



Westminster
Presbyterian Church
NACOGDOCHES, TEXAS

What Is Your Price? **Acts 6:1-10**

When I was three years old, my family moved from central Texas to Decatur, Georgia. We left the 1950's drought and hot rocks and sand for the lush green of northern Georgia. We must have moved in the fall, for I can remember my mother going on and on about how beautiful the trees were. As a child, I never noticed the beauty of the town. I returned as an adult and visited my old neighborhood. It was spring and the dogwoods and azaleas were in full bloom. The place was beautiful.

As a child, I did not let flowers go completely unnoticed. I vividly remember on one occasion when, wanting to pick some flowers for my mother, I went to my sandbox, found my pail and proceeded to pick a bouquet of unopened rosebuds from the hedge that separated our house from Mr. Knox's house. There is probably a good psychological explanation why I can so vividly remember that incident from my childhood. Something made a lasting impression upon me to think twice before I picked another rosebud. Maybe the good news was that Mr. Knox was 92 years old and he probably could not see the roses. He was the first person I ever knew who was over 90 years old.

The neighborhood of my early childhood had two attractions that drew young boys like a magnet. First, the street we lived on was a dead end road with a steep slope that led to a creek. The hill was perfect for our skateboards that Daddy made from plywood and an old skate screwed to the bottom. The second attraction was the creek that separated our neighborhood from the Claremont neighborhood.

I was told to never go down to the creek unless my older brother Carey was with me. I also remember the day my mother bought me a new pair of shoes. She said, "Steve, remember, stay away from the creek." The problem was that my friend David lived in the second house up from the creek. And when I got to David's house he said, "Let's look for crawfish."

And I said, "I can't, I'm wearing my new shoes." Of course, David was a year older and persuasive. He said those three words that often get young boys into trouble, "I dare you."

“You dare me to do what?”

“I dare you to jump across the creek.”

Now why is it that boys do that sort of thing – challenge a friend in spite of their parents’ wishes? But saintly as I was, I said, “I can’t, my mom will kill me if I get my new shoes wet.”

Then David said those powerful words that make the movie “The Christmas Story” something young boys can identify with; David said, “I double dog dare you.”

“I can’t.”

“I triple dog dare you.”

Just like in the movie “A Christmas Story,” there was nothing I could do to keep my honor in the face of a triple dog dare than to jump across the creek. So I got a running start, jumped with all my strength and with great delight I cleared the creek, but sank ankle deep in the mud on the other side.

You may laugh, but I had to try because there was a triple dog dare on the line. That was my price. I was bought. I was willing to chance getting my new shoes wet. I was willing to chance the trouble I would be in when I got home, but the price had to be at least a triple dog dare.

Well, what is your price? You hear in the movies and television shows where there is an evil man who has too much money. He wants to buy off somebody.

Someone always says, “He won’t do it.”

“Of course he will.”

“No, I know the man, he has too much integrity.”

Then with a grin as he lights his cigarette, the rich gangster says, “Everyone has a price.”

How often does it make the paper or the television news? Men and women, chosen by the people to represent the people, sell themselves to the highest bidder, or to special interest groups wanting favors. In the business world, how often have influential people been willing to sell their integrity to get a fast buck? Student athletes sell themselves to universities whose boosters can offer the best under-the-table deals, people willing to sacrifice a quality education for a winning football team.

Was J. R. Ewing right? Does everyone have a price?

“I can’t sell pornographic literature in my store.”

“It will increase your take home profits by \$10,000 the first year.”

“Well, business is business.”

“I’m sorry, but I have to tell your prospective buyer they are planning to build a Wal-Mart behind your house.”

“If you keep quiet, I’ll make it worth your while.”

“Well, maybe I can keep our little secret.”

Do we all have a price? I hope not. I hope we are all people of integrity. In the book of Acts, we find the man who is my namesake. His name is Stephen. I am the first Stephen on my family tree. Stephen is not a family name; it is from the Bible. And you can read about Stephen in Acts chapter 6 and chapter 7. Today I will be reading Acts 6:1-10. Hear the word:

“Now during those days, when the disciples were increasing in number, the Hellenists complained against the Hebrews because their widows were being neglected in the daily distribution of food. And the twelve called together the whole community of the disciples and said, “It is not right that we should neglect the word of God in order to wait on tables. Therefore, friends, select from among yourselves seven men of good standing, full of the Spirit and of wisdom, whom we may appoint to this task, while we, for our part, will devote ourselves to prayer and to serving the word.” What they said pleased the whole community, and they chose Stephen, a man full of faith and the Holy Spirit, together with Philip, Prochorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas, and Nicolaus, a proselyte of Antioch. They had these men stand before the apostles, who prayed and laid their hands on them.

The word of God continued to spread; the number of the disciples increased greatly in Jerusalem, and a great many of the priests became obedient to the faith.

Stephen, full of grace and power, did great wonders and signs among the people. Then some of those who belonged to the synagogue of the Freedmen (as it was called), Cyrenians, Alexandrians, and others of those from Cilicia and Asia, stood up and argued with Stephen. But they could not withstand the wisdom and the Spirit with which he spoke.”

We do not know much about Stephen. Luke gave no biographical data, but he did tell us something about Stephen's character. Luke told us that Stephen had a good reputation. Stephen was full of faith and the Holy Spirit. He was filled with grace and exhibited power in his witness. It is no wonder that Stephen's name heads the list of the first seven deacons chosen by the apostles to assist those in the church who needed help. Stephen gave his time to church duties, and he also, following the example of the Apostles, was a powerful witness to the Lordship of Jesus Christ.

Stephen shared Christ with such wisdom and power that no one could withstand his arguments. He was offensive to the Jewish leadership who eventually plotted to get rid of this troublemaker. They brought in false witnesses who said, "We have heard Stephen speak blasphemous words against Moses and God . . . This man never ceases to speak words against the Temple and the Law, for we have heard him say that this Jesus of Nazareth will destroy the Temple, and will change the customs which Moses delivered to us."

Stephen was brought before the High Priest and charged with blasphemy. The High Priest looked at Stephen and asked, "Is it true?" And what did Stephen do? How did he answer the question when he was asked about Jesus?

Think for a moment about this situation. Stephen's trial parallels Jesus' trial. Stephen was seized by an angry mob. There were no friendly faces to give him encouragement. False witnesses were brought in. He was brought into the court of the High Priest and the people were shouting blasphemy. Stephen knew what could happen if he stood up for the cause of Christ, and he knew that if he denied Christ he would be freed.

The High Priest asked, "Is this so?" And Stephen, in true ministerial fashion, preached a sermon. Jesus did not preach a sermon when he was arrested, but Stephen did, and it was a good sermon. But he did not win any points when he called the Jewish leaders "stiffed necked murderers." You know the rest of the story. Stephen was taken out of the city, thrown off a cliff and large stones were thrown down at him until he was dead.

As he was dying, the people quieted down and listened to his dying words. And in the quiet of that moment, from the bottom of the cliff they heard the weak voice of Stephen praying, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit and, Lord, do not hold this sin against them."

As he died from the crushing blows of the stones, he remembered the words of Jesus and prayed the same prayer: "Father, forgive them, for they do not know

what they do.” I have often wondered if these words of Jesus so stunned one of the thieves who died with him that he called out to Jesus, “Remember me.” Then there was the Roman centurion who exclaimed when Jesus died, “Surely this man is the Son of God.”

And I wonder, as we look at the parallel between Jesus’ execution and Stephen’s, if the grace shown by Stephen affected a young Jew from Tarshish. Did Stephen’s prayer asking God to forgive his executioners haunt Saul of Tarshish until the day when Jesus met Saul on the road to Damascus? For, as you know, this Saul who consented to the death of Stephen, held the coats of those who cast stones at Stephen. We know him as the Apostle Paul, who filled our New Testament with his letters to the churches and would one day also give his life for Christ.

I shudder to think what may have happened if Stephen could have been bought. What would have happened if Stephen would have answered the High Priest, “No the charges are not true”? “I do not know or have anything to do with Jesus Christ.” Stephen was all alone. None of the church members were there. It would have been so easy to have saved his life and then gone his way.

Maybe God would have found someone else to be his witness in Jerusalem, but as it was, God used Stephen in the life of Paul and as a paradigm of faith.

Can we be bought? Are there times when the stakes of living out our faith are simply too high? Times when we are tempted to sell ourselves to the highest bidder? Times when we can deny our faith and our Christian principles to escape? I wonder if at times we are tempted to deny our faith simply because we may lose something in the process, or even be inconvenienced.

Patrick Hamilton was born in 1504 in Lanarkshire, Scotland. His father was considered by many as the first among the knights of the realm. His mother’s father was the second son of James II of Scotland and his uncles were some of the most powerful men in Scotland.

With royal blood flowing through his veins, Patrick Hamilton had the means to acquire the best education offered at the time, and he excelled in his studies. At the age of 14 when he was studying in Paris, he learned of the writings of Martin Luther that were causing quite a stir in Paris where they were publically condemned.

Hamilton received his master's degree in 1520 and moved to Holland where he studied Latin, Greek and Hebrew. In 1523, Hamilton moved back to Scotland where he became a teacher in St. Andrew's, the ecclesiastical capital of Scotland.

Though at the time Hamilton had not rejected his Catholic faith, he was appalled by the corruption in the church. Church leaders were immoral, bloodstained and illiterate. The prior of the monastery where Hamilton served often boasted of his frequent adulterous relationships with married women.

With a combination of Luther's writings and Tyndale's English translation of the Scriptures being smuggled into Scotland, all that was needed to fan into flame a reformation was a person with the right foundation to preach the gospel in the Scottish tongue, and Patrick Hamilton was that person.

So moved by Luther's writings, this young scholar began to preach justification by faith alone in Jesus Christ and the authority of the Bible over and above the Pope and church traditions.

Though Patrick was a Hamilton and from a powerful family, he had caught the attention of Archbishop Beaton who wanted to see Hamilton dead, so in 1527 Hamilton fled to Germany where he was able to learn from the two great reformers, Philip Melancthon and Martin Luther.

Six months later Hamilton returned to Scotland and continued to preach the gospel of grace alone. And as his reformed message spread, the Scottish people began to understand the wonder of justification by faith alone. Hamilton was pronounced a heretic; however with his family background he was a more formidable heretic in Scotland than Luther himself would have been.

Archbishop David Beaton had to rid Hamilton from Scotland, but what could he do against such a formidable opponent? First he had to get Hamilton to St. Andrew's, which he did by simply inviting Hamilton to come St. Andrew's for a simple debate. When Hamilton arrived he was given the best accommodations and was allowed to teach and preach, all while the leaders of the church studied Hamilton's teachings in order to outline his heresies.

Archbishop Beaton then called for thousands of troops to come to St. Andrew's to defend the city from anyone who might want to rescue Hamilton when the trap was sprung.

Finally, Beaton prevailed upon the young King James V to take a religious pilgrimage to Rossshire, making him unavailable to intervene in what was about to happen.

The trap was now set and in February 1528, Hamilton was arrested on heresy charges. Hamilton was condemned and led to the stake where he would be burned. He was given a chance to recant, but rather than recant he said, “As to my confession, I will not deny it for awe of your fire, for my confession and belief is in Christ Jesus. Therefore I will not deny it; and I will rather be content that my body burn in this fire for the confession of my faith in Christ.”

The fire was set. One eyewitness said during the whole time of suffering that “the martyr never gave one sign of impatience or anger, nor ever called to heaven for vengeance on his persecutors; so great was his faith, so strong his confidence in God!”

After Hamilton’s death, it was said, “The reek of the smoke from Mr. Hamilton’s body infected all it blew on.” Another said that, “The flames in which he expired were in the course of one generation to enlighten all Scotland.”

Hamilton’s life and death inspired such men as George Wishart and eventually John Knox, and today we worship in a Presbyterian Church partly due to the faith of this man who could not be bought.

Now it is one thing to peach about the lives of such men as Stephen and Patrick Hamilton. But I hope that we are so grounded in Christ that we too cannot be bought.

Stephen’s faithfulness had its effect on St. Paul. Patrick Hamilton’s faithfulness had its effect on John Knox. But what about our faith? Does our faithfulness, our integrity, our morality, our willingness to make decisions based upon what we know about Jesus Christ, does it make a difference? You may not see it, but you bet it does. You may never know how many youth, family members, business associates, friends who are inspired by the fact that you cannot be bought. Do you have a price? I hope not. Amen.