I did, she said, well, I'm sorry I can't do it.

I really would love to do it, but I know I'm not the only Asian in your network. It did me justice to know that she's not the only Asian in my network, that I have other Asian friends, that I have friends of all different types of ethnicities because I want to be armored up for where God has called me to be in ministry.

[27 : 32] I want to be armored up for where God has called me to be in ministry. It's not just about the church. Ministry is in your workforce. If you're working in the hospital, if you're working in television, if you're working in the government, you have got to be armored up.

This is about doing the ground work, about making sure that your name is built, that people respect your name because you're already doing the tough work like Steven. My last question is this. Are you ready to fight? Steven's willingness to succeed, his passion for his calling, wins over some, but it gains him a whole other audience of opposition as well.

The decree to do good often does bring about tension and opposition. Let me say that again. The decree to do good often does bring about tension and opposition.

Steven becomes a hot topic if he joins the groups of believers who celebrate Jesus. To some, a champion of Jesus is also an enemy to the established order and a rebel to the inveterate powers.

[28 : 48] Those in authority begin to attack Steven verbally. By chapter seven, by the end of chapter six, they begin to bully and they even try to frame his character. They attempt to build this smear campaign against his name.

That's often how the enemy will attack you. The enemy will try to humiliate you. Degrade you. Come against your reputation. Steven is wise. And so when the enemy tries to embarrass him because he was prepared, because he was armored up, Steven actually excels even more.

And he's even more victorious in his verbal battles because Steven knows how to come against his enemy. Just like some of us who I hope we have learned or we're learning so much.

We are, I see so many of my table folks who are posting, so many of my table folks who are putting things out there and standing up for what's right. You've got to be ready because the enemy is going to definitely try to bring you down as an advocate and as an ally for God's people.

How many of us have prevailed in not only the talking the talk, but walking the walk? Not to err as a tool for bragging, but how many of us are genuinely just a lover for God's people?

[30 : 03] How many of you are armored up and ready to rise to the occasion for justice? I mean, Steven is preaching and teaching the multitudes. I wonder how many of you are ready to reach the multitudes for the sake of justice, for the cause of equality.

But this name has caused enemies to rise up. It has caused a rift among those who find comfort in their systems. Those who enjoy better schools without concern for all children. Those who aren't worried about the police shootings.

Those who don't worry about being slighted of work because their skin complexion is lighter and brighter. Your name, Steven, is now bringing on more than you potentially bargained for. You're making people uncomfortable.

Perhaps you should have just stayed quiet. Perhaps you should have just accepted the lower position and kept your mouth closed. Your name, Steven, is now bringing more than what you thought it would.

And now the time has come. You have to back up all that you have started, Steven. In chapter 7, now you must eat from the bowl that you stirred. These adhesion, those in the established order, snatch Steven at the time when he least expected him.

[31 : 10] They rush him off into a place where he's ostracized from those who respect him. He is separated from the place of influence and he is now set for trial. He is now put to test.

Some would say it's not just about what you do in front of the crowd, but it's about who you are when you're alone. It's about who you become when you're under pressure. Steven has to make a decision.

Is his loyalty to righteousness, his commitment to God worth his freedom, worth his privilege, worth his life. And so Steven is placed before the jury.

His life is now hanging in the balance. His future all depended upon the verdict of those who oppose him. Steven, who are you now? You have represented so many, but now who will represent you?

Where is your God, Steven? Where is your support? Your path was already a lonely one and now it perhaps feels at its loneliest. This is the true test of character.

[32 : 13] You considered yourself an ally. You. You considered yourself an ally when you had money for yourself, when you had influence, when you had safety amongst your own people.

You have fought for the cause while you were around those who look like you. Your liberal friends have thrown liberal parties. You fell to church and a community that represents the ideas and morals that provide comfort for you.

But now you are called forward to prove your humility. Now you are supper amongst the wolves. You are carcass in front of the vultures.

If you are white, your friends of color and your network of white folks have disappeared and it's only you. If you're a person of color, then perhaps your friends of good stock and influence have evaded the picture.

Who are you now? And so Steven, now up on the stand. Steven, now in front of the opposition of the judge and the jury, is on trial.

[33 : 18] And Steven has to open his mouth and decide in this moment when nobody else is around, who are you, Steven? And the results is that Steven opens up and Steven, I begin, I believe, he prays about it and when Steven opens his mouth to the Sanhedrin and the priests and those who are accusing him, Steven begins to quote the book, the Bible, to the people, our scholars of Bible, in his own Greek tongue.

He begins to recount the stories of Abraham and the story of Moses and he moves all the way up until now. And when he gets to the end, he tells them, you, you, you fake and phony people are now doing the same things that our ancestors did.

He, the, the, the, if you will, the, the, the, the, the white male is now telling his white counterparts, he actually says to my father and my brethren, he says, look, you are the privileged place.

You in this hierarchy, you now have turned around and you are doing to people what you wish that other people would not do to you. The last point that I have is this.

Expand your vision. Expand your vision. When Steven does this, the Sanhedrin, the priests, they do not want to hear it. They are mad. They are upset.

[34 : 50] How dare you attack my privilege? How dare you attack my authority? Or if you're the one who has been fighting for them, he is now, he is now saying, you are now saying, look, I am going to continue to fight even though you have removed me from all of the people.

My name is what it is. I love God too much. I love my people too much and I am now going to tell you who you are and the people that come after him. They come after Steven and they begin to stone, they begin to, to drag him through the streets.

You, my friends, if you're going to be an ally of the people, it is in this moment that you must be willing to give up everything for the sake of love.

This is where you must be able to tell the story of God and God's agape love. This is the place where you must expand your vision past the place of comfort. This is the place where you must expand your vision past the place of being with ones who agree with you.

This is the place where you must expand your vision to the future and not just to the present. This is where you must expand your vision past seeing a black man or colored folks in a hoodie and believing the worst of the worst.

[36 : 00] This is where you must expand your vision past the talk of things like what if they would just stop resisting and you must expand your vision to see the place of they just are, they're human beings that don't deserve their blood to be poured in the streets.

This is where you must expand your vision past the pain past the injustice past the oppression past the circumstance past your hurt past your privilege you must expand your spiritual vision to say that even if I am alone even if I am by myself my name must represent a child of God at all times.

I must commit to the will of God to stand with all people for the sake of love. I leave you with this family it was the words of Dr. Martin Luther King in one of his final sermons when Martin Luther King stood in the shoes of someone who was fighting for those who were oppressed he understood the fight and it's in this moment that he shares with us this glimpse of what he sees in the future.

I believe that like Stephen who looks up as they are stoning him and he says and he cries out I see I see God there I see God and I see Jesus even while the people were brutally stoning him to death God provides a peace peace that passes all comfort and even at the end Stephen says God forgive them and the last stone hits him and he's gone forever.

Martin Luther King said well I don't know what will happen now we've got some difficult days ahead but it doesn't really matter with me now because I've been to the mountaintop I don't mind like anybody I would like to live a long life longevity has its place but I'm not concerned about that now I just want to do God's will and he's allowed me to go up to the mountaintop and I've looked over and I've seen the promised land I may not get there with you but I want you to know tonight that we as a people will get to the promised land so I'm happy tonight I'm not worried about anything I'm not fearing any man mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord family I pray that as you search your heart for people like Dwayne

[38 : 56] Wright for people like Tamir Rice for people as far back as Emmett Till that those things will crush your heart and that you will consider what it means to represent God at all times don't give up it's tough but as a black man I can tell you it's been tough all my life continue to fight expand the vision and like Stephen when they try to come after you and they try to bring you down and it seems like it's tough like Martin Luther King fix your eyes on God and the promised land expand your vision past the nail and declare that even if you don't make it we will do all that we can to expand our vision to a better tomorrow I love you family and until next time

I love you and there's nothing you can do about it