

# **“DEACONS TO THE RESCUE: THE MAGNIFICANT SEVEN.”**

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**Scripture Texts: Acts 6:1-7**

## **Introduction.**

In our reading of Acts, we have heard stories about how the church devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers, how they gathered together in homes, practiced hospitality and sold their possessions to help those in need.

We heard stories of bringing money and laying it at the feet of the apostles' to be distributed to the poor. Several times Luke has mentioned how much the church grew even in the face of opposition. We have heard about the church together in bold prayer and the Spirit filling them.

It is good for us to hear about the growth of the church in the world, it encourages us that God is at work, His Spirit is still as always powerfully transforming lives and gathering worshipers from every tongue, tribe and people.

Now Luke tells us about a problem in this growing church and how the Spirit led them to solve the problem. And it's good for us to hear that all churches have problems and issues.

## **The Problem, Murmuring among the members, vs. 1.**

Widows in the first century were especially vulnerable, they had little or no means of financial support. There was no SS or welfare, there were no good employment opportunities. They were often destitute, without property or assets.

A lot of widows moved back to Jerusalem after their husbands died.

These Hellenists were Greek speaking Jews, meaning they were diaspora Jews, born and raised in some other part of the Roman empire, who didn't speak Hebrew or Aramaic and had different customs and traditions. They were immigrants.

In our culture this would be immigrants and homeless, in the church maybe single parents.

After Pentecost they have become Christians and are among the Greek speaking part of the church. They were being overlooked or neglected by the Hebrew speaking part of the church in the daily distribution of assistance.

While the growth of the church is clearly a work of the Holy Spirit, it is not a pure or perfect church that is growing. We are reminded here that there is no such thing as a perfect church. All churches have issues and problems, conflicts and sin. There will always be wheat and tares, wheat and weeds.

As long as there is a church left standing on earth, Satan will do anything he can to cause trouble and bring about complaining, murmuring, dissension, strife.

When we heard about the people selling their possessions and bringing the money to the apostles to be given to those in need, we were impressed, amazed, what a generous congregation, what a caring church. How could God not be pleased to bless such a church?

Nevertheless, something wasn't working in their administration and stewardship of the benevolence funds. The plan put in place back in Acts 4:34-35 was not working perfectly, a minority was being neglected. This created *three serious threats to the church*.

**First**, this was a serious threat to the unity of the church. We should pay attention. This is a warning that the unity of our church could be threatened by a very small fire, just a few tongues wagging.

We could be divided between Dutch and non-Dutch, between Americans and Canadians or foreigners, people born here and people who aren't from around here, Democrats and Republicans, Christian school and public school, upstairs and downstairs. Satan has a lot of tools at his disposal to get us divided.

Do you know how easy it is to have problems in the church? Do you know how easy it is to get people upset about something? Someone says the wrong thing or makes a critical comment or gives us a critical glance, someone ignores us, someone gets in our business or space, someone gets a bigger serving of turkey or pumpkin pie.

There are a hundred ways we can have a similar situation develop in our flock.

Some ball gets dropped, or something falls between the cracks.

We leave a name out of the bulletin or neglect someone. We forget a surgery or a need. My fear is when someone tells me something in the narthex after the service and by the time I am downstairs eating a cookie its gone.

How easy is it in the church to have a misunderstand or a miscommunication?

Brothers and sisters, we need to grow in our ability to overlook minor offenses, to not take offense, to make allowances for each other, to not keep a record of wrongs.

Can we die to our differences, and be united in Christ, we are brothers and sisters, in the same family.

**Second**, there is the threat of how the issues is handled. It started poorly. They started complaining, murmuring, grumbling. This sort of thing has destroyed many a church. This could have led to the first church split. We have heard of church splits sometimes over seemingly trivial matters. The classic is over carpet color.

This complaint could have been handled better. Someone should have gone to the apostles first before it became broadly known. It is never good or God-glorifying or leader-honoring to spread complaints and dissatisfactions, building coalitions, taking sides.

**Third**, there is a threat to be distracted from ministry of Word and Prayer, to neglect first things, the most important things. If this problem was resolved in the wrong way, it could be serious damage to the advance of the Gospel and the growth of the church. This was Satan's intent.

Whatever threatens the Word of God in our world, in our churches, in our homes and in our lives is a most serious threat. It should be taken with utmost seriousness. Resist this work of Satan.

There will always be troubles and problems, the only question is how will we deal with them.

### **The Solution, Serving the widows, vss. 2-6.**

It speaks well of the apostles for the manner in which they handled the situation. They could have been annoyed for being criticized and complained about behind their backs. They could have just thrown their hands up and said, "Fine, forget about it, we will just shut down this benevolence ministry. Nobody gets anything, that will be fair."

Or they could have been shortsighted and done a quick fix and just taken care of the problem themselves. If you want something done right, do it yourself right? Most of us want to do, to fix, to be proactive. But sometimes the most important thing to do might be not to do something.

We see here their wisdom, godly concern and compassion. They deal with it quickly before it gets out of control. All leaders know if you don't nip this sort of thing in the bud quickly, it can snowball like a house on fire.

*Now what are the apostles saying by the solution they offer?*

Are they saying that the Word and prayer are more important than caring for the poor. That their office and role is superior to all others? Are they saying they are above this kind of work?

Not at all. They are saying both are important and they can't do both well, one or the other will suffer, one or the other must be given up. So, they ask for help. We all have gifts and we all have callings, we are all equipped and appointed by the Holy Spirit to works of service in the church. And there are gifts in the body that need to be exercised.

Are the apostles saying they shouldn't serve anymore? Of course not. Jesus said He came to serve, not to be served, and set an example by washing their feet.

The issue was not serving, but abandoning their primary calling to do something others are be called to do.

**A word** needs to be said about the priority the apostles gave to their calling, to the preaching of the Word and prayer. That is important and essential work, it is neglected to the detriment of the congregation. The Word and prayer are demanding occupations and deserve the full and undivided attention of those devoted to it.

Are pastors and elders the only ones who pray, the only ones who are diligent in knowing and handling the Word? No, of course not, that belongs to all Christians. But pastors and elders compared to others have a special and particular calling to be especially diligent in Word and prayer.

***But it is also a high and holy calling to look after the poor and needy***, to serve those in need. And it is a calling that is pleasing to Lord.

Let's make sure that we are reaching out to all in need and that we are willing to ministry, that we have hearts that are as compassionate and caring as our Lord's, and as He has shown to all of us in our own condition of poverty.

We see the great wisdom of the apostles in two ways.

***First***, they call on the church to appoint the men, and you may not notice this but all seven of the men have Greek names, they are from the Greek speaking church.

***Second***, they give spiritual guidance as to the kind of men they should set apart. Not just any men, seven godly men.

Notice the emphasis on spiritual qualifications and character. If it wasn't a spiritual office, they might have said just look for those good at administration or organization or accounting.

You see how clearly the apostles stated the qualifications of deacons, men of good reputation and full of the Holy Spirit, and full of faith. By the way, full of the Holy Spirit doesn't mean some kind of super spiritual person. Full of the Spirit is a normal Christian life, that's how we are all supposed to live, depending on the Spirit and not on ourselves.

Without the Holy Spirit our work is worthless and in vain in any eternal sense, which of course is the most important sense.

I remind deacons each year, while it is true elders are to pay particular attention to the spiritual aspects of the church, that doesn't mean that deacons aren't a spiritual office or that their work isn't spiritual work.

It is a spiritual office in our Lord's church, it must be treated as such, it is right to hold to a higher standard those who hold the office and it is right to have higher expectations of them.

Who is sufficient for these things? No one, but the one wholly dependent of the Spirit.

### **The Result, vs. 7.**

Notice how Luke celebrates the solution. The church is pleased. The widows are cared for.

The Word is not neglected. The church increases greatly.

Our text begins and ends with mention of the church growing. You get the sense that if this issue had not been handled as well as this, the grow may have been seriously hindered.

Notice what Luke says about the Word. The Word of God continued to increase. Because they didn't neglect the Word of God, it increased and bore much fruit.

And just to show how powerfully the Spirit was at work, beyond signs and wonders, the priests who had been so opposed to Christ were submitting to the Gospel.

### **Implications and application.**

I commend our church for having both biblical offices, elders and deacons. I commend our church for how it honors the offices and for how well our elders and deacons do their work and how they respect each other in their particular callings. They work at not overstepping their bounds or usurping what belongs to the other. We are well served here.

Pray for your leaders. Pray for the joy of our leaders. Joyless leaders are no advantage to you. Pray that they will be overwhelmed with the knowledge of God's love for them and

how precious they are in His sight. Pray for the Spirit to fan into flames the gifts that are in them for the sake of Christ and His church. Pray they are full of the Holy Spirit and wisdom.

### ***Ministry in the body.***

Do you see a need? Do you see something that is being overlooked? Can you be part of the solution rather than just the problem? We need more people willing to serve, help, see a problem and address it. Resist Satan's work to create only problems and blind us to solutions.

### ***Priorities, first things first.***

Home and family life are a challenging, daunting, demanding and never-ending task. The pace of family life these days fast and furious. Keeping priorities is hard work.

Everything demands attention, except Word and prayer.  
Everything seems more important than Word and prayer.

Emails, meetings, work, kids, diapers, doctors, TV shows, sports, homework.  
I fight that fight every week to keep prayer and the Word from being pushed aside.  
Make it a priority to keep your priorities straight. Seek God first in prayer, Scripture, worship.  
Resist Satan's efforts to side track and derail these things.

### ***Word and prayer.***

Let us be diligent in praying for the Word to be faithfully proclaimed and taught and believed and lived and obeyed and loved here at First CRC. Let us in our words and actions do nothing that might hinder the progress and growth of the Word. Pray there would be no obstacles, most of all in any of our own hearts.

If we don't have the Word we are lost and dead. The Word is the power of God for our salvation. It is our source of unity and hope. It is our daily bread and living water.

The church in Luke's day was tested and they passed. As we are tested may we not be found wanting or neglecting but growing and thriving and loving.

**Prayer:** Holy Father, thank you for this wonderful story of your Holy Spirit working in the hearts and lives of your people helping them to resist the attacks of the enemy. Father, help us to examine our own hearts where we are grumbling or complaining or murmuring, to guard our hearts and lips. And when there is a real, legitimate concern or issue to go to the right person who can give wisdom. And show us where we can help lighten the load here in acts of service. Holy Spirit guard most of all Word and prayer, that we not neglect them in our own lives and homes and church.