

Sermon Notes

WORSHIP SERVICE - 6.8.2025

PART 18 - GROWING PAINS

I. INTRODUCTION

- The early church, as we have already seen, faced numerous challenges.
- The church experienced threats from without and threats from within.
- Stories like the one we will study today, take away any impression that one might have that the early church was perfect. Churches will always face difficulties and challenges, and sometimes they don't handle them properly.
- But what we will see is how God strengthened his church through Spirit-filled leadership, committed to the word and prayer, and how the church organized to overcome growing pains that threatened to break the unity of the church and derail the mission of the church.
- And the result was continued growth and gospel advance.

Acts 6:1-7

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. 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. 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 of the word." 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.

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.

II. THE REASON - GROWTH AND GRUMBLING

GROWTH

- "Now in these days..." The church is still in Jerusalem.
- Luke makes note again that the number of the disciples were increasing.
- The church had experienced tremendous growth. The church in Jerusalem at this time numbered in the thousands.
- Pentecost - 3,000 souls were added to the church. (2:41)

- After Peter and John's preaching in the temple, 5,000 men heard the word and believed. (4:4)
- The Lord was adding to the church's number day by day those who were being saved.
- It's remarkable how Luke records these numbers and stresses the numerical growth of the disciples.
- Numbers matter because they represent people who came to faith.
- We place a lot of emphasis on being faithful, and every church should desire and strive to be faithful in every way.
- But we also want to be fruitful. We want to see good gospel fruit from faithful proclamation of the gospel.
- There is amazing momentum in the early church despite the persecution and the challenges.
- But they will face another obstacle—and this is a big one.
- How will the church respond to the new challenge it is facing that could kill its momentum in growth?

GRUMBLING

- What was the nature of the problem that arose in the community of faith?
- A complaint arose by a certain group within the church against another.
- One group, the Hellenists, said that the other group, the Hebrews, were neglecting their widows in the daily distribution.
- The issue that is brought forth as a complaint is racial—we know that is a very sensitive topic even in our time.
- And it also concerned the welfare of the widows—whom the church had accepted the responsibility to care for.
- The Hellenists - were the Greek-speaking Jews who had lived outside of Israel.
- The Hebrews were those native to Israel and spoke Aramaic.
- But the rift between these two groups goes beyond origin and language to culture.
- The Hellenists not only spoke the Greek language, they were steeped in Greek culture, they thought and behaved like Greeks.
- The Hebrews were deeply immersed in Hebrew culture, vastly distinct from Greek culture.
- So we can call them the Grecian Jews and the Hebraic Jews.
- The Hebraic Jews were the majority group as the church was in Jerusalem, the center of Hebrew life, and the Grecian Jews were in the minority.
- We have these two groups with vastly distinct cultures merging in the early church.
- It's not a surprise that there would be tensions.
- We're not told if the complaint had merit or if it was merely a matter of perception.
- But the group felt their widows were neglected, their feelings were involved, and grumbling followed.
- As the apostles were made aware of the situation, they discerned that the rivalry between these two social groups, along with a possible oversight presented in the complaint, threatened to undermine the movement and the credibility of the gospel message they were proclaiming.
- This was a schism in the making—if you've been part of a church split—you know how devastating that can be.
- How was this a threat to the church and the credibility of the gospel?
- It threatened the unity of the church and could potentially divide the church.

- It was a threat to the credibility of the gospel if they could not care for their own.
 - Additionally, if the apostles had decided to take the matter upon themselves to resolve, it would have been a significant distraction to their main task of preaching and teaching, and that would have hindered the movement greatly.
 - We have to be careful to preserve the unity of the church. That's not just the pastor's job.
 - A tactic of the enemy is to get people grumbling and complaining.
 - When you perceive something is not going the way you want to see it, or you spot a potential challenge, don't grumble about it, don't murmur and complain to others.
 - Prayerfully present it to the elders and give them an opportunity to address it, and you also be part of the solution.
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- Here we see that growth brings logistical challenges to the church. It strains relationships. It heightens tensions. And it's easy for some to get overlooked and hurt.
 - And the church also has a very real enemy that wants to see her falter and fail, to see her influence eroded and power diminished.
 - The enemy will magnify those problems, stir up strife and discord.
 - Luke wants us to see that at the onset of the problem that arises, the church was growing and had momentum, and though this challenge threatens to undermine that, he bookends this section with a high note—the church does not lose momentum.
 - This threat also fails. The gospel is unstoppable.

III. THE RESOLUTION - PRIORITIES AND PROVISION

PRIORITIES

- What do the twelve do?
 - Leaders lead, they make decisions. They propose a solution to the church.
 - They gather the whole church together and first stress that this problem is not something that they can personally handle and take care of.
 - For them to take up this responsibility, the care and oversight of widows in the daily distribution, the serving of tables, would take them away from their primary ministerial responsibility and calling—preaching the word of God.
 - They emphasize again that they will devote themselves to prayer and the ministry of the word—that's what they were called to do by the Lord.
 - They could have easily stepped in for a season to ease the racial tensions—but they're not going to be distracted by this from their priority.
 - They can't do it all! And they shouldn't.
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- Reminder for all of us—the ministry of the church isn't just the job of the pastors.
 - We can't do everything, we're not supposed to.
 - But some people expect that!
 - Exodus 18 - Moses and Jethro's counsel of delegation.
 - Pastors and Elders have a limited spectrum of responsibilities in their care and oversight of the church, we must devote ourselves to prayer and the ministry of the word.
 - And we also have a limited bandwidth as we also have families and responsibilities outside of the church.
 - And all of you need to help protect that.

- The quickest way for the standards of preaching and teaching to decline in the church is by burdening the pastors with administrative and other responsibilities so they have little time to study or pray.
- All believers are called to serve and help in the church to take care of its needs.
- It's the priesthood of all believers who are gifted and called by the Lord to help build up his church.
- If pastors don't delegate responsibilities and take on everything themselves, then believers are not exercising their gifts to help build up the church and that inhibits the growth and maturity of the church. (Ephesians 4:11-16)

PROVISION

- They delegate the important responsibility of caring for the widows in the daily distribution.
- They get the whole church involved and engaged in the solution.
- They tell them to pick from among them, seven men who meet these qualifications:
 - Notice, it's not just anybody to fill the slot. These had to be disciples.
 - First, men of unimpeachable character, "of good repute."
 - Second, men "full of the Spirit," men who are living under the influence and power of the Holy Spirit.
 - Third, men "full... of wisdom," as Stott refers to it in his commentary, "men of sanctified common sense." They need to be men of tact. Men who could assess a situation and reach the best ends by the best means.
- V5 "And what they said pleased the whole gathering..."
- They select seven men who meet these qualifications, they present them to the apostles who commission them to this holy and sacred ministry by the laying on of hands and prayer.
- What's amazing in the list of names is that all of the names are Greek names.
- The Hellenists imagined that the Hebrews in the church were neglecting their widows, and when the church was presented with the apostolic solution to the issue, the church manifested its love and desire for unity, that they elected seven Hellenists, not Hebrews.
- This is the church manifesting not her weakness but her strength.
- This is the gracious work of the Spirit in her midst.
- Divisions have no place in the church of Jesus Christ.
- Prejudice against a particular ethnic group or any social distinction must be destroyed at the threshold of the church.
- There is no Greek nor Jew if they are united in Christ.
- Christ has abolished those racial distinctions, erased those divisions, reconciled Gentile and Jew to God in one body through the cross, and made us members of the household of God.
- No matter where you come from, what your skin color is, whatever your native tongue, if you have been baptized into Christ, we are all one in Christ Jesus. (Ephesians 2:14-22; Galatians 3:28)
- Was this the beginning of the deacon ministry?
- This may have been the prototype for the diaconate in the church, but that's not what seems to be intended here. What Luke writes about is descriptive. The seven are not called deacons.
- The Greek word that is sometimes translated as 'deacon' in Paul's letters, is not translated that way here. The noun and verb forms are used to speak both of the ministry of the apostles and the reference to serving tables.
- All ministry is service. The apostles served (deacon) in preaching and proclamation. The seven are commissioned to serve (deacon) tables.

- The office of Deacons as mentioned in 1 Timothy 3, are qualified men who assist the elders in the care of the congregation.
- They help to free up the elders for their ministry priorities.
- They also serve as examples to the whole church of what it looks like to serve.
- They help preserve the unity of the church.
- But here's what's important—all believers are called to serve and have a responsibility to serve in the church.
- All ministry requires spiritual people, The church needs people full of the Spirit to exercise their gifts for the benefit of the church.
- Every aspect of ministry in the church is high and holy work.
- The Son of man came not to be served but to serve and give his life as a ransom for many (Mark 10:45)
- That is the pattern and that is the basis for serving.
- We have been ransomed in Christ and set free from selfishness, self-absorption, self-centeredness, and given a new heart and new eyes to see the needs around us and engage in service to others.
- Get connected with your local church. You're not called to be a spectator. Your church is the family you serve.

IV. THE RESULTS - MULTIPLICATION AND MOVEMENT

- In the list of the seven, we are introduced to two other names that will figure prominently.
- They will do things the apostles have not yet done.
- Stephen, features in the next passage, as a man full of grace and power whom God used to do signs and wonders among the people.
- Philip, takes the gospel to Samaria after the stoning of Stephen.
- Nicolaus is another who is mentioned as a proselyte of Antioch. Antioch became an important ministry base for the Jewish and Gentile church. (Acts 11)
- God uses these men to inaugurate the next step in the fulfillment of Acts 1:8.
- This isn't just about handling a complaint, God had a larger purpose in how the church organized around the resolution to the complaint.
- As a direct result of the action of the apostles and the delegation of the work in order to concentrate on their ministry priority, the word of God increased.
- The bookends of this passage is about the continuing growth and expansion of the church.
- V1 "the disciples were increasing in number..."
- V7, "And the word of God continued to increase, and the number of the disciples multiplied greatly in Jerusalem..."
- The Spirit is powerfully at work, the enemies of the gospel can't stop the spread of the gospel.
- The challenges within the church and without can't hinder the mission.
- When the church is healthy, the gospel advances.
- When the church is faithful, there is missional fruitfulness.
- v7c, "and a great many of the priests became obedient to the faith."
- We've seen how many of the priests were hostile to the gospel and to the apostles. Yet many of them believed in Jesus and turned to him.
- Even the fiercest enemies of the gospel can be saved by the power of gospel.
- May God use our church to see even the most ardent enemies of Christ turn to him and come to trust him as Lord and Savior.

- Let's pray and labor for gospel-centered growth; to see the word of God increase in our city, to see the number of disciples multiplied greatly in Longwood and Lake Mary and Sanford.
- Commit yourself to prayer and the word of God.
- Let's maintain the unity of the Spirit in our church, with every member engaged in ministry, taking care of one another's needs, fully engaged in Christ's mission, and seeing disciples multiplied for the glory of God.

APPLICATION AND REFLECTION

In light of today's message....

- What did I learn about the gospel?
- How can I apply what I learned about the gospel to my life?
- With whom can I share the gospel this week?