

When the Mission Gets Messy: Why the Gospel Must Be the Focus

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If you've got your Bible, go to Acts chapter 6. Acts chapter 6. If you're new with us, we've been in a series now for several weeks in the book of Acts. Just kind of going verse by verse through the book of Acts.

And just amazing how, and some of you, you say this, like you'll come to church sometimes and you'll be like, you know what, that is exactly the message that the Lord had for me.

That came at a perfect time in my life. And as if we didn't need other reasons to know that God is alive and well and working in our lives, there's just some of those moments when God just says, you know what, I have a word for you.

And so we're just preaching through the book of Acts, and I trust that from tonight's passage, we will see that the Lord has a word for us as his people. So let's turn our attention to Christ seen in his word here in Acts chapter 6.

[1:35] And we're going to pick up at verse 1. If you're able to stand, please do so. Some of you are already doing that. And this is a way of us honoring the reading of God's word. We recognize that Luke is writing this under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit.

He says, And they chose Stephen, a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit, Philip, Procurius, Nicanor, and Timon, Parmenas, and Nicholas, a proselyte of Antioch.

And they sat before the apostles, and they prayed and laid hands on them. And the word of God continued to increase.

Pray with me.

Pray for me as we ask God to teach us and talk to us tonight. So here we are, Lord, asking you once again in this gathering that you would speak to us from your word.

[3 : 22] We know that your messenger is in no way perfect to be able to do this, but your spirit is perfect. Your word is perfect. So help me simply be faithful to your word as your people gathered here in this place would hear from you.

And, Lord, that you would speak to me even as I speak to your people. I pray this in Jesus' name. And God's people said, Amen. You can be seated. One small distraction can have serious consequences.

One small distraction can have serious consequences. That's the lesson that Kara Hudson learned in a hard way. She was driving down Mill Creek Road on Highway 38 in Indiana, but her attention was not on the road.

Her attention was actually on an argument that she was having with her boyfriend on her cell phone. She remembers a lot about that day. It was a chilly day outside.

One Step, Two Step was playing on the radio. She remembers that her and her boyfriend just kept going back and forth and back and forth. And while all of that was going on, she noticed movement out of the corner of her eye.

[4 : 39] It was a squirrel in the middle of the road. And rather than slowing down or putting on the brakes, she panicked. Still holding the cell phone in her hand, she cranked the wheel as hard as she could to the right, causing her car to flip off the road, landing in a ditch and on the driver's side door.

Kara was taken to the local hospital. There at the hospital, her entire family, which included her parents and her five siblings, were gathered with her when the doctor gave her the news that would change her life.

The doctor informed her that she would never walk again. It was reported in the Indy Star, and she said when she was interviewed that she'd never really thought much about the dangers of using her cell phone while driving, but the guilt started to set in when she was going through rehab.

This is what Kara said, quote, One small distraction can lead to serious consequences.

Focus. It's really hard to do sometimes. Amen? Particularly given the fact that you and I live in a world full of distractions.

[6 : 24] We live in a cell phone ringing, text buzzing, email sending, kids screaming, job changing, horns honking, errand running, social media posting, always changing, look, a squirrel culture.

Our life is like the student section at the Arizona State basketball game. I don't know if you've seen this, but when the opposing team is shooting free throws, this curtain opens up.

It's called the curtain of distraction. And you have no idea what's going to come out whenever it opens up. And it distracts the other team while they're shooting the free throws.

And it's amazing how much the percentage goes down. No one should ever have to see that. That is what our life is like. Can I get an amen? There are distractions everywhere.

Nicholas Carr in an article in The Atlantic, he writes this, quote, Immersing myself in a book or a lengthy article used to be easy.

[7 : 24] My mind would get caught up in the narrative or the turns of the argument. I'd spend hours strolling through long stretches of prose. But that's rarely the case anymore.

Now my concentration starts to drift after two or three pages. I get fidgety. I lose the thread. I begin looking for something else to do. I feel I'm always dragging my wayward brain back to the text.

Deep reading that used to come naturally is now a struggle. We are a distracted people. There are all kinds of distractions in our life.

And listen, if we are not careful, those distractions will keep us from focusing on what matters most. And that is not just true for your life.

That is true for the church of Jesus Christ. Because it is exactly what's happening here in Acts chapter 6. Look at it in verse 1.

[8 : 26] This is what's going down. 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.

Luke says here that the number of disciples are increasing. In other words, and we've seen this. If you've been with us the last few weeks or you've watched online, the church is growing like crazy.

I mean in Acts chapter 2, you've got 3,000 people on one day that put their faith in Jesus and are baptized. In Acts chapter 4, it says 5,000 just men.

Who knows if you add the women and others to that. I don't mean others in terms of gender. I don't want that to be misrepresented. Like kids. Who knows what that number is? So we've got like 10,000 people maybe that in a short amount of time have come to faith in Jesus Christ.

And now in Acts 6, it says the church is rapidly increasing. And keep in mind, this is not some superficial belief like walk an aisle and just check a box. Luke is describing for us the kind of disciples that are being made.

[9 : 34] People are studying the word that is the apostolic witness of the faith. They're committed to fellowship. And they're praying. And as these thousands of Christians are doing this, do you know what God is doing?

Adding to their number. I mean revival is happening here. And if there is anything, I mean anything that I have learned in 25 years of ministry, it is this.

More people, more problems. More people, more problems. More people, more complaining. Well, how come we don't do that anymore?

And I think we should do it this way. But what about me? And what about my group? We all know this to be true. Notice it on the screen. Growth brings growing pains.

Growth brings growing pains. And if you don't believe me, try having multiple children. True, right? We laugh at that because it's true to life.

[10 : 32] And if that's true in a family, it's certainly true in a faith family. That as a faith family is growing, there are growing pains. Well, what's the growing pain in Acts 6?

Look at it again in verse 1. It says they're increasing in number, so there's growing pains. A complaint by the Hellenist arose from the Hebrews about their widows that they're being neglected in the daily distribution.

In other words, the growing pain here is you have a group that's being neglected. And that's a legitimate issue. In fact, it's such a legitimate issue that the apostles are going to get involved.

And all of us, like if you know a little bit about the Bible, you know how much the Bible talks about the importance of taking care of widows, right? Let me remind you what James, the brother of Jesus, said in James 1.27.

Religion, pure and undefiled before God, is to visit orphans and widows in their affliction. So, I mean, this is basic care, to care for widows.

[11 : 30] But we need to understand what being a widow in the ancient Near East was because it was more than just be compassionate towards somebody that has lost a spouse, which of course is true and something that you would want to minister to.

I'm just saying that in this context, it's deeper than that. When you think about caring for widows here in Acts 6, you need to understand that this is first about economic provision.

Being a widow in the ancient Near East meant you had no way whatsoever of providing income. Now listen, I know our society would be different in this view, but listen, in the society to which Acts 6 is happening, men weren't the primary providers.

They were the only providers. So when your husband dies, you have no one or no way to provide for yourself unless you have other family members to support you.

So when they pass, you don't have a 401K to take out. You don't have Social Security helping you out. So a widow in the ancient Near East most often ended up being someone poor, having absolutely nothing.

[12 : 44] And so the church took that serious. Amen? Do you remember last week? Please tell me you remember last week. Back in Acts 4, what were they doing?

Selling their land and giving the proceeds of it so that what? There was not a single one of them in need. Oh, the early church took caring for the poor very, very serious.

This is a big deal. And notice, secondly, it's not just about economic provision. It's about racial reconciliation. The text says, Luke tells us there are two different groups here, and it's not just that one can't eat, it's that they can't get along.

Here are the two groups that are happening. You've got the Hellenistic Jews. Hellenistic Jews were Jews that lived outside of Palestine. If you know your Old Testament, you know that there were times of exiles where Jews were taken out of their homeland into another land.

Think, for instance, like the Babylonian exile. So you have Jews taken out of Palestine, out of their homeland, and they're living in Gentile lands. And what happens over time is that they begin to look like Gentiles.

[13 : 56] They begin to act like Gentiles. They are outsiders. Those are the Hellenistic Jews. Are you with me? Say yes. The Hebraic Jews were the people that never left their hometown.

They're still in Jerusalem. They're there with all of the normal Jewish customs that they grew up with. And so here's what's happened. You've got these outsider Jews and these insider Jews, and now because of the day of Pentecost, they've been brought into one location, and because of Jesus, they've been brought into one body, and they can't get along.

And one of the reasons why they can't get along is because the Hellenistic Jews look and act like Gentiles. They took on Greek customs.

I tried to think of a way to really kind of help illustrate this, and this is a story I would know from my own life in terms of my friends. I've got a friend of mine. His name is Lance. We co-authored a book together, and he is Japanese-American.

And he told me one time he was working for Pepsi-Cola, and Pepsi-Cola sent him to Japan to oversee their Japanese plant. And he said, going in as a Japanese-American, the Japanese would respect Americans more than they would me because they looked at me as, you're not Japanese or American.

[15 : 25] You're Japanese-American. And they would judge him and isolate him and refuse to follow his leadership because he was an outsider.

That's what's going on here. It's one thing not to be. It's one thing to be a Gentile. It's another thing to be a Jew and look and act like a Gentile.

And so you've got relational conflict happening here, and guess what happens? Assumptions. People make assumptions.

They make assumptions. Without all the facts, they go ahead and make conclusions. They don't care about us. That group gets a better treatment. They must hate us because of our race.

Listen, here's where I'm getting that from. Listen, Luke tells us that they were neglected. He doesn't tell us why. It might have been because of race. It might not have been.

[16 : 23] And that's the problem with assumptions. You see, when you make assumptions, you assign motives. That is, you judge the motives of others before you actually talk to them.

And when that happens, the heart becomes a fertile ground for the enemy to sow division. That's what he's doing here in Acts 6. And then what happens from that is gossip.

That is, instead of taking it to the source, you begin to grumble with one another. Now, this does not happen in churches today. But back in Acts 6, this was a really big problem. And I want you to notice this on the screen.

Gossip is saying something negative to someone who can't do anything about it. It's having a complaint like Acts 6. And rather than actually taking it to the source and figuring it out together, you begin to grumble and complain.

And that is dividing the church in Acts 6. Now, let me ask you a question. What's really going down here? What's really happening here?

[17 : 25] Come here. Come here. Come here. Come here. If you think this is about food, if you think this is about race, if you think this is about relationships, you haven't gone deep enough.

You know what this is about? It's about Satan trying to distract his people. Listen, he's already tried to disrupt the mission in Acts already, like using persecuting government in Acts 4, like when they throw the apostles in prison.

He's tried internal hypocrisy like he does with Ananias and Sapphira in chapter 5. And now he's using grumbling and gossip. Notice it on the screen.

Faith family, gossip has killed more churches than physical persecution ever has. Here's how the strategy works. And you've got to give it to the father of lies.

He's so brilliant when it comes to deception. Amen? And so here's how the strategy goes. Hey, let's create a scenario where the church starts focusing inward rather than on the mission.

[18 : 33] And here's the thing. Oh, this is good. Come here. Come here. Come here. It doesn't have to be heresy. It can be hearsay. It doesn't have to be heresy. It can be hearsay.

Well, do you know what I heard about the Hellenistic Jews? Do you know what I heard about those Hebraic Jews? And here's what's going to happen. We're going to take a legitimate issue that isn't the most important issue, and we'll distract them.

And now they'll lose sight of the mission because it only takes one distraction to have serious consequences. I think C.S. Lewis captures this brilliantly.

You know that I love Screwtape Letters. It's one of my favorite works of Lewis. Here's what he writes. Of course, you know that Screwtape's letter is fictional. It's written from the perspective of a senior demon that's trying to instruct a junior demon on how to go about spiritual warfare.

And so this is what Screwtape writes to Wormwood, his nephew. It's so brilliant. Listen. Talking about the Christian. Listen. Make him waste his time only in conversation he enjoys with people that he likes.

[19 : 45] But in conversations with those he cares nothing about on subjects that bore him. Listen. You can make him do nothing for long periods of time. All the outgoing activities, that is the mission, which we want him to avoid can be inhibited so that he may say, as one of our own patients said upon his arrival down here, Now I see that I spent most of my time doing neither what I ought nor what I liked.

Remember, the only thing that matters is the extent to which you separate the man, the Christian, from the enemy, that is God. It doesn't matter how small the sins provided their cumulative effect is to edge the man away from the light and into the nothing.

This is so good. Lewis is brilliant. Amen. I'll amen for you. Listen to what he says. He says this. Murder is no better than cards, if cards will do the trick, because the safest road to hell is the gradual one.

Oh, make no mistake about it. The enemy will try to spread heresy. But hearsay works much easier to distract the church from her mission.

So let me ask you today, and this is in your personal life, what is diverting your attention from the important things of life? Maybe your job has distracted you from important things.

[21 : 14] Maybe you've put money over relationships. Maybe you've put your needs over the needs of others. But I guarantee you, just like the church in Acts 6, there are things trying to distract you from the important things in life.

And the apostles will have none of it. Verse 2. Listen, the apostles do something here that would have been easily misunderstood.

Are you ready? And this often gets misunderstood in churches today. They refuse to get involved. What do they say? We will not give up prayer and the preaching of the word to serve tables.

To which most of the people in churches today would respond like this. Well, you're not much of a shepherd. Well, all you want to do is preach your sermons and go home. You don't really care about the sheep.

You're a preacher, not a pastor. You must think you're some kind of big shot super apostle that just thinks, Ooh, he's too good to serve tables and show up at the picnic.

[22 : 25] Listen, the apostles, and I love this. I don't only love it, I've learned from it. The apostles know who they are and exactly what God has called them to do.

You see, you need to understand this, Faith Family. We notice it on the screen. The apostles are not trying to be prideful. The apostles are trying to be faithful. They're not trying to be prideful. Oh, we're too good for that.

No, God has given us something really important to do. God has called our life to the importance of prayer and the proclamation of the word.

We can't sacrifice that even for an important issue. And the church, I'm just preaching the word, right?

You may kick me out the door after tonight. Who knows? But I'm telling you, a pastor is not your personal life coach or your individual chaplain. He is someone called out, a Christ follower called out, to dedicate his life to the preaching of the gospel.

[23 : 29] And success is not busyness. It is faithfulness. It's not about how many meetings he's in. It's how faithful is he in proclaiming the word.

And the downfall of so many pastors is they get caught up in really good things, like Acts chapter 6, to the point that they neglect the most important thing.

There's so much drama, it ends up a 60-hour work week, and he hasn't even touched the word. And you'll call him likable, you'll call him approachable, but the one thing God won't call him is faithful.

And his sermons will get flatter and staler, and the very thing that breathes life, namely the gospel, is getting ignored. I'm telling you, faith family, if immorality has slain its thousands, busyness in the ministry has slain its tens of thousands.

And the apostles do something. Will you please hear my heart? The apostles do something that you have no idea how hard it is to say. They said, no.

[24 : 39] No. No. No. We won't be at your event. No.

We won't show up for the party. No. We're not going to serve tables. Because we're too good for that? No. But because we have been called by God to devote our life to the preaching of the word.

And at the end of the day, we won't be judged by whether or not we're liked, but by whether or not we were faithful.

It's not about standing before the people and being popular. It's about standing before God and doing the calling he's placed on your life. Chuck Swindoll says it this way. This is good. He says, the leader has the strength to say no without explanation.

It is really hard to do. You have no idea the guilt that I feel as a pastor sometimes when you just have to say no. I can't be at that.

[25 : 42] I won't be at that. Because I must devote the bulk of my week to the ministry of the word of God. David Myers, who is a researcher on the brain, he says, what makes great athletes, authors, leaders, and musicians is the ability to focus on a single task for extended periods of time.

This is why I don't do hardly any counseling. Do you know why I don't do a lot of counseling? I hate people. That's one reason. Okay.

That's a joke, right? Because I'm not a good counselor. That probably is true. But the reason why I don't do a lot of that is because I've learned that's not where I'm gifted and it's not how I best serve the church.

And so I have to learn to say, man, I'd love to be your counselor and your chaplain and your life coach and your buddy or whatever. But, like, what I'm called to do is to preach the word.

And to, by the way, prayer and preach the word go together. Because you're not much of a preacher if you're not doing a lot of praying on God help me understand this so that I can feed your people.

[26 : 57] Right? So they said no. Why did they say no? Notice it on the screen. The message of the mission is the gospel, and the mission's not going to advance without it.

And I know what some of you are thinking. You're like, I know what you're implying. Like, I'm starting to see what you're saying, and here's what you're saying.

The widows, economic caring for the poor, and racial reconciliation are secondary issues. Is that what you're saying?

Are you really implying that? Let me be very clear. Yes, I am. Actually, I'm not. The apostles are by their very action.

And do you know why? Oh, you've got to hear this. This is significant. Because you're never going to have the right motivation to care for the poor or the right motivation to help reconcile race without the gospel.

[28 : 00] Let me break that down. Take racism. Racism is a sense of superiority. It's when you feel yourself is superior because of the color of your skin or your ethnicity. Or maybe it's not even racism.

Maybe you think you're greater than other people because you have more money. Or you have a higher education. Or you're more attractive than they are. But what does the gospel remind all of us of? We have no basis for superiority whatsoever because everyone, red, yellow, black, and white, has sinned and fallen short of the glory of God.

Look at it on the screen. The reality of grace eliminates the superiority of race. How can I feel more superior than you when I am just as much need of grace as you?

I am a sinner just like you in need of grace. So there's no, if I'm really understanding the gospel, there's no way I could feel myself greater than you in any way.

It's why, here's something that will get me in trouble for some, not most of you. It's why the woke approach won't work. Listen, notice this on the screen. Yes, I said it here.

[29 : 05] Churches want to end racism by being woke when it's only the gospel that will work. And again, I'm not being political. I'm being biblical.

It's the gospel that helps address this issue of race. And not only that, think of poverty. A Christian is someone who has admitted, I'm bankrupt before God.

I have nothing. Do you remember the Sermon on the Mount? Blessed are the poor in spirit. The spiritual beggars. We understand that the gospel is the fact that Jesus was rich and he became poor so that in my poverty I could be rich in God.

So when you see somebody who's poor, you've heard me say this many times, you don't look down on them. You say, I'm just like them. I'm a beggar. I have nothing.

In some of the songs we sing, like we talk about, there's nothing in our hands. When we come before God. That's me, but by God's grace. In other words, you can't have the proper motivation to take care of the poor without the gospel.

[30 : 08] You can't have the right motivation to address issues of race without the gospel. So the apostles are not going to set aside the gospel for social issues. Satan would be thrilled.

Hear me. Satan would be thrilled to see everybody get along racially and all the poor fed socially as long as the gospel isn't proclaimed faithfully.

And the apostles say no.

No. No. We're not going to get involved. We're going to preach the word.

Faith family, are you a focused Christian? Are you a focused Christian? Listen to just a few verses. We're almost done. Colossians 3.2. Set your minds on the things that are above and not on the things of earth.

[31 : 25] Focus. Yes. Philippians 3.13. I do not consider that I have made it my own, but one thing I do, forgetting what lies behind, I strain forward to what lies ahead.

I press on towards the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus. Focus. One more. Hebrews 2.1. Therefore, we must pay much closer attention to what we've heard, lest we drift away.

One last thing. One last thing. Because some of you are like, okay, I get that, but what about the widows? I mean, are we just going to say, forget that issue?

We're just going to preach the gospel. No, no, no, no, no. No. That's not what happens here. Look at verse 3. Therefore, brothers, pick out from among you seven men of good repute, full of the spirit and wisdom, whom we will appoint to this duty.

And we will devote ourselves to prayer and the ministry of the word. And I love verse 5. And what they said pleased the whole gathering. We love that our pastor said no.

[32 : 36] We love that he said no because we want him to preach the gospel. We don't want any distractions. Just preach the word. What can we do to get involved and make sure these widows are fed?

And this is where, most agreed, the office of deacon is formed. Where you have these seven men who are appointed by the apostles to now take care of this issue of the widows being neglected in the daily distribution.

And the result is this, verse 7. The word of God continued to increase. And the number of the disciples multiplied greatly in Jerusalem.

And a great many priests became obedient to the faith. In other words, the very people that killed Jesus came to faith in Jesus.

Because the church wouldn't let a distraction keep them from the mission. That will preach to me and to every one of us.

[33 : 45] Because one little distraction can have serious consequences. And here's what happened. Quick overview. Because the gospel was protected and people got involved and they worked together to bring a solution.

The gospel is proclaimed. Disciples increase. And lives are transformed. I'm referring to the priest in verse 7 that put their faith in Christ. In other words, what's Luke saying?

The mission kept going. Let me translate that for you. And I don't mean this cliché. Satan loses again. You thought throwing the apostles in prison was going to shut this down.

You thought Ananias and Sapphira was going to shut this down. You think a complaint and a little bit of division and some disagreements going to shut this mission down?

No chance. No chance. The people of God will get this right. And the gospel will inform us in how to do it. And the mission will press on.

[34 : 55] This is God's word to us tonight. So I close with this story. It's about Lindsay Jacob Ellis. She's a professional skier. Was skiing in the Olympics. And she had the gold medal all but around her neck.

It was hers. And she came down to the final stretch. And she lost her focus. Watch what happens here. She's coasting to what is going to be a runaway victory. And she diverts her attention.

And when she does, she falls to the ground. And the person behind her goes right by her. And by the time she gets up, it's too late. And Lindsay loses the gold.

That one little distraction had serious consequences. Faith family, what is distracting you? What is it in your life that's taking your focus off the things that matter most?

Today, if your life or my life is full of distractions, here's what the word of God says to you. It's what we just sang a few moments ago. Turn your eyes to Jesus.

[36 : 04] Put your focus where it's supposed to be. And that is on your Savior. A Savior who I might remind you lived a life on earth that was full of distractions.

Are you kidding me? Here's just a few of them. Turn these stones into bread. Jesus, I'll never let anything happen to you.

Let this cup pass. Come down off that cross if you're really the Son of God. And the good news of the gospel is that while you and I frequently get distracted from our mission, guess what?

Jesus never got distracted from his. And so today, for the good of our life, for the good of this church, for the good of the mission of Christ, let's put our focus on him.

And God's people said, amen. Lord, we thank you for your word. It's just perfect. It's not only perfect in content, it's perfect in timing.

[37 : 17] So thank you for speaking to me through this text. I trust you have spoken to your people through this text. And so, Lord, help us. Help us because our lives are full of distractions.

This is not just a church thing. This is a walking with Jesus thing. We have lots of things that can pull us off track or distract our attention and pull our focus in different directions.

And tonight is just like the apostles did. No, no, no. We're going to step back and focus on what matters the most. And that is the mission that we've been called to. We will not neglect the important issues.

But our focus is the gospel. Our focus is the mission we've been called to. So whatever that means for us, whatever that means in our individual lives, Spirit of God, make it clear.

[38 : 21] Just speak to us, convict us, and ultimately put our eyes on our Savior who died for us.

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