

Shepherds and Servants – Deacons: Biblical Servants

Acts 6:1-7

This morning we continue the series on shepherds and servants and move from the role of Elders to that of Deacons. Our text is Acts, Chapter 6 where we will take a look at a Biblical model for the diaconate. What I hope from our time this morning is to have a clearer understanding and greater appreciation of the role of the deacon as a servant leader to the body of Christ. When we meet this evening, we will look at the diaconate with a more practical eye toward the character of the ministry. We will focus more on the implications and application of the diaconal ministry here at Clearcreek.

The context of the passage this morning is the changes and challenges in the early church as it grows at a rapid pace in the early chapters of Luke's account. So imagine, if you would, the early church as we see it in the book of Acts. Literally thousands are being converted and added to the church daily. Many of those converted are coming from outside the city of Jerusalem and must be provided for. Many are being impacted by persecution and are in physical need of food and shelter. These are the tensions and trials that surround the formation of the Church.

The church is not the only organization that must deal with the difficulties brought about by rapid growth. A 1992 article from the *Industrial Management Business Journal* warned of such perils. The article began, "*The most perilous period in a company's development is when it starts to succeed wildly, enjoys high earnings and shows rapid sales growth. This period of peril is not limited to small businesses. Parallel perils have been observed in small, rapidly growing, not-for-profit organizations as well. Almost any small, rapidly growing organization faces the same perils.*" We all inherently understand that as any organization would, a business must plan, adapt, and respond to growth in order to be successful.

There are also numerous articles and academic studies written on the dangers of rapid growth of a city. As metropolitan areas expand, absorbing surrounding communities and rural areas, they become a sprawling mass of people, streets, and buildings that grow into modern urban centers with economic and political networks that bring life and vitality to its very essence. But a city's rapid growth can also bring major problems that include traffic congestion, run down housing, industrial pollution, inadequate sanitation services, crime, and difficulties with utilities and other public services. To sufficiently serve the public, a city's growth must be managed and planned in order to avoid serious problems that would threaten its life and strength.

I was really tempted to further illustrate this point by speaking of the dangers of rapid technology growth, but thankfully you will be spared. Even a short dissertation on the dangers of growing server farms, network bottlenecks, and workstation configurations spiraling out of control, would only be meaningful to the 5 or 10 of you who work in IT. But even without that excellent illustration, I am sure it is still clear that any organization that experiences growth, be it rapid or slow, must adapt and respond to the complexities and changes that it inherently brings.

So let's bring this a little closer to Clearcreek. What would we do if suddenly the Lord brought 300 new converts into our doors with essentially little to no financial support or means to provide for themselves? How would we respond with Christ-like love and care in real and tangible ways? These were the kinds of questions and the magnitude of the problem that faced the early church. To understand this morning's passage, we need to experience Luke's account just as the early church would have felt it while they faced **the challenge of serving God's people in the midst of difficult circumstances.**

One of the helps in studying Acts is to look for textual markers that Luke uses to emphasize his theme and create sections for the reader. Those of you who have been studying Acts in BILD are familiar with these important markers. Luke's account of **the formation and expansion of the church** is filled with these way points that indicate the path of growth and maturing of the church. In the Chapters prior to Acts 6 we have the following textual markers. Turn to Acts 2:47. Here Luke records that "*the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved.*" Now look at Acts 4:4, which reads "*But many of those who had heard the word believed, and the number of men came to about five thousand.*" Jump ahead to Acts 5:14 and we see that "*more than ever believers were added to the Lord, multitudes of both men and women.*" Can you imagine the responsibility the Apostles had in leading, caring for, and teaching the early church in Jerusalem?

It is this rapid growth of the church that is the backdrop for our text this morning. As the gospel message went out with the power of the Holy Spirit to Jerusalem, and to Judea, and even to the ends of the earth, it was accompanied by **great growth** in the church. But such is the beauty of God's perfect provision for the church, that we see in Acts 4:33 that along with the **great power** of the Apostle's testimony came also a **great grace**, so that the needs of the church were being met. Brothers and sisters, it is my hope this morning, that as we unfold this text, we will see not just the wonder of God's provision for serving in the body of Christ, but that we will see the marvelous perfections of Christ and the working out of the gospel within the Church in a way that brings great glory and honor to our Lord.

Let's pray as we begin our time in the Word.

There are three primary views of this morning's passage. The first view is that this text is an account of the establishment of the first deaconate ministry. While we do not have a direct or technical sense of an origin here, it can be argued that other texts establish the office and role of the deaconate and would therefore indicate that this is an account of the first or an early diaconal ministry. The second view is that this text is an account of the establishment of the office or at least forerunners of Elders by the Apostles. This is consistent with verse 6 of this passage as seen in their assignment to the ministry through prayer and the laying on of hands. Additionally, two later verses, Acts 11:30 and 21:8 would seem to support this position.

The third view and the general consensus of the Clearcreek Elders attempts to harmonize the first two. This is a view of the text that sees the seven appointed men as serving a temporary, prototype diaconal role that is filled by Elder qualified men. In other words, this text defines an early diaconal solution to specific problems created by the rapid growth in the church, which is initially filled by early Elders. Connecting this with later texts, particularly from the Epistles, we observe that this specific diaconal ministry ultimately developed into a more general, but official role as servant-leaders to the body of Christ that was distinct from the office of Elder.

So please turn to Acts 6:1-7. Let's read the entire passage as we begin to work through the text. *"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. 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. 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." 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. These they set before the apostles, and they prayed and laid their hands on them. 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."*

At the end of this passage we have one of Luke's way points providing the repeated marker regarding the Church's growth. But the end of this passage also serves as launching point of the account of Stephen's defense of the Gospel and subsequent death. We should take from Luke's inclusion of the diaconal ministry in this passage that he was highlighting its importance and contribution to the growth and structure of the early church. This was certainly not the first challenge the early church leaders had faced. But Luke's record here serves to illustrate how the Apostle's leadership and wisdom led to the creation of an important role with the church. And it is a marvelous example of how those that exercise gifts of service within the body are critical to its growth and gospel mission.

In the first two verses, we immediately see **the difficult situation** the Apostles were facing. At this time in the Church's history there were a great number of Jews who had come to Jerusalem and were won over by the gospel. While this was a wonderful blessing it also created logistical problems. What was the church to do with all these new believers and their attending needs?

In verse 1 we see **the needed structure** for serving the growing church. It appears that there were two particular Jewish groups within the church at that time; the Hellenists, or Grecian Jews and Hebraic Jews. It is likely that majority of the Hellenists were from outside the region and spoke Greek rather than the native Aramaic of the Hebraic Jews who were from around Jerusalem. This gave rise to a problem in the distribution of food each day, because some of the Hellenist widows were being neglected. This distribution was likely part of or out of the collections and gifts that were made for the common good of the church recorded by Luke in Chapters 3 and 4. We can imagine that as the church grew, the sheer numbers combined with language and cultural barriers made it difficult to ensure that everyone was being cared for. A solution was needed to provide structure to the ministry of distributing food.

So after noting the needed structure for service Luke next underscores **the caring concern** for the Church seen in verse 2. The Apostles realized that as busy as they were, they could not both teach and serve in a way that would meet the needs of the early church. If power of the Gospel continued the current path of growth, they would neglect both the physical and spiritual needs of the church. The text here should indicate to us that the primary ministry of the Apostles was that of teaching the Word. Out of a genuine concern for the people and expansion of Christ's kingdom, they could not allow themselves to be further drawn away from the ministry of the Word. To minimize or neglect their teaching and proclamational ministry would thus have been spiritually harmful to the strength and growth of the church.

Now listen carefully. There are **two dangerous ways** we may be tempted to think about this. First, I think it would be wrong here to think that the text is making a statement regarding that value between those who teach and those who serve. This is not the Apostles thinking to themselves, "we are too important to distribute food". Nor do I believe that we are to imply from this text that serving in any capacity is somehow menial and unimportant. To the contrary, these are both critical roles in the care and serving of the church. And while we see the beginning of a distinction in roles for teaching and serving, they are both necessary and required for the body to function, mature, and grow.

It brings to mind Paul's words in 1 Corinthians 12:22-25, where Paul speaking of the body of Christ says "*On the contrary, the parts of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, and on those parts of the body that we think less honorable we bestow the greater honor, and our unpresentable parts are treated with greater modesty, which our more presentable parts do not require. But God has so composed the body, giving greater honor to the part that lacked it, **that there may be no division in the body, but that the members may have the same care for one another.***"

We should never think or say, I'm just a Deacon or she is just a Deaconess. Nor should an Elder take pride in their position. These are both biblically wrong. We should not think of roles of service as less honorable positions. In the kingdom economy these are indispensable roles within the church. The truth is that those of you in diaconal positions are functioning on the front lines of service to the body of Christ. Your role as an example of sacrificial love, or what is true Biblical service, is a key part of God's perfect design for the church. You may not publically receive the praise and appreciation of those in more public roles. But your role works to prevent division and ensures that there is a common care to all. This divine design causes us to be mutually dependent upon one another in a way that poises us to care for one another according to our gifts and roles in a way that unites us to function for the glory of Christ who is the Head of the body.

Luke moves on in verse 3 through 6 to record **the specific solution** the Apostles establish to resolve the tension and meet the needs of the church. The simple solution was to select men of worthy character to take on the responsibility of distributing the food. It is worth noting that there likely is a chiasmic structure present in this passage that places verse 4 at the center, giving us the focal point of Luke's account. In essence, giving us the tie in to his primary purpose as to how and why the church grew and was strengthened.

The first part of verse 3 points us to **the character required** of those who were to be **selected**. The apostles established qualifications, if you will, for the character of men who would serve in this capacity. They were to have a good reputation so as not to be open to accusation or possibly favoritism in the distribution of food. They were to be full of the Spirit and wisdom. In other words, they were to be men known for walking in faith and obedience and who were wise in the decisions they made. They were to be Godly men who would faithfully apply themselves to the ministry and concern for the people of God. I believe it is the further development of these character qualities that we see in 1 Timothy 3:8 where Paul lays out the qualifications of deacons.

Not only do the Apostles define the character required, Luke records next that it is under their authority that we have **the ministry assigned**. It is the Apostles who assign or appoint those responsible for the ministry. It is interesting that while the church identified those with character to serve, it was left to the Apostles to make the assignment. Luke points out that the authority to commission these men into their ministry was vested in the spiritual leadership of the church. The model here reserves the authority of those charged with spiritual leadership over those who serve in deaconate capacities within the church.

I would also like to add an important warning about the word duty here because I believe it is especially relevant to those in diaconal roles. The sense of the Greek word here is that of "need" or "necessity". That is the men were to be appointed to what needed to be done. We must be careful not to take from this that the responsibility of the deacon is a duty in the sense of being drudgery or a joyless task. To the contrary, other passages make clear that our service to the body is a reflection and overflow of the grace and power of the Gospel. It can and should be a joyous and satisfying responsibility. While serving the church at times may be a difficult, inconvenient, and even thankless job, it is to be a Christ-serving, others-focused labor of love. It is a largely a question of where such joy is to be found.

So if you are in a diaconal role, how do you deal with the temptation to treat ministry as mere duty? How do you find real joy and satisfaction in serving the body? We would be wise to consider the account of Mary and Martha in Luke 10:38-42. Turn there for a moment. Look at these verses. Here we see that Martha is distracted with what? Serving! Does that surprise you? And what is her response to Jesus? "Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to *serve* alone?"

Now before we are quick to judge, how many of us have had similar thoughts run through our heads when we are left to serve alone in a ministry here at Clearcreek? Don't we think things like, "Lord, why am I always the one who has to get this done?" Or maybe it's something like, "I can't believe only two people showed up. Why can't everyone else help out?" When we, like Martha, see our responsibility as a duty, we are prone to grumble and complain rather than find joy in serving by God's grace.

In contrast, what is Mary's focus? She is enthralled with the presence of Jesus in her home. She has chosen not to be distracted by the duty and busyness of daily tasks, but rather to keep her eyes and focus on Christ who is truly satisfying. My point here is that if you serve simply out of duty you are like Martha and are missing the true blessing of your role. The heart of a deacon or deaconess sees past duty and obligation to the blessings of being poured out in service to Christ and to His body. When you serve the people here at the Chapel, don't miss the true joy by focusing solely on the task, processes, rules, or the mistakes and faults of others. Yes, your flesh will be tempted to think that way. But when those thoughts enter your head, remind yourself that you serve because of all that Christ has done for you and that He is pleased and honored when you serve through His grace and for His glory.

Let's move on to verse 4. Here we arrive at the center of this passage and the focal point Luke of the text. This verse repeats a similar thought to verse 3, but moves to **the ministry enabled** by those assigned to serve. These men were to be appointed to this ministry so that the Apostles could devote themselves to prayer and the ministry of the Word. The primary ministry of the Apostles, and correspondingly the Elders of a church, is to be in prayer, to preach, and to teach the Word. The text makes it clear that diaconal ministry in the early church furthered its growth by enabling its spiritual leaders to devote themselves to prayer, teaching, and spreading the Gospel of Christ.

We should not underestimate the importance of this key purpose to the diaconal ministry. There is a repeated theme in scripture of the significance of sound doctrine to the church. Without it the church is prone to division, error, false teaching, and sin. Sound doctrine leads to right living. To care for the church, the Elders must have the time to be in prayer, study the word, and teach it carefully. This is the ministry that diaconal service and leadership enables. It is the central part of their role within the body of Christ.

The specific solution results in **the ministry realized** in verses 5 and 6. Here Luke records that the people were pleased with the wise answer that was proposed. They then proceeded with appointing seven men to meet the needs. It is interesting to note that all seven names are Greek, indicating that they chose men from within the Hellenist segment of the church to minister to their own people. These were men who could speak the language and would likely have the confidence of the people they would serve.

And so these men were set aside for the ministry by the laying on of hands and a prayer of dedication. Here we have the public recognition of the servants to the church. Their appointments were officially recognized before the church as they started their ministry. The public appointment before and by the Apostles further emphasizes authority over their specific ministry. And it equally indicates the submission of the appointed men to the Apostles and their commitment to the ministry to which they had been assigned. **The commissioning of these deacons to their assigned ministry was not an obscure or unimportant event. Rather, it was a public demonstration of God's grace and provision for the Church** and the commissioning of Godly men into its service.

The end of this passage is verse 7, which we noted earlier is one of the several way points and a marker to the end of a larger segment of text. Within this marker, Luke shows us **the glorious result** of God's work in the early church. Because of the wise way the church cared for those in need and by enabling the Apostles to continue to focus on prayer and teaching the church continued to grow. The number of believers was multiplied in Jerusalem and even a number of the priests were given eyes of faith and followed Christ.

The first part of the result that we see is **the gospel extended** to a wider number of people within Jerusalem. Luke's inclusion of the diaconal ministry would seem to indicate a cause and effect relationship between the impact of the solution and the growth in the church. As unbelievers came in contact with the church, they observed a level of love and care for others that could only be accounted for because of the transforming power of Christ. In this way, the deacons were a visible and powerful testimony to the power and grace of the Gospel. They were direct evidence of the truth of its message.

There should be a similar effect today as unbelievers come into the Chapel. It should be evident to them through our service to one another that this is the body of Christ. It should look and feel different than what they see in the world. When the lost come in contact with the body of Christ, they should be able to see that there is something special to our care and love for one another. The diaconate ministry here should be living proof that Christ redeems and heals the lost, transforming them into trophies of His grace. They are marvelous examples of the same merciful and sacrificial love that Christ showed in calling and redeeming His people.

So we have the gospel extended in the ministry of these men and we also see **the gospel exemplified**. There is perhaps no better example of transformed lives than to see sacrificial love in action within the church. Where the world would be selfish, biblical diaconal service is selfless. Where the world would be proud, biblical diaconal service is humble. Where the world would be greedy, biblical diaconal service is giving. Where the world would complain and grumble, biblical diaconal service rejoices in suffering for the sake of Christ and His body.

This is the power of the gospel. To free men and women from selfishness and pride and giving them hearts to serve and give of their spiritual gifts in a way that serves the body and brings glory to Christ. This is the grace of the gospel. To enable men and women with gifts of service to joyfully and sacrificially give of themselves, pouring out their lives for brothers and sisters in Christ. **This is the admonition of Romans 12:6-7.** *"Having gifts that differ according to the grace given to us, let us use them: if prophecy, in proportion to our faith; if service, in our serving; the one who teaches, in his teaching;"*. The diaconate is proof of the grace of Christ poured out upon the church through gifted men and women. Let us hear and heed Paul and use our gifts of service for the sake and glory of our Redeemer.

So what is **our response** to this text? What does all this mean for Clearcreek? Well first and foremost, I believe that we must have and hold a high view of diaconal ministry here at the Chapel. Understanding its importance and the impact of service ministries is only the beginning. A Biblical diaconate with a heart of service to others is essential to life and growth at the Chapel. But even more than this, it is a model of Christ-like service to both believers and the lost. Deacons and deaconesses show all of us what godly service in the body looks like. They are living demonstrations of the reality and power of Gospel truth. They are examples of the healing and transforming of spiritually dead sinners into grace-filled instruments of Christ's blessing.

A high view of diaconal service at the Chapel cuts two ways. First, those of you in positions of diaconal roles and leadership should not take your responsibilities lightly. **Do what you have been given to do well because first and foremost, you are serving Christ.** Strive to maintain the qualifications of your office. Never forget that you represent Christ not only to the Chapel, but to the lost. When you interact with those outside our doors in or out of your diaconal capacity, what kind of person do they see? Do your words and actions demonstrate the grace and kindness of our Redeemer? Are you willing to set aside your rights for the sake of serving others and the honor of Christ's name? This is the high calling of biblical diaconal service.

From the congregational perspective, there should be an equally high view of those in roles of diaconal service. There should be a great appreciation for those who serve. Not because of the personal benefits of having others serve us, but because of glory it brings to Christ. We should encourage those who serve. We should pray for those who serve. And we should thankfully give praise to God for His provision of care and the ministry that their service enables. We should have the mind of 1 Corinthians 12:22-25, and honor those who serve, because the work to preserve our unity and care for the needs of the body.

Let me reflect on a few important thoughts for those of you in diaconal service or considering diaconal service. It is first a ministry of caring for people in the local church. You must never lose sight of this. It is easy to get caught up in the task or responsibility of the ministry and forget that it is about serving people and representing Christ to others. You must be careful that your words and decisions put people first. You have many priorities in serving and leading, but you must be mindful to balance them with a care for people. In fact, I would suggest that those in diaconal roles should even prefer care and love for people over other priorities. In essence, developing a heart that tends to generous caring and giving to those you minister to.

You see biblical diaconal service is about being a good steward of the gifts God has given you. And God meant for those gifts to be used with the local church. You can rationalize, justify, and fight this all you want. But your gifts were meant to be used and not locked up. Do not keep them to yourself. You will find that there is great joy and satisfaction to be found in sacrificially using your gifts for the sake of others.

Let me also urge you not to serve by your own power. Remember that diaconal service is meant to be carried out through the grace God supplies and not by your own strength. So how do you know if you are serving through your own strength or serving through grace? Let me contrast serving in the flesh and serving in the spirit using the following chart.

Flesh Constrained, Self Oriented Serving	Grace Enabled, Gospel Oriented Serving
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • You serve others out of duty or obligation 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • You serve others out of joy
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • You don't see the needs of others 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • You see needs that others often miss
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • You do as little as needed 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • You do all that you can to meet the need
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • You take pride in your position or leadership 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • You have a passion for a particular ministry
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • You are more concerned about rules and processes than people 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Your primary concern is the care and comfort of others
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • You are harsh and selfish in the face of difficulty 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • You are kind and giving in the face of difficulty
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Your words and actions reflect a sinful and selfish heart 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Your words and actions reflect the reality of the Gospel in your life

Some of you may be thinking you are exempt from the message of this text. But the truth is that this message applies to anyone who serves in the Chapel, whether in diaconal roles or not. To some degree, we are all servants and part of the body of Christ. We should all strive to use our gifts in a way that reflects humble and self-sacrificing service to Christ within the body. Furthermore, we should all evidence the power of the cross in transforming us for His service.

Let me share just a few more thoughts about diaconal service. We have to be careful in our thinking about roles within the church. **Our natural tendency is to associate honor with those who are in more visible positions.** Let me give you a few examples. We visibly see our musicians up front. We enjoy their talents and often express our appreciation of their ministry and service to us. Our Elders and Sunday School teachers as well have visible roles in teaching and it is easier to see the expression of their work and ministry among us.

But there are other important, yet less noticeable, roles within the body that rarely get that much praise. I particularly think of our office staff that quietly serve and allow the body life of the Chapel to smoothly function. What about our men who stack chairs, setup tables, mow the lawn, and maintain the facility so faithfully. I would guess it would be hard for any of us to name even half of those who serve in these capacities. Also there are our ladies who provide meals to families, change dirty diapers, clean up messes, organize events, and care for our children with very little recognition. How difficult would it be for us to gather together without them serving silently but faithfully behind the scenes? Think of how our ministries would suffer if this work was not being done.

When you serve in these ways you are the hands and feet of Christ to the local body. You allow others to benefit and be blessed from your sacrificial service. You may not personally receive honor or words of appreciation, but Christ is honored and I believe He is pleased as we find satisfaction in service to Him. Service within the Chapel can be challenging and we may be tempted to become discontent, focus on the failures of others, or even feel sorry for ourselves. When these thoughts fill your head, remind yourself that Christ is honored in your serving and that you are an expression of His love to the Church.

And yes, diaconal ministry is generally not easy. The work can be hard and you will serve along with, and to people, who are imperfect sinners. Just as we all are. But as Russ reminded us from the pulpit a month ago, it is especially in suffering and through difficulty that we become broken vessels allowing the glory and light of the gospel to spill out into the lives of others. This is the precious nature of diaconal work. That in sacrificial service to others you become an expression of the power and glory of Gospel truths that bursts through the cracks of your suffering and strain; for it is the fullness of faith and grace that enables you to pour out your life for the sake of others. Indeed, **you will shine the brightest when weakness and difficulty allow the greatest reflection of the light and life of Christ to pass through you.**

May God richly bless our deacons and deaconesses as they faithfully serve the Chapel. They have a God-designed, grace-filled, gospel-enabled ministry that unites and cares for the body of Christ. They have a ministry patterned after Christ's selfless sacrifice for us. Praise God for giving us gifted men and women willing to share Christ's love.

Let's pray.