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Ministry Pressures & Priorities

Acts 6:1-7

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PowerPoint Presentation included: none

SermonAudio Blurb: Luke inserts a short story between the rising tide of oppression against the Jerusalem church that centers on the sin of partiality against some who were very vulnerable. But the point of the passage actually is upon what the priorities of church leaders ought to be and how ministry pressures can subtly pull leaders away from what ought to be their focus.

I. Introduction.

- A. Review of Acts 5:12-42.
 - 1. A large passage that shows how the early church broke out from under the shadow and umbrella of Judaism.
 - a. Judaism had various sects attached to it.
 - b. This new entity we know as the “church” looked like a new sect but was still fully identified as being part of Judaism and was Jewish in its make-up.
 - 2. The apostles are preaching about Jesus being the promised Christ. Miracles of all sorts. People are flocking and the religious leaders are jealous.
 - 3. The apostles are arrested, miraculously released from jail, back preaching, and ultimately are brought up on charges again.
 - a. The anger of the Council centered on the apostles saying that they killed Jesus and that He was raised by God.
 - b. This brought them to the edge of being killed except for the intervention by Gamaliel: if God is in this movement, nothing can be done. If God is not, it will die off.
 - c. 2,000 years of history shows that God is with the Church. The soil of every continent is stained by the blood of martyrs as movements and governments try to destroy the Church.
 - d. But Jesus declared that He would build His Church and nothing could overcome it.

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- B. Back a bit further we saw that God dealt very strongly with two people in the who lied due to greed.
 - 1. Husband and wife killed right before the rest of the church.
 - 2. They sold land and claimed they were giving all of the money to the church.
 - 3. Remind them about money, financial needs, etc. in early church.
- C. Now we pick back up with the issue of money and caring for those in need within the church.
- D. What we have here is a quick story to introduce some key people while explaining how the church developed leaders beyond the scope of the apostles. And in the process it shows us how the early church leadership was able to work through pressures and crises by having a clear vision of the priorities for a church.
- E. We will gain three lessons through the presence of a crisis. Three things that any believer can learn when a crisis hits.

II. Ministry Pressures and Priorities.

- A. Crises reveal existing weaknesses (1).
 - 1. A crisis is nothing more than a type of trial. And when it strikes it is very revealing to those who are wise enough to quietly observe.
 - a. We all like to think we are doing better than we are. We are more mature. We are more wise.
 - b. Then a sudden crisis strikes and the real you steps forward. Some people are paralyzed, some look for an escape, some demand pity, some dig the hole deeper and some respond with wisdom.
 - c. It is not bad when a crisis hits and it is to be expected since we live in a fallen world. But it is bad to not have already anticipated key issues and made initial, non-negotiable reactions or responses.
 - d. This is what we see here in Acts 6. A crisis strikes and how it is dealt with will either bring healing and stability or further division. So this crisis is a pastoral one, typical of the kind that can strike any local church.
 - 2. Hellenists vs Hebrews.
 - a. The Greek-speaking people were from other countries and were the diaspora.

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- (1) Very obvious who they were by language, dress, customs and such. They would have their own country's language but also the common language of Greek.
 - (2) They had come for Pentecost and now remained because of gospel. But they had no employment, home or support system. A totally different set of social standards and expectations.
 - b. The Hebrews were the Jews who lived and were raised in Israel and especially around Jerusalem. Aramaic speaking and very Jewish. They owned land, had trades and a very complete support structure.
3. Widows are a unique subgroup.
- a. God is described as the God who executes justice for the orphan and widow.
 - b. Simply put, the widow and orphan were very easily exploited and this still is true today. Little to no protection.
 - c. Repeatedly in Deuteronomy God reminds Israel to care for the widow, to not exploit the widow and to remember her in very practical ways.
 - d. The Psalms speak of those who are wicked who take advantage of the widow, orphan or alien. In 93:7 the wicked think that God does not see, but He does.
 - e. The widows referenced here in Acts are those who had, on their own, traveled all the way to Jerusalem to be part of the Day of Pentecost.
 - (1) They likely had not planned on an extended stay and would have limited funds.
 - (2) And anyone who would be their support structure and who would speak on their behalf would likely be back in their home country.
 - f. The church was concerned for these sort of people but being concerned and actually acting on it properly are two separate things.
 - (1) So they are being overlooked.

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- (2) The question you might ask is if this was on purpose or by accident. It is impossible to say with absolute certainty but I take the position that there is a willfulness here that is sinful.
 - (3) Two reasons: First, it was limited to the Greek-speaking widows. And second, it was not an occasional situation but on a daily basis that their needs were neglected
4. A type of partiality.
- a. Ananias and Sapphira were not the only ones sinning. They were the ones God chose to use as an example. Many preach about that story as if it was purifying the church and after they were gone, things were fine.
 - b. But this story shows it to be otherwise. Notice in vs 1 “now at this time” or “in these days” for it indicates that all of these events are happening around this time frame.
 - c. Details are not given because they are not important here. Some sort of breakdown happened from the point in time where the money was given to the apostles and the actual care for those in need.
 - d. Partiality is a serious sin that shows itself in many ways: racism, tribalism, sexism, bribery, injustice and favoritism are just a few ways it shows itself.
 - (1) Leaders of tribes of Israel: *“You shall not show partiality in judgment; you shall hear the small and the great alike. You shall not fear man, for the judgment is God’s”* (Deut. 1:17)
 - (2) In the Old Testament the issue of partiality is usually focused upon those in power and influence shown preference over the weak.
 - (3) But it is in James that we see this idea developed rather starkly. James 2:1-18.
 - (a) First book of New Testament at around A.D. 45. Written by Jesus’ half-brother.
 - (b) Take them through it briefly.
 - e. It is important to see that the daily serving of food to widows was **not** merely an administration issue, but it is an issue of gospel

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obedience. There are consequences to believing and following Jesus as Lord.

5. Apostles under pressure and must make some decisions.
 - a. Ministry pressures can derail a church or ministry.
 - b. You need to resist being reactive by establishing non-negotiables early on that are biblically sound. (True for your personal life, work life, marriage and family, finances)
 - c. How many of you have established certain non-negotiables early in your life so that they are in place once problems and crises arise? It is imperative that you do.
 - d. What will you **not** do in your work place? What line or lines are drawn that you will not cross? What about with your finances? Or your spouse and children?
 - e. Sin crouches at the door of each of our hearts. None are exempt. And it presses on us at every moment of every day moving us toward capitulation. If we do not have standards and non-negotiables already clearly established then we eventually will be nudged into grievous sin and scratch our heads as to how we got there.

B. A Crisis Gives Opportunity to Show Wisdom (2-4).

1. Notice how calm this event is. Immediately upon hearing of the problem the apostles respond and react. They gather the church.
 - a. The apostles do not start yelling at each other or fixing blame on people. In fact those things don't even seem to enter into the equation.
 - b. Who did what is not that important. The crisis needs to be met and they, as the leaders, must model the right attitude and actions.
2. What is the response? It is obvious that the apostles recognized two things:
 - a. First, that this was an important issue that needed to be resolved quickly. They couldn't just ignore it and hope it goes away.
 - b. Second, they saw it as a possible threat to their priorities as established by God. And because they recognized that certain avenues of possible reactions and resolutions either opened or closed for them.

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- c. They saw the need and they saw the solution. But most importantly they saw that the solution could not directly involve them because it interfered with their priorities.
3. It is not desirable. It is not right. It is not fit or proper.
 - a. They are not denigrating the waiting on tables. That is obvious by the high requirements given for those who resolve the problem.
 - b. They are recognizing that waiting on tables will distract them from their task of teaching/preaching.
 - c. This is a key passage for current events within the American Church.
 - (1) Often people will refer to this passage when talking about Social Justice Movement and COVID. They seek to make the fact the widows are overlooked as the point of the passage. And then tell us that we need to feed the homeless or fight for immigration rights and so on.
 - (2) But that is not the point of the passage and to follow that line of reasoning will always harm the Church in the end. The reason is it will take away the Church's primary mission to proclaim the Word of God. Instead it redirects the church to social issues.
 - (3) Given time, the gospel and sound doctrine will steadily diminish in individual churches while focus on social issues will rise. If you doubt this merely study the old mainline denominations. Not one is still faithful. We see this pressure in the SBC right now with the advent of Wokeism.
 - (4) And the only thing that will resolve this is a doubling down on the centrality of the preaching and teaching of the Word of God to the people of God **at the local church level.**
4. Having defined the limitations of their own labors the apostles then define boundaries for the church to then work out a solution. This is good leading. Let the people make the decision but define how that decision can be made.
 - a. Seven men.
 - (1) No spiritual meaning in this number.

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- (2) But it is worth noting it was men who were to be chosen. This was to be a position of oversight and authority and it would be driven and directed by these men.
 - b. Good reputation.
 - c. Full of Spirit and wisdom.
 - (1) πλήρης (*pleres*) This word speaks of being under the **control**, or of an **abiding relationship** with the Holy Spirit.
 - (2) The same for wisdom. These are men who are Word bound and Word directed. Not in a vague way but in a skillful way.
 - (3) This is an emotionally charged problem and it needs wisdom and Spirit-led men to resolve it.
 - d. The apostles will then put them in charge (delegated authority). There is a great joy when leaders delegate something and they have full confidence it will be handled.
- 5. Reaffirmation of what the apostles must be doing (4). It is worth noting that the Word of God is mentioned in vss 2, 4, and 7. That is the point of this passage and story.
 - a. Problems will always arise in any church. Crisis is part of pastoral ministry.
 - b. But wise leaders will not let the problem define them or control them. Wise leaders will always default back to the Word being taught and preached.
 - c. It is basic to my decision-making all these years in the pastorate.
- C. The application (5-6).
 - 1. The church quickly gets behind it showing that the apostles did not lead in a heavy-handed way.
 - 2. Seven Hellenistic men chosen.
 - a. Shows humility by the Hebrews and perhaps even grief over what happened.
 - (1) They were the majority and stepped backward to resolve the problem.

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- (2) This is a small glimpse into repentance. You never have to wonder if someone is repentant, it is obvious. If you are not sure if a person has repented, likely they have not.
 - b. The men.
 - (1) Stephen. We see the type of man he is in vs 8. But what no one knew at this point was that in a very short time he would be stoned to death.
 - (2) Philip. He will be seen again with the gospel going outward to Ethiopia.
 - (3) Nicolas the proselyte from Antioch.
 - (a) This is the city where Paul and Barnabas were identified and sent out to plant churches throughout the Gentile world.
 - (b) As a proselyte he was not even a Jew. He was a Gentile who converted to Judaism as a worshiper of YHWH. And now as a disciple of Jesus.
 - (4) The others are not known.
 - (a) And again this is the nature of ministry.
 - (b) Some become known by all. They rise to a level of importance. And others simply live out their life unknown, but faithful.
 - c. Apostles pray and laid hands and we hear not one more word about this situation. They chose well.
- D. Crises bring clarity to solutions (7).
- 1. Crisis averted the Word of God is spreading.
 - 2. The Word of God is really all that matters.
 - a. The Word of God must be proclaimed for in it we find the gospel, we find the mind and will of God and we find our calling and purpose.
 - b. Christians and the church cannot ignore sin and if it does, it only does it for a while before harm comes to the church and the people.
 - c. But the sin cannot be the focus. We obey and address sin because we learn of it and identify it and its solutions via the Word.

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- d. If we become Word saturated it will then create the mind set that the apostles had in this crisis. They had developed a biblical mind that prevented them from being distracted.
3. The church keeps growing.
 4. Priest becoming obedient to the faith.
 - a. Now we are seeing that the worst nightmares of the Council are coming true. Priests are believing the gospel too. They are hearing the apostles preach as they go about their work in the Temple and many of them are becoming convinced of the truth about Jesus Christ.
 - b. Why is it described this way, “obedient to the faith?” The book of Romans deals with this idea and in that book we see that faith and obedience are closely tied together:
 - (1) Romans 1:8 with 16:19.
 - (2) Romans 10:16 (heed = obey).
 - (3) Romans 11:23, 30, 31.
 - c. At the same time, Paul was very quick to point out that to believe in Jesus was not cheap. The gospel is not merely a set of facts to accept—they are a set of facts that are to be embraced and lived out daily.
 - (1) Romans 15:18 shows that the obedience that Paul was looking for was not a one time event, but an on-going lifestyle.
 - (2) One that was obedience that flowed out of faith in the Son.
 - (3) To believe in Jesus was to make yourself his slave (Romans 6.1ff.)
 - (4) Therefore, what Paul is saying is that he is not merely out there preaching the gospel. Rather, the preaching of the gospel is to produce something in those who listen.
 - (5) It is to produce faith. But not some vague type of faith that simply hears and accepts the facts, but a vibrant, life-changing faith that grips the person and redirects their life. It is a faith that obeys.

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- (6) What makes this so radical is that Paul the object of the faith that Paul is speaking of, and that object is Jesus Christ.
 - (a) Obedience must flow out of faith, faith in something or someone.
 - (b) There is really no such thing as “blind” obedience because it is flowing out of some sort of faith, whether it be in faith in a reward, or faith that someone else knows better, etc.
 - (c) This obedience of faith flows through faith in Christ. And this makes it devastating to the religious Jew and religious Gentile.
 - (d) For though they may be quite religious, and quite obedient, it is an obedience that is not flowing out of a faith **in Christ**.
 - (e) As a result it is unacceptable. It is nothing but a dead work.
 - (f) And when this type of obedience is placed before God it is judged sinful and is rejected.

III. Conclusion.

- A. As we close today what did you see in yourself in the last crisis you experienced?
 - 1. Things of which to repent?
 - 2. Things to give thanks.
 - 3. Things that need to be strengthened?
 - 4. Things that need to be learned?
- B. How well were you guided by the non-negotiables of the Word of God in the midst of that crisis?
- C. How well have you prepared yourself for the crisis that is headed your way? A preparation that allows you to meet it with a level of grace, calmness and stability?
- D. What all of this really boils down to in the end is this, are you obedient to the faith?

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Benediction

May our gracious Father in heaven cause us to be found in Christ, clothed on in His righteousness which comes through faith from the hand of God. May we know Christ and the power of His resurrection and the fellowship of His sufferings as we become conformed to His death. Amen.