

Deacon Ministry (*Servant Ministry*)

Acts 6:1-7 on November 22, 2020

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Before reading further in this manuscript, please read Acts 6:1-7.

My sermon title today is “Deacon Ministry.” However, the official title “Deacon” never actually shows up in Acts 6. What does show up in the NIV text, at the end of v. 2, is the phrase “wait on tables.” Other translations (*ESV/NKJV/NASB*) translate this phrase as “SERVE tables.” That’s because they are translating the Greek word, “διακονέω” from Acts 6:2. “διακονέω” is where we get our English word “Deacon.”¹ Deacon isn’t always a title, oftentimes it simply means to serve or servant. In other words, Deacon Ministry could be rightly translated *Servant Ministry*.² And that’s exactly what we find in Acts 6, a group of 7 men who were chosen by the church to SERVE the needs of the church. So, as we talk about “Deacon Ministry” this morning, we’ll be really be talking about “*Servant Ministry*.” We’ll be considering what “*Servant Ministry*” in the life of the early church, has to teach US about ministry in our OWN church today.

Please open your Bible to Acts 6:1. Acts 6:1 begins, “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.” So we learn here, that in the early church, one of their daily ministries was distributing food to the widows in the church, particularly those who didn’t have family who could help them.³ During this time/culture, there was no governmental social security system for the elderly. Therefore, once people got old enough that they could no longer make an income for themselves, the local church would help provide for their needs.⁴

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The obvious question that arises from verse 1 is WHY were some of the widows being overlooked? The clues in our text suggest two possibilities. As we consider these possibilities, we’ll learn some things from *Servant Ministry*. **Servant Ministry teaches us to...**

1. Approach our cultural/communication differences with grace and understanding.

Acts 6:1 points out that, “...the Hellenistic Jews among them complained against the Hebraic Jews” “At this stage in its development, the church was entirely Jewish in its composition. However, there were two groups of Jews within the fellowship: [Hellenistic or Greek Jews & Hebraic Jews.]⁶ To be clear, this distinction goes beyond just language and location, the distinction was CULTURAL. In other words, the Hellenistic Jews “not only spoke Greek but thought and behaved like Greeks.... [Likewise the Hebraic Jews] not only spoke Aramaic but were deeply immersed in Hebrew culture.”⁷ This doesn’t necessarily indicate a lack of love for one another. Nor does it mean that there had to be animosity or malice between them. It doesn’t even necessarily indicate an issue of racism.⁸ Even among a congregation of Spirit-filled people, there can be significant ministry challenges due to cultural/communication differences.

For example, many of us can tell funny stories of the frustration that often comes from cultures colliding. My wife Debbie and I once invited some friends over who’d been serving in France for a

¹ The noun form also shows up in Acts 6:1, “διακονία.” The *NASB95* translates Acts 6:1, “the daily serving of food.”

² See *NIV Study Bible*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI, 2011, p. 1835 footnote on Acts 6:6.

³ See 1 Timothy 5:3-16.

⁴ “Help was needed by widows who had no one to care for them and so [they] became the church’s responsibility.” *NIV Study Bible*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI, 2011, p. 1835 footnote on Acts 6:1.

⁵ **Now, let’s be clear there**, it is not just our responsibility to care for one another in the church, it’s also our joy and privilege. See 1 Timothy 5:3-16. James 1:27 reminds us that looking after widows in their distress is part of having a pure and faultless faith. **Let’s also note, right from the get-go**, that “The early church was concerned not only about a spiritual ministry... but also about a material ministry.” (*NIV Study Bible*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI, 2011, p. 1835 footnote on Acts 6:2.) And Acts 6:3 clarifies that this *Servant Ministry* of “waiting on tables” called for people who were “full of the Spirit.”

⁶ (1) Hellenistic Jews. Those born in lands other than the Holy Land who spoke the Greek language and were more Grecian than Hebraic in their attitudes and outlook...(2) Hebraic Jews. Those who spoke Palestinian Aramaic and/or Hebrew and preserved Jewish culture and customs.” *NIV Study Bible*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI, 2011, pp. 1834-1835 footnote on Acts 6:1.

⁷ John R. W. Stott, *The Message of Acts*, IVP, Downers Grove, IL, 1990, p. 120.

⁸ **Now, it’s certainly POSSIBLE that there was a problem with outright favoritism or perhaps even a mean-spirited racism.** But we don’t see any sign of sin being confronted in the text; and the fact is, language/culture barriers have been a struggle for mankind ever since the tower of Babel. See Genesis 11:1-9.

long time.⁹ These people were born and raised in America, but they'd been living among the French for a LONG time. When we invited them over for dinner, we were expecting them to be relatively on time for supper. However, in French culture, apparently, it is RUDE to be on time. In fact, if you aren't AT LEAST 15 minutes LATE, you risk INSULTING your host and putting them under undue pressure. This TOTALLY blew our minds! BUT, once we understood the cultural differences, we all laughed together and then enjoyed a nice, long, COLD supper.

Because of experiences like these, we can't help but wonder if there may have been some of these kinds of dynamics in the early church. In other words, perhaps the widows were being overlooked in the daily distribution of food because they were simply showing up late. Or, perhaps it was some other kind of cultural/communication barrier.¹⁰ In order for the early church to overcome these cultural/communication differences, it responds in a very gracious and understanding way. Instead of insisting that these Hellenistic Jewish widows "get with the program," they kindly chose 7 men, all with Greek names, to oversee this ministry.¹¹ In other words, the Hellenistic Jewish widows would now have clear representation, from people who understood the issues of Greek culture and language.¹² Brother or Sister in Christ, for the sake of effective gospel ministry, let's learn to approach our OWN cultural/communication differences with grace and understanding.¹³ Servant Ministry also teaches us to...

2. Approach our organizational/administrative challenges by developing effective ministry infrastructure.

Acts 6:1 points out, "In those days when the number of disciples was increasing..." This is how Luke, the author, sets up the context. The problem of these widows being overlooked, may very well have been caused, by one of the VERY BEST problems a church can ever have: an increasing number of new disciples.¹⁴ In other words, at this stage in the development of the early church, it appears that the speed of the church's growth, may have been outpacing its organizational structures.¹⁵ Many of you will remember that back in Acts 4, from time to time people would sell a piece of property and then bring "the money from the sales and put it at the APOSTLES' feet, and then it was distributed to anyone who had need." So, clearly the Apostles cared about ministering to people's physical needs. Even so, as the church was exploding with new believers, certain people were starting to fall through the cracks. Some of the widows were being overlooked. It became clear that there was now a PRESSING need to develop an effective and sustainable infrastructure.¹⁶ Like choosing a team of 7 people to take this off the Apostles' plate.

In other words, things that worked in a church of 120... (remember the good old days, back in Acts 1, when it was a nice comfortable group of just 120 people?) ...things that worked back then, may not work in a church of over 5k. Things just can't happen quite as organically. Even among a congregation of Spirit-filled people, the larger a group gets, the more challenging that ministry organization and effectiveness can become. This is one of the reasons that we have developed Life Groups in our church. And, it's a good reason to be part of a Life Group. Life Groups help us to serve one another more effectively, in a more 1-to-1, meaningful way. While infrastructure may not SOUND very spiritual, Acts 6 shows us that it can be VERY spiritual and pleasing to God.

⁹ I am referring here to the Gibbons and their daughter who is now a Shindelar.

¹⁰ Communication/Culture are significant forces in this world. We dare not underestimate the challenges they pose to the advancement of the gospel.

¹¹ They chose Stephen, a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit, who we will learn more about in Acts 6-7. They chose Philip, who we will learn more about in Acts 8. They chose Procorus = "PROCK uh russ" and Nicanor = "nigh KAY nor" and Timon = "TIE mon" and Parnenas = "PAR mi nus" and Nicolas from Antioch, a convert to Judaism (i.e. not a Jew, but a Gentile proselyte who converted.) Pronunciation helps thanks to Severance, W. M., & Eddinger, T. (1997). In *That's easy for you to say: your quick guide to pronouncing Bible names* (p. 133). Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman Publishers.

¹² There were now people in leadership who communicated in the Greek language, who could advocate clearly for the needs of these widows. By the way, Acts 6 gives all of us this friendly reminder: if you see a problem in the church and you think it needs to be fixed, then you better be ready to step up and fix it!

¹³ For Bemidji, in particular, our Anglo and Native American dynamics come to mind.

¹⁴ "It is not suggested that the oversight was deliberate... more probably the cause was poor administration or supervision." John R. W. Stott, *The Message of Acts*, IVP, Downers Grove, IL, 1990, p. 120.

¹⁵ They may very well have run into the practical realities of "The tyranny of the urgent." "In the 1960s, Charles Hummel published a little booklet called *Tyranny of the Urgent*, and it quickly became a business classic. In it, Hummel argues that there is a regular tension between things that are urgent and things that are important—and far too often, the urgent wins." <https://theartofsimple.net/fighting-the-tyranny-of-the-urgent-at-home/>

¹⁶ "As churches grow, two...things always happen, you have an increase in diversity and an increase in complexity." Kevin DeYoung online sermon, Service with Strategy, www.avisualguide.com

Now, one easy solution to the organizational problem caused by numerical growth, is to simply NOT grow! Just keep the church small, keep it simple. If we don't do any outreach, if we don't invite anyone else in, then we can make sure that we'll never have a problem with too many people coming to the church. We won't have people crowding out our ministry spaces and using up all of our resources and our pastors' time! I hope this sounds RIDICULOUS to you. I trust we all agree that this way of thinking, this kind of solution... is a TERRIBLE solution! Brother or Sister in Christ, for the sake of effective gospel ministry, let's learn to approach our organizational/administrative challenges by developing effective ministry infrastructures. Ministry structures like Life Groups, Bible studies, and other small groups. Anyone who is currently participating in a Life Group or some other kind of small group, has a MUCH LOWER likelihood of being overlooked.¹⁷

Now to their credit, the Apostles didn't ignore this important ministry need of the widows in their church. Nor did they belittle it as something unimportant. Rather, they took action and addressed it in a meaningful way, with a sustainable plan and strategy.¹⁸ Servant Ministry also teaches us to...

3. Pay attention to our strategic ministry priorities.

In Acts 6:2-4, the Apostles gathered the church 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... 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." Kevin DeYoung says it this way, "sometimes the most important thing that you can do is deciding that you're not going to do something."¹⁹ John Stott makes this helpful observation: "There is no hint whatever that the apostles regarded social work as inferior to pastoral work, or beneath their dignity. It was entirely a question of calling."²⁰ What seems apparent here, is that the continuing numerical growth of the early church, was outpacing the apostles' ability to continue leading this important part of the church's gospel ministry. There is a very real danger of becoming distracted by important things, IF those important things cause us to neglect our God-given responsibilities.²¹

Again, John Stott is helpful here: "the work of the Twelve and the work of the Seven are [BOTH] called *διακονία* (1, 4), 'ministry' or 'service'.... Neither ministry is superior to the other... both are Christian ministries... ways of serving God and his people. Both require spiritual people, 'full of the Spirit,' to exercise them.... The only difference between them lies in the form the ministry takes, requiring different gifts and different callings."^{22 23 24} To put it another way, being filled with the Holy Spirit, not only empowers us to boldly proclaim the gospel, but it also empowers us for Servant Ministry to those within our church body.

Acts 6:6 says, "They presented these men to the apostles, who prayed and laid their hands on them." So, the Apostles completed the handoff, by officially sanctioning these leaders and commissioning them for their new ministry role.²⁵

Acts 6:7 concludes, "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." Let's notice what verse 7 does NOT record: Luke doesn't conclude with a note of rejoicing that these widows were now being

¹⁷ "**Acts 6:2** poses a special problem: care for, take care of with dative of thing *τραπέζαις* look after tables can be understood of serving food at tables... but it is improbable that some widows would be deprived of food at a communal meal. The term *διακονία* verse 1 **more probably refers to administrative responsibility.**" Arndt, W., Danker, F. W., Bauer, W., & Gingrich, F. W. (2000). *A Greek-English lexicon of the New Testament and other early Christian literature* (3rd ed., p. 230). Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

¹⁸ Consider Exodus 18:13-26.

¹⁹ Kevin DeYoung online sermon, Service with Strategy, www.avisualguide.com

²⁰ John R. W. Stott, *The Message of Acts*, IVP, Downers Grove, IL, 1990, p. 121.

²¹ Consider the example of Martha and Mary in Luke 10:38-42. See discussion by John R. W. Stott, *The Message of Acts*, IVP, Downers Grove, IL, 1990, p. 120.

²² John R. W. Stott, *The Message of Acts*, IVP, Downers Grove, IL, 1990, p. 122.

²³ **This is NOT just about delegating, it's about each part of the body doing its own work so that the gospel can advance. Ephesians 4:16** urges us on, "From [Christ] the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work." Know what role you play in advancing the gospel and accomplishing God's purposes in this world. **Romans 12:6-8**, "We have different gifts, according to the grace given to each of us. If your gift is prophesying, then prophesy in accordance with your faith; if it is servicing, then serve; if it is teaching, then teach; if it is to encourage, then give encouragement; if it is giving, then give generously; if it is to lead, do it diligently; if it is to show mercy, do it cheerfully."

²⁴ There's a time/place for Christ-followers to be willing to do whatever's needed. But there's also a time/place for specialization, for focus, and for single-mindedness.

²⁵ See Acts 13:2-3.

provided for. Rather, Luke's primary focus was on something else, something broader. Not ONLY did their strategic ministry priorities meet the real need of providing for these widows, but it ALSO, contributed to the successful spread of the gospel. Verse 7 forms a bookend with verse 1: they both point out that the number of disciples continued increasing, but NOW, in verse 7, Luke includes the word "RAPIDLY."²⁶ How interesting, that the concluding thoughts in verse 7 don't even MENTION the distribution of food, but rather the distribution of the gospel!²⁷

All of this talk about "Strategic Ministry Priorities," begs the question: "What particular ministry area has God called each one of us to focus on?" Certainly, this is a matter for personal reflection and prayer. But let me close by urging each one of us to consider

2 Servant Ministry opportunities:

1) Visit www.efcbemidji.org/serve and fill out a volunteer form.

This is our church's website. Pastor Eric has put together a simple form that you can fill out and find ways to serve. If you go there today, you'll see that one of our church's MOST URGENT needs right now is for more technology help. We need people to help run sound, to run the projection computer, and to run our livestream cameras. All of these ministries offer training. This page on our website is updated regularly. So, if none of the current options interest you, check back later for updates and additions. There is also an option that simply says, "Not sure where to serve?" You can fill out that form and we'll help you find a ministry that fits your gifting and calling. Also, if you're a ministry leader, let us know if your ministry area needs volunteers. We'll create a customized form so that people can sign up and get connected.

2) Join our newly forming Servant Team by emailing: Efree@PaulBunyan.net

Another area where our local church is struggling right now, is in the area of meeting the physical needs of our older adults. Recently, our Elders have been discussing the need to form a new ministry, that we're calling our Servant Team. Not an official "Deacon Board" perse, but rather a group of men/women who could help people in our church family with their tangible, physical needs. Not so much \$ needs as needs like shoveling snow, picking up groceries, or building a wheelchair ramp. Needs like cleaning someone's house, setting up Christmas lights, or helping someone move. These kinds of needs are far more than our Visitation Caregiver, Kay Sue, or the pastors can do by themselves. So E-Free Bemidji, we need some people with this kind of gifting/calling to JOIN our Servant Team. This ministry isn't even off the ground yet. In fact, we are currently looking for someone to officially LEAD this ministry team. We hope to officially launch it, beginning in January of 2021. If you're interested, please email the church at Efree@PaulBunyan.net

²⁶ σφόδρα = "a very high point on a scale of extent, very (much), extremely, greatly." Arndt, W., Danker, F. W., Bauer, W., & Gingrich, F. W. (2000). *A Greek-English lexicon of the New Testament and other early Christian literature* (3rd ed., p. 980). Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

²⁷ And, how intriguing that, rather than the widows, Luke mentions "priests." **Just think about this for a minute.** Even though these Jewish priests were, "involved by lineage and life service in the priestly observances of the old covenant, they accepted the preaching of the apostles, which proclaimed a sacrifice that made the old sacrifices unnecessary." (*NIV Study Bible*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI, 2011, p. 1835 footnote on Acts 6:7.) In other words, these men had a vested interest in keeping the priestly sacrificial system going. They stood to lose their very livelihoods. But they were SO convinced by the message about Jesus' and His sacrifice on the cross, that they placed their faith in His onetime, once for all, atonement for sin. See Hebrews 10:11-14 and Psalm 40:6-8. Back in Acts 4, I remember thinking to myself, if the evidence was so undeniable (Acts 4:16b), why didn't at least a few of the religious leaders decide to put their faith in Jesus? Sure, 2,000 more households were added to the Early Church in Acts 4:4. But what about the religious leaders, why weren't any of them convinced? Acts 6:7 is one of the coolest verses in Acts! A large number of priests became obedient to the faith; praise the LORD!