

**Acts 6: 1-7; “When the Local Church Advances”, Sermon # 22 in the series –
“Laying the Foundations”, Delivered by Pastor Paul Rendall
on June 10th, 2012, in the Morning Worship Service.**

It says, “In those days, when the number of the disciples was multiplying....” Those were days when the Church of Jesus Christ was advancing. There was only one local church in the world at the time that this event took place; the church at Jerusalem. Today there are thousands of local churches all over the world. This church in many ways is a model of what all local churches should strive for. They were growing in numbers; yes it is true. But they were also to grow in wisdom in relation to the problems that were coming up because they had the greater numbers. Greater numbers in a church is not necessarily an indication of that church’s greater maturity in the faith. You may have thousands in your church and yet there may be many who are babes in their understanding. Just because people come together and assemble in the Name of Jesus does not mean that they are automatically glorifying to Him in what they are doing. You can see this if you read the letters to the seven churches of Asia in the book of Revelation. Sometimes Christ was pleased with a particular church and sometimes He was displeased. And sometimes it was a mixture of the two. No, we must understand that with greater numbers will often come greater problems in any church. This was the case here. And we can see from this passage that it is when the leaders, together with the members of the church, are able to deal with the problems that come up, without those problems side-tracking the main purpose for which the a local church exists; that is when a local Church is making progress, and that is when Christ’s church as a whole advances.

You say, “Well, what is the main purpose that a local church of Jesus Christ exists?” I would say to you, the local church exists to glorify God as a body of believers united to do His will. They glorify God by together declaring to Him and to the watching world, that they have a united doctrinal and practical witness to God’s glory, His Worship, and the truth of His Word. They publicly confess that it is their united intention, to proclaim by words and deeds the salvation which is found only in God’s Son, the Lord Jesus Christ. Their continual prayer is that their witness to the truth of God’s word would be lived out, by the power of the Holy Spirit, as a local expression of the larger universal Body of Christ. The universal body of Christ is made up of all believers in every place, and it is God’s will that every local church should be attempting to fulfill this purpose which I just described to you. This purpose is being fulfilled when the elders, the deacons, and the members of a local church are all attempting to glorify God by doing what God has called them to do according to the truth of His word the Bible. Their goal is the fulfillment of the Great Commission of Christ; to make disciples by teaching them to observe all that Christ has commanded us in His word. So, in order that we might learn from the Apostles and this church in Jerusalem, we want to 1st of all look at the high priority of the needy widows in the first church. Then 2nd – We want to look at the higher priority for the Apostles, in preaching the word and praying for that church. And then 3rd – We want to look at the blessings which came from this wise decision of the Apostles to devote themselves to prayer and the word of God.

1st – Let us think about the high priority of the needy widows in the first church.

(Verse 1)

“Now in those days, when the number of the disciples was multiplying, there arose a complaint against the Hebrews by the Hellenists, because their widows were neglected in the daily distribution.” As we begin I would have you notice that those who made up the church in Jerusalem were a definite number. “The number of the disciples was multiplying”. The leaders of the church kept track of them because they were called to be under-shepherds of Christ to this

flock. Those who were disciples were counted and their names and numbers were known. And it appears that these believers had consciously, openly, and publicly committed themselves before the church, probably in conjunction with their being baptized; they had committed themselves to become learners of what they were supposed to believe and do in relation to Christ and His church now that they were saved. They committed themselves to the Apostle's doctrine, and fellowship, the breaking of bread and prayers, as it says in Acts 2: 42. This, then, is a very good argument for church membership, and your becoming a member of this church if you have not. That first church of Jerusalem is a model for all other churches in ecclesiology in this holy way. Ecclesiology is the study of the doctrine of the church from what is written in the Scriptures.

I think that it is pretty evident from this passage that all those who believed desired to join the local church there, and thus formally commit themselves not only to the Lord, but to His people and His kingdom work as well. The issue is not so much what the church can do for me, but what I can do for the Lord with the church. I can show you that this really was what usually happened when people were saved then, and it is what we hope that you would see now, if you are not presently a member of this church. So turn over with me to 2 Corinthians 8, verse 1. "Moreover brethren, we make known to you the grace of God bestowed on the churches of Macedonia: that in a great trial of affliction the abundance of their joy and their deep poverty abounded in the riches of their liberality." "For I bear witness that according to their ability, yes, and beyond their ability, they were freely willing, imploring us with much urgency that we would receive the gift and the fellowship of the ministering to the saints." "And not only as we had hoped, but they first gave themselves to the Lord, and then to us by the will of God." I would hope that you might see that both their "giving themselves to the Lord" and their giving themselves to the Apostles to be taught in the context of the local church, appeared to be formal acts of their will and their words. They really joined a certain church in Macedonia. And when they joined, they joined to help the needy and to help forward the gospel of Christ. I think that this was, and it is still today, the very thing which the Lord and His Apostles would teach us if they were standing here with us today. And they are here, through their word being preached today.

Why should you join this local church and formally commit yourself to Christ and His people? It is because this is the way which the Bible teaches that you will glorify God and serve Christ. It is secondarily the way that you will come to be more happy, and blessed, and useful to your Lord in service to Him. By coming to apply for church membership you are saying, "I am willing to be taught the Bible which shows me God's will for my life. And I am willing to give of myself, my time, my money, and my strength to help build Christ's kingdom in and through this church; this group of believers. That is how a Christian glorifies God. By joining the church which teaches you the Bible, you are saying that you are willing to receive that teaching to do it. You want to receive God's word as it is preached, and you want to live it out with this particular group of people who are doing these same things together; worship, serving one another, helping one another, and spreading the truth of his word to others. There are also certain great benefits which come to you when you do this. You become a more real part of this local expression of the body of Christ. You will become a part of a work that is greater than that which you can do by yourself. That is what was happening here in this first church. They had both informal fellowship and then they also, together as a church, made a formal commitment to help the many widows in their midst. They were not a social work organization. They were the church of the living God ministering Christ to the needy among them. I hope that you can see that it is very evident from the New Testament letters of Paul, that a local church is a formally organized assembly with leaders who are called elders and deacons. The men who lead have real authority which has been given to them by Christ, and they work together on formally agreed

upon tasks, in relation to needy people. Perhaps this is a new thought to you. But if you go through the New Testament you will find this very thing happening. It is very true that Christ has a universal church which is made up of all believers in every place. But it is also very true that this universal church is comprised of local churches in various places, planted by those who have preached the gospel in those places, and then ordered according to the Apostolic instructions found in the New Testament.

So I want you to think with me for a few moments about the fact that there was a high priority in this first church concerning their meeting these very real needs of widows among them. We can see that while the Apostles had been trying to directly oversee the meeting of these needs, there was murmuring that was taking place; there was a complaint that arose which came from the Hellenists, the Greek-speaking Jews, against the Hebrew-speaking Jews, because their widows were neglected in the daily distribution. If you will remember, the church in Jerusalem began with 120 Hebrew Jews meeting in an upper room. But at the day of Pentecost 3,000 were baptized and added to the church. And then a short time later, in Acts 4: 4, it says that 5,000 more became believers, and a short time after that, in Acts 5: 14, it says that “believers were increasingly added to the Lord, multitudes of both men and women”. When it says that they were “added to the Lord”, I believe that it means that they joined the church. They were added to the Lord’s body, His Church. In verse 13 it says, “Yet none of the rest dared join them, but the people highly esteemed them.” And so great growth was taking place in this local church. And in this large congregation there were many Greek-speaking Jews. But still, there were probably far more Hebrew-speaking Jews. The Hebrew speaking Jews who had widows among them; because they spoke Hebrew, were probably far more likely to receive aid and assistance more quickly, and perhaps even more regularly than the widows who were a part of the Greek-speaking group.

And so this complaint arose. It does not appear that this was due to any defect in the love or intended care of the Apostles, to help them. It was simply that they did not have the time to be able to attend to all these individual needs personally. Money, from lands being sold, had been brought and laid at the Apostle’s feet, it says in Acts Chapter 4, verse 37. There was distribution of these funds that was taking place, but it was not well organized. This became an immediate high priority; not only that the needs of the widows would be met, but also so that the unity of the church would be preserved. Let us observe, by way of application, that the particular physical needs of every single member of the church must have high priority in the thinking of not only the elders of the church, but of all the congregation. There should not be murmuring and complaining in regard to these needs, as though the local church is some sort of social service agency to continually help people in need. But there must be a regular and on-going evaluation by the united leadership of the church to consider who is worthy to receive the church’s benevolence.

We see that as time went on, and churches also began to multiply, that the organization of this relief work to widows developed as well, according to the instruction of the Apostle Paul. Turn over to 1 Timothy Chapter 5, verse 3. “Honor widows who are really widows.” “But if any widow has children or grandchildren, let them first learn to show piety at home and to repay their parents; for this is good and acceptable before God.” Then Paul goes on to define who really is a widow. He says, “Now she who is really a widow, and left alone, trusts in God and continues in supplications and prayers night and day.” Paul was not afraid to define what was the right way to minister to widows, and the wrong way. So he would go on to talk about how they needed to behave; not living in selfish or sensual indulgence. He would speak about the age of widows who should be put on “the list” in verse 9. “Do not let a widow under sixty years old be taken into the number, and not unless she has been the wife of one man, well reported for good works; if she has brought up children, lodged strangers, washed the feet of the saints,

relieved the afflicted, and if she has diligently followed every good work. Why did he do this? He did this so that the church would not be burdened by any unnecessary charity cases. Verse 16 says, "If any believing man or woman has widows, let them relieve them, and do not let the church be burdened, that it may relieve those who are really widows." So you can see that caring for widows, widows who are widows indeed, has always been a high priority for the church of Jesus Christ. But now we must turn our attention to another consideration in this whole situation.

2ndly - We want to look at the higher priority for the Apostles, which was their preaching the word and praying for that church in Jerusalem. (verse 2-4)

"Then the twelve summoned the multitude of the disciples and said, 'It is not desirable that we should leave the word of God and serve tables.'" "Therefore, brethren, seek out from among you seven men of good reputation, full of the Holy Spirit and wisdom, whom we may appoint over this business; but we will give ourselves continually to prayer and to the ministry of the word." Now, it is very interesting to see what the Apostles believed their highest priority was, as ministers of Christ. It was to "give themselves continually to prayer and to the ministry of the word". They did not see it as "desirable" to neglect the word of God in order to serve tables. It was not in their minds a reasonable or a wise thing to do. It was not as though the work of serving tables was unimportant to them, or below them. Not at all. The Lord Jesus had said to them in John 13: 14 – "If I then your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet." "For I have given you an example, that you should do as I have done to you." If they could follow their Lord and obey Him in doing that menial task, then certainly serving tables was not beneath them. No, here was simply a higher priority for them.

They, as Apostles were called to serve Christ continually in prayer and the ministry of the word of God. This is also the highest priority for all of the ministers of Christ's word today. Those who are preachers and teachers of the word of God are called to devote themselves, not so much to serving the physical needs of people, as to serving God, by ministering the word of God and praying for all the saints; ministering to the spiritual needs of people. This is what God has called them to. The practical physical needs of people in the church are a high priority, but for the minister (the pastor-teacher-elder) there are higher priorities. And they cannot allow themselves to be taken away from this great work that they have been called to do. This, by the way, is the reason why the office of deacon came into being right here at this point. It was so that both of these high priorities in the church could be addressed. It was so God would be glorified in both, and the cause of Christ advanced by both.

In applying this, this morning, I would have you to lay hold of this important truth and remember it; that the preaching and teaching of the word of God, by the one called to it, is the highest of privileges and the greatest of responsibilities. It cannot be neglected or left off because of the many needs of people around us. "Man does not live by bread alone, but by every word which proceeds from the mouth of God." (Matthew 4: 4) "Study to show yourself approved unto God, a worker who does not need to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth." (2 Timothy 2: 15) It requires much time and much study to rightly divide the word of truth. And this good work of the pastor's studying ought to be regularly prayed for by the whole congregation. At least one man in every local church ought to be set aside by the congregation to devote himself full time in preparation for preaching it each and every Sunday to them. It is a very rigorous discipline. It is wearisome to the body, but it yields great fruit to the local church's building up; to its growth and usefulness to Christ. This is not to say that the minister should not take some time to visit those in his congregation. His ministry is to be private as well as public. The ministry of the word encompasses both. It is not to say that he should not do the work of evangelism. He can and he should at times do so. But the regular ministry of the word is the preparation for the messages that he will deliver on the Lord's Day.

The deacons, in conjunction with the whole congregation, should study to see to it that their minister has sufficient time to prepare for these times when, through his message, God will speak to the congregation through his preaching and teaching of the word of God. The minister is also, it says here, to devote himself continually to prayer. He will be praying to God for wisdom and insight into the Scriptures, praying to God for power in the delivery of the messages, praying to God that people would come to church and listen. He will also regularly be in prayer for each and every member of the congregation to which he ministers, all of their needs and all of his hopes for their growth in grace. If this is the case, then you can see why the Apostles said, "It is not desirable that we should leave the word of God and serve tables." The ministry of the word would have been neglected if they had left off their preparations. Their holy resolution was that they would give themselves continually to prayer and to the ministry of the word.

The deaconate came into being here in order to protect the office of the elder from being overrun with responsibilities related to people's material and physical needs. The deacon is a servant of Christ ministering to the physical needs of the church, but in doing so, he will also minister spiritually in an interpersonal sense the word of God as well. He does not necessarily have an ability to preach, although we will see that 2 of these 7 men listed here in our text were. But as he has opportunity to help in these good works to widows and the needy in the church, he will be also ministering the word of God along with it. The Apostles put the whole matter into the hands of the whole congregation of disciples, the church in Jerusalem. And they said to them, "Seek out from among you seven men of good reputation, full of the Holy Spirit and wisdom, whom we may appoint over this business." So you can see that the church would decide suitable candidates for this work, who would be put forward, and they (the Apostles) would appoint them over their business. We should remember that this is how a local church raises up its officers and leaders. The congregation should have the opportunity to seek out from among themselves those who would be qualified, and the Apostles, or in our case, the elders will commission them to that work if they see that the congregation has chosen wisely. The whole church ought to be able to vote over these important choices and the elders ought to be able to approve and confirm, or disapprove and state their reasons why they disapprove of candidates put forward. But it is evident here that what took place glorified God as every man's welfare and every man's responsibilities were established in the fear of God. "The saying of the Apostles pleased the whole multitude." They chose and put forward these seven men and the Apostle's confirmed them, and prayed over them, and appointed them to this office and work.

Then 3rdly - We want to look at the blessings which came from this wise decision of the Apostles to devote themselves to prayer and the word of God. (verse 7)

"Then the word of God spread, and the number of the disciples multiplied greatly in Jerusalem, and a great many of the priests were obedient to the faith." What a great and mighty blessing it is when the word of God spreads and the number of disciples multiplies. John Calvin translates it: "Furthermore, the word of God grew." Is the word of God growing in you? Is it spreading to others? It can only spread out from a church if there are men who are devoted to preaching it, and disciples who are devoted to listening to their preaching. Disciples are multiplied when everyone in the local church is taught what their spiritual responsibilities are. This is found in the Bible of course, but the truth must come with power to the minds and the hearts of the hearers so that they will more carefully consider what they should do. A disciple is a learner, one who not only reads the Bible for himself, which is what every Christian ought to do; but he is also one who deliberately places himself Sunday after Sunday under the preaching of the word of God so that they can become more useful to Christ in the context of their membership in the local church. There is a body of doctrine to be learned. There are many

applications of truth which need to be made. We can make them better together, here in the church, than we can by our private study alone.

You will notice that it says that, “a great many of the priests were obedient to the faith”. Among these Jewish priests were probably some who had before said in John 7: 48 – “Have any of the rulers or the Pharisees believed in Christ?” “But this crowd that does not know the law is accursed.” (John 7: 48 and 49) Perhaps some of those who had thought this way before, had now come to obey the gospel; they had been saved. Whenever a religious man, a priest, or otherwise, is saved, you will be able to tell that he is saved by his “becoming obedient to the faith”. They began to bring their lives into conformity with what the Apostles were teaching; those truths which would eventually be written down, as they are for us now, in the New Testament Scriptures. That is the great object of preaching, that each of us would bring our lives into conformity with the truth of the Scriptures, that we would not only be hearers of the word, but also doers.