

DEVOTED TO PRAYER AND THE MINISTRY OF THE WORD

Acts 6:1–7

Key Verse: 6:4

“But we will devote ourselves to prayer and to the ministry of the word.”

What are your priorities? Often, we don't have any. Or we forget them. We just live in the moment, based on the immediate needs around us. Or we focus on what we like to do and leave the rest for others to deal with. That's probably not pleasing to God. Setting and living with priorities is hard, but if we consider this matter prayerfully, it can set us free from struggling hectically and getting exhausted. But what should our priorities be?

Before we get into this, let's review our study thus far. The Book of Acts has given us some powerful lessons. First, we all, without exception, need the Holy Spirit (1:1–11). We all need to pray together with one accord (1:12–26). God wants to fill us all with visions and dreams for his work (2:1–21). For that to happen, we all need to repent and make Jesus both Lord and Christ of our lives (2:22–41). We all need to be together, devoted to digesting the gospel teachings, to real fellowship, and to prayers (2:42–47). As Jesus' witnesses, we all need confidence in the power of his name (3:1–10). We all need to be urging people to repent, turn back, and put their faith in Jesus (3:11–26). We all need to hold onto Jesus as our source of salvation (4:1–22). And, as we face threats, we all need to pray for “all boldness” in proclaiming Jesus (4:23–31). God wants us all to treat our Christian community with holy reverence, as a place where his Spirit dwells (5:1–16). And God wants us all to live fearlessly, with the spirit of martyrdom, obeying Jesus, our Leader and Savior (5:17–42). All these things display the power of the Holy Spirit in us and among us.

Now, in 6:1–7 we see a transition. In this new section in Acts, we'll see how the gospel of Jesus spreads from Jerusalem to Judea, Samaria, and beyond. But before this, the Jerusalem church experiences an internal problem that threatens to derail its direction and growth. The apostles handle this problem wisely and turn it into an opportunity for God to continue his mighty work. The key lesson is setting the right priorities. How can we know what priorities God

wants? How can we manage our lives so that we can actually devote ourselves to these priorities? May God speak to us through his living word today.

Look at verse 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.” Based on the increasing numbers, clearly God wants people in his church to grow as disciples of Jesus. But practical challenges can so easily become a hindrance. In verse 1 we learn several things about this church. First, there were two major groups: the Hellenists and the Hebrews. Hellenists were Jews who spoke Greek and had adopted Greek culture, because they’d lived in various places around the Roman Empire and had now emigrated to Jerusalem. Hebrews spoke Aramaic and lived with a Jewish mentality and lifestyle. Both groups are here in this church, have accepted Jesus, and are growing as his disciples. And until now, they’ve gotten along. But a sensitive issue comes up that might divide them.

It’s the daily distribution of food for poor widows. This was an important church ministry. We’ve seen how some wealthy believers donated for this cause, and how the apostles were responsible for overseeing it (4:34–35). But because of the rapid growth of the church, the management of this duty has been stretched thin. In this situation, people’s natural tendencies have surfaced. It’s natural for us to focus on our own kind of people, those we can speak with and relate to culturally. But a diverse church demands us to transcend our own culture and generation, and care for everyone.

In this case, the Hellenist widows, probably in the minority, are being neglected. Most likely it’s not intentional. But it’s a real problem because they’re not getting enough food on a daily basis. On the other hand, the Hebrew widows seem well-fed. Of course, complaining is not good. But this issue cannot be ignored. Hungry and neglected widows are a serious matter. Somebody has to bring it up. It eventually reaches the ears of the apostles. What do they do?

Read verse 2. “And the twelve summoned the full number of disciples and said, ‘It is not right that we should give up preaching the word of God to serve tables.’” “The full number” literally means “the multitude.” It’s a huge, church-wide meeting. And what are the apostles trying to say at this meeting? Are they saying the work of serving the widows is beneath them? No. They’re admitting the

needs of this large, diverse church are more than they can handle. They realize they have to prioritize what God has called them to do. As the original followers of Jesus, God surely wants them to focus on sharing what they personally learned from Jesus. They're uniquely prepared to do that. But to keep that focus, they practically need more helpers for all the work. How do they find them?

Read verses 3–4. “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. But we will devote ourselves to prayer and to the ministry of the word.” They ask all these disciples to pick seven men, probably because seven was considered God’s perfect number. What’s even more important is the kind of men they’re looking for. They only want men “of good repute.” It means men whom *others* have been witnessing and watching. They’re looking for men who don’t just talk well, but whose practical lives and inner character have been exemplary. Such men wouldn’t have only one or two supporters; the whole community would be able to recommend them. In a word, most people should trust them as Christ-centered men.

The specific qualification is: “full of the Spirit and of wisdom.” It’s just distributing food daily, so why do they need these qualities? Clearly, through this task the apostles want to raise more spiritual leaders. But candidates need to be willing to start with a humble task. As our Lord Jesus said, “One who is faithful in a very little is also faithful in much, and one who is dishonest in very little is also dishonest in much. If then you have not been faithful in the unrighteous wealth, who will entrust to you the true riches?” (Luke 16:10–11). Here, “faithful” means “trustworthy.” As Proverbs 20:6b says: “...but a faithful man who can find?” It’s the Holy Spirit who gives a man the wisdom to be faithful in small things. Later, Paul wrote: “Moreover, it is required of stewards that they be found faithful” (1 Cor.4:2). And at the end of his life Paul wrote: “...and what you have heard from me in the presence of many witnesses entrust to faithful men, who will be able to teach others also” (2 Tim.2:2). In choosing future leaders, the Bible says to “entrust to faithful men.” Why? It’s because God is faithful, and the community of his people, where God’s Spirit dwells, requires faithful men as stewards. Also, the apostles say they’ll “appoint” them (3). The congregation picks faithful, Spirit-filled men to recommend, then the apostles review and appoint them, putting them in charge of the work. This solution builds unity between the congregation and the apostles. Also, in appointing these men, the apostles don’t

micromanage, but actually entrust the work to them. In raising leaders, this is God's wisdom.

What happens? Read verse 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." All these names are Greek, so it's likely they're all from among the Hellenist Christians. This is a major shift for the Jerusalem church. They select men closest to the problem of the neglected Hellenist widows. And God's hand is in it. God is leading his church to raise men familiar with the broader culture outside of Hebraism. Why? The Risen Jesus told his apostles to be his witnesses "to the end of the earth" (1:8b). But this could never happen if the gospel stayed among a people isolated within their own culture.

Some names among the Seven stand out. First is Stephen, who grows remarkably, and because of his clear gospel message, becomes the first martyr. Next is Philip, who becomes a fruitful evangelist in all Samaria. For these two men, the daily distribution of food for widows was just the beginning. Also notable is the last name on the list, Nicolaus. It says he's a "proselyte of Antioch." Later in Acts, Antioch becomes a new model of a diverse, missionary church, and it replaces Jerusalem as the focal point for the world mission task. Nicolaus being a proselyte means he's a Gentile who converted to Judaism first, and was circumcised, and now he's accepted Jesus. God raises Nicolaus as the first ethnically Gentile leader for his church.

Let's think more about the apostles' words. Read verse 4 again. "But we will devote ourselves to prayer and to the ministry of the word." This is what resolves both the conflict and the need of the church. Its leaders propose to focus on two things: prayer and the ministry of the word. They choose not to get distracted by other problems or demands. What do they mean by "prayer" and "the ministry of the word"? And why are they so important?

First, prayer is the means through which God works among his people. As we've seen in Acts, prayer was the glue that held the original followers of Jesus together and prepared them to receive the Holy Spirit (1:14). Prayer gave them the wisdom and guidance to fill the void of Judas Iscariot (1:24). Through prayer, they became one. Through prayer, they mentored thousands of new believers

who suddenly joined them (2:42). Prayer was their daily practice before trying to do ministry (3:1). Through prayer, they could bring people God's healing (3:7). Through prayer, they could face threats and persecution with boldness (4:29). As we're going to see in Acts, through prayer, God leads his servants to the right people to minister to (11:5–14). Through prayer, God rescues his servants from danger (12:5–11). Through prayer, a church can even send out missionaries (13:1–3). Through prayer, missionaries can discern God's leading where to go (16:6–10,13–14). Through prayer, God's servants can be filled with songs of joy while suffering and give a powerful testimony (16:25–32). Prayer invites God's presence into our lives, fills us with the Holy Spirit and wisdom, and empowers us to do his will. Prayer, whether private or public, should always come first.

Second, combined with prayer, only the ministry of the word builds people up in Christ. Facing a practical problem in the community, the apostles were convinced that they had to prioritize “the word.”¹ What is “the word”? It's not just Bible study generally. In these first chapters of Acts we see “the ministry of the word” in Peter's ministry. He proclaimed the meaning of Jesus' death and resurrection based on specific Old Testament prophecies.² So “the ministry of the word” is explaining to people how the Bible points us to Jesus. “The word” is a shorthand way to refer to the gospel of Jesus (15:7). It's called “the word of the Lord”³ and “the word of his grace” (14:3; 20:32). It's also called “all the words of this Life” (5:20). Throughout Acts, at key moments we're told how the word of God “increased,” “multiplied,” “was spreading,” and would “prevail mightily” (6:7; 12:24; 13:49; 19:20). It means this word about Jesus has power to penetrate sinful hearts, transform lives, and overcome all kinds of spiritual darkness. Later, Apostle Paul testifies: “the word of his grace...is able to build you up and to give you the inheritance among all those who are sanctified” (20:32). In his last letter he writes to Timothy: “...and how from childhood you have been acquainted with the sacred writings, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work” (2 Tim.3:15–17). It's “the word” itself that makes anyone complete and equipped. It's amazing!

¹ In Greek, this expression “the word” is repeated in today's passage four times (2,4,5,7).

² 2:16–21,25–28,34–35; 3:20–26; 4:11.

³ 8:25; 11:16; 13:44,48–49; 15:35–36; 16:32; 19:10,20; 20:35.

But it doesn't happen automatically. Here, the apostles resolve that they will "devote" themselves to prayer and to the ministry of the word. "Devote" means to be steadfastly attentive and give unremitting care to it.⁴ So, God's servants entrusted to bring people the word need to be supported, so they can have time to be "occupied" with the word, as Paul was in Corinth (18:5). Here, to be "occupied" with it means to be "constrained, even distressed and afflicted in one's soul."⁵ Why? It's an intense struggle in prayer to hear God's word ahead of my own ideas and common sense and really repent and digest it before sharing it. As we really focus our minds and hearts on prayer and the ministry of the word, God enlightens and empowers us through his Spirit to do gospel work.

The apostles' priority reminds us of our Lord Jesus' words, "Instead, seek his kingdom, and these things will be added to you" (Luke 12:31). To practically prioritize the ministry of the word is an act of faith. We all have various responsibilities: jobs, family, studies, household chores, etc. Even those in full-time ministry don't have the luxury to ignore all personal and administrative duties and focus only on prayer and Bible study. But if, by faith, we set aside time each day, as our first priority, for meditating on God's word and praying for ourselves and others, God strengthens and inspires us. Setting aside quality time for prayer and God's word each day, faithfully, may seem small, but in the long run it really makes a difference. In the Jerusalem church, it's through such devotion to prayer and the word that a new generation of leaders like Stephen and Philip are raised. The needy Hellenistic widows are well cared for, division is avoided, and God's work flourishes and reaches even more unlikely people (7).

This passage shows us that we all need to resist being pulled away by life's problems, needs and demands, from what God calls us to do. Read verse 4 again. May God grant each of us faith to prioritize devotion to prayer and the ministry of the word, so that we can truly grow as one in Jesus, and so that God can raise spiritual leaders for the world through us.

⁴ *Strong's Exhaustive Bible Concordance.*

⁵ *Ibid.*