

## ATTENTION TO PRAYER AND THE WORD OF GOD

Acts 6:1-15

Key Verses: 6:3-4

*“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.”*

As the church in Jerusalem grew rapidly, problems arose. Some members complained against others about food distribution. The apostles were not fazed by the problem. Instead, they found a clear direction for the church. They decided to focus on prayer and the ministry of the word by delegating business matters to trustworthy servants. May God help us to focus on prayer and the ministry of the word!

### I. THEY CHOSE SEVEN DEACONS (1-7)

Look 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.”* The number of disciples was increasing day by day. The word “disciples” indicates that those who joined them were not casual visitors, shopping for church. They were committed disciples of Jesus. They made personal commitment to follow Jesus as their Lord. They were eager to learn of Jesus. The church was growing, not only in number, but in faith and commitment. At the same time, the church experienced growing pain.

In Jerusalem, there were Hebraic Jews and Hellenistic Jews. The Hebraic Jews spoke Aramaic and followed Jewish culture. The Hellenistic Jews spoke Greek and followed Greek culture. The Jerusalem church was predominantly Hebrew. Hellenistic Jews were a minority. Apparently, Hebraic Jews were in charge of the daily distribution of food to the widows. They never missed giving food to their own widows, but they overlooked Grecian widows. It was probably unintentional. The first time was okay. Then it happened again and again. The Grecian widows began to be hungry. They became skinny and pale. They had endured discrimination in the society as a minority before they joined the church. They loved the church because everyone loved one another, regardless of their background. Now discrimination happened in the church. The widows felt a deep sorrow.

While on earth, Jesus had compassion on widows. Once as Jesus was entering a town called Nain, he met a funeral procession. A dead young man was being carried out to be buried. When Jesus saw his mother, a widow, his heart went out to her. He said, “Don’t cry.” Then he touched the coffin and said, “Young man, I say to you, get up!” The dead man sat up and began to talk, and Jesus gave him back to his mother (Lk 7:11-17). St. Paul learned this heart of Jesus and said: “Give proper recognition to those widows who are really in need” (1Ti 5:3).

So when the widows were not treated properly, it was a big problem for the church. The apostles, who knew the heart of God, felt that they had to put on aprons and serve the widows. Hellenistic Jews were beyond consolation. Our society treated us badly. How could the church treat our widows this way? They complained bitterly against the Hebraic Jews. It could have led to a division. What did the apostles do?

Look at verse 2. *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."* The Twelve called for a meeting. Taking off their aprons, they said, "It would not be right for us to neglect the ministry of the word of God in order to wait on tables." Some apostles had to miss several group Bible study meetings to take care of the widows. Others realized that they could not fully devote themselves to message preparations. They knew that food distribution was not a trivial matter. They must find an answer. The members expressed their opinions on how to solve the issue. Some said a distribution system with food vouchers, user satisfaction surveys, and financial audit was needed. Others suggested that Hellenistic Jews should take care of their own widows. The Twelve apostles had spoken boldly before the Sanhedrin despite many threats. But this internal church problem was different. God's children were hurting. Some were resentful. They needed God's wisdom to address the sensitive matter. They prayed earnestly for God's wisdom. Then they made a decision. They decided to give the first priority to the ministry of the word of God. Yes, waiting on tables was important. But it was not right for them to neglect the ministry of the word of God. Actually, this was what they had learned from Jesus. Jesus did many things during his earthly ministry. He healed the sick. He drove out demons. But his priority was preaching the word of God. Jesus taught the word of God whenever and wherever people gathered. He taught early in the morning, during the day, and late at night. He taught in synagogues, on mountains, and at the lakeshore. Even during the Passion Week, Jesus rose early in the morning and taught the word of God in the temple courts every day.

Once Jesus was praying very early in the morning in a solitary place. He had healed many sick people on the previous day. Because of that, a lot more people came, looking for him that morning. His disciples were excited when they saw that Jesus was becoming very popular. When they found him praying, they exclaimed: "Everyone is looking for you!" Jesus replied, "Let us go somewhere else—to the nearby villages—so I can preach there also. That is why I have come" (Mk 1:38).

Jesus did more than set an example in teaching the word of God. Jesus told his disciples to preach the gospel as of first importance. All four gospels end with the same command about preaching the gospel. In Matthew 28:19-20a Jesus said, "Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you." In Mark 16:15 Jesus said, "Go into all the world and preach the good news to all creation." In Luke 24:47 Jesus said, "...and repentance and forgiveness of sins will be preached in his name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem." In John 21, Jesus said to Peter, "Simon son of John, do you truly love me more than these? ... Feed my sheep." Why is preaching the word of God so important?

Why did Jesus give his priority to preaching the word of God? Why does he want us to focus on the ministry of the word of God? It is because the word of God is the word of life. Jesus said in John 5:24, “Very truly I tell you, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life and will not be judged but has crossed over from death to life.” Everything on earth is perishing, spoiling and fading away. But the word of God gives eternal life. St. Peter says: “All people are like grass, and all their glory is like the flowers of the field; the grass withers and the flowers fall, but the word of the Lord endures forever” (1Pe 1:24-25). All human glory is like flowers. They wither. Only the word of the Lord endures forever. Each of us has a limited time on earth, after which we must stand the judgment seat of God. Those who follow Christ through the word of God will be saved for eternal life in the kingdom of God. Those who reject Christ will go to hell for eternal condemnation. Jesus said, “What good is it for someone to gain the whole world, yet forfeit their soul?” (Mk 8:36) Nothing should be more important to a person than the salvation of his or her soul. Only Jesus can save man’s soul. Jesus saves those who accept the gospel message by faith. Therefore, teaching the word of God is the most important ministry of God’s people.

The apostles made a decision not to neglect this life-giving ministry in order to wait on tables. We must also not neglect the ministry of the word of God. We should help others doing things such as volunteering for soup kitchens or Habitat for Humanity projects. We should do these things out of compassion, as much as we can. But our priority must be sharing the word of God. Social and relief work may help people temporarily, but the word of God can give them eternal life. We should have the eyes to see with compassion those who do not know Jesus personally through his the word of truth and who are dying spiritually.

Then how did the apostles address the complaint? Look at verses 3-4. *“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.”* They decided to delegate the responsibility of food distribution to other servants. They asked the brothers and sisters to choose seven men for the task. What were the qualifications for the positions? Did the apostles post a job vacancy, saying, “Wanted, seven highly qualified individuals with two years of experience in food distribution. A four-year degree in logistics is required”? No. The qualifications were not based on human ability, but spiritual maturity. The men had to be full of the Spirit and wisdom. First of all, they were looking for spiritual men, “known” to be full of the Spirit. Not brash young men with keen business acumen, but mature servants with reputation to be spiritual. Next, those who were known for their wisdom. There is difference between knowledge and wisdom. Knowledge is about having a lot of information. Wisdom is the ability to discern what is true, right and lasting. You can have knowledge without wisdom. So how can we have wisdom? St. James says, “If any of you lacks wisdom, you should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to you” (Ja 1:5). Wisdom comes from God.

We learn that the apostles did not ignore the problems of the growing church. They dealt with them prayerfully. They delegated some of their responsibilities to other mature servants. In this way, the ministry of the word of God can be carried out most fruitfully. In a growing church, senior leaders must be responsible for everything that goes on. But this does not mean that they must do everything by themselves. They must delegate important tasks to spiritual coworkers. It is interesting that the number of men chosen was seven. This is large enough to be representative and small enough to be effective.

Look at verse 4 again. *“...and will give our attention to prayer and the ministry of the word.”* The apostles clarified their mission to pray and serve God’s word. They did not become social workers or businessmen. They made a definite, absolute commitment to spend their time in prayer and the ministry of the word. This decision became the foundation of the spiritual life of the church. Christian leaders must learn from the apostles this commitment to prayer and the ministry of the word. We must give our attention to prayer and the ministry of the word. Spiritual leaders must love the word of God more than anything else. They must enjoy spending time with God in prayer and Bible study. May God help us to devote ourselves to prayer and Bible study!

Look at verses 5-6. *This proposal pleased the whole group. They chose Stephen, a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit; also Philip, Procorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas, and Nicolas from Antioch, a convert to Judaism. They presented these men to the apostles, who prayed and laid their hands on them.* They all agreed with the proposal. They chose Stephen, Philip, Procorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas, and Nicolas. Stephen was a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit. He became the first martyr, as we will study next week. Philip became an evangelist to Samaria. He went down to a city in Samaria and proclaimed the Christ there (Ac 8:5). Tradition says that Parmenas preached the gospel in Asia Minor and was martyred in 98 A.D. at Philippi, under the persecution of Emperor Trajan. The apostles prayed and laid their hands on them as they appointed them to take care of the business side of the church.

It is interesting to note that all seven had the Greek background. The Hebraic Jews sacrificially made peace with Grecian brothers. The Grecian Jews accepted, repenting their complaints. All ill feelings melted away. Unity was restored. God blessed their decision to focus on prayer and the ministry of the word. Verse 7 says, *“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.”*

## II. STEPHEN, A MAN FULL OF GOD’S GRACE AND POWER (8-15)

Among the seven chosen, the first one named is Stephen. He is described as a “man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit” (5). Stephen was a great spiritual leader on his own right. But he was humble and obedient. When he was chosen to distribute food to widows, he could have felt sorry, thinking that he was overqualified for the job. But he did not. He accepted his mission with a glad and obedient heart. He was ready to do anything to serve the Lord. He learned the servanthship of the Lord. In Mark 10:45 Jesus

said, “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.” Stephen served each widow with a prayer that she might be used in God like the prophetess Anna (Lk 2:36). His good influence contributed greatly to the growth of the church.

Stephen’s most striking quality was that he was full of faith and the Holy Spirit (5). And God used him beyond his duty for the distribution of food. Look at verse 8. *“Now Stephen, a man full of God’s grace and power, did great wonders and miraculous signs among the people.”* When he worked humbly and faithfully in the soup kitchen, God did great wonders and miraculous signs through him. In fact, Stephen and Philip became the next generation of spiritual leaders. I know a UBF shepherd who was faithful in doing small things for the Lord. He loved Jesus and the work of God among young students. He cleaned the Bible center’s toilets for more than 10 years without complaint. Then God appointed him to be the leader of our ministry. It is a lesson for those who have ambition to be great before God. They should serve the Lord with small things faithfully.

Where there was work of God, there was work of Satan. Opposition arose against Stephen. The members of the Synagogue of the Freedmen stirred up people and Jewish leaders to persecute Stephen. They were a group of Jewish slaves who had been freed by Rome and had formed their own synagogue in Jerusalem. They brought Stephen before the Sanhedrin, falsely accusing him for speaking against Moses, God and the temple. They treated him as they had treated Jesus. However, Stephen was not upset. Nor was he afraid. Look at verse 15. *“All who were sitting in the Sanhedrin looked intently at Stephen, and they saw that his face was like the face of an angel.”* His face was like the face of an angel. He had peace in his heart in the time of trial. Everyone was surprised. How could he be so peaceful when his enemies tried to kill him? Stephen was full of the Holy Spirit. He knew he would be with the Lord if they killed him. He felt honored to be treated like the Lord had been.

In this passage, we learned the apostles made a decision to give their attention to prayer and the ministry of the word. They did not set aside prayer and the word of God in order to take care of the pressing matters in the church. Instead, they chose faithful men to serve the church business. We also have many things to take care of. But we should not neglect the word of God. Our focus always must be on the word of God. May God help us to be faithful witnesses of Jesus to the end!