

Sermon Summary: Deacons

Acts 6:1–7

Overview

Acts 6 takes place while the early church is growing rapidly despite considerable external opposition. The apostles have been arrested, threatened and beaten, yet they continue preaching Christ and the church continues to grow.

When persecution from outside fails to stop the church, a new danger emerges inside the church: division. The Greek-speaking Jewish Christians complain that their widows are being overlooked in the church's daily distribution of food. This threatens both the unity and the witness of the church.

1. A Growing Church Develops a Serious Problem

The church contains two culturally different groups: Hebrew-speaking Jewish Christians and Hellenistic, Greek-speaking Jewish Christians. The Hellenistic believers discover that their widows are not receiving the same care.

Whether this neglect was deliberate or accidental isn't clear. What matters is that it was happening, and the resulting grumbling and resentment were beginning to divide the church.

This was particularly serious because the church was supposed to demonstrate God's kingdom by caring for those in need. A church proclaiming God's grace while practising favouritism would undermine its own message.

2. The Apostles Recognise Different Callings

The apostles respond: "It would not be right for us to neglect the ministry of the word of God in order to wait on tables."

This does not mean serving tables is beneath them. Rather, the apostles have been specifically called to preaching, teaching and prayer. Taking responsibility for everything would mean neglecting the work Christ had given them.

So they ask the church to select seven men to take responsibility for this ministry.

3. Serving Requires Spiritual Maturity

These men aren't selected merely because they're available or good administrators. They must be known by the church, full of the Holy Spirit, and full of wisdom.

The practical ministry requires discernment, godliness and wisdom. They aren't simply distributing food. They're dealing with people, conflict, fairness and potentially serious divisions within the church.

Stephen and Philip particularly demonstrate that these weren't second-rate Christians given second-rate jobs. Both later become significant evangelists. Their gifts don't make practical service beneath them.

4. Two Priorities of the Church

The sermon identifies two priorities running through Scripture: proclaim the gospel and care for those in need.

The church gets into trouble when it chooses one while neglecting the other. Gospel proclamation without practical mercy makes the message appear hollow. Practical care without the gospel eventually loses the reason for that care.

Acts 6 therefore points towards the emerging distinction between elders and deacons. Elders primarily lead through teaching, prayer and spiritual oversight. Deacons lead and organise the church's practical ministry of mercy and service. Both ministries matter.

5. The Church Responds Wisely

The congregation chooses seven men, and significantly all seven have Greek names. The church appears to entrust the problem largely to people from the very community that had raised the concern.

Rather than becoming defensive, the church listens and gives responsibility to people who understand the problem.

There's also a practical application here: when something in church bothers us, grumbling to uninvolved people achieves very little except spreading dissatisfaction. Take the concern to those responsible. Sometimes the thing that particularly burdens us may also be an area where God is calling us to serve.

6. Service Strengthens the Gospel Witness

After the problem is addressed, the Word of God spreads, the number of disciples increases rapidly, and even many priests become believers.

That final detail is important because the priests had been among the strongest opponents of the apostles. They had already heard the gospel and rejected it. The sermon suggests that they now also saw the gospel lived out.

Christians caring sacrificially for vulnerable people demonstrated something of what Jesus himself had done. Christ, though rich, became poor for us. He came not to be served but to serve, giving his life for others.

Big Idea

Deacons help the church live out the gospel it proclaims.

Their ministry isn't merely administration or getting practical jobs done. They lead the church in Christlike service, particularly towards those who are vulnerable or in need.

A faithful church therefore needs both the ministry of the Word and the ministry of mercy. When those work together, the church's life reinforces the gospel it preaches.