



# Serving Tables

## Kicking It Off

What is a responsibility you took on that turned out to be way harder than you expected?

## Read

Acts 6:1-7

## Summary

Being part of a church community: it is a lot like being in a family. People have needs, people complain, and sometimes it feels overwhelming. But that is actually the point.

In the early church, things were growing fast, and some people started getting overlooked. The Greek-speaking widows were not getting their fair share of food. And the apostles did not blow them off or tell them to go find another church. They said, "Okay, we need to organize better so nobody falls through the cracks." They picked seven trustworthy, spirit-filled, wise people to handle the practical side of things while the apostles kept teaching.

What is interesting is that both jobs, the teaching and the serving, are described with the same word in the original language. It is all one ministry. One is not more important than the other. The whole point is that Jesus' ministry was always both: speaking truth and meeting real needs. The early church was learning to do the same thing.

Structure is not the goal. The goal is the mission, helping more people encounter Jesus. Structure just makes sure nobody gets left behind along the way. When the early church got this right, the result was explosive growth, not in money or buildings, but in people coming to faith.

This applies to everyone, not just pastors or leaders. Growing up spiritually means taking on more responsibility for others. It means expanding the number of people you are willing to love, even when it is uncomfortable. And right now, with so many people feeling isolated and lonely, the church has a huge opportunity to step in and say, "You are not alone, and we actually have someone who can help."

The church exists to serve people with the love of Jesus, and getting organized is just how we make sure we actually do it.

### Discussion Questions

1. Was there anything from the sermon or the passage that stuck out to you?
2. The early church faced a moment where people felt overlooked because the community was growing faster than its ability to care for everyone. Have you ever felt overlooked or neglected in a community, and how did that experience shape the way you treat others?
3. The apostles responded to complaints not with defensiveness but by creating new ways to serve. When someone brings a complaint or frustration to you, what is your natural first reaction?
4. Scripture describes the ministry of teaching and the ministry of serving tables using the same word, placing them on equal footing. What type of service do you tend to undervalue, and why do you think that is?
5. Acts 6:7 shows that when the church organized itself to care for people well, the gospel spread and the number of believers multiplied. What is one practical step you could take this week to serve someone who might otherwise be overlooked?

### Significant Quotes from Sermon

"The heart of the church is to meet people where they are. The heart of the church is not to talk to people and explain to them a list of rules."

"The gospel is looking at your small group of people that you love, and it is not about dropping them and saying, 'I no longer love you.' It is saying, 'I want to add. I want to grow the amount of people I can love.' But with that comes more responsibility, more discomfort, more hungry mouths, more crying babies, more complaints, more drama, more issues."

"Structure serves the mission; the mission is not the structure. When structure trumps mission, you lose the hearts. You could have a structure of millions of people, but if they have failed to understand the reason why we have the structure, they end up just being religious."

"I do not have the answer to anxiety. Jesus does. I do not have the answer to depression. Jesus does. He is the solution. He is the answer. All he needs us to do is take responsibility for these people and say, 'We love this person. We care about this person.'"

**Sermon Notes****Acts 6:1-7**

*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.*

## Outline

1. When Growth Outpaces Structure (v. 1)
  - a. The disciples were increasing in number, and the Hellenist widows were being neglected in the daily distribution
  - b. The complaint was not sinful; it reflected a real, felt need in a growing community
  - c. Everyone has the capacity to feel neglected; the church's response is not "toughen up" but to meet people where they are
  - d. The apostles did not dismiss the complaint or tell the neglected to leave and find another church
  - e. Sending neglected people elsewhere risks their spiritual formation if that community lacks sound teaching
  - f. Growth is not the problem; the lack of structure to match the growth is the problem
  - g. Parallel to Exodus 18: Moses distributed leadership on the counsel of Jethro because the burden was too great for one person
  - h. A growing church must adapt its leadership; good structure catches people who would otherwise be overlooked
2. Distributed Leadership by Design (vv. 2-6)
  - a. The apostles instructed the community to choose seven men to oversee the ministry of serving tables
  - b. The Greek word for "ministry" (diakonein) is the same for serving tables and serving the word; both fall under one ministry of Christ
  - c. The apostles were not creating a hierarchy; preaching and physical service are equally essential
  - d. Christ's ministry always paired spirit-empowered teaching with spirit-empowered service to tangible needs
  - e. Three qualifications for the seven: good repute, full of the Spirit, full of wisdom
    - i. Good repute: they were known in the community through real relationship, not resumes or online profiles
    - ii. Full of the Spirit: what overflowed from their lives was the love of God, building others up
    - iii. Full of wisdom: they understood why they served, pointing to Christ rather than seeking merit or recognition
  - f. The church is structured to lift up one person: Christ. All members bow equally before him
  - g. Leadership does not confer VIP status; it confers greater responsibility and accountability

- h. Christ's one ministry requires many servants, each faithful to their specific calling
3. Faithful Structure Unleashes the Mission (v. 7)
- a. Result: the word of God increased, disciples multiplied greatly, and many priests became obedient to the faith
  - b. The increase was in souls, not budgets, buildings, or material possessions
  - c. Structure serves the mission; the mission is never the structure
  - d. When structure trumps mission, the church becomes merely religious and loses its heart
  - e. Every believer is called to grow in responsibility, expanding the circle of people they are willing to love
  - f. The way of the cross is progressively giving more of yourself for others, as Christ did for us
  - g. Cultural urgency: the church must reach the lonely, anxious, and depressed rather than turning them away
  - h. The church does not need every answer; it has the Answer in Christ
  - i. Structure is not meant to stifle but to free God's people to use their gifts and testimonies for his kingdom

## Notes

There is a natural tension that every growing community must face, and the early church was no exception. In Acts 6:1-7, we encounter a moment that feels remarkably familiar: a thriving community begins to experience growing pains, and the question becomes whether leadership will rise to meet the challenge or let people fall through the cracks. What unfolds in this passage is not merely an administrative decision about who serves food. It is a window into how God has always intended his people to organize themselves, not for the sake of organization, but for the sake of love.

The passage opens with a problem. The number of disciples was increasing, and with that increase came a complaint: the Hellenist widows were being neglected in the daily distribution. It is tempting to read this and immediately look for someone to blame. Were the Hellenists being unreasonable? Were the Hebrews being exclusionary? But the text does not frame this as a moral failure. It frames it as a structural one. There were simply too many people and not enough organization to ensure everyone was cared for.

This is worth sitting with for a moment. The complaint itself was not sinful. It is an entirely natural thing for people in a community to feel overlooked, especially when that community is expanding rapidly. Every person carries the capacity to feel neglected, and the presence of that feeling does not automatically mean something is morally wrong

with the person expressing it. Sometimes it means the system around them has not kept pace with the reality on the ground.

The apostles' response is instructive. They did not dismiss the complaint. They did not tell the Hellenists to toughen up, to be more spiritual about their hunger, or to go find another community that could better serve them. They took the concern seriously. This is a posture worth emulating: the heart of the church is to meet people where they are, not to hand them a list of prerequisites before they qualify for care.

There is also a deeper principle at work here. Telling neglected people to simply leave and find help elsewhere carries a hidden danger. Another community may not be grounded in sound teaching. Sending people away to solve a structural problem risks their spiritual formation. The better path, the harder path, is to build the kind of structure that keeps people within the community where they can be both served and shaped by the truth.

This is the core tension of the passage: growth is not a bad thing, but growth without structure leads to neglect. And neglect, left unaddressed, quietly pushes people to the margins.

The apostles' solution was both practical and theologically rich. They instructed the community to select seven men of good repute, full of the Spirit and of wisdom, to oversee the ministry of serving tables. This decision established what we now recognize as the office of deacon, but the implications go far beyond a title.

First, it is important to understand the language at play. In the Greek, the word used for the ministry of serving tables and the ministry of the word is the same root word, the word from which we derive "deacon." Both are forms of service. Both fall under the singular ministry of Christ. The apostles were not creating a hierarchy in which preaching was noble and table service was menial. They were distributing one unified ministry across multiple servants, each faithful to a specific calling. The ministry of the word and the ministry of meeting physical needs are equally essential because the ministry of Jesus Christ encompassed both. In the Gospels and in Acts, the pattern is consistent: spirit empowered teaching accompanied by spirit empowered service to real, tangible human needs.

The three qualifications given for these seven men are worth examining closely. They were to be of good repute, full of the Spirit, and full of wisdom. Good repute did not mean they had flawless resumes or impressive public personas. It meant they were known. They were present in the community, not hiding in isolation. People could vouch for them not because of a biography on a website, but because they had broken bread together, had real conversations, and had been seen in action. In an age where so much

interaction is digital and so many leadership structures are built on image rather than intimacy, this is a corrective worth heeding.

Being full of the Spirit meant that what overflowed from their lives was the love of God. When they spoke, they did not tear others down or elevate themselves. They built others up, recognizing that every person is made in the image of God. And being full of wisdom meant they understood, at a foundational level, why they were serving. They were not accumulating spiritual merit or seeking recognition. They served because they loved their community and loved their Lord, and they could articulate that clearly when pressed.

This distributed model of leadership reflects something deeply intentional about how God designed the church. The church is not meant to elevate one person or concentrate authority in a small circle. Christ alone sits at the center, and every member of the body, whether elder, deacon, or congregant, bows equally before him. Leadership exists not to create tiers of spiritual VIP status but to ensure that more and more people can be reached, cared for, and disciplined. The leader who serves faithfully does not gain privilege; they gain responsibility, and they are held to a higher standard because of it.

The result of this structural decision is recorded in Acts 6:7: "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." The outcome of good structure was not a bigger budget or a more impressive building. It was an expansion of souls coming into relationship with Christ.

This distinction matters enormously. The mission of the church has never been organizational excellence for its own sake. The mission is the gospel: meeting people in their physical, emotional, and spiritual need, comforting the sick, loving the overlooked, and proclaiming the truth of Jesus. Structure exists to serve this mission, not to replace it. When structure becomes an end in itself, the church drifts into mere religion, a system of obligations disconnected from the heartbeat of sacrificial love. But when structure is rightly ordered, it frees God's people to do the work they are called to do.

This has practical implications for every believer, not only those who hold formal leadership titles. The call to grow in responsibility is woven into the fabric of discipleship. A new believer may rightly need to be fed and cared for, like an infant who cannot yet feed themselves. But maturity in the faith means an increasing willingness to take on responsibility for others, to expand the circle of people you are willing to love, even when that expansion brings discomfort, complaints, and sacrifice. The way of the cross is a way of progressively giving more of yourself for others, just as Christ gave himself for us.

There is also a cultural urgency to this calling. Young adults today are experiencing unprecedented levels of loneliness, depression, and isolation. The digitization of social life

has left many people disconnected from genuine community. The church has, at times, failed to meet this moment, turning away those whose struggles feel too messy or too complicated. But the people who come with anxiety, depression, and brokenness are precisely the people Jesus came for. The church does not need to have all the answers. It needs to have the Answer, and to be willing to walk alongside people as they encounter him.

The beauty of a well structured, mission driven church is that it creates the conditions for this kind of ministry to flourish. When the lonely discover they are not alone, they become equipped to go into the dark corners and find others who feel just as isolated. The epidemic of loneliness is not solved by programs alone. It is solved by a community that takes responsibility for the people God sends through its doors, that refuses to say "we are not equipped," and that trusts in a God who is more than able to work through willing, imperfect servants.

Structure, then, is not a cage. It is a scaffold, built so that the gospel can reach further, so that no one gets left behind, and so that the ministry of Christ, both word and deed, can continue to expand until every neighbor, every neighborhood, and every dark corner has been touched by the love of God.

## Blog

The early church had a problem. There was no doctrinal crisis, no moral scandal, no persecution from the outside. The problem was that the church was growing too fast for its own structure to keep up. Luke tells us in Acts 6:1 that "the disciples were increasing in number," and in the very same sentence he tells us that widows were being neglected. Growth and neglect showed up together, and that's not a contradiction. It's a pattern. When a community expands and its leadership doesn't adapt, the people who suffer first are always the most vulnerable.

The specific grievance came from the Hellenists, Greek-speaking Jewish Christians from the diaspora, against the Hebrews, Aramaic-speaking Jewish Christians native to Palestine. Both groups belonged to the same church. Both followed the same Lord. But they came from different cultural and linguistic backgrounds, and when the daily distribution of food and resources couldn't keep pace with the growing community, the Hellenist widows were the ones who fell through the cracks. This wasn't an abstract theological dispute. It was a justice issue. Widows in the ancient world had no husband to provide for them and were entirely dependent on the community's care. To overlook them was to fail at one of the most basic obligations God had given His people. Deuteronomy 10:18 says that God Himself "executes justice for the fatherless and the widow." James would later write that pure religion means visiting "orphans and widows in their affliction" (James 1:27). The church was falling short of something close to the heart of God.

We should note what Luke is not saying. He's not suggesting that the early church was in spiritual decline. He's not framing this as a failure of faith. The problem was organizational. The Spirit had been adding to the church in extraordinary numbers (three thousand at Pentecost, then five thousand men, then "multitudes" in Acts 5:14), and the existing leadership structure simply wasn't built for that scale. This matters for how we read the passage. Structural problems in the church are not necessarily signs that something has gone spiritually wrong. They may be signs that the Spirit's work has outpaced the current framework. The absence of organization is not more spiritual than its presence. In fact, it's usually the weak and the overlooked who pay the price when structure is neglected.

The apostles responded with remarkable clarity. They gathered the whole community and said, "It is not right that we should give up preaching the word of God to serve tables" (Acts 6:2). That statement can sound arrogant if you read it too quickly, as though the apostles considered table service beneath them. But that's not what's happening. The Greek phrase, *ouk areston estin*, means something closer to "it is not fitting" or "it is not appropriate." The apostles were making a judgment about calling and

capacity, not about dignity. They recognized that Christ had given them a specific assignment: prayer and the ministry of the word (Acts 6:4). To abandon that calling, even for something genuinely important, would be poor stewardship. The issue was not that serving tables was too small. The issue was that the apostles were called to something else, and trying to do both would mean doing neither well.

Luke builds the entire episode around a wordplay that English translations tend to obscure. In verse 1, the "daily distribution" uses the Greek word *diakonia*. In verse 2, "to serve tables" uses the verb form *diakonein*. And in verse 4, "the ministry of the word" uses *diakonia* again. The same root word appears in all three places. Luke is making a deliberate point. Both the apostles' work of preaching and the Seven's work of distributing food and resources are called *diakonia*, service. They are not two tiers of ministry, one sacred and the other merely practical. They are two expressions of the same service rendered to the same Lord through His body.

This reflects something true about Christ Himself. Jesus' ministry was never just one thing. He taught with authority and He fed the hungry. He proclaimed the kingdom and He healed the sick. He trained the twelve and He washed their feet. The ministry of the word and the ministry of the table both find their origin in Him. When the church distinguishes these callings and staffs them faithfully, it looks most like its Lord. When it collapses them into one role or elevates one above the other, something essential is lost.

The apostles told the congregation to select seven men "of good repute, full of the Spirit and of wisdom" (Acts 6:3). Spirit-fullness is the same language Luke uses for Jesus in Luke 4:1 and for Barnabas in Acts 11:24. Wisdom here means practical, godly discernment, the kind required to navigate cultural tensions, manage shared resources justly, and care for vulnerable people. The church was not looking for warm bodies to handle logistics. They were looking for spiritually mature, publicly proven leaders to carry a critical ministry. The qualifications for serving tables were every bit as demanding as those for serving the word. That tells us something important about how God views practical ministry.

The pattern the apostles followed was not new. Centuries earlier, Moses found himself overwhelmed by the task of leading Israel alone. His father-in-law Jethro watched him judge disputes from morning to evening and told him plainly, "What you are doing is not good. You and the people with you will certainly wear yourselves out, for the thing is too heavy for you" (Exodus 18:17-18). Jethro's counsel was to appoint capable, God-fearing men to share the load. Moses would handle the great matters while others led in groups of thousands, hundreds, fifties, and tens. The parallels with Acts 6 are unmistakable. Both crises arose from growth among God's people. Both solutions involved distributing leadership among qualified servants. Both preserved the primary

leader's core calling while empowering others for theirs. And both resulted in the flourishing of the whole community. God's design for His people has always involved shared, distributed leadership. One person carrying everything is not faithfulness. It's a bottleneck.

One remarkable detail in the selection of the Seven is that all seven men have Greek names. Most scholars take this to mean they were drawn from the Hellenist community, the very group that had raised the complaint. The apostles didn't just fix the system from the top down. They empowered the affected community to lead the solution. And the congregation didn't merely tolerate this arrangement. Luke says "what they said pleased the whole gathering" (Acts 6:5). The people chose; the apostles confirmed and commissioned. This is the ekklesia at work, the called-out community operating through shared discernment and mutual trust.

The apostles then prayed and laid hands on the Seven (Acts 6:6). This was a public act of commissioning with deep Old Testament roots, echoing Moses' commissioning of Joshua in Numbers 27. It declared that the ministry of serving tables was authorized, prayed over, and affirmed by the church's leadership. This was not volunteering. It was calling. And the church treated it with corresponding gravity.

The results speak for themselves. Luke summarizes the outcome in verse 7 with three statements of expansion. "The word of God continued to increase." "The number of the disciples multiplied greatly in Jerusalem." And, remarkably, "a great many of the priests became obedient to the faith." Even members of the temple establishment, people deeply embedded in the old religious order, were being converted. The structural reorganization did not distract from the mission. It unleashed it. When the apostles were freed to devote themselves to prayer and the word, and when the Seven were empowered to lead the ministry of practical care, both ministries flourished. And the whole church grew.

Notice that Luke doesn't mention the widows or the daily distribution again. That silence is itself the evidence of success. The serving ministry was now functioning well, quietly and faithfully sustaining the community so the word could run freely. The ministry of the table doesn't seek the spotlight. It creates the conditions for the ministry of the word to bear fruit. And the ministry of the word, freed from distraction, draws people into the community where the ministry of the table cares for them. These two callings are not in competition. They form a cycle that sustains the life and mission of the church.

We also shouldn't miss the phrase Luke uses for the priests' response. He doesn't say they "believed." He says they became "obedient to the faith" (Acts 6:7). Paul uses nearly identical language in Romans 1:5, where he describes the goal of his apostleship as bringing about "the obedience of faith." Faith in the New Testament is never mere

intellectual agreement. It is active allegiance, a reordering of life around Christ and His people. To be called out, to be part of the ekklesia, is to be called into a community where every form of service matters, where the word and the table work together, and where the Spirit distributes gifts and callings so that no one carries the load alone and no one is left behind.