

Ministry and Growth

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[0 : 00] Please turn to page 117, Acts chapter 6. We're going to be looking at this short reading from verses 1 through 7. And as you're turning to that, I'm hoping all of you have been going to each of the sermons in this series that started back in September.

David started with Acts 1, a very good place to start. And in that, David talked about the mission of the church. He talked about how in verse 8 of chapter 1, Jesus told his disciples, this is who you are.

You are witnesses of me. You are witnesses of Jesus. And the eyes of their hearts had been opened to the truth of the risen Lord Jesus, that he lived and reigns.

And this is our identity as Christians, as the church as well. Our mission is to be witnesses who speak. Because we, in the same way that the disciples were, have seen that Jesus is our ruler and our Savior.

This is who we are. People who have seen this. This is what it means to be a Christian. And this is what we pray for, for Jack, who was just baptized as well. That the eyes of his heart would be open to the truth of the living Jesus.

[1 : 24] That he would see Jesus' love and his mercy and his grace and his forgiveness and his healing and his power through God's word. Just as all of us who are praying for him have become this kind of witness.

And the work of the church, what we are about as a church, the really important things that we do, all have to do with actually speaking about what we have witnessed.

To open our mouths in testimony and in prayer. And when the church does this, it blesses the world. And not only that, it does great damage to the cause of evil and death.

And so it makes sense that Satan would want to do something about a church that would speak about what it has witnessed. And the last two weeks we've seen this. In chapter 5, we saw, first of all, Ananias and Sapphira.

And here are two leaders of the church who bring corruption into the church. They didn't really believe in the reality of the living Jesus. That he truly was Lord. That he was in charge of this world and involved in it in a way that he reigns.

[2 : 36] And so they denied the power of the gospel in that way. Sin really could have taken root. But of course what happened is that God revealed himself to be a living God. He immediately struck down Ananias and Sapphira to purify the church.

And he did many miraculous signs and wonders immediately after that. We see this incredible power of God coming into people's lives. Healing them of all kinds of illnesses.

And releasing them from evil spirits as well. Only a living God who is Lord could do this. And then last week we saw Satan try another attack.

After trying to corrupt the church and say, well, this Jesus doesn't really live. He said that he tried persecution. And so you saw leaders of the church jailed and intimidated by the council.

And physically abused in awful ways. Flogged and ordered not to speak in the name of Jesus. Yet again, God the Holy Spirit meets this attack powerfully.

[3 : 37] So the Holy Spirit strengthens these men to actually be witnesses who speak during the trial. They actually talk about who Jesus is. And they call people to repentance as well who are listening to them in that trial.

And in fact, at the end of their flogging, they considered it to be actually a worthy thing. To be suffering disgrace for Jesus' name.

And it says every day they taught and proclaimed the good news that Jesus is the Christ. And I want you to notice about those two strategies of Satan. They are trying to silence the church.

And that's how you stop the work of witness. Silent witnesses have no effect. In fact, as David mentioned, silent witnesses are actually hostile witnesses. And so through Ananias and Sapphira, Satan tried to convince the church not to speak because the gospel is not real. And then through the intimidation of the Sanhedrin and the physical abuse, Satan tried to convince the church that the gospel is too difficult.

[4 : 44] It's too hard to speak about Jesus. Well, there's a third way. Those didn't work. And so Satan tries a third type of attack. And it is simply this.

To distract the church with important matters so it won't speak about what it has witnessed. And this is the temptation for the church to be too busy to speak.

And it's much more subtle. It's different from thinking that Jesus is not real or it's too hard to speak. This is one that's too busy. We're too active as a church to be speaking witnesses.

And in verse 1, you see the source of the distraction. The church is growing. And Hellenists were murmuring against the Hebrews because their widows were neglected in the daily distribution. And what was happening is the widows depended on the church for their well-being because there was no social net. And the church was an incredible gathering in which there were no needy people, we heard in chapter 4.

[5 : 45] Yet the feeding of the widow was a very... And that's why the feeding of the widow was so important. Yet because of the rapid growth of the church, Greek Jewish widows were being overlooked in this very important ministry.

It wasn't intentional, but likely it was due to a lack of communication. So you had two different types of Jewish people who had been converted. There were the Greek Jews who had been living outside Jerusalem, outside in the Greek world.

They spoke differently and had a different culture. Whereas the Hebrew Jews were born in Jerusalem. And they were immersed in Jewish culture in Jerusalem as well.

And so there was a rivalry between these two groups within the Jewish world. And probably that transferred into the church as well. And so there was lack of communication.

And one group was not receiving the care that they should. This was the problem. And it was a big one because it involved very basic aspects of worship.

[6 : 48] You know that James said that pure religion, pure worship, what it means to actually give of yourself, is involved the looking after orphans and widows in their distress. In other words, giving to those who cannot give back.

This is what pure religion is. And it was being compromised in Jerusalem. And this is important for us today as well to think about. Because it is critical that the church should look after those in the congregation who are in need.

It is the sign of a healthy church when this is happening. And Catherine and I experienced the health of a church in this way, in a powerful way this fall when our little baby died.

Because during Catherine's hospitalization and her recovery, you fed us and you visited us and you babysat Alexander. You sent encouraging notes.

You cleaned our house and even gardened for us. And in fact, most importantly, we received the prayers of many, many of you.

[7 : 52] And we saw in that time, and we are seeing now, that St. John's is a church that really knows how to love. And that was the case in the early church as well.

They knew how to love as well in a remarkable way. There was no needy people. But here we have a crisis where that is not happening. And many widows are not being cared for.

And you know, there is a cost to this crisis. There is murmuring in verse 1 is the way it's put. And that word was used in the Old Testament when the Israelites in the desert were murmuring because of the fact that Moses had led them into the middle of nowhere.

They actually complained about wanting to go back to Egypt, back to slavery. And this murmuring, therefore, was a complaining against leaders, against the apostles, because of the ineffectiveness of the distribution.

And that is incredibly destructive to the life of the church and to the leadership. Many churches are crippled by this murmuring today. And certainly, it was undermining the work of the Jerusalem church.

[9 : 03] But fortunately, we know that someone brought the matter right to the disciples, to the apostles, because in verse 2, they actually address the problem. And if you can look at verse 2,

what they did there was to immediately bring the whole body of disciples together.

So they're all gathering together in one place. The apostles are realizing how important this ministry is and how destructive murmuring is to the life of the church.

And they know it's going to take a lot of time to address. In fact, so much time that they will have to neglect preaching. And that point here in this reading is a critical point in the life of the early church, because it's here that the identity of the church, the mission of the church, is being tested.

And it's here that Satan is attacking. His method was very clever. It's to crowd out the work of preaching and the word of God by using an incredibly important ministry of taking care of the needy. And in that way, he was going to compromise the speaking of the witnesses. But thankfully, the Holy Spirit spoke through the apostles very clearly.

[10:21] Look at the end of verse 2. It's not right that we should give up the preaching of the word of God to serve tables. Very simply, this is what they said.

And what they're doing there is that they are remembering. They are remembering. The Holy Spirit reminds them of the mission of the church. That Jesus told them when he was with them that they would be witnesses.

And that witnesses must talk about what they have seen. And surely that's what the church is about. They have seen Jesus. And that's what we are about. The eyes of our hearts have been opened to the living reality of Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior.

And that's why they, along with us, said to the Sanhedrin in chapter 4, we cannot help speaking about what we have seen and what we have heard because we are witnesses.

That's the mission of the church, to speak about Jesus. Now, when we think of this relationship between speaking as witnesses and pastoral care, I think that I cannot imagine going through the hardship that we went through this fall without knowing who Jesus is through the word of God.

[11:38] This was the deepest source of help and care and strength and hope. It is what has carried us through. In fact, the care of St. John's has meaning for Catherine and I and depth as well because of God's word.

Your prayers and your notes and the practical care that you have, I believe, arises out of your understanding that Jesus Christ truly is risen, that he is present with us and that he truly ministers to us by the Holy Spirit and that he rules over our fallen world and situations like we went through. But what Satan is trying to do here is produce an either-or situation. Either you preach God's word or you care for one another. But the truth is, they belong together.

True pastoral care, the kind of care that deeply affects you and has great effect, flows out of the right preaching of God's word.

True pastoral care comes out of the ministry, the serving of God's word. True pastoral care comes out of the ministry, the serving of God's word.

[13:16] And takes a lot of preparation. It's really a work that can easily be put off for those pressing matters. And there's a continual pressure during the week of a pastor to eat into the time that's spent on sermon preparation and teaching.

So how does the church meet this attack of distraction? How does the church protect that incredibly important time of preparation?

Well, let's look at verse 3. The apostles ask the congregation to raise up new leaders. This is how they solve the problem.

They ask, they say, pick out from among you seven men of good repute, full of the spirit and of wisdom, whom we may appoint to this duty of serving tables.

And because of this, the apostles then will be free to devote themselves, in other words, to renew their deep commitment to prayer and to ministry, literally serving of the word of God.

[14:21] You see, those two things they're asking would happen. The Holy Spirit has actually countered Satan's either or by a both and. He actually brings out a strategy of strengthening both types of service.

He frees up the apostles to serve the word of God and pray by bringing more people to serve in another way, in the care of the needy.

He protects the preaching by commissioning people for service. And that's a lesson for our church as well. It's a lesson to be a healthy church.

It's very interesting. The apostles don't ask the congregation to pick seven men who are really good at distributing food, really good at giving out things that people need.

No, it says that the qualifications are good character, men of good repute, full of spirit and of wisdom. And of course, these are fruits of the spirit that come from obeying God's word.

[15 : 23] It comes right out of the ministry of God's word. It produces these fruits in a person. There wouldn't have been anybody in their congregation with this kind of character if it hadn't been for the ministry of God's word, the apostles teaching.

And in fact, we're going to see two of these people that are listed. The first two that you see, Stephen and Philip in verse five, are going to set Jerusalem on fire. They're going to make a huge impact on the world with the gospel.

They are men who have been shaped and changed by God's word. And that brings a challenge up for us because at St. John's, one of the strengths of this church is that it takes the first few verses of chapter six very seriously.

Preachers are encouraged to spend time on the service of God's word and to spend time in prayer. And in fact, you cannot really have an effective sermon or preaching ministry without deep prayer for that sermon, for God's word in that preparation and for the people who you are preaching to. That's what makes for faithful and powerful sermons. And St. John's also encourages the ministry of God's word through small group Bible study that we really urge people to be part of a small group that reads the Bible together and prays together.

[16 : 44] And so our challenge is this. When the ministry of God's word flourishes like that, it's actually doing a work in you and me. It is preparing us to serve in a ministry.

So if you're listening to sermons and you're studying the Bible at St. John's, you are being shaped to serve him. And that's sometimes kind of a scary thought.

It means that God is preparing you for something that you may not be doing right now. And so as we're listening to this book of Acts, it's actually a very good time to think about being involved in ministry if you aren't already or to strengthen your devotion to service as you see the apostles doing.

Next month, during three Sundays in January, David is going to be talking a bit from the book of Acts about the nature of ministry. And during those three Sunday services, he will be actually commissioning people for ministry.

Everyone will stand who's involved in ministry and you will all be commissioned. And in fact, it will be very similar to what is going on in this passage because there the congregation in verse 6 put seven people before the apostles and they pray and they lay hands on them.

[18 : 03] And what they're doing there is that they are praying that God will strengthen them for service, but also the apostles are authorizing them for ministry. They are passing on their authority to minister to these people.

And they're saying the ministry is not confined to people who wear dresses in the front. Although I don't think that was happening yet in the book of Acts. But everybody, they are saying here, the ministry that God intends is spread out to all who have been shaped by God's word, to everyone who is a witness, to everyone whose eyes of their hearts have been opened to who Jesus is. Those are the people who are called to minister. And that means everyone in this congregation. I want you to notice the result of this service, the result of protecting God's word, the ministry of God's word.

And this is what we end with in verse 7. And it's a marvelous expression of these ministries flourishing. The word of God increased and the number of the disciples multiplied greatly in Jerusalem.

And a great many priests were obedient to the faith. Isn't that a remarkable last line? These priests who were completely invested in a religious system that didn't accept Jesus as Lord, as Savior, those people whose livelihood depended upon it, their hearts were changed.

[19 : 30] Those who were most resistant to God's grace, probably, received grace and abundance and are turned and believe. They're obedient to the faith. And you know, that verse is an important verse for us and a good one to end on because it talks about what we hope to be as a congregation, what the leadership of St. John's hopes to have happen here at St. John's.

Our goal is to see the word of God increase. And by that, it's really talking about people's lives being shaped and changed by God's word. And pastoral care taking place in which the truth of God's word is spoken and real hope and real comfort and real joy are given because of God's word.

We also hope to see our whole congregation serving God and caring for one another because of the ministry of God's word. And finally, we see here that disciples multiplied greatly and certainly this is our great hope as well, that those who would follow Jesus, who would be witnesses who speak, would be raised up because of the preaching of God's word.

In Advent, we know and believe and look forward to the day that Jesus will come again. And on that day, the things that will be important are, were you a witness who spoke?

Were you a witness who spoke? Or did things in this world and even in our church keep you from speaking? This passage tells us that through the ministry of God's word, God will change you and calls us to serve him.

[21 : 13] And it is through the ministry of God's word that we will be able to say, we will be able to hear Jesus say, well done, good and faithful servant. Amen.

Thank you. Amen. Amen.