



+ **YOU**

Summer 2023
Mentoring: Investing in Others

Sermon Title: The Greatest Among You Shall Be Your Servant

To be used with Session 1: Jethro and Moses

Scripture: Acts 6:1-7

Connection with Bible Study: To complement the Bible study “Jethro and Moses,” this sermon is a New Testament example not of one person hearing wisdom from another, but of the entire Jerusalem church hearing and implementing apostolic wisdom in order to solve a relational problem threatening to dismantle the church’s mission.

Introduction: Scripture teaches that God has always directed His people to care for widows and orphans. Leviticus 23 and Deuteronomy 24 explain the practice of gleaning, or leaving some of the harvest for the indigent. The book of Ruth demonstrates how this command was carried out. Paul exhorted Timothy to continue this practice of helping widows (1 Tim. 5:3), and James insisted helping widows and orphans was a sign of “pure and undefiled religion” (Jas. 1:27). It was logical that the young church in Jerusalem would make provision for their widows as they tried to lead lives of service in obedience to Christ. But fulfilling this ministry in Jerusalem became the first internal conflict mentioned in the book of Acts. The apostles sought God’s will and helped the church find a way forward together.

1. The Conflict (Acts 6:1)

Widows in the first century often were vulnerable without their husbands’ provision. Civil governments didn’t have social welfare programs, sometimes called “safety nets,” as we now have. The Jerusalem church determined to help its widows with food. Luke explained that there were two groups of widows in the fellowship: the Hellenistic, or Greek-speaking Jews who weren’t Palestinian natives, and the native Jewish widows. The Hellenistic Jews were probably immigrants from the Roman world who adapted the Jewish faith and perhaps came to Christ after Pentecost (Acts 2). It was the Greek-speaking Jewish widows who raised the issue and felt they were treated unfairly. Since the apostles didn’t challenge this claim, nor did the narrative writer, it seems to be a valid concern, and may have been simply an issue of prejudice. As disputes often do, the issue spilled over into the larger fellowship. The problem threatened both the unity of the church and the mission of the church; thus it was potentially fatal to the young fellowship.

2. The Consideration (Acts 6:2-4)

The apostles found their time diverted from prayer and the proclamation of the gospel and sought wisdom from God. They gathered the church together and reaffirmed their divine call. An apostle was one commissioned of God to preach the gospel and who had been witness to the

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resurrection of Jesus. Paul later argued for his apostolic pedigree when he said the risen Christ appeared to him uniquely (1 Cor. 15:8); thus the designation of apostolic authority was important as the church grew. The apostles had a unique calling that no one else could fulfill.

Southern Baptist denominational leader and pastor, Ron Lewis, popularized the motto, “The main thing is to keep the main thing the main thing.” How easy it is to let issues of lesser significance stake out larger territory! The apostles weren’t declaring themselves too good to do manual labor, such as serving tables. After all, Jesus had earlier washed their feet and told them to do the same (John 13). But no one else could do their work, and others were available to help the church deal with the issue at hand.

A Lifeway survey found some pastors spend up to eight hours a week performing custodial duties at the church including opening and closing facilities, managing lights (and, no doubt, thermostats!) and general cleaning of the building.¹ Surely there’s nothing inherently wrong with manual labor like this as long as it doesn’t take time away from prayer and study. But the survey shows how easy it is to be diverted from “the main thing.”

Sharing responsibility leads to ownership, so it is wise to involve others in our work. The apostles suggested the church select seven laymen to serve the widows. This number might indicate seven groups of widows or seven days of the week. Whatever the case, these men became servants and problem-solvers. Though the writer doesn’t call them “deacons,” we most often say this was the origin of the deacon office.

3. The Consequence (Acts 6:5-7)

The apostles shared godly wisdom with the church, and the church received it as a God-honoring way out of difficulty. The young church chose seven men of good reputation, full of wisdom and full of the Holy Spirit. These qualifications accentuate the spiritual nature of the task more than the physical task itself. They were more than laborers; they were spiritual leaders and problem-solvers. And all seven had Greek names. This indicates how the church went the second mile to show fairness to the group who lodged the complaint. The practice of “laying on of hands” is symbolic of God’s blessing and the blessing of the congregation. The apostles’ wisdom brought blessing into the lives of the seven, blessing into the lives of widows in need and blessing to the larger Christian community. The witness of the congregation was enhanced. The church brought more people into the faith, even a number of Jewish priests who believed that Jesus was indeed the promised Messiah.

Conclusion: Whenever the church chooses and ordains (“sends forth”) deacons, we’re reminded of the wisdom shared by the first disciples of Jesus. They underscored the calling of the church to preach, teach, and pray, but also the calling of service. We’re also reminded that the church heard this word, accepted it and sought God’s wisdom in selecting these special servants. Wisdom is shared and received, and God is honored. The psalmist wrote, “How good and pleasant it is when brothers live together in harmony!” (Ps. 133:1).

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ⁱ <https://research.lifeway.com/2014/07/10/what-effective-pastors-do-with-their-time/>