

Acts 6:1-7 Serving is the key to greatness

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Last week I spoke about how we should move with God when he moves and as we do this each step of the way with him, we will accomplish great things with him.

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And we saw that when God moves that those who attempt to stop it could be found to be opposing God and that any genuine move of God will have a lasting effect on those around them.

I also mentioned that too often we can fall into the trap of wanting to do something great **FOR** God instead of **WITH** God and we can come unstuck.

Why?

Because in our attempts to do something great for him we can often find ourselves in the place of showing God what we have done and in turn we end up actually doing it for ourselves and our own glorification rather than for him and his glory.

Whereas when we move with him each step of the way, working together with him and as a team of believers, seeking his guidance and resources then we know without a shadow of a doubt that it was God who led us and empowered us in the work that has been accomplished.

This morning I want us to follow up on from that and look at the heart attitude toward our relationship with God and each other that will determine our long lasting effectiveness in God's kingdom.

Let's turn to Matthew chapter 20.

Matthew 20:25-28

25 But Jesus called them to him and said, "You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones exercise authority over them.

26 It shall not be so among you. But whoever would be great among you must be your servant,

27 and whoever would be first among you must be your slave,

28 even as the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many."

What is Jesus saying in this passage?

He is showing us how the kingdom of the world operates in regard to greatness and how this is the complete opposite way the kingdom of God operate.

Jesus is in effect saying that **serving is the key to greatness** in God's kingdom and it is this aspect of our relationship to God and each other that we need to continually work out in our lives.

Now let's pick up from where we left off last week in Acts and turn to chapter 6.

Acts 6:1-7

1 Now in these days when the disciples were increasing in number, a complaint by the Hellenists arose against the Hebrews because their widows were being neglected in the daily distribution.

The disciples were continuing to increase in number in Jerusalem in spite of sin among the believers like Ananias & Sapphira, persecution by the Jewish authorities and disputes between the Greek speaking Jews and their Hebrew brothers and sisters.

In this instance the food and daily necessities that were brought to the apostles and were distributed to those who had need was being overlooked in regard to the Hellenist widows.

2 And the twelve summoned the full number of the disciples and said, "It is not right that we should give up preaching the word of God to serve tables.

There could have been between 5,000 to 10,000 believers at this time and the apostles needed to do something quickly to resolve this issue.

When looking at this verse it is easy to think that somehow preaching the word was seen as superior to serving at tables. But we will see in the next two verses that this is not really the case at all.

3 Therefore, brothers, pick out from among you seven men of good repute, full of the Spirit and of wisdom, whom we will appoint to this duty.

4 But we will devote ourselves to prayer and to the ministry (or service) of the word."

If serving at the tables was menial, then why would the apostles want men of good repute, full of the spirit and of wisdom?

It is because this type of work is needed to ensure that all of God's people are being adequately cared for. These men were called to serve in this way.

They needed to not only be able to distribute the food but no doubt to answer questions and complaints that would have had the possibility of sending a great division among the believers.

A few disgruntled people could have started an avalanche that may have had the potential to undermine the spreading of the gospel.

They needed to be upright men of good repute, full of the spirit as they were caring for God's spirit filled people and they needed to have wisdom so that they could ensure that peace was maintained. This was important work they were called to do.

Now what about the apostles? Were they going to sit in their nicely appointed offices why the seven sweated it out serving people?

No, we see that they were to devote themselves to prayer and the ministry of the word. They were going to sweat it out in a different form of serving.

All these people were here together as a direct result of them preaching Jesus and they had a special mandate from Jesus to preach his word from Jerusalem, throughout all of Judea, Samaria and to the end of the earth. To neglect this would mean directly neglecting the mandate given to them by Jesus.

Acts 1:8

But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth."

What we see from these verses is that **BOTH** things needed to be done to effectively spread the good news of God's kingdom and ensure that none should miss out.

5 And what they said pleased the whole gathering, and they chose Stephen, a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit, and Philip, and Prochorus, and Nicanor, and Timon, and Parmenas, and Nicolaus, a proselyte of Antioch.

6 These they set before the apostles, and they prayed and laid their hands on them.

Of the men chosen we see that both Stephen and Philip had powerful ministries that helped continue to spread the gospel - although Stephen's ministry only lasted a short time before he was killed for his beliefs as we will see next time.

This work was important enough for the apostles to lay their hands on them pray for them and essentially commission them for the work. This was no menial task.

7 And the word of God continued to increase, and the number of the disciples multiplied greatly in Jerusalem, and a great many of the priests became obedient to the faith.

This last verse shows that as a result not only did the number of disciples MULTIPLY, but also the word of God continued to increase.

If this action was not taken by the apostles, I believe it would have diluted the work they needed to do and would have sidetracked their mission - meaning that many would not have had a chance to hear the gospel.

The strategy to instigate the seven to help look after the people definitely paid off. The gospel was not only heard but it was also seen in how people were being cared for.

So, what does that mean for us and how do we relate that to what Jesus meant when he said to be truly great we must become servants.

Well, first of all it would be easy to look at this passage and make a distinction between those who are especially called to serve and the rest of us, to make a distinction between the clergy and the laity, the ministers and those being ministered to.

But what Jesus meant is that there is to be **NO** distinction. As believers we must **ALL** continue to become servants and look for opportunities to serve as he himself came not to be served but to serve.

No job of serving should be too small for us.

If this was the case then these men full of the spirit and of wisdom would have balked at this task and said to the apostles - "no guys we have much more important work to do than serve at tables, please don't choose us".

No they didn't complain or grumble they just got on with the job.

I firmly believe that the apostles would have jumped in given half a chance but realised quite clearly that they were to serve in a different way.

Now I want to discuss this passage in light of these men being the first deacons.

Commentators appear to be divided over whether these men were the first deacons in the church.

Some say yes they were and some say no they weren't and that this was a one off task

that needed to be taken care of.

We know from the letters to the churches that there were pastors and deacons that together provided the spiritual leadership and oversight of the churches but what about this passage.

My personal opinion is that given that Acts is really the genesis or beginnings of the early church, what we see here is the very beginnings of the relationship that was to eventually take place within each local church - that of pastors and deacons working together so that God's people are cared for and the gospel is spread.

From the New Testament we see that in the church all of us who have been saved by Jesus are called saints - literally holy ones set apart for God.

We are also called by Jesus to serve and minister to him and one another.

From here some will be called to serve at a more sacrificial level and become deacons, while others will be called to become pastors and still others will be called to become teachers, evangelists, prophets and apostles.

All of these functions are in essence about serving and not being served. If God promotes you to one of these functions then he is in effect promoting you to greater levels of sacrifice and service.

If we were to take a worldly view of all this - we would see it as making our way up the corporate ladder where we get the chance to be served more and more by those under us.

This is not the intent, spirit or viewpoint of promotion within God's kingdom. In fact it is the complete opposite.

Also I want to say to each of us as way of admonition (to call attention to by way of warning) that the worldly view of serving is vastly different to the kingdom view of serving.

The worldly view will ALWAYS have attached to the service, the question: "What will I get out of this"? Or "What's in it for me"?

It's the you scratch my back and I'll scratch yours mentality and it's something that we need to be very careful to avoid as believers, particularly within the church as it will set us up for either seeking glory for ourselves or disappointment when we are not repaid in kind or not appreciated for ALL the work we have been doing.

Jesus put it this way.

Matthew 6:1-6

1 “Beware of practicing your righteousness before other people in order to be seen by them, for then you will have no reward from your Father who is in heaven.

2 “Thus, when you give to the needy, sound no trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, that they may be praised by others. Truly, I say to you, they have received their reward.

3 But when you give to the needy, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing,

4 so that your giving may be in secret. And your Father who sees in secret will reward you.

5 “And when you pray, you must not be like the hypocrites. For they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, that they may be seen by others. Truly, I say to you, they have received their reward.

6 But when you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret. And your Father who sees in secret will reward you.

We are ALL called to serve and we can do this in many ways. It all starts with our heart attitude. If we get that right, the rest will follow.

Something as simple as can I get you a coffee is one of the easiest ways of serving someone.

It can be other things like praying for people, calling them and letting them know you have been thinking of them. There are numerous ways that we can serve; we just need to let Jesus who lives in us also serve through us without seeking the reward or the praise of man.

Over the coming years some of you will be called to help serve this church as deacons and we will be bringing some more deacons on board over the coming month.

I want to encourage you all to keep on serving as you have and to look for new and innovative ways to serve. We serve a creative God who wants us to also be creative.

But also to not be afraid if I approach you at some time in the future and ask you to consider be promoted to greater levels of service and sacrifice by being a deacon. You are also free to approach me and we can discuss freely what will be required. Don't see this as self promotion. If your heart is right - your service will be right.

My heart is to not burn anyone out which can sometimes happen, but to develop a broad base of servants within this church who work alongside me to help us to care for all the people God will send us.

Let's pray