

Chosen to Serve

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 20 September 2015

Preacher: Daniel Ralph

[0 : 00] for this morning, which is Acts 6, 1 to 7. So, Acts chapter 6, beginning in verse 1.

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. 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. 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. But we will devote ourselves to prayer and to the ministry of the Word. 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 Procorus, and Nicanor, and Timion, and Paramenez, and Nicholas, a proselyte of Antioch. These they set before the apostles, and they prayed and laid their hands on them. And the Word of God continued to increase, and the number of disciples multiplied greatly in Jerusalem.

[1 : 51] And a great many of the priests became obedient to the faith. And the Bible's back to Acts 6. If you're there, already there, great.

If you're not, just open up your Bibles again to Acts 6. As you're doing that, I'll pray for us. Father, lead us into your truth.

Your Word is truth. Allow us to see that what you're about to say here to us is relevant not only to us as a person, as a believer, but also as a church.

And this is perhaps one of those messages where we need to think not only about what does it mean for me, or to me, or what does it do for me, but more importantly, what does it do for me and for others, and what does it do for the church?

So we ask you for your Word to speak, and we pray that your Word would do the work. Just as by your Word you created, and each day you created by your Word, and it was good.

[3 : 05] We pray this morning that your Word would do the work. And by your Word, you will create in us the things that are needed. through faith and by your Holy Spirit.

In Jesus' name. Amen. Well, as you are aware, this is the last Sunday before our day of prayer, and this, like the rest of the messages, is to lead us into that day of prayer with a head and a heart filled with what it ought to be filled with in order that we can pray together.

Next Sunday is going to be probably, you know, one of the most important Lord's Days that we've ever participated together, given the fact that we're devoting it to prayer before God.

And honesty is required. And so this passage here, which is to do with the church and to do with service, is part of the things, no doubt, that we're going to be praying about next week.

Well, the church here in Acts is a church that reaches the lost with the Word of God. And that is why the church is growing.

[4 : 31] There's no special speaker. There's no method or model other than just allowing the Word of God to do the work. And I think sometimes we can get so caught up in thinking that we must do something else when actually the Word of God is the only thing that can work, and we must let the Word of God do the work.

And so here's a church that's using the Word of God to reach the lost, and that is why the church is growing. It is as simple as that. Everything in this church revolved around the Word of God, the proclamation of the Word of God, the Word of God being taught in the church and proclaimed in the church, as well as the Word of God being taught and proclaimed outside of the church.

Everything revolved around the Word of God. And we notice that because of this, people are being saved, but people are being saved from different backgrounds.

You've got two groups of people mentioned here, the Hellenists and the Hebrews. Well, there's a bit of a scuffle between them. They're both people that have come to faith in the Lord Jesus Christ,

both from a Jewish background.

The Hellenists, however, didn't speak Hebrew. They spoke Greek. And so that, you know, possible intermarrying with Gentiles would have, and being in a Gentile region, and these type of things all play in, and, you know, where people travel to and fro and pick up different languages.

[6 : 08] But that's the main distinction between them, that, you know, while they're essentially the same, that they belong to Jesus, they're different in the sense that, you know, they don't all speak the same language.

But this is something that can be overcome. So everyone needs saving, and these are two groups of people that are saved. And we saw last week in the life of Peter that the kind of faith that Jesus Christ builds his church upon, upon you, Peter, I will build my church, is the type of faith that Peter had.

And we asked the question, how did Peter know that the answer was Jesus Christ? How does anybody know that the answer is Jesus? Well, we concluded that the only way anybody can know is the same way Peter knew.

Blessed are you, Peter, for calling me the Messiah, for calling me the Christ, because flesh and blood cannot reveal that. You didn't get it from the pastor in your church.

You didn't get it from the local rabbi. You didn't get it from growing up in Sunday school. You got it from my Father in heaven. Blessed are you, Simon Peter, for flesh and blood cannot reveal this to you, but my Father in heaven.

[7 : 29] And so we concluded, if that was the case for Peter, it's the case for everyone. How did you come to faith? Blessed are you, for flesh and blood did not reveal it to you.

How is your next door neighbor, or your daughter, or your son, or your husband, or your wife, or even your enemy, going to come to faith in Christ Jesus?

Well, they're only going to come to faith in Christ Jesus in the same way Peter did, in the same way that we have. Blessed are we, for flesh and blood cannot reveal it to you, but my Father who is in heaven.

And so salvation is a blessing of God that comes to the people through the Word of God. How does anybody get faith? How does anybody get this blessing?

Well, the Bible tells us that the Word of God produces that faith, and that's the blessing that leads people to Christ Jesus.

[8 : 25] We let the Word do the work. And yet so often, we don't let the Word do the work. We think we have to do something additional, we have to try harder, but here, the growth in this church comes down to one simple thing, that flesh and blood cannot reveal it, but the Word of God can do the work that you can't.

And so the Word of God is being preached, the kind of faith that is being built up, that Jesus builds his church on, is coming from the Word of God, and so the church of God is growing, and it is as simple as that.

Because the Word is preached, people are blessed, and the church is growing. And so what is the issue? Well, like all churches, there comes a situation where the Word of God becomes threatened. Not that people are attacking the Word of God, but the very amount of time given to the Word of God to actually being spoken is threatened by a whole number of things.

Here it just so happens to be that there is an issue in the church that is threatening the church, or threatening the Word of God from continuing in the church.

[9 : 54] And so if the church is growing and the Word of God creates the growth, it follows that the growth will stop if the Word of God stops. You don't have to be a rocket scientist to work that out, but if the Word of God produces a people of God, then if the Word of God diminishes, then so do the amount of conversions to the people of God.

If the Word of God produces a church, then wherever the Word of God is not being spoken, you will have a diminishing church.

And so not only will the church struggle to grow, it may not grow at all. And so while this passage may look as though it's to address an issue of widows in the church, it's actually not that at all.

It is an issue, it's an important issue, but that is not exactly what Luke is pointing out to us when he writes acts, when he records acts to us.

And so if the situation in the church is not really the main issue, but the Word of God is the main issue, how does it all fit together? And why is it so important? Well, you'll notice that there are three

problems in the church, or three issues that need to be dealt with.

[11:16] The first one is that the Word of God has to continually to be preached in the church and outside. Number one. The second issue in the church is that there are widows in the church, and we have a clear command to look after widows and orphans.

You know, I was brought up by a single mother, and so you kind of know as a child that it must be tougher for a single mother than it is for a mother and a father, but as a child you can't really ever know just how tough it probably is, unless, you know, you're in that position.

So we as a church have a special command to look after widows and orphans, so that's the issue number two. But what's the third one? Do you see the third one?

Because it's the third one, which is the point of the passage. The third issue is, what about the Word of God continuing? Because the issue in the church is, this problem has arisen, but the Word of God needs to continue to be preached.

But if those who are preaching the Word stop to look after the widows, what happens? Well, the Word of God stops being preached. And so you solve one problem, but then you've got another.

[12:38] And so effectively, you've got three problems. How do I make the Word of God continually go forth from the church? How do I make sure that the widows in the church are continually looked after?

And how do I solve both those problems without robbing Peter to pay Paul? How do you do that?

They say, you'll notice in verse two, and the twelve summoned the full number of disciples and said, it is not right that we should give up preaching the Word of God to serve tables.

Well, why is it not right to give up preaching the Word of God to serve tables? Is it because it's a lesser duty? No. It's not a lesser duty at all. But the fact that if they gave it up, what are they giving up?

They're giving up the very command of Jesus to go forth and proclaim the gospel. That's what's at stake. And so it's not that the widows aren't important.

They're very important. But do you understand what's at stake? Do you understand how the two problems in the church cause the third problem? Do you understand how the issue here is, one, that the leaders who are currently leading in the church can't stop what they're doing in order to do something else and still continue to do the thing that they've left?

[13:57] It just can't happen. The resources have been stretched too thin. And so the solution is, we need new leaders. And that's what happens.

They call together the full church and ask for new leaders. Go ahead and find me seven men full of the Holy Spirit. But before we get to the solution, I want you to just spend a little bit of time in asking the questions, what happens if nothing happens?

Right? What happens if nothing happens? What if there is a church that we're constantly robbing Peter to pay Paul?

What if those in the church who are serving in one area are then having to go over and serve in another area, fill in the gaps because others aren't there to serve God?

What happens if nothing happens? Well, I'm going to let you know. That if no solution is being found, then the widows are either going to be looked over, overlooked.

[15:01] You're going to have people in the church that are not going to be cared for because you've not got the people in the church to care for them. There's just no way around that. And so what normally happens is that you look to the leadership.

But notice what the leadership does, verse 2. The 12 summoned the full number of disciples. In other words, the leadership currently in the church didn't consider that it was their issue alone, but it was the issue of the church.

Everyone needs to understand this. And the solution needs to come from everyone. And so if nothing happens, then the widows get overlooked and the word of God possibly gets overlooked. And both of those happens in churches. I still remember David Gibbs saying to me, we used to have this group where a group of ministers would meet in David Gibbs' house on a Thursday morning every now and then, and we would check whether or not each other were handling the word of God properly.

Well, given the fact that they'd been in ministry for a long time, it was normally them checking the younger ones, but you can understand the benefit of the group. And I can remember David Gibbs saying to me, and I'm not going to tell you how many hours he expected of me, but he said, if you

spend less than this amount of hours on your sermon in preparation and you worked for me, I'd give you the sack.

[16:31] Do you want to know how many hours he said? Fifteen hours per message. Not including prayer time. See, I think some of us think it's quite easy just to proclaim exactly what God is saying.

But the leaders here understand that they can't stop what they're doing and do something else as well and effectively do what they were doing before.

It can't happen. Both areas diminish and diminish quite quickly. And so both areas in the church become overlooked.

The next thing to notice is that the solution, when there is a solution found, is not found in those already serving. I've been in this church long enough to know that whenever there's a call for new leaders in any of the groups, that the groups that need new leaders often get their new leaders from other groups in the church.

And all it's doing is passing the problem on. So YP looks for new leaders and it takes it from what? What looks for new leaders and it takes it from Sunday school? And so the problem is never solved.

[17:53] The problem's just passed on. And then Sunday school's asking for new leaders. And so the issue goes around and around and around and around. And yet here the church, because they've been brought together, need to understand that the solution is not found in the existing leadership.

Whatever group in which you serve, it can't be found there because the moment you take away from there, you diminish the ministry that exists, that happens. And so the pressure is not really to be felt by those who are serving God.

It's really to be felt by those who are not serving God. Because that's where the pressure is actually coming from.

So those who preach can continue to preach, and those widows who need care can actually be cared for. The church needs to be made aware of the problem. The church isn't made aware of the problem so that everything can continue as it should.

Everyone in the church is to understand the issues involved in both. Both the importance of the word of God and prayer, and the importance of looking after people in the church.

[19:09] Everyone is to understand. So it's not really the case that the word and prayer is more important than the widows.

I mean, you could look at it that way, but I don't think that's how you're meant to look at it, but what is more important, or what would be wrong, is to pull people away from serving in one area of the church to then go and serve in another area of the church.

You're not solving anything. You're just pushing the problem around the church until you run out of leaders.

You're robbing Peter to pay Paul. So what do you think would happen if you, this morning, changed the area in which you serve?

Or what do you think would happen if you stopped serving all together? I've had that. I've had people in this church stop serving, disappear, and I've never seen them again.

[20:20] Never even told that they were going to stop, or that the group has ended. And you're gone. And then people look to you and say, well, how do you explain that?

I can explain it, other than it was rude. Disrespectful to the whole church. And so what do you do if you stop doing?

Well, there is a time where we have to pick up our tools, and there is a time when we have to put our tools down, because, you know, there are other issues in life that need looking after as well. But do you also see that any service you render in the church, you are actually serving more than the people directly in front of you?

That any service you render in the church, you are serving in more areas than the areas that you're actually serving in? Because that's exactly what we see here.

[21:27] And that's exactly what the church needs to see. So here's the solution. How big is the problem in the church it acts? Well, I think, along with a few others, that it's only the tip of the iceberg.

I think it's put in gentle forms that there's a little polite falling out over the daily distribution of food. I actually think that when you look at the church throughout the rest of the New Testament, that some of the issues in the church are pretty wiry, hard to deal with.

And how big is the problem in churches today? Well, it's the same. And it doesn't matter how big the problem is, the problem always will grow.

Problems grow. And so if you can deal with the problem immediately, then it's easier to deal with. But if you let the problem grow, it gets to a point where you can't seem to do anything with it. So it doesn't really matter if you've got a great leadership at that point. Do you know what? It doesn't even matter if your leadership has come up with the best plan ever since the day of creation.

[22 : 39] It wouldn't make a blind bit of difference if you didn't have the people in the church willing to serve God. Things don't happen in the church because we're short of solutions.

I'm not short of solutions. I don't think the eldership is short of solutions. I don't think people generally in the congregation are short of solutions. What we're actually short of is people serving. Because their solution always seems to involve people. Try something different. Well, try something different.

But if it still involves people, you've still got the same issue. The issue is not the solution. You can have the best solution in the world. But if there are not people who are going to be serving God, your solution means nothing.

And so what these seven need to understand as they begin to serve is that they're actually serving more than the widows and the church. Their service is both a direct service and an indirect service.

[23 : 58] So this is how it happens. The apostles appoint seven men full of the Holy Spirit because those who are already in ministry can't spread their ministry any further without it all being stretched.

And so this is the point where we have to stop and notice what's happening of just how important this is. The seven begin to serve, but ask yourself the question, who are they serving? Now, most of us would say the seven are serving the widows in the church in the daily distribution of food.

Well, that would be true. They're serving them directly. But who are they serving indirectly? I really want you to see this because it's so important. Who are the seven serving indirectly?

Well, you would have noticed that even though they're picked and they begin to serve in the church, they obviously have the God-given qualifications to be filled with the Holy Spirit, qualified by God as it were to serve in the church.

And that while they're serving in the daily distribution of food directly, they are at exactly the same time serving the apostles indirectly.

[25 : 11] Because as they do what they do in serving and waiting on tables for the people in the church, the apostles, those who are dedicated to the Word of God into prayer, can continue to do what they were doing, which they could not have done if there were not seven more leaders in order to address the additional need in the church.

So even though it looks like these seven are not really advancing the gospel, that is exactly what they're doing. That even though it may look like on the surface that these seven are just serving on tables, they're not really doing anything gospel-orientated, that couldn't be further from the truth.

The service they render in waiting on tables is serving the widows, but the service they render in waiting on tables is at the same time serving those who proclaim the Word of God and pray.

And so I wonder this morning if you've ever stopped and noticed what your service actually does.

When you serve, you don't just serve the people in front of you, but you can be guaranteed that you are actually serving the gospel directly or indirectly.

Everything matters in a church. You may think that what you do isn't beneficial to the advancement of the gospel.

[26 : 39] It's just not true. Because if you didn't do what you did, and one of the other leadership in the church had to come in and do it, then one of the things that would stop happening quite often is that the Word of God and prayer gets overlooked.

And so instead of the gospel advancing, it just stagnates. And so you need to understand that whatever service you render in the church, you're not just serving that one area directly, but you are serving a whole host of other areas indirectly.

The solution, in many ways, sort of kills two birds with one stone. I've never really understood that. I mean, who on earth would want to kill two birds with one stone anyway? I just don't... I've never even tried. I mean, you know... I felt guilty for shooting a sheep once with a 2-2 pellet, but...

But do you understand that here, the solution here is not just a solution for the widows. It is actually a solution for the advancement of the gospel as well.

[28 : 01] And so the next thing we read in verse 7, after the seven are appointed and they begin to serve, is that the apostles pray, verse 6, and the apostles and those proclaiming the Word of God, verse 7, proclaimed it, and the congregation continued to increase.

The number of disciples multiplied greatly in Jerusalem, and a great many of the priests became obedient to the faith. So the seven serving in the church were at exactly the same time serving the apostles outside of the church.

And I think perhaps you don't see that. You're a creche leader. You're a Sunday school leader. Helper. You're a YP leader, a Watt leader.

You're... You know, you do the paperwork. You do the finances. You do the secretarial work. You do the administrative work. You answer the telephone. You play. You sing.

You... And yet, you can guarantee, as it says here, that every bit of service you render to God is serving more than the people directly in front of you.

[29 : 15] It's serving the church as a whole. And that's why, verse 2, the church is brought together to understand the problem together, because the problem cannot be resolved by the few.

It can only be resolved by the many. The solution can be found by the few, but the solution is no good without the backing, without the people.

And so let me ask you a few questions as we conclude. Do you recognize that when a problem arises in the church, that not everybody's going to see it? Do you recognize that when a problem arises in the church, it may not necessarily be seen by the leadership?

It wasn't here. It's seen by those who are being overlooked. Those who are creating the problem don't see it, but those who are on the other end of being overlooked, they're the ones that notice what's happened and bring it to people's attention.

And so do you notice that... Do you understand that problems can arise in the church, and it can be quite a long time before anybody actually ever sees what's happening? Do you also understand that the whole church is to understand the problem?

[30 : 33] And that it would actually be wrong to say, that's not my problem. It would be wrong to sit here thinking, well, that's Watts' issue, or that's Sunday School's issue, or that's Kresch's issue, or that's, you know, Daniel's issue, or that's the elder...

It would actually be wrong to say that. The whole church needs to understand, because we're a body. We're the body of Christ. Here's another question.

How important do you consider the Word of God to be? And prayer to be? And those who have been given the ministry to study the Word, to proclaim the Word into prayer, how important do you consider that to be?

How important is it for you to understand, as it is here, for that time to be protected, and for that work to continue?

Because serving in the church is always about serving the gospel. And so the church is a growing church, and as the church grows, the church has needs, and those needs often create problems, and those problems often need a solution, and the solution is always going to be found in people.

[31 : 57] Believe it or not, God's way of doing things is through you. God's way of doing things is through you. So, verse 2, we all need to recognize the needs.

I'm going to finish with this story. It's a short story, and it's one that I remember Gordon Taylor telling me, and it was back in the day over in Yorkshire, where they had organs in the church, but the organs were not operated by electric.

They were operated by air, and you had to pump them, and the organ could be played on reserved air. I've seen one of these, not in use, but I've, you know, gone into churches and seen them, and think, oh, that's quite clever.

And, of course, it takes more than one person to operate one of these, and I guess they work in the same way bagpipes do. You fill it with air, and then you play the bagpipes on the reserved air that's in the bag, and in the same way these organs play their notes on the reserved air that has been pumped in.

And one day, this organist, who was sort of an itinerant organist, came into this local Methodist church in Yorkshire, and decided to just sort of hint to everybody just how important he was to them, because without him, nobody could sing.

[33 : 26] And this man was filled with just a little bit too much self-importance. And so the young boy who was responsible for filling the organ with air at the back through the pump, decided not to, to show the man playing just how important he was.

And, of course, the lesson is, is you can't do it on your own. The organist could play, but he could only play with a boy pumping. But what's the point in playing if he's not got a congregation to sing as well?

Whatever you do, you are always serving more people than the people that you think you are actually serving. And whatever you do, you need to understand that you are always serving the gospel, whether it be directly or indirectly, you can guarantee that you are serving the gospel. But above all, all of us are always serving God. Are we serving God?

Amen. Amen. So, Amen.

[34 : 59] Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.

Amen. Amen. Amen.