

Acts 6 (Part 1): 1-7 • Raising us servants and keeping to your calling

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We're in Acts chapter 6 and so I'd like to have you join me over there, please. Acts chapter 6. And we're just going to cover the first 7 verses of Acts today because this is really its own event. And then when we get into verses 8 through following, we start another story event, and that's going to cover the rest of chapter 6 and even chapter 7. We're going to take that all together next time.

Follow along with me as I read through these first 7 verses, okay? Goes like this.

“Now in these days when the disciples were increasing in number, a complaint by the Hellenists arose against the Hebrews because their widows were being neglected in the daily distribution. ² And the twelve summoned the full number of the disciples and said, “It is not right that we should give up preaching the word of God to serve tables.

³ Therefore, brothers, pick out from among you seven men of good repute, full of the Spirit and of wisdom, whom we will appoint to this duty. ⁴ But we will devote ourselves to prayer and to the ministry of the word.”

⁵ And what they said pleased the whole gathering, and they chose Stephen, a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit, and Philip, and Prochorus, and Nicanor, and Timon, and Parmenas, and Nicolaus, a proselyte of Antioch. ⁶ These they set before the apostles, and they prayed and laid their hands on them.

⁷ And the word of God continued to increase, and the number of the disciples multiplied greatly in Jerusalem, and a great many of the priests became obedient to the faith.” (ESV)

I'm going to have you stop there. Let's pray as we get into the Word.

Father, as we approach the Scriptures, we always want to approach with an attitude of humility and just a desire to learn. Lord, You are the teacher in this

place and we are the students and the receivers. And we just want to receive from You today what You have for us.

We pray for wisdom. We pray for grace. We pray for insight and we pray, Lord God, that we would be able to apply these things to our lives because we know that it is not just those who hear the Word who have done good, but those who do the Word, put it into practice.

Guide us in that very thing we pray, Father, in the name of Jesus our Savior, amen. Amen. Amen. Alright.

We talked in an earlier study here in the Book of Acts about the fact that the first century Church had adopted a communal living arrangement as it relates to their daily activities. They shared their resources and their money even to the point of selling land and distributing it among the rest of the body.

We also made the point that kind of a living arrangement is fraught with difficulties and those difficulties are some of what we're reading here today. There's a challenge that came up and it's expressed for us in the first verse.

If you look with me again in your Bible, it tells us that while there was an increase in the number of believers in the body of Christ, that a complaint rose. And sometimes that happens in church life. People see an issue that needs to be corrected and they complain.

It's always important that we aren't just complainers, but we recognize issues. But we recognize them to the point where we want to do something about it. We want to be positive about it. We don't just want to complain because there's always something to complain about. Because we're a church full of imperfect people who deal with sin on a regular basis. And when you put all of those people in a family, there's going to be drama. There's going to be challenges. There's going to be problems.

It's important that when we recognize those problems, we don't just go that's a problem and complain about it. But we start praying about what we can do about it and how we can solve the issue.

This particular issue had to do with the fact that even though the church was predominantly Jewish, there were people, Jews in the church who had come from very, very different backgrounds. Some of them came from a Jewish background, and we call those Hebraic Jews. Their background, their language, their practice, was very Jewish, but there were also a lot of Jews who had been

scattered to other parts of the Roman empire who were raised in a very Roman culture. And we refer to these as Hellenists or Hellenistic Jews. They're also referred to as Grecian Jews.

They're Jews by biology and DNA, but by culture, they come with some very different ideas, very different languages, very different emphases in the way they do life. And what was happening here is that some of the widows were being overlooked in the daily distribution of food, which is all part of living in a in that communal society; we share meals and so forth.

And because these people were different, they were being neglected. And this is human nature, unfortunately. What I mean by that is, as humans, we tend to look at any one who is different, whether that difference is skin color, or culture, or language, and because they are different, we treat them differently. We usually respond by rejecting them, or being suspicious about them, simply because they are different, and that's obviously not a good thing.

But in this case, as we read, they were being; some of the women, and again they're widows, women who had lost their husbands, they were being neglected in the distribution of food.

And of course, taking care of widows and orphans, for that matter, was a very big deal for the first century church because there was no welfare system to take care of these individuals. When a woman lost her husband, she many times lost her ability to be fed, to eat, literally. And so it was up to the church to step up in these sorts of situations, and they did.

In fact, the church eventually established what was referred to as a, Widow's List. Meaning widows that would qualify to be on support from the church, and this developed over time. But by the time Paul wrote his letter to Timothy, or at least his first letter to Timothy, he outlined some of the guidelines for this widow's list and who should be put on the list and who not and so forth. Let me put this on the screen for you. 1 Timothy chapter 5, Paul says,

1 Timothy 5:3, 5,9-10 (ESV)

Honor widows who are truly widows. She who is truly a widow, left all alone, has set her hope on God and continues in supplications and prayers night and day. Let a widow be enrolled if she is not less than sixty years of age, having been the wife of one husband, and having a reputation for good works: if she has brought up children, has shown hospitality, has washed the feet of the saints, has cared for the afflicted, and has devoted herself to every good work.

Honor widows who are truly widows. She who is truly a widow, left all alone, (and that means she has no family now that her husband has passed) has set her hope on God and continues in supplications and prayers night and day. (he says) Let a widow be enrolled (in other words, on the list) if she is not less than sixty years of age, having been the wife of one husband, and having a reputation for good works: if she has brought up children, has shown hospitality, has washed the feet of the saints, has cared for the afflicted, and has devoted herself to every good work.

In other words, the church got to a place where they realized, they couldn't support everybody. They had to have this list where a woman qualified to be taken care of. If a woman was younger, they expected her to remarry. If she had children, they expected her children to take care of her in her old age.

This is the passage where Paul makes that statement that, a man should take care of his family, and if he doesn't, he is worse than an unbeliever because obviously even unbelievers know how to take care of family and that sort of thing. Again, here in chapter 6, some of the widows were being overlooked and that was the problem. Now that we've identified the problem, we can look at the solution they came up with.

Look with me again in verse 2 in your Bible, and it says, “*And the twelve (meaning the 12 apostles) summoned ... the disciples*” together, and they made a statement to them saying that we should not give up what we're supposed to be doing, which is preaching the Word and serving the Lord in that way, in order to serve tables. Therefore, they said, we want you guys to choose from among you 7 men, and then they gave qualifications for those men. And they said these are the individuals we will have to take care of this.

By the way, the idea of picking 7 people or 7 men to take care of a task was a very Jewish thing to do. Whenever there was a task or a function that needed to be taken care of, they would choose seven men.

Seven is God's perfect, complete number, so that was a very common sort of a thing. And honestly, when you look at this passage, this is really an ingenious plan because the complaint was coming from the people. And for the apostles to turn this over to the body of Christ and to say, okay, so some of the women are being ignored and neglected, so you pick those who are going to oversee this ministry. You choose the ones that are going to do this. It really is a brilliant plan and the people knew that it was a good plan because we read in verse 5 that what the apostles said pleased the whole group. They were like, yeah, this is a great plan so they started to choose the men who are going to take care of this.

Now you read through that list of men beginning there in verse 5 and so forth, and you see the names: Stephen, Philip, Prochorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas, Nicholas, and so on and so forth. There's something that's very interesting about all of those men, they have Greek names.

They're Jews, oh, well, except for one of them. Nicholas was a convert or they called him a proselyte. And the Jews referred to anyone who converted to Judaism as a, God fearer, so they would refer to people as, God fearing individuals. Those were Gentiles who came to a knowledge of the one true God in Judaism.

This man had converted to Judaism and then come to a saving knowledge of Jesus Christ so he's the only Gentile among them but they're all Greek in the sense of their names. And the importance of that selection of men from this point onward is that this would eliminate any further criticism or accusation related to the charge of favoritism since these men are Grecian by culture, and the complaint was leveled about the Grecian women being overlooked, so they've got some of their own taking care of this situation. And it really is a perfect sort of an arrangement.

I want to make one other point about this. This is not a biblical passage to support the idea of congregational rule. Some people have tried to do that. They said, see, the apostles turned it over to the body and they just care of it, so that's the way church you should run. It should be the body of Christ making all of the decisions and so forth.

Well, that's not what's going on here, and this is not a proof text for that. You'll notice that the apostles are staying within in the realm of their position of authority in the body of Christ. They are saying to the body, you choose, you guys choose, but we're going to give you the qualifications.

In other words, we're going to tell you who is qualified to function in this role. And we read that once the men were chosen, it was the apostles then who laid their hands on them and commissioned them to go forward.

It's an important thing to understand that God has given that role of leadership within the body of Christ and they're not to abdicate that role, but there are times when they will commission others to function as you see happening here.

And as far as those qualifications go, you'll notice that there were 3 key things that the apostles wanted the body of Christ to keep in mind as it relates to the selection of these individuals. Let me put these on the screen for you.

Qualifications for the Seven

- A good reputation
- Full of the Spirit
- Full of Wisdom

They were to choose men who had, **A good reputation**. I think we all know what that means.

They were to choose men who were, **Full of the Spirit**. And that means the evidence of the fruits of the Holy Spirit were seen or could be seen in these men's lives: love, patience, joy. All the fruits of the Spirit should be recognized in these individuals.

And then lastly, they are to be men who are, **Full of Wisdom**. And I think you know what that means too. Although some Christians, I think, get wisdom and knowledge mixed up and they're not the same thing.

Knowledge is knowing what the problem is. Wisdom is knowing how to solve the problem. Wisdom is putting knowledge into action, knowing which way to go in order to deal with the problem.

And that was very important in the selection of these men, because everybody knew what the problem was, that's not the issue. We don't have to sit around and just talk about the problem. We have to solve the problem and these men were going to be tasked with solving the problem, so they needed wisdom going forward.

Now, who are these men? Well, some people just refer to them or Bible students refer to them as, the seven set aside from the twelve, meaning the apostles. So you have the apostles and then you have the seven. Other people see in this passage, the very beginning of what we refer to later as deacons in the church, even though Luke in the writing of this passage doesn't refer to them as deacons.

In fact, you'll notice as you read through the passage he doesn't give any kind of a formal title to these individuals at all. But the reason that people believe that these are the first deacons is because they were of what they were asked to do. Look with me in verse 2, and I will reiterate what they were asked to do.

Look at verse 2, “*And the twelve summoned the full number of the disciples and said, (to them) “It is not right that we should give up ... (doing what we’re supposed to be doing) to serve tables.”*”

That's what the Apostles expected these guys to do, to serve. Okay. And that word, serve, is very important because the word, serve in the Greek, let me show you this on the screen, is the word, diakoneō.

Acts 6:2

“Serve”: Greek: diakoneō; to serve, minister

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Right? Doesn't that sound familiar? Yeah, it sounds like deacon. In fact, that is the same root word where we get the noun that is rendered in English, deacon. What is a deacon? It is someone who serves and in this case, serves tables.

Now, they need wisdom, they need to be spirit filled, they need to have a good reputation. And there's other qualifications that we're going to look at here in a moment as the idea of deacon became more developed. But still, these individuals are servants.

Now I know that some of you come from a church background where deacons were the leaders of the church. They were the final group of men, usually, who make the decisions in that particular church. And I get that, and I respect that, and I mean, churches can call their leaders whatever they want to, I guess.

From a purely biblical standpoint, it is incorrect to refer to spiritual leaders as deacons. That's elders/overseers/pastors, shepherds, that's whom God has given spiritual oversight of the church.

Deacons are servants. They are the ones who take care of issues that are more on a physical level, not as much on a spiritual level. All right. That's the idea behind deacon. Now again, a church is going to do whatever they want to do, but that is the biblical definition.

Now, as deacons began to become more developed in the body of Christ, Paul wrote to Timothy and gave direction on the qualifications for deacons that went beyond what we read here in the Book of Acts. It was a pretty rudimentary sort of a qualification system here, but let me put this on the screen. Here's the longer version of that. Paul writes and says,

1 Timothy 3:8-10, 12-13 (ESV)

Deacons likewise must be dignified, not double-tongued, not addicted to much wine, not greedy for dishonest gain. They must hold the mystery of the faith with a clear conscience. And let them also be tested first; then let them serve as deacons if they prove themselves blameless. Let deacons each be the husband of one wife, managing their children and their own households well. For those who serve well as deacons gain a good standing for themselves and also great confidence in the faith that is in Christ Jesus.

Deacons likewise must be dignified, not double-tongued, (and that means not given to double talk, which was a sign of insincerity. In fact, some Bibles say they must be sincere) not addicted to much wine, not greedy for dishonest gain. They must hold the mystery of the faith with a clear conscience. And let them also be tested first; then let them serve as deacons if they prove themselves blameless. (meaning above blame) Let deacons each be the husband of one wife, managing their children and their own households well. For those who serve well as deacons gain a good standing for themselves and also great confidence in the faith that is in Christ Jesus.

Now you think about that. You think, wow, those are pretty tall qualifications for guys who really don't have a spiritual oversight, but are mainly servants in the body of Christ and you're right, those are tall qualifications. As well they should be. Right? But remember deacons are servants, not overseers. All right. Just a very important distinction from a biblical standpoint.

And then the section ends in verse 7 by saying, that “...*the word of God continued to increase, ... the number of the disciples multiplied greatly in Jerusalem, and a great many (even) of the priests (we're told here) became obedient to the faith.*” Which means they came to a saving knowledge of Jesus Christ and walking by the Spirit.

But before we end this morning, I want to bring out one other issue from this passage that I think bears a moment of our time, because it can be prone to misunderstanding. And it's essentially what the Apostles said related to their position in the Church and how they shouldn't be doing what the deacons are going to be doing, or the servants are going to be doing, and so forth.

And it's basically what they start to say in verse 2. Look with me again. I know we've read this already. So they summon “*the full number of the disciples...*” Now, what is it that they say? They say, “*It is not right that we should give up preaching the word of God to serve tables.*”

Now, I know that you can read that and it can sound a little bit like they're acting a little self-important. Almost like, men of our immense importance shouldn't be bothered with such menial tasks like serving and waiting tables and that sort of thing. I know it can possibly sound like that, but that's not what they're saying at all.

You need to remember these are the same men who watched Jesus on the night that He was arrested. They watched Him stand up during the Last Supper, take off His outer garment, wrap it around His waist, get down on His hands and knees, and wash their dirty, smelly feet. And they got the lesson.

They understood that Jesus was teaching them about humility and the need to be willing to serve in whatever way was necessary. It's not that these men are unwilling to serve. What they are talking about is staying in their lane and by lane, I'm referring to staying or keeping to the gifting and the calling that had been given them by the Lord.

And the reason this is an important thing to understand is because in many sectors of the body of Christ, we've gotten away from the idea of calling. We've abandoned the whole idea of one's spiritual gifting and calling from the Lord. And we've come up with some of our own systems of getting people involved in church.

We've come up with committees and groups and things like that. And we'll tell people, once they start attending a church and they go through their membership, that you need to serve, and you need to serve probably in every capacity that the church has to offer at least at some point in your time here.

And what that means is, we're going to have these committees, and by the way, you're on a committee whether you want to be on it or not. And if you ever miss a meeting, that's a sure way to be voted in as president, right? And at some point during your service on this committee, you need to be in charge.

And so what you end up with, is you end up with a church with all these committees that basically run the church. And one year, you can be on a committee that literally is in the position of ultimate leadership in the church, and in the next committee, you're on the hospitality group, and you're deciding between paper and cloth napkins. And it's just a rotational system.

And they tell you, well, it's been 2 years since you've been on the hospitality committee, don't you think it's time to serve again? Or maybe you need to be on this committee, or that committee, or have you done this, or whatever.

The whole arrangement belies the spiritual aspect of our calling and our gifting by the Holy Spirit who prepares people to function in the body of Christ in their lane, and to keep to their lane. And the body of Christ functions well when it, when people function within their lane. But when we start asking a mouth to operate like a foot, or a hand to operate like an ear, we're asking them to get out of their lane and to function outside of their gifting.

And don't you know things aren't going to go as well? And you're going to have people making stupid decisions. And doing things that just really anger everybody, and there's going to be drama. We've never seen that before, have we? And all the other things that go along with it because we've abandoned the idea of keeping to our lane.

And what the apostles are saying here in verse 2, I actually like this out of the NIV. Can I put this on the screen for you? It says,

Acts 6:2 (NIV)

“It would not be right for us to neglect the ministry of the word of God in order to wait on tables.”

Acts 6:3b-4 (NIV)

“We will turn this responsibility over to them and will give our attention to prayer and the ministry of the word.”

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“We will turn this responsibility over to them and will give our attention to prayer and the ministry of the word.”

What they're saying is, guys, if we were to take this responsibility upon ourselves, it's not that we object to doing that kind of work, we don't. But we would be neglecting what the Holy Spirit has gifted us to do. And therefore, by neglecting that work, the body of Christ is not going to function in the way that it was intended to function.

Your body, the apostle Paul does this, he uses the human body as a picture of the body of Christ. Can you imagine if you decided that you were going to walk with your nose? Or reach and grab something with your ear? But that's what we're doing in the body of Christ by forcing people to function outside of their lane.

And so the apostles, and you can see the second passage here from the latter part of verse 3. I have it on the bottom of that slide, where the apostles say,

Acts 6:2 (NIV)

“It would not be right for us to neglect the ministry of the word of God in order to wait on tables.”

Acts 6:3b-4 (NIV)

“We will turn this responsibility over to them and will give our attention to prayer and the ministry of the word.”

We're going to turn this responsibility over to those whom you choose, and we're going to give our attention to the lane that the Holy Spirit gave us to walk in, and that is prayer in the ministry of the Word.

And they're not saying that other people aren't called to a place of prayer as well. They're simply saying, this is the unique area of ministry that we've been called to, and it would be wrong to give it up to do what others have been gifted and enabled by the power of the Spirit to do. Because don't you know, Christians, we don't all have the same grace.

It's the grace of God that enables, that's what grace is. Grace is the enabling power of the Holy Spirit to do. Okay. What do you have the grace to do? People ask all the time, pastor Paul, I don't know what my gift is. Well, I don't know. Don't ask me. I'm not the Holy Spirit.

Here's your question for you. What do you have the grace to do? And that means what do you have a passion to do? What is it that you do that doesn't burn you out because, when you have the grace of God to do something, what does Jesus say about the burden that's given by the Lord?

He says, “...*my yoke is easy ... my burden is light.*” (Matthew 11:30) That's the grace that He gives you. When you have the grace to do, that yoke is easy, that burden is light. You're like, yeah, lay it on me. This is fun. I love it.

The highlight of my week is doing just what I'm doing right now, sitting right here and teaching the Word of God. But other people, they're like, they would be scared to death because they don't have the grace of God. But I don't have the grace to do what you do. There are people that I've put together in a group over the last several years that I call our Calvary prayer warriors. Some of you guys might be on it.

It's an email group, but it's people who aren't just people that pray, it's people who are gifted to pray. In other words, they have a calling from God to pray, and they love it.

And I know that I can send them prayer requests, and I'm never going to overburden them because they're like, lay it on me. I just want to pray. They just love it. Now there's other people like me, I'm called to pray just like you are, but I don't have that same gifting. I don't have the grace to just be in that place of prayer like some people do, they just love it. Their prayer closet is the most comfortable place in the world for them.

And I love those people and I like to gather them around because I love shooting them prayer needs and they just gobble them up. It's just really the coolest thing to see but it's to say, it could be any number of areas of ministry.

Here's what the apostle Paul said in 1 Corinthians chapter 12 about these giftings. He says,

1 Corinthians 12:4-7 (ESV)

Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; and there are varieties of service, but the same Lord; and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who empowers them all in everyone. To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good.

Now there are varieties of gifts, but (it call comes from) the same Spirit; and there are varieties of service, (it all comes from) but the same Lord; and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who empowers (or if you will, gives the grace for them in everyone) them all in everyone. (and) To each (he says) is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good.

And then he says also in chapter 7, verse 17, he says,

1 Corinthians 12:4-7 (ESV)

...let each person lead the life that the Lord has assigned to him, and to which God has called him. This is my rule in all the churches.

...let each person lead the life that the Lord has assigned to him and to which God has called him. This is my rule in all the churches.

Can I give you my paraphrase of that? Let each man stay in his lane. Stay in your lane. Find out what your gift is and then stay in your lane, that's what

Paul's saying here. Let them lead the life the Lord's assigned to them. They've received the gifting to function with and so forth, and to which God has called them.

He says, *"this is my rule in all the churches."* This is the way we do things. We don't do things by committee, and by rotation, or popular vote. We do things by gifting and by calling. And it's important or it behooves you to come before the Lord and say, Lord, what is my gifting? What is my calling? What is my lane?

Because I want to know so that I can do it, so that I can be the most efficient with my time and energy and so forth, and so that I can be faithful. Because do you guys know, it's all about faithfulness. It's not about how much you do. It's how faithfully you do it

Someday, Jesus is going to say, well done, good and faithful servant, right? And you know what? For some people, that faithfulness might have lasted a day. For some people, it might have lasted a lifetime. It doesn't matter whether it lasted a day or an hour or a lifetime. You were called, you did it, you were faithful, and that's the important part. Amen? Amen? All right, let's stand together and close in prayer. I just want to make sure you guys were awake.

If you need prayer this morning, we would be more than happy to pray for you. We've have people down front here after we close and love to lift up things to the Lord.

Father, we thank You so much for the reminders You give us in Your Word. Now, Lord, I want to pray specifically for those here today who just aren't certain about what their lane is, let alone how to keep to it.

But I pray, my Father, that You would make that clear to them, that You would bring that kind of clarity of understanding so that they can walk it out through the power of the Holy Spirit.

But remind them, Lord, that it is Your Spirit who empowers us to do what You've called us to do and to be. It is not in the strength or power of the flesh that You desire that we would walk out these giftings, but in the power of the Spirit and through the ministry of grace.

And Father, we thank You for this reminder and we praise You, Lord, that not one single person has been overlooked in the area of gifting and calling. And I know Father that there are some in the body of Christ who are tempted at times

to believe that lie, that somehow they've been left out or somehow they've been overlooked.

But Father God, we just, we stand against that right now, and in the name of Jesus, I pray that You would remind all of your sons and daughters that You love them, that You've called them, that You've gifted them. And that as they stretch out and begin to serve, that You will be faithful to show them the area that that You've given to them and made them passionate about.

I thank You and praise You for loving us and using us in everyday circumstances to accomplish Your will. We pray all of these things in the name of Jesus, our Savior, and all God's people said, amen.

God bless you.

Have a good rest of your Sunday.