

This morning we are continuing through the book of Acts, the story of the early church. In the first couple of chapters, Jesus has risen from the dead, ascended to heaven, and sent His Holy Spirit to be the presence and power of God inside each believer. Since then, the transformed disciples have been boldly sharing about Jesus' death for their sins and his resurrection and triumph over death, calling people to turn from their sin and self-centeredness to faith in Jesus, and thousands of people are coming to faith in Jesus. A multi-ethnic community has formed in Jerusalem that is growing like crazy, devoted to following Jesus and caring for everyone's needs.

But in the past few chapters, the church has to deal with some real threats to their unity and witness. The first threat is persecution, as Peter and John are arrested by the Jewish religious leaders for proclaiming the gospel of Jesus to the crowd, and are warned to stop what they are doing. Soon after, all of the apostles are thrown in jail for doing the same in chapter 5. The second threat comes from inside: corruption, as the hypocrisy of Ananias and Sapphira threatens to sow discord within the church. But the church passes both of those tests. In chapter 6, which we will look at today, the third threat comes in a very subtle way.

Read Acts 6:1-7

*In those days when the number of disciples was increasing, the Grecian Jews among them complained against the Hebraic Jews because their widows were being overlooked in the daily distribution of food. <sup>2</sup> So the Twelve gathered all the disciples together and said, "It would not be right for us to neglect the ministry of the word of God in order to wait on tables. <sup>3</sup> Brothers, choose seven men from among you who are known to be full of the Spirit and wisdom. We will turn this responsibility over to them <sup>4</sup> and will give our attention to prayer and the ministry of the word." <sup>5</sup> This proposal pleased the whole group. They chose Stephen, a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit; also Philip, Procorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas, and Nicolas from Antioch, a convert to Judaism. <sup>6</sup> They presented these men to the apostles, who prayed and laid their hands on them. <sup>7</sup> So the word of God spread. The number of disciples in Jerusalem increased rapidly, and a large number of priests became obedient to the faith.*

**What is the threat?** There is one obvious threat, but one underlying threat that is more subtle. As the church grows, the Grecian widows – the Greek-speaking ones – are being overlooked in the daily distribution of bread. The widows in the church had no family to care for them, and so the church as the family of God took on the responsibility of caring for them. But now, one specific group of widows were

apparently being overlooked. Why is this? **It could be bias**. Before the birth of the church, the Hebraic Jews, who spoke Aramaic, looked down on the Grecian Jews, who spoke Greek. But now in Christ they have become one family, one people. But the old prejudices might still remain.

Or it could just be **poor administration**. Maybe as the church was smaller, it was easy for the apostles to meet everyone's needs. But as the church grows, it becomes clear that Peter, James, and John can't visit all the widows and care for their needs. Nevertheless, they still need to be visited and fed. And since the apostles can't do it, there is grumbling and complaining building in the church.

And so, whether because of bias or poor administration, people are falling through the cracks, and the resulting complaining and grumbling is threatening the unity of the church. But there is another threat underneath the threat. That is the threat of distraction, that Peter, James and John and the other apostles would set aside their main priority, which according to verse 4 is prayer and the ministry of the Word, in order to devote more time and effort to making sure the Grecian widows get their meals. This is the threat I want to look more closely at this morning.

So How do the apostles handle the threat? They do two things:

1) **The apostles prioritize prayer and the ministry of the Word**

There are many good things the apostles could be devoting their time to, and taking care of widows is definitely a necessary and Biblical thing to do.

**James 1:27** - **Religion that** God our Father accepts as **pure** and faultless **is** this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world.

**Matthew 25:37,40** - "Then the righteous will answer him, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you something to drink?' "The King will reply, 'I tell you the truth, whatever you did for one **of the least of these** brothers **of mine**, you did for me.'

So if caring for widows is a good and Biblical thing to do, then why do the disciples say that it is not their job? How do they know what their priority is? Remember the orders Jesus left them with: **Acts 1:8** – "But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth."

**Matthew 28:18-20** - *Then Jesus came to them and said, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. <sup>19</sup> Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, <sup>20</sup> and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.”*

Jesus’ marching orders are to go out to preach the gospel and to baptize and gather people into local churches, where they will learn how to follow Jesus in community. Jesus will be with them, and the Holy Spirit will be in them. That is their main priority – to proclaim the gospel to those who do not believe and teach those who do believe to follow Jesus. In other words, the ministry of the Word. But their effectiveness in this task is going to depend upon staying connected to Jesus.

**John 15:5** – *“I am the vine; you are the branches. If a man remains in **me** and I in him, he will bear much fruit; **apart from me** you can do nothing.”*

In other words, their priority is both the ministry of the Word and prayer, remaining connected to Jesus. Why is this the case? Because according to Jesus, we can not accomplish anything of supernatural or eternal significance on our own. People can not turn from sin to faith in Jesus unless the Spirit allows them to see.

**2 Corinthians 4:4** - *The god of this age has **blinded the** minds of unbelievers, so that they cannot see **the** light of **the** gospel of **the** glory of Christ, who is **the** image of God.*

The apostles have been given the task of bringing the world to Jesus. This tiny group of Jesus-followers, living under threat of persecution in the Roman Empire, has been tasked with proclaiming a message that could get them killed and teaching people that this Jesus rose from the dead, that their eternal destiny depends upon trusting in Him, and creating counter-cultural communities with values distinct from the surrounding society. Impossible!

They are to prioritize the ministry of the Word, because that is what brings people to Jesus and teaches them what it means to follow Him. And they are to prioritize prayer, because apart from His supernatural help, none of what Jesus has asked them to do will be possible! If they had gone off to do what Jesus had asked without waiting for the Holy Spirit, they would have failed! This is why the apostles need to be in communion with God. They needed to receive Christ’s

direction and provision. Leading the church is a supernatural assignment, not a ministry enterprise.

“Prayer is intimacy with God that leads to the fulfillment of His purposes” – Alvin Reid. Prayer has to be a priority because this is His kingdom, His enterprise, and we would be fools to try to decide for ourselves how to spend our time.

The danger today is that we have so many resources that we have lost sight of the fact that we are in the same boat as the disciples. We will not accomplish anything of spiritual significance apart from prayer and the supernatural empowering of the Spirit. The danger today is that there are many tricks we can do to draw a crowd and to make a person feel like they have met with God. Music, lighting, speaking a certain way. But if all we are doing is of our own effort and cleverness, nothing of eternal significance will be accomplished. We need to prioritize the ministry of the Word and prayer because building God’s kingdom is not primarily about human effort, talent, strategy and programming, but about the power of Christ and the indwelling Spirit.

What does it tell you that the church grew exponentially in the 1<sup>st</sup> century without the internet, big church buildings, branding, marketing, hip worship leaders, great sound systems? What does it tell you that the church is growing fastest in places like China in the underground churches, or in Africa and South America, in many places that do not have the resources we have?

It tells me that we are trusting in the wrong things. We are trusting too often in programming and marketing and human wisdom and strategy instead of devoting ourselves to prayer and the ministry of the Word and believing that God’s power and presence can accomplish in one minute what we could never do in a lifetime.

They were devoted to prayer. And they were devoted to the ministry of the Word. The ministry of the Word is through preaching, teaching, counseling, discipling. Forming people in the truth. Teaching them to obey everything Jesus has commanded.

**2 Timothy 3:16** - *All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, <sup>17</sup> so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.*

Being devoted to the ministry of the Word today means that we still believe in the inspiration and authority of the Bible. That we draw upon our reason, experience,

and tradition, but in the end, wherever they conflict, we trust that this is God's Word. It means we are committed to understanding and preaching the text. Not my thoughts, but the text.

**“Preaching is truth poured through personality”** – Phillips Brooks.

We see an example of this in the life of Paul:

*1 Corinthians 2:1-5 - When I came to you, brothers, I did not come with eloquence or superior wisdom as I proclaimed to you the testimony about God. <sup>2</sup> For I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and him crucified. <sup>3</sup> I came to you in weakness and fear, and with much trembling. <sup>4</sup> My message and my preaching were not with wise and persuasive words, but with a demonstration of the Spirit's power, <sup>5</sup> so that your faith might not rest on men's wisdom, but on God's power.*

And we see it in the apostles as well:

*Acts 4:13 - When they saw the courage of Peter and John and realized that they were unschooled, ordinary men, they were astonished and they took note that these men had been with Jesus.*

The priority is prayer and the ministry of the Word. But in order to maintain the priority of prayer and ministry of the word, the apostles need to do a second thing: empower godly leaders.

## **2) They empower godly leaders**

In order to devote ourselves to prayer and the ministry of the word, we need to lead. We need to raise up leaders. We need to delegate, administrate.

**What do they do?** They recognize what their role is. They ask the disciples to choose seven men to attend to the needs. Seven men full of the Spirit and wisdom. They delegate this important and necessary work to capable people to ensure that the Grecian widows are cared for and the unity and witness of the church is preserved.

I have to know my role. The elders have to know their role. Elders and pastor should not apologize for focusing on prayer and the ministry of the word. It doesn't mean social work is less important; it's a matter of calling and priority. One thing

that often happens as a church grows is that people grumble and complain that the pastor or elders don't visit them, just as I'm sure the Grecian widows probably did. But the important thing is that people are visited and cared for. Every member is a minister. I am no more special than anyone else. In order for the leaders to focus on prayer and the ministry of the word, we will need to delegate and raise up leaders to fulfill the other needs.

***Ephesians 4:11-16** - It was he who gave some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be evangelists, and some to be pastors and teachers, <sup>12</sup> to prepare God's people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up <sup>13</sup> until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ. <sup>14</sup> Then we will no longer be infants, tossed back and forth by the waves, and blown here and there by every wind of teaching and by the cunning and craftiness of men in their deceitful scheming. <sup>15</sup> Instead, speaking the truth in love, we will in all things grow up into him who is the Head, that is, Christ. <sup>16</sup> From him the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work.*

This passage shows the need for those with the gift of administration and the heart for the people of the church to assist the elders. Administration is a spiritual gift. It carries the idea of someone who guides and directs a group of people toward a goal or destination. With this gift the Holy Spirit enables certain Christians to organize, direct, and implement plans to lead others in the various ministries of the Church. This gift is closely related to the gift of Leadership, but is more goal or task oriented and is also more concerned with details and organization.

They chose men full of character and wisdom and the Spirit. **What is the result?** People are raised up as leaders. The apostles can focus on the priorities. More people are cared for.

Pray. There is a need to be devoted more to prayer, to ensure that we are cultivating an intimacy with God that leads to the fulfillment of His purposes. I need to improve my delegation so that I am focused on prayer and the ministry of the Word. And we need to empower godly leaders, and to have people willing to step up to lead and serve.

Let's pray.

**John 15:5** - *“I am the vine; you are the branches. If a man remains in me and I in him, he will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing.”*

**1 Peter 4:10** - *Each one should use whatever gift he has received to serve others, faithfully administering God's grace in its various forms.*

How would He have you serve? How can you free us up to focus on prayer and the ministry of the Word?