**FOCUS ON PRAYER AND THE MINISTRY OF THE WORD**

June 26, 2016

Acts 6:1-15

Key Verse 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.”

The Jerusalem church was born on the Day of Pentecost, and was growing in number daily. By the time we get to chapter 6, the church is large, perhaps numbering in the tens of thousands. They assembled on the Lord’s Day for Communion, public worship, and the preaching of the gospel. They were also breaking bread from house to house. Somebody had to make the bread. Somebody had to plan the event. Somebody had to sort of break down these thousands of people so they could go from house to house. Remember that many people came on the Day of Pentecost from all over the world and they became Christians. Then they did not go back to their hometown. They stayed in Jerusalem because they wanted to be in Christian community. They have to be housed and fed and cared for. Somebody had to know the needs of all these people, and somebody had to process the meeting of those needs. So there was the need to collect money. We’ve already seen that some people were actually selling their property and taking the proceeds of their property to the apostles and the apostles were using that money to meet the needs of the people. It was exciting to be in that church. God was working in powerful ways. Daily there were reports of new people coming to faith in the risen Savior. Every day sheep brought more sheep to Bible study. Brothers brought their brothers and sisters to Bible study. They studied the word, repented of their sins and made a commitment to follow the Lord Jesus Christ. The church was not only growing in number, but also in spiritual depth. Its numbers were growing in faith and commitment. But whenever things are growing, problems will naturally arise. Especially, when the church grows, Satan is jealous. He wants to divide the believers and break them up and hinder the work of God. A complaint arose that threatened to split the church. The problem was with unity. The cause was the distribution of food to the widows. Some widows were being neglected and were missing meals. Today we will see how the apostles dealt with these problems that could have become very serious if they were ignored and not solved in a godly manner. The way they solved the problem showed that they held onto two basic spiritual qualities so that the work of God might be healthy and growing among them. These two were prayer and the ministry of the word of God. When they did this, the unity was restored and the work of God could grow in incredible numbers. May God help us to focus our attention on the word of God and prayer this summer.

I. The Choosing of the Seven (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 their daily distribution of food.” In the Jerusalem church, there were Hebraic Jews and Hellenistic Jews. The Hebraic Jews were Jews born in Judea and Galilee. They spoke Aramaic and followed Jewish culture. The Hellenistic Jews spoke Greek and followed Greek culture. The Jerusalem church was predominately Hebrew. The Hellenistic Jews were most likely the minority. So what developed here was an ethnic issue. Apparently, the Hebraic Jews were in charge of distribution of food to the needy on a daily basis. They never missed giving their widows their distribution of food. However, they seemed to miss giving the Greek widows their distribution of food. It was probably not intentional at first. But it happened again and again. The Hellenistic widows began to be hungry. In addition they began to get sorrowful feeling that they were being abandoned and were not important people. The minority Greek brothers complained that the Hebrew brothers were being selfish and proud and were concerned only with their kind. They began to point their fingers at them and call them names. Then the Hebraic Jews also began name calling back at them. They called them “Gentile dogs.” They even told some to go back home to Greece where they belong. They argued and fought and some even began to meet separately.

What was going on here? It was the problem of unity. It was the problem of how to work together as a church whose members are mixed and full of many different backgrounds and cultures and languages. Our church is similar. We have many different cultures, backgrounds and languages represented here. We are from Korea, China, Burma, and Zimbabwe. By nature, we meet with our own kind and whenever possible speak to each other in our own native tongues. Perhaps this is OK in the outside world. But as a church, we need to break down all barriers and work together as one body. We need to be sensitive towards each other so that unity in Christ may be our desire and in our actions and words. Dr. Samuel Lee used to rebuke Korean missionaries for speaking in Korean in churches while American shepherds were around. It was to make an environment for American shepherds to feel welcome. This is what Jesus prayed for. He prayed for his disciples to be one. Jesus prayed in John 17:11, “…Holy Father, protect them by the power of your name, the name you gave me, so that they may be one as we are one.”

How did the apostles deal with all the complaints and name calling and potential division in the church? 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.” We see here that they dealt with the problem immediately. They did not ignore the minority Greek believers. They considered them very important members of the body of Christ. And they did not ignore the widows’ food problem, either. This shows us that we should not ignore anyone’s complaints about the church or about its members but listen carefully to what they say and be sensitive about it. However, from their comment we can learn what the pressing problem was. It was the apostles’ realization that they had neglected the word of God.

The apostles themselves had tried to help with the distribution of food. They had dedicated themselves to solve this problem when it became large. They did not want to ignore the needs of the widows. However, after some time they became exhausted in taking care of the widows’ food problem. They went shopping to buy all the ingredients. They even tried to cook and prepare delicious meals to bring to the widows. All of this became an exhausting activity. It really began to hinder them in doing what God pointedly called them to do, namely, to teach and preach the word of God. How did the apostles practically propose to solve this food problem that was causing divisions? 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 we will give our attention to prayer and the ministry of the word.”

The disciples decided to delegate the responsibility of food distribution to others, instead of trying to monopolize the church and control it. They did so in order that they could focus on prayer and the word of God. They asked the brothers to choose seven men for the task. What were the qualifications in choosing these seven? It was not based on human ability nor was it based on those who achieved elite academic standing such as a Ph.D. or a theology degree. It was based on their spiritual maturity. The men had to be full of the Spirit, this means the Holy Spirit and wisdom. Anyone who is appointed to a task of stewardship in the Christian church or desires to do so, should be men and women full of the Holy Spirit and men and women who have God’s wisdom. This is the qualifications that the leaders of the first church expected and this is the example that we need to follow. The church of Jesus can grow when the responsibilities are delegated to spiritual man and woman. That is why we pray so much to raise leaders and Bible teachers.

Though a church may have many programs and activities, if it lacks leaders who pray and who minister the word, then it loses the real purpose of the church, namely, saving souls. Many churches today concentrate all their efforts in feeding the homeless and taking care of the needy. But they neglect preaching the gospel. If the apostles chose to take care of the widows, then Mother Teresa’s kind of heroic acts could have been in Acts. However, Acts is filled with the apostles’ preaching the gospel to all peoples. Also, without prayer and commitment to study God’s word and teach God’s word, we become very weak spiritually. Attention to prayer and the ministry of the word are two key elements for our Christian growth both personally and as a church. This decision by the apostles to give their attention to prayer and the ministry of the word became the foundation in which the first church was built upon. Through giving attention to prayer and the ministry of the word, God can give us new and fresh insights so that we can serve the will of God more effectively and fruitfully and use our God given talents to glorify God. Here the order is important; first, prayer and then, the ministry of the word: We have to speak to God about men before speaking to men about God.

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.” The names here suggest that those who were chosen were Greek believers. Now, if they were looking at sort of what is politically correct, they probably would have had maybe three Greek Jews and four Israeli Jews just to balance everything off, but they didn’t. This means that the minority Greek believers were chosen by the majority Hebrew believers to take this responsibility. We learn from this passage that the people who have the most at stake in a ministry are the people who should lead the ministry. It is the people who are pouring their life into it that should have all the authority and the empowerment to do that ministry the way they think it should be done. As a result, unity as a church could be restored. A potentially dangerous outcome was averted and the direction of the church remained clear to all: To give our full attention to 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, the exemplary steward in the church (8-15)

Among the chosen stewards, the first one named is Stephen. He was an exemplary man of faith. When he was chosen to distribute food to widows, he could have felt sorry about it, thinking that his calling was too insignificant and unnoticeable. But he did not show any signs of that. Instead, he accepted his mission with willingness, gladness and obedience. He was ready to do anything he was asked to do in order to serve the work of God and to help build up and encourage people in the church. The widows might have enjoyed his conversations and wished that they had had such good sons like him. He made sure that they each received enough food each day, especially the food that they could eat, since some might have been missing some teeth. He thanked God for them and reminded them of their value to God. He might have told them to devote themselves to prayer and in helping the younger women in the church.

But Stephen’s most striking quality was that he was full of faith and the Holy Spirit. Although he was chosen initially to oversee the distribution of food to widows, he became a powerful servant of God’s word, devoting his free time to study and prayer. God did great wonders and miraculous signs through him. Like Stephen, those who humbly perform menial tasks in God’s church with personal faith in God can be powerful spiritual leaders. In fact, Stephen and Philip, the second man mentioned in the seven in verse 5, became the next generation of spiritual leaders in God’s work.

When God was working through Stephen however, opposition arose. Evil men formed a conspiracy against him. They falsely charged him and brought him before the Sanhedrin. They treated him as they had treated Jesus. Stephen was not upset. His face was like the face of an angel. Everyone could see the godliness of his inner man in the time of trial. Stephen’s imitation of Christ was not only outward; he learned Jesus’ faith and love for God from his heart. This is the fruit of real Bible study.

May God help us to be sensitive to each other and make every effort to keep unity despite our cultural and language differences. May God especially help us to give our full attention to prayer and the word of God so that we may see the work of God spread through us.