

## Acts 6:1-7

### Disciples of Devotion

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Intro: How do you handle interruptions? If you are very task oriented, then interruptions are very challenging. If you like to have everything planned out, and execute by that plan, then interruptions create a whole lot of frustration.

I've read productivity books that say how interruptions are productivity killers, and that's true. We (I) tend to see interruptions as hindrances.

But the more I learn about following Christ and serving the church, interruptions are just a whole part of ordinary discipleship. Just read the gospels. Jesus is constantly interrupted. And never agitated.

There are interruptions that are self-imposed (e.g. constant checking social media), but there are also interruptions that are God-designed (usually problems and people). It's really important with each God-designed interruption to ask: what is God teaching me? Interruptions can be teachable moments.

\*Acts 6:1-7 is *God-designed interruption* in the church. It's a very teachable moment.

- The common thread of this text is *disciples*. Some see leadership as the focus, but I think it's broader. It's a text for all disciples.

In other words, Luke's intention is not to describe how deacons originate, rather, the main intention for us is to give disciples priorities to shape life around. As those priorities are kept, God's work goes unhindered.

- This is the first time we see the word "disciples" in Acts.

It really answers the question: In the church, what does devoted discipleship look like? What are the marks of it?

We can find four marks.

Devoted disciples:

#### 1. Desire God-honoring kingdom growth (1a, 7)

- The text is framed with two references of the church is a state of growth at the beginning and end.
- The point being that the church in Acts had rapid numerical growth.
- We get a glimpse of the *kind* of growth.

Look at the 3 distinct groups:

Hellenists—Jews who once lived outside Promised Land after exile and picked up Gk. language and culture.

- Down in vs 5, when we stumble in pronouncing the names it's because they were Gk. names. The 7 men chosen were from this Hellenistic community.
- E.G. —Nicolaus was not even a Jew by birth, but a Gentile convert.
- His hometown of Antioch is where the first Gentile church will form (Ch. 11) and will be a sending base for missions (Ch 13).

*The very mention of these names gives us a broader picture of Mission and a picture of kingdom growth where the gospel advances among the nations.*

Hebrews—Jews who lived in the Promised Land and retained either Hebrew or Aramaic.

Widows—the most overlooked in Israel. Yet God's word tells us that true spirituality is noticing and caring for widows (Jas 1:27).

Now, all three of these groups have an underlying unity. They are unified in Jesus. They all have the Spirit. It's the unity of "one faith, one baptism".

The kind of growth we see reflects the picture of God's heavenly kingdom.

(Rev 5:9) —worshippers from "every tribe and language and people and nation"

(Rev 7:9-10)—"9 After this I looked, and behold, a great multitude that no one could number, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb,"

The kind of growth that honors God is *kingdom* growth. It's unity in diversity. And it's the growth that Acts envisions.

But the point is that kingdom growth is really under threat. Notice that the first major threat to unity in the church is *not doctrinal, but cultural, social, racial*. This has been a historical problem and global.

Last spring, Bob (fellow elder at TRB) and I went to Central Asia to visit some of our missionaries. Bob spoke at a leadership school. At one point, Bob was trying to describe a blue-collar worker, when a student blurted out a racist remark about people from another country who work those jobs. This student's perspective was that people from that country are so below socially that they are fitted for certain jobs no one else wants to do.

If the gospel saves that man and the church grows in Central Asia, they will have to overcome that. They will have to start thinking in gospel and kingdom ways.

Social, cultural, and racial issues have always been a real threat to kingdom unity. Let make sure we are not blind to the prejudices in our own heart.

We don't need to study "Critical Race Theory", we just need to ask the questions prompted by Scripture. Begin by asking God: "who am I prone to *overlook*". "Who in your kingdom could I neglect" (v1)?

Devoted disciples:

## **2. Deal with growing pains in the church (1b)**

- It's actually the greatest strengths of the church that made them vulnerable.
  1. The church growth was exploding.
  2. There were generous people who truly cared about the poor (e.g. Barnabas)
  3. The church had a strong level of unity.

- And that is when we encounter the first major internal problem—manifested in one word: *complaint*.

The word complaining, also often translated "grumbling" (murmuring KJV) describes low voice mumbling. Complaining is "behind the scenes" talk.

Complaining is such an unpleasant word. You don't want to deal with complaining customers or live with a habitual complainer.

Complaining is when we have a sense of discontent or displeasure.

- This situation parallels Israel's history. When Moses and Aaron led the people out of Egypt, it wasn't long until the "whole congregation grumbles against them" (Ex 16:2). —displeased with their leadership.
- Even though the complaint in Acts seems legit, complaining is never encouraged in scripture as a way of God-honoring problem solving.

Grumbling is always condemned in scripture

(1 Pet 4:9)

<sup>9</sup>Show hospitality to one another without grumbling.

\*Notice that it's when we can be doing something good and God-honoring that we can grumble.

(Phil 2:14)

<sup>14</sup>Do all things without grumbling or disputing, <sup>15</sup>that you may be blameless and innocent, children of God without blemish in the midst of a crooked and twisted generation, among whom you shine as lights in the world,

—notice here that when grumbling is absent, we are better witness.

If grumbling goes unchecked, it will kill the momentum of mission.

God showed me how negative grumbling can be about a decade ago. I was working at UPS and was having a conversation with a coworker who also had several young children. We were going back and forth swapping stories of sleepless nights, sickness, dirty diapers. Another coworker overheard and said to us: with how you describe having children, I'd never want to be a parent. Children sound like joy-killers.

He was right. I did not sell the *positive joy* and calling because of my *low-leveling complaint*.

Change the analogy to the church, or Christians.

What if an outsider heard us say all the negative things about the church you could possibly say? Would they say: *Why would I want that faith?*

Grumbling is toxic for mission. It's like battery acid.

- The church leadership wisely recognizes that this is not a problem that can be swept under the rug—so they take action.

Growing pains are dealt with by caring for the people God gives us, but also using wisdom so we don't lose priorities.

### **3. Dedicate focus on the priorities of mission (2-4)**

- Problems can be very distracting.
- But they can also provide opportunities to reset priorities.
- The apostles comments really set the tone, and should also 2000 years later.

“It is not right” to give up preaching the Word to serve tables (Acts 6:2)

The Word is mentioned 3 times (v2, 4, 7).

The Word is what endures from generation to generation.

(1 Pet 1:25) the Word of the Lord remains forever...And this word is the good news preached to you

—There is a rightness and wrongness to ministry philosophy...just like there is a rightness and wrongness to how we prioritize our lives.

I think of my dad. He was an extremely hard-working man. Between his law enforcement job, and military service, it was common to see him work 16-hour days, and sometimes go weeks without a day off.

But when he was home, he was home. He didn't have tons of hobbies that took an already busy man away from his family. He may spend his time in his garage or shop, but he was present. That stood out to me over the years.

For him to add hobby after hobby to a busy life that took him away, *would not have been right.*

Priorities help us ask the right question...both individually and as a church.

Is how we spend our time, right? Am I doing the right thing with the time and talent God gives me?

At the church level:

It's not right when a church gives up preaching and prayer to address social needs.

It's not right to ditch preaching solid doctrine to appeal to a non-Christian culture.

It's not right for a church to give up praying because of time constraints.

When I was doing my undergrad work at CIU, for a ministry class we had to read the most popular book on church growth at the time. The author who has a huge ministry on the West Coast, suggested to make services more efficient, be sure to time your prayer on Sunday morning—and be sure they are short, since that will kill the flow and momentum of service.

It's critical to dedicate ourselves to the right priorities: prayer and ministry of the Word.

#### **4. Determine the leaders who the Spirit will use to further the mission (5-6)**

- While deacon selection is not the main point, there are some principles for determining good deacon candidates.

First,

- Seven men. Not magical, Jewish boards often had 7 men.

- "good repute" —Lit. good witness; others had to have given a good report of their character.

- "Full of Holy Spirit" —Spiritual life and spiritual fruit.

- "and wisdom"; Competent in administration and organization. Their main task is to help with an overwhelming and overlooked administrative task. Simply put, they could get the practical things done.

- The point of selecting these men is to support the *overall mission of the church*.

The church is a very "big picture" in this regard.

Two stand out.

1. Stephen—who preaches and dies...and is forgotten.

2. Phillip (8:5:40; 21:8-9) \*21:8 Phillip the *Evangelist*

The way they further the mission is by *servicing*.

-serving tables (v2): that's the task that the apostles are overwhelmed with. It's a practical needs ministry.

-serving the word (v4): The ministry of the 7 frees up the apostles to devote to serving of the word.

\*\*In the heart of all leaders, is the heart of a servant—whether apostle, elder, deacon...or with no official title.

(Mk 10:45)—

“<sup>45</sup> For even the Son of Man did not come to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.”

This servant-based mindset is seen supremely in Jesus.

Redemption is seen as a *servicing act*.

It would surely show itself; helping overlooked widows is not glamorous. It's humbly serving in the name of Christ.

Finally, there is a miracle:

(v5) is simply miraculous! This pleased the whole gathering.

If you have ever been around a group of complainers and you can please them, without actually aiming for that target!!

The complaining could have destroyed the church.

Conclusion:

By dealing with an interruption, there is no interruption in God's mission (v7). The summary statement is God's approval. The word of God continues to spread and grow. The Word is mentioned 3 times. Why? Disciples of devotion are devoted to one thing: The Word.

The Word always has been, and always will be central the churches growth.

May we stick to God's priorities: caring for people—but never neglecting a strong ministry of Word and prayer.

And may God bless his Word with unhindered progress in growth and discipleship for his glory.