

Acts 6:1-7 // So the Word of God Spread

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[0 : 00] Our second lesson today is from the Acts of the Apostles, chapter 6, starting at verse 1, which! can be found on page 1098 of the Church Bibles.

That is page 1098, Acts chapter 6, beginning at verse 1. In those days, when the number of disciples was increasing, the Hellenistic Jews among them complained against the Hebraic Jews because their widows were being overlooked in the daily distribution of food.

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.

Brothers and sisters, 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 and will give our attention to prayer and the ministry of the Word.

This proposal pleased the whole group. They chose Stephen, a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit. Also Philip, Prochorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas, and Nicholas from Antioch, a convert to Judaism.

[1 : 32] They presented these men to the apostles who prayed and laid their hands on them. This is the Word of the Lord. Thanks. Thanks, Innes, for reading that.

It would be a great help to me if you could keep Acts chapter 6 open. And we're going to look at that together.

You can find an outline on the back of the notice sheet if you'd find that helpful. And let's pray. Let's ask for God's help. May the words of my mouth and the thoughts and reflections of all of our hearts be pleasing in your sight.

Oh Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen. Well, on Giving Sunday, we come out of our regular series to look at a portion of God's Word that can help us reflect on what it means to give towards God in our lives.

And we heard in our first reading, Romans chapter 12, the apostle Paul calling the church to give generously in Romans 12.

[2 : 39] But as part of the financial giving, being part of giving in all kinds of ways. So if you just look on the screen there, verses 6 to 8 of Romans 12, Paul lists a variety of different gifts people might have.

Prophesying, teaching, encouraging, leading, showing mercy. And in that, he talks about giving, financial giving, to give generously.

And the fuel for doing that comes in verses 1 and 2 of Romans chapter 12. That though the world would say to you, if you've got gifts, if you've got resources, if you've got talents, use them to look after yourself.

In Romans 12 verse 2, it says, Don't be conformed to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind. And that renewing of your mind is that for every Christian, the Holy Spirit has opened our minds to see the mercy of God to us.

How good God has been to us. So chapter 12 verse 1 of Romans, he says, Brothers and sisters, in view of God's mercy, I urge you to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God.

[3 : 53] This is your true and proper worship. In other words, as our mind gets filled afresh day by day with a deep, large view of the mercy of God to us, it moves us to be willing to serve God's people as we offer ourselves back to God.

So we don't give financially or serve in different ways in church because necessarily we see there's a crisis. We do it because God is helping us see how merciful he's been to us.

His mercy is a tender mercy that he was compassionate towards us. It's a redemptive mercy. It's shown supremely to us at the cross where Jesus has paid the price that we would be redeemed.

And it's a decisive mercy. That is that it has transformed our eternity. God set his love on us, chose to be merciful to us, and it's changed our destiny forever.

And so as we see that more clearly, we can ask ourselves, what can I give gladly to God? Now for the rest of our time, we're going to look at this account of how this plays out so vitally in the early church in Acts chapter 6.

[5 : 09] And it's an account of something that happened in the early church that might come across to us as quite mundane, especially given the rest of Acts.

Acts is a book about the early church with extraordinary things that happen. Miracles, signs, wonders. Christians suffer. They get martyred. The gospel goes out.

And yet here we get the story of a church meeting where there's some delegation. But the writer Luke wants us to know that this is a very significant moment.

The book of Acts is the story of God's unstoppable word. And in the book of Acts, Luke signals to us the end of each section by telling us each time that the word of God continued to spread.

And the book finishes in chapter 28. The very last word in Acts is the book unhindered. The apostle Paul is in prison in Rome at the end of Acts.

[6 : 11] But we read at the very end that the word of God went out unhindered. You can lock up an apostle, but you can't hold back the word of God. It's going out.

That's Luke's message. And so at various points, you can see them on the screen there, just the references. There are six points in Acts where Luke puts a summary statement that the word of God spread.

And it's the way of saying that's the end of a section because that's the culmination of all that's happened. The word is going out. Now, what's really interesting is that the first end of section like that comes in chapter 6, verse 7.

If you have a look down there. So the word of God spread. Evidently, Luke sees this, Acts chapter 6, verses 1 to 6, as so significant that this is the culmination of the first section as the gospel goes out in Jerusalem.

We've had the day of Pentecost in Acts chapter 2, as the Holy Spirit came and God's people were able to speak the wonders of God in different tongues. And 3,000 people became Christians and got baptized.

[7 : 23] And then in Acts chapter 2, it talks about the early church and how wonderful it was to be part of it. It says that they were devoted to the apostles' teaching and to prayer and to fellowship and generosity to each other.

Wonderful. But between Acts chapter 2 and that first forming of the early church with the Holy Spirit and Acts chapter 6, when we get this summary, the word of God spread, Luke recounts for us three major obstacles to the growth of the church.

The first one is external opposition. And he tells us about that in Acts chapter 4, as Peter and John, apostles, are preaching about Jesus and they get brought before the Jewish council and commanded to stop speaking about Jesus.

And they go in Acts chapter 4 and gather the believers together and they pray. And do you remember what they pray for? Boldness. They pray for boldness that they can keep preaching the word in the face of external opposition.

Then Luke tells us about a second threat to the word going out and it's internal corruption. So he tells us that as the believers were bringing generously what they had to share with those in need, two of them, Ananias and Sapphira, hold back deceitfully some money, implying that they've given more.

[8 : 49] And God judges them for it. And so the word can keep going out because internal corruption has been dealt with. And then we get to this moment in chapter 6.

And it might be for us at St. Silas today the bigger threat that we face that would stop the word from going out from us. It's the problem of ministry distraction.

So we're going to see a familiar problem, a resolute priority and a tremendous proposal. First of all, a familiar problem. The problem was the church was mismanaging its care ministry.

Have a look with me at verse 1 of chapter 6. In those days when the number of disciples was increasing, the Hellenistic Jews among them complained against the Hebraic Jews because their widows were being overlooked in the daily distribution of food.

Now the first problem here, obviously, is that needy people are going hungry. They are Jewish background believers in Jesus. They belong to the church. And the church evidently has a system where widows who are impoverished, there's no welfare system, if they've got no family to provide for them, they're given a distribution of food each day.

[10:06] And some of these widows were being overlooked. And there's more to the problem than that because there's no sense here that it was deliberate, but you can see that it's the Hellenistic Jews.

Now what's being described there is a cultural divide in the church, a divide over language and culture between the Jews who spoke Hebrew and those who spoke Greek, those who were more assimilated with the Roman Empire, the Hellenistic ones, and those who were not, the Hebraic Jews.

And this is really significant because cultural divisions are very strong in our society all around us. We get class divides, gender divides. We have language divisions in our city, in our world. And the power of the gospel, the power of the news about Jesus, brings together people from all those different backgrounds and across those divides to be a new humanity in Jesus.

So that whenever we as a church meet somebody who would have been across a cultural dividing line from us, and we're able to overcome that and be united, we in doing that demonstrate the victory of God in Christ as we overcome those barriers.

[11:34] Conversely, when you have a divide like that in church, it threatens to undermine the witness that we are to how wonderful and powerful it is what God has done in the gospel.

So this is a real problem. And it's a problem that also leads to grumbling. Can you see that in verse 1? People are complaining about it in the church.

So the apostles realize something has to be done about this. People are being distressed by it. How do you balance the real personal material needs of people in our congregation with the urgent need to teach the Bible?

So the apostles realize that something's got to be done. It's got to be done urgently and it mustn't be done by then. So we get to our second point, a resolute priority.

Their priority was word ministry. So have a look with me at verse 2. So the 12 gathered all the disciples together and said, Now just picture that.

[12:47] It must have been quite something. We know by now there are over 3,000 believers in Jerusalem. And they get gathered together for this huge members meeting. And the apostles steer the group.

They say, this is the priority, the ministry of the word of God. That is the apostles' work of teaching the Bible, the word of God, bringing it to bear on people's lives, showing how it's all about Jesus so that people can grow in Jesus and people can become disciples of Jesus, saved by him, and can grow to maturity in Jesus.

That work of gospel ministry, of word ministry, is the priority. And I think Act 6 is saying that to us, to each one of us who is a Christian, to say that it's to be our priority as well, for our lives and for our church.

The work of making the word of God known, making the gospel known, is the priority. We saw in our series in Luke's gospel last year that it was Jesus' priority.

We were struck week by week as we looked at Jesus in Luke's gospel, how he keeps traveling from town to town and he must have been confronted by so many needs.

[14:05] And he had the power to deal with all of them, to put everything right. And he chose not to be diverted from his mission to be a proclaimer of good news for the spiritually needy, the saving news about him.

So gospel ministry was Jesus' priority and it's God's priority for the world. So in 1 Timothy chapter 2, we hear that God doesn't want anyone to perish, he wants all people to be saved and so he wants the gospel to go out.

The gospel ministry is what brings about deep social change. As we grow in the gospel, as we grow in our grasp of what Jesus has done for us, it moves us to be compassionate for other needs that we see all around us.

It's gospel ministry that grows God's kingdom. Whenever somebody hears the news about Jesus and receives him as their saving king, they join the kingdom of God. And gospel ministry glorifies God supremely.

So in Ephesians chapter 1, it talks about how God is gathering people in Christ and he's doing it for the praise of his glorious grace.

[15:19] So whenever someone becomes a Christian through gospel ministry, through hearing about Jesus, they are saved to glorify God forever. So it's true that we can do anything for the glory of God in life.

If you're a train driver, you can do that for God's glory. If you're a joiner or a school teacher, God calls you to do those things for his glory. We can run marathons for the glory of God. We can play Zelda on a Nintendo Switch for the glory of God. We can rescue migrants from the sea for the glory of God. But surely we can also say that some activities are more valuable than other things because they are more in line with the will of God for our lives.

And of all the things that we could prioritize, the priority the Bible calls us to as Christians is gospel ministry. The work of making the gospel known by sharing the word of God.

Now, lots of us will not be doing all that much word ministry. We may be serving God in our lives in all kinds of other ways. But in that sense, I think we're a bit like, you know, there's the story told of a man who was cleaning the toilets for NASA in 1969.

[16:36] And when he was asked, what are you doing? He said, I'm putting a man on the moon. So that idea of what I'm doing here doesn't look like it, but I'm part of a massive project that means we're going to get a man on the moon.

And my cleaning is part of that. That's the goal. And it involves many people doing many different things. Well, the goal in our times is gospel ministry.

That's the priority. But of course, it's not an exclusive priority. It doesn't mean we don't do anything else or we don't care about anything else. So nobody in Acts chapter six says, don't feed the hungry widows.

We haven't got time. No, the apostles are saying the priority is word ministry. And so to reflect that priority, we need to be set apart for prayer and the ministry of the word.

And we mustn't be distracted by other essential things. And I think it's striking how tempting it must have been for them just to run after the problem.

[17:39] In church life, when I hear that someone is unhappy about something, the instinct I feel is to drop what I was doing and run after them to fix the problem. As the apostles heard that people were grumbling, how tempting it would have been to add feeding the widows to their task list to say, well, if we don't do it, people will think we don't care.

But they had the conviction to stand in front of all those people and say, this really matters, but it would not be right for us to do it. We're not the ones to fix it.

And instead, we get their tremendous proposal. That's our next point, a tremendous proposal. Their proposal was delegation to a team. So have a look with me at verse 3.

Brothers and sisters, 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 and we'll give our attention to prayer and the ministry of the word.

This proposal pleased the whole group. So they trust that the church members will make a good choice. They set the criteria. We need these people to be full of the spirit and full of wisdom.

[18:54] So they're looking for godly character and for competence. And then we get this list of seven, starting with Stephen and then another six. And they publicly commissioned them in verse 6.

They presented these men to the apostles who prayed and laid their hands on them. And that sets the apostles free to continue to be devoted to word ministry and prayer.

So the needy get cared for and the word is being proclaimed. I take it it's not that these seven men cared more for the mercy work, the waiting on tables work, than the word work.

In chapter 7, Stephen preaches a magnificent sermon and then gets stoned to death. In chapter 8, Philip, who's one of the seven, explains the gospel to an Ethiopian leader and baptizes him.

But in this moment, they see what the church needs here is a servant-hearted team just to get on and do what needs doing. We'll do it. And that's our principle today.

[20:02] For a healthy church, it needs healthy teams serving in different ways. So that others can be set apart without distraction for gospel ministry.

I hope this is really helpful for understanding what we see all around us in the life of our church. I hope that people who start coming to St. Silas might often say, I'm picking up that this is a church that really prioritizes word ministry.

I hope they would notice that in our Sunday gatherings, in our small groups, in our informal conversations, that we're a church that want to help others grow by sharing God's word. But we also have hundreds of people in our church serving in church life in many and varied ways. So you might find that you get asked to volunteer to serve in a way that seems to have nothing to do with teaching the Bible.

Acts chapter 6 helps us understand why we see that and why we would do that. There's one priority, gospel ministry, upheld by different ways that we serve.

[21 : 15] I think of a friend who is a lawyer and in his church, the next door neighbouring land was being built on with pile drivers and things.

And the minister got really concerned about the effect it was having on the building, the church building. And my friend who's a lawyer heard about it and he just said to the minister, give me all the information and then stop thinking about it.

I'll deal with it. I can do this. This is my day job. I'll update you when I need to update you. Forget about it otherwise. And just took it off him.

Because he was saying, I want you to do prayer in the ministry of the word. I'll deal with the difficult neighbours. And I can think of ways that we as a church have had to evolve with that.

And we need to keep evolving. With teams to do the good and important things that need to be done. So some years ago, our evening service congregation was 17 people were coming on a Sunday evening.

[22 : 21] So at that time, I was on the tea and coffee rotter to serve tea and coffee. In fact, we had one young woman who came back to our church and started coming along.

And she said, the thing that made me come back was that the minister served the coffee. I've never seen that before. But now there's over 100 people come on a Sunday night. And I never do the coffee.

And the coffee is probably a lot nicer because of that. But that's not why I don't do it. It's that people have come in and said, well, we'll be the tea and coffee team. So that the person doing the sermon or the leading doesn't do that bit.

When we left our denomination in 2019 to take a stand on God's word, a guy on our vestry at the time, Trevor, realized we had to have a new constitution.

We had to be a new charity. And he did the work. He said, I'll do that. He ran meetings for our church to consult about it. He met lawyers. He got our constitution drafted.

[23 : 19] He listened to people on it. But he was doing it to set apart the ministry staff from that role. So as a church in our life together, there'll always be things that we want to do that we see need doing.

We want to show hospitality. We want to support young families. We want to help people in our church who are struggling with addiction. We want to encourage those who are unemployed. We've got buildings to look after.

You know, today the boiler is still bust in here. The boiler next door is bust as well, actually. Two at once. We've got administrative needs. We've got HR needs.

Legal compliance needs. We look around at a local community where there are needs. We want to welcome international students who arrive each year. We want to help those who are vulnerable around our church.

And even with the teams we have, maybe we can think there's more we'd like to do. How do we do what we can while keeping gospel ministry as our priority?

[24 : 22] Well, how did the early church do it? Luke wants us to know. First, its church leaders stayed focused resolutely on word ministry and prayer.

Secondly, other church members were motivated and mobilized to serve. They were motivated because thanks to the word ministry and prayer, they were growing in their appreciation of the mercy of God.

And so they wanted to serve. And they were mobilized because they got appointed and empowered to take ownership of the problem and solve it themselves.

And look at the outcome. It went ballistic. Look at verse 7. 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. So as we think about our church, across our church, it's honestly marvelous how many people serve in our church family in different

ways.

[25 : 27] It's marvelous and it's moving how many people serve, often in very unnoticed but very hard ways. Chapter 6 reassures us here.

As we do that, as we give of ourselves gladly and what we have, and the word of Christ goes out, people will be saved. God will add to our number those being saved.

And as we finish, just look back at verse 2 there. And I just wanted to pick up that in Acts chapter 6 verse 2, the word ministry there that the apostles use of themselves, their ministry of the word of God, is just the word for serving.

And it's the same word that gets used in that verse where we have it translated, wait on tables. It's table ministry.

It's table serving. The same word gets used twice. One priority for the church, gospel ministry, many different ways to serve, to do ministry.

[26 : 29] And the assumption there in verse 2 is that the members of the church and the leaders of the church would all be willing to view themselves as servants.

Why would we do that? Well, it's the same word that Jesus used of himself when in Luke 22 he said, I'm among you as one who serves.

The same word he used in Mark chapter 10 of himself when he said, the son of man came to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many. Our very salvation comes from the fact we have a king who was the king of kings and yet chose to see himself as our servants to save us.

And as we turn our eyes to him and we let our hearts grow in love for him, it reshapes us to follow on the same path, willing to serve his people.

Let's pray together. Heavenly Father, we praise you for your wisdom in teaching us how much every member of our body of Christ, our church matters, by the way you've distributed different gifts to each of us so that we can serve together for the good of the body.

[27 : 46] Father God, we recognize that with the growth you've given us, perhaps this is our greatest danger as a church, that we would be distracted by very good things, very important needs around us.

And so we ask that your spirit will be at work in our hearts and in our minds, that we will more and more prioritize the ministry of your word.

And may we be fueled by the grace in that word to serve willingly. And would you grant us the wisdom and discernment and character to serve in the ways you've gifted us to do that, in order that the saving word about Jesus may be spread.

And would you add to our number those who are being saved. For we ask in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen. Well, let's stand and sing. Amen.