

Acts 6:8-9, 7:2a, 51-60

“Keep your eyes on your opponent.” Whether you’re wrestling, playing basketball or football, or any other sport, or whether you’re engaged in live combat in the heat of a battle, this rule always applies—“keep your eyes on your opponent.” Stephen failed to do this and it was a fatal mistake. When the angry mob rushed at him, Stephen’s eyes looked up to heaven. He did not focus his attention on his opponents. Instead he looked to Christ Jesus at the right hand of God. The mob rushed at him, cast him out of the city, and stoned him to death. “Keep your eyes on your opponent?” Not Stephen...and it cost him his life.

Then again, perhaps Stephen did not look upon that angry mob as his opponent. He did not desire their death; he desired for them to be forgiven. He was not fearful of them; he kept Jesus’ words, “Do not fear those who can kill the body but are unable to kill the soul.” Stephen feared God. He trusted in the Lord. He wasn’t there to fight this mob; he was there to give Jesus to them. They were not his opponents; they were his congregation of hearers—people to whom he was given the task of preaching the Word of God. They were not his opponents anymore than you are my opponent, or I, your opponent.

But what a congregation they were. They resembled the congregation at Nazareth who threw Jesus out of town. They resembled their fathers and grandfathers who had thrown God’s prophets out of town and put them to death. This congregation of people in Jerusalem had, not long before, cried out, “Crucify Him! Crucify Him!” as Jesus stood before them in Pilate’s court. And now this congregation of hearers picks up stones to throw at Stephen’s body until he is dead. Did I say “congregation of hearers?” Actually they were “unhearers,” if there is such a word; for as Stephen spoke while gazing into heaven, they covered their ears as they rushed toward him.

A court of law...an honest court of law would have convicted them of murder. And yet, a good defense attorney would have reminded the judge that the man they were accused of killing, Stephen, did not hold this sin against them. “Forgive them,” he prayed as he was dying. Therefore, they had done nothing wrong. What do you think? Were they guilty, or innocent? And if guilty, then of what? What was their crime? What was the worst thing they had done?

A jury would say “murder;” but not God. In His eyes they had done something much worse than murder: they had covered their ears. God’s man, Stephen, while gazing intently at Jesus, was speaking to them. He was telling them of Christ, but they stopped their ears from hearing him. “Not a crime at all,” a jury would say. But to God there is nothing worse. There is nothing worse than keeping our ears from hearing the words of Christ.

It’s time for us to ask ourselves who we are in this story. Stephen? Saul, who was the young man holding the garments? Or the mob? If you always see yourself as a victim; as one who others are always picking on; one who is doing the right thing while others do the wrong thing, then you’ll say, “I am Stephen in this story.” If you like to ride the fence and you really don’t get involved; if you realize that you could do better in standing up for what’s right, but you’re not all that bad—at least you’re not like those who throw stones—you keep your hands free of evil, then you’ll say, “I am Saul in this story.” But if you say the words, “I am a poor, miserable sinner, and I deserve both temporal and eternal

punishment for my sins,” and you truly believe these words of our liturgy, then you will admit that you are a part of the mob in the story.

And in truth, because as Christians we are both sinners and saints, at different times in our life we resemble all three. There are times when others throw stones at us. They stone us with their angry words because we are doing what is right; because we are looking to Jesus Christ and following Him. There are times when we are not the target. Someone else is attacked for sticking to the truth of God’s Word, but we do not come to their aid. In fact, our silence is only helping the attackers. Whether we admit it or not, we are at such times giving our approval to the stones that are being thrown. And there are times when we ourselves throw stones; when we speak against the truth of God; when we, with our words, persecute the Church of Jesus.

But as bad as that sounds, it is even worse when you and I cover our ears; when we prevent the words of God from coming to us. Even a persecutor and a murderer will be forgiven if he repents. Saul, who held the garments that day in Jerusalem, and who later on, himself, attacked the Church and persecuted Christians, became the forgiven Paul, an apostle of Jesus.

But how will one repent when his ears are closed? How can God work within us when we stay away from the preaching of Christ? And I’m not just speaking about those who refuse to come to church, for we cover our ears by coming but not listening. We cover our ears by listening but then excusing ourselves from what we hear, applying the words only to others.

God refuses to work repentance and faith within us apart from the hearing of His living Word and His Sacraments. As the apostle declares: “How shall they believe unless they hear...faith comes by hearing the word of Christ.” (Romans 10) For someone who makes it a habit of covering his ears; who even at one time used to listen to God’s Word but now keeps his ears stopped up—for that is what the mob did...at first they listened to Stephen and then they closed their ears to him—for that person there is no hope...if they continue in such a way of life.

If your ears are hearing these words, it is by the grace of God. For you and I are tempted, whenever God’s Word is preached and taught, to go the other way; to busy ourselves with something else in life, and thus, to cover our ears. It is by God’s grace alone that any of us hears the truth of Jesus Christ. It is by God’s grace alone that we believe that truth. It is by God’s grace alone that we are thus saved from perishing and enter into the eternal mansions of heaven.

May God in His mercy lead you to a friend or loved one who has been covering his or her ears. And may He lead you to pull their hands away from their ears so that they may hear, and repent, and believe the good news of Jesus Christ. Be warned ahead of time...they may throw stones at you. It happened to Stephen. Anyone who has their hands clasped over their ears, has them there for a reason—they were offended by a church member, and so they don’t come; they were offended by what the pastor said, and so they don’t come; they are angry at God, and so they don’t come; they enjoy their sins too much and don’t want to hear what God has to say, and so they don’t come.

Do not be afraid. Do not fear the stones that may come at you. Trust in the Lord. Stephen did and he is in heaven today. And God, for Jesus' sake, is even now preparing your room there, not because we become the target of stones, not because we try to do the right thing in life, but because God has, in mercy, preached Christ into your ears. He has brought you to repent of your sins. He has given you faith in Christ and keeps you in the Faith by His Word and Sacraments.

Understand this...God's ears are not closed up. Stephen prayed, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit," and God heard him. And for you Jesus prayed, "Father, forgive them"—the prayer that Stephen echoed as he was dying. And the Father listened to His Son. He has forgiven you. How do you know this? Because He raised Jesus from the dead; and this same Jesus commands your pastor to preach to you forgiveness of sins in His name. This same Jesus gives you His body and blood for the remission of all your sins. This same Jesus is He who declares you His forgiven saint in the washing of Holy Baptism.

God doesn't listen to your true opponent, Satan's accusations against you. He listens only to Jesus. He hears Him who is, for you, the Way, and the Truth, and the Life. Your Savior, day after day, is at God's right hand pleading for you: "Look at the nail marks in My hands, Father...for him, for her I died; forgive them." And He does. And so listen to this...hear these words today and keep coming to hear them...you do not need to cover your ears: God is at peace with you for Jesus' sake. Repent of your sins—God forgives you. He is at work in you who believe. As Stephen fell asleep in Jesus, so can you...each night, and when death comes. Amen.