

Series: You Are Sent.

Sermon #8: How deacons rescued the church

Scripture: Acts 6.1-7

Intro - Shelton Lawn Care

How many of you had a lawn care business when you were in middle school? Listen up middle schoolers if you don't do this I'm not sure what you are doing in life. My dad taught me how to mow. So I started with my yard. I asked him if I could get paid he said what do you think all the food and shelter are?

But then I got a call from grams. That's my mom's mom. She said I'll pay you \$25 every week to mow & weed eat. But you gotta do a good job. I was like...\$25 a week? As a 12 year old!? Are you kidding? Is this REAL? So mom drops me off, and I get to work. Get done like an hour later because her yard was tiny. And she pays me. AND a lightbulb went off. I finally cared about MATH. Because if I mowed 4 yards a week...that's \$100! So I started recruiting yards. Got a lead on a few yards and I started building a business. But then something happened I did not know about. As my workload increased I had to work on the very business I was building. I had to maintain a schedule, pay out some of that \$100 on expenses, and almost had to bring on my little brother when I missed a couple of yards one time. I couldn't just keep adding yards unless I was willing to add some quality controls. Otherwise, the quality of my service would go down. And what anybody who has ever built any business or any organization will tell you is that the more it grows the more you have to work on it in order to maintain the quality of what you started with.

Here's the connection: A church is no exception to this rule. The only difference is, if we believe what God says about how much he loves and values his church...the stakes are a lot higher for how we care for it than how we care for anything else, even something as sacred as a middle schooler's lawn mowing business.

Today we are going to see growing pains in the early church. We are going to see how it walks through it and what is going to come out is a beautiful picture of what church should be. And what you are going to see is God is inviting you into it. Inviting you not into a business or an audience but into an ever growing family with an urgent message of grace and love.

The headline for this sermon is "How deacons save the church." And listen, I believe this sermon on deacons may be one of the most timely, important sermons for Mercy Church in this entire Acts series. Acts 6. We are only covering 6 verses. Let's get going.

1 In those days, as the disciples were increasing in number, there arose a complaint by the Hellenistic Jews against the Hebraic Jews that their widows were being overlooked in the daily distribution.

Ok so here's the situation. The church is growing. And there arose a complaint!?! You mean to tell me a young, vibrant growing church who is being faithful to do what God has called it to do....can still have problems!? And the answer is a resounding YES! There's 2 problems present here and I want to make sure we see both of them.

1) obvious one: The church is experiencing growing pains. It's reached a critical moment where if it doesn't make some important changes in how it operates, it's no longer going to be this distinctive body of people that stood out from the world. It's going to die on the hill of good intentions if something doesn't happen fast. Because in Acts 4, there was not a needy person among them.

34 For there was not a needy person among them because all those who owned lands or houses sold them, brought the proceeds of what was sold, 35 and laid them at the apostles' feet. This was then distributed to each person as any had need. -- Acts 4:33-35

The practice was bring the money to the apostles. And then the apostles distributed it out to those in need. And widows were certainly those in need because in this culture most women spent their lives in households that belonged to their fathers and their husbands and didn't control a lot of property and didn't have a lot of economic opportunity. So when widowed, they were vulnerable economically and socially. And the church had this gospel message that said ALL PEOPLE are made in the image of God. And God has not left anyone in need. He's provided salvation for EVERY ONE in Christ. He's provided in abundance. And so God's church...God's church should be a place where everyone's needs are met. It became this radical place where, what we said last week, people loosened their grip on their stuff and tightened their grip on God's people. IT WAS A CALLING to provide for these needs. And as the ministry of the word grew...which is a good thing...the ministry of needs

is slipping. Too many laws too little time. Growing Pains.

But that's not all that's happening in this situation. Look at verse 1 again.

1 In those days, as the disciples were increasing in number, there arose a complaint by the Hellenistic Jews against the Hebraic Jews that their widows were being overlooked in the daily distribution.

2) The church is experiencing a cultural conflict. The Hellenistic Jews are Greeks who have converted to Judaism and are now followers of Christ. They are the minority culture at this point in the church. So It's not JUST that church growth has stretched capacity thin. It's that Christians in the Majority are overlooking the needs of Christians in the minority.

And this is completely counter to the gospel of Jesus Christ. The important powerful reality of the gospel is that it UNITES cultures that were once divided. Christ broke down the dividing wall of hostility. BUT, what we are seeing here is that PRACTICING cultural equality is different than talking about it. And thankfully the church serves as a good model for us because they don't dismiss these concerns. Instead, they take action.

2 The Twelve summoned the whole company of the disciples and said, "It would not be right for us to give up preaching the word of God to wait on tables.

The apostles. The ones charged with shepherding the church of God...gather everybody together. They are going to address this problem. Now remember there were a whole lot of people and very little structure up

until now. They get everybody together and they say that it would not be right to give up preaching the word of God to wait on tables. That word “wait” is diakoneo. It means serving tables just like you are thinking. When I bring up Greek its because I think its important.

Wouldn't be right. That means it would go against God's commissioning on their lives to do what needs to be done. That's a powerful message. The PROBLEM must be solved...and having the apostles solve it would be disobedient to God. They address this from a place of calling. This is huge. It's not that it's beneath them. They aren't divas. They are called by God. And so the answer to meeting the growing needs of the church...the answer to resolving important cultural tensions...cannot be done by the apostles because they have to preach the word....WHICH MEANS MORE PEOPLE ARE GOING TO KEEP COMING! Feel that tension? So here's what they do.

3 Brothers and sisters, select from among you seven men of good reputation, full of the Spirit and wisdom, whom we can appoint to this duty. 4 But we will devote ourselves to prayer and to the ministry of the word.”

Pick seven guys to do this. And notice the requirements? Good reputation, full of the Spirit, and wisdom. Pick seven who are carry the aroma of Christ with them... that's the fullness of the Spirit. The fruit of the spirit is evident. They've shown it through their interactions with you & through the wisdom of their decisions. You see what they are saying? THIS DUTY - diakoneo...serving the needs of God's people... IS A BIG DEAL. PUT OUR BEST PEOPLE ON IT!

5 This proposal pleased the whole company. So they chose Stephen, a man full of faith and the Holy Spirit, and Philip, Prochorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas, and Nicolaus, a convert from Antioch.

Everybody said let's go. And I find this pretty awesome... based on their names, some of them were from the cultural minority. Especially the last one Nicolaus. These are the first seven diakonoi which the church in every culture has kind of translated / created their own word for. English..we translate it deacons. A servant of Christ who serves the needs of the body.

6 They had them stand before the apostles, who prayed and laid their hands on them.

This is commissioning. You notice we commission quite often around here and what the apostles are doing in laying on of hands is affirming the calling of God and imparting the blessing of God onto them for the task they are being sent into. They put these deacons in front of the whole assembly and said these are your guys. You've approved them, we affirm you.

7 So the word of God spread, the disciples in Jerusalem increased greatly in number, and a large group of priests became obedient to the faith -- Acts 6:1-7

A LARGE GROUP OF PRIESTS, a group of religious and social leaders in the city GOT SAVED! I LOVE how this section ends.

Remember verse 1? The disciples were increasing in number? That's how this section ends as well. They were increasing. Here's what Luke wants you to see: The

appointment of deacons was MISSION CRITICAL. It wasn't just that deacons were appointed and so the complaining stopped. No its that deacons were appointed and city council got saved! The deacons stepped in at a critical moment in the life of the church and kept it's ministry flourishing!

Ok coming out of this let me do 2 things. FIRST - I want to take a brief excursion to show you the biblical role of deacon and how it works itself out here at Mercy Church. That excursion will be a bridge into how this passage can be a powerful model for us to follow into the days ahead as a church. But the key to get there is understanding this deacon role so let's talk about that for a few minutes. Excursion time!

What does a deacon do?

There are many spiritual giftings in the church. We see a few different lists in the new testament which only reinforces to us that there really are a vast array and every single person has a gifting. But, there are only two offices given to the church. Two official roles that need to be filled. Elders - the shepherd leaders of the church. and Deacons - the servant leaders of the church. Here's what a deacon does:

A deacon is a servant of Christ who demonstrates the character of Christ, follows the wisdom of Christ, and serves the needs of the Body of Christ.

A deacon is NOT an elder. That would be double work. A deacon serves the physical needs of the church so the elders can devote themselves to the two things we see in acts 6: ministry of the word & prayer. MAYBE you

come from a background where a group of people were labeled as deacons but functionally were elders. That's bad for everyone. Elders should eld & deacons should deac. Serve.

Here at Mercy we currently have 5 deacons and in a couple of weeks we will present a few more to you for you to pray for & assess before we commission them. Our members have access to our deacon hotline and this team is AWESOME at praying for and meeting the needs of our people. But this is critical critical. Deacons Serve the needs of the people while the elders minister the word of God to the people and pray for the people. Deacon isn't J.V. elder. These are twin engines of a healthy church. Proclamation and Provision. Preaching & Providing. Gotta have both and God sets aside people for both.

What qualifies someone to for the role of deacon?

When you look at the qualifications here, and in 1 Timothy 3 what you see are character requirements. The church may have members who are STRONG administratively...members who are great at meeting needs...but that gifting isn't what qualifies somebody for the office of deacon. It's all about character.

8 Deacons, likewise, should be worthy of respect, not hypocritical, not drinking a lot of wine, not greedy for money, 9 holding the mystery of the faith with a clear conscience. 10 They must also be tested first; if they prove blameless, then they can serve as deacons. 11 Wives, too, must be worthy of respect, not slanderers, self-controlled, faithful in everything. 12 Deacons are to

be husbands of one wife, managing their children and their own households competently. 13 For those who have served well as deacons acquire a good standing for themselves and great boldness in the faith that is in Christ Jesus. -- 1 Timothy 3:8-13

Deacons are not necessarily the most skilled and capable people, they are model Christ-like believers who show a pattern of serving others faithfully before they were ever asked.

A deacon's qualification is based on character, not ability

Ok our third question is a little more specific but we want to be clear on it.

Can Women Serve as Deacons?

I want to say something very important before I answer this. Our elders spent a lot of time praying & studying through this question before we installed deacons last year. That's a part of what a new church does. Just like what we see in Acts 6. And as we came to a decision we did so humbly. BECAUSE we know of Godly, Scripture loving, Christ exalting churches that hold different positions on this question and STILL bring glory to God in their churches. There are three passages of scripture that are the more primary passages studied in this question.

- Acts 6 - The choice to select 7 men is describing the beginnings of this role and the apostle Paul goes back in other texts and begins to build order

into the church where there wasn't order before. What we are seeing is more descriptive of how the role began. BUT, it does say men. So, we take a cue from this but we take lead from another spot.

- 1 Timothy 3.11 - The passage I just showed you. Depending on your translation that word is different. I read you the CSB which says wives. The ESV says "their wives" even though the pronoun 'their' is nowhere in the Greek. The NIV says 'women' and then has a footnote that says 'possibly deacons wives OR women who are deacons.' And so on if I were to keep going.
- the greek word *gynaikas* can be translated either "women" or "wives." As we read the rest of the verse and surrounding verses, we see the character of a servant leader that all Christians are called towards and some in the church family, deacons, are commissioned to lead out in. But we also see verse 12 that says husband of one wife.
- Romans 16.1 - Phoebe is referred to as a *diakonos* of the church in Cenchrea. She is recognized for the type of character and service congruent with the role of deacon Paul puts forward in 1 Timothy 3.

So this comes down to an interpretation decision and we believe you can be faithful on both sides of it. We believe God's word affirms men and women who meet the character qualifications are both able to serve as deacons in the church.

We believe the scripture is clearer that the office of elder is reserved for men and so men serve in that role

here at Mercy. I'll tell you what I love about mercy is that we have brothers and sisters who have different opinions on this. But because it is such a tough interpretation question, and because we are trying to be faithful to scripture and not to the winds of culture, we have people who believe differently on this who are fully committed members of Mercy Church. It's an open-handed issue and one we trust God will bless our submission to him in.

Ok we've arrived back home from our excursion. I hope you enjoyed it. If you have more questions please email me at pastorspence@mercycharlotte.com. Happy to answer all of your deacon questions. Some of you that aren't concerned, well...now you know we care a lot.

Ok like I said understanding deacons is a bridge to seeing the beautiful picture of the church and your role in it. See to faithfully be the church, there are two interdependent ministries that happen always at the same time. You can't have one without the other. They are the twin engines of the church and they are BOTH a product of receiving the Love of God for you in Christ. Both are in view in Acts 6. Every single person who truly comes to believe the gospel begins to develop a love for people that expresses itself in word and deed. In word it's the proclamation of the gospel and in deed it's meeting the needs of one another.

And as this is what every individual christian is compelled to, its also what every group of Christians, every church, is compelled to. And what we are seeing

in Acts 6 is...what do we do when these two ministries seem to conflict.

After all Jesus says GO make disciples of all nations! We have been given a mandate from God himself that we are his plan A for taking the gospel to people. PEOPLE are God's plan A for reaching other people. And all people means all people! And the scripture is FILLED with passages like Romans 10...how will they hear unless they are sent...how beautiful are the feet of those who bring the good news of the gospel. The Old Testament foreshadows a day of salvation for all peoples of the earth, the gospel announces its arrival, the book of acts shows the gospel go to every people group, the letters to the church are sent all over the known world and the book of revelation tells us about a day WHERE EVERY TRIBE TONGUE & NATION will gather around the throne together! And God SENDS US OUT!

God's Mandate to the Church - Make Disciples of All Nations

But then again...isn't a disciple one who Loves God and Loves others? Isn't the love of God for us at the very core of the message we proclaim? Matthew 22 the pharisees ask Jesus what is the greatest commandment and he says love the Lord your God and the second is love your neighbor as yourself. By this the world will know that you are my disciples. By the way you love one another. The gospels and the new testament are filled with "one another" commands. Love one another, serve one another, care for one another, pray for one another. Meet needs together. Fight sin together. The letters after all are written TO

THE CHURCH. So if the church is going to be THE CHURCH...it MUST set the standard in radical generosity towards one another. Our energy must go there. OTHERWISE...what are we winning people into?

Spence Story - used to be a community groups pastor in a fast growing church. Here's what happened: We'd all celebrate a record attendance on the weekend! MORE PEOPLE! And I'm over in the corner in the fetal position sucking my thumb. Because I'm thinking...yeah that's great that more people are here...BUT THEY'VE GOT ISSUES AND PROBLEMS AND NEED TO BE DISCIPLED INTO CHRIST FOLLOWERS! STOP CHEERING AND START PRAYING!!!

God's Mandate to the Church - Love One Another

But then again...one of the primary acts of love we offer one another is proclaiming God's truth to one another isn't it! I mean when the apostles devoted themselves to the ministry of the word...a big part of that was preaching the beautiful comforting life giving truths of God to the people of God.

What sometimes happens in church is we feel we have to bend our ministry to one of these over the other. And individuals within the church will feel, maybe as a God given part of their passion or maybe as a preference... they will feel one of these should be given priority over the other.

Here's what I think Acts 6 is showing us: If proclamation of God's love and demonstration of God's love are both

mandates from God...they are not in conflict with one another. They are the exact opposite. The ministry of the word explains the motivation for the love people experience from Christians. And the ministry of meeting needs validates the message being proclaimed.

So how does the church faithfully demonstrate and proclaim the gospel?

If proclamation comes out without demonstration...the church will be seen as hypocrites. Just preaching a gospel that doesn't tangibly change anyone or anything. If demonstration comes without proclamation, the church will be nothing more than a social welfare group. Connecting justice to the gospel is like connecting electricity to a lightbulb.

- 1) **Rehearse the gospel daily** - Listen I can't say this enough to you. If we do not give ourselves desperately to knowing God. To confessing sin, believing God's love is enough for us, and praying for one another... everything else we do will be
- 2) **Appoint & Support deacons and elders** -
- 3) **Unleash every member to use their giftings**

THE BENCH

Structure of passage

- I. The disciples were increasing, which comes with problems
 - a. A complaint arises
 - i. Widows are being overlooked. Serving (diaconeo) needs aren't being met.
 - ii. Cultural Clash. Widows are Greek. Who are the minority at this point. Christians in the Majority are overlooking the needs of the minority.
 - b. The twelve call a church meeting to resolve the problem
 - i. Apostles can't stop preaching - wouldn't be right.
 1. So select other men to serve in this role. Their main job is Diaconoeo - literally serving tables.
 - a. Good reputation, full of spirit & wisdom
 2. So we can devote ourselves to prayer & ministry of the word
 - c. Deacons are selected & commissioned
 1. Names - all are Greek names. Likely all hellenists but Nicolaus specifically it seems was not Jewish by birth. And that's big.
- II. Church continued to grow

(CSB)

Piper says, "Luke celebrates this solution. The widows were cared for, and the ministry of the Word of God was not forsaken. Both were utterly crucial. Either could have undermined the church and ended its amazing growth. The solution was the diversity of gifts and calling. The solution was a new kind of teamwork in the body of Christ. ... What Luke is celebrating is that the triumph over this in-house problem resulted in a new breakthrough in evangelistic power. Now, even priests, who had been so hostile (Acts 4:1), are responding to the Word of God and obeying the faith. The church had been tested. She had passed the test by caring for the widows and guarding the Word. And God honored this triumph with new power and fruitfulness."

The result of this triumph, as noted in the bookend statements of 6:2 and 6:7 is that the church grew, and the gospel increased. Even enemies of God (which we all were) saw the wisdom and goodness of God and turned to him.

It cannot be assumed that there was a doctrinal rift between the Hellenists and the Hebrews, but language and culture are closely linked, and it is likely that these two groups brought differences of outlook and attitude with them into the

community of Christian disciples. Old prejudices and resentments may have reasserted themselves—or appeared to have been an issue—when practical problems relating to the care of widows became obvious. Christians in every age and social context need to be aware of the threat that cultural and racial differences can pose to their unity in Christ.¹

- See Tim Lucas notes on Luke 6 under “Ministry: servanthood”
 - Tim Lucas on Acts 6, Serving the church:
 - Our new offices are ‘brand new’ (that’s a stretch), like new... slightly worn... crack den comes to mind
 - Acts 6:
 - This wasn’t “below” the Apostles
 - Problems in the cafeteria line kept the church from growing.
 - Barna:
 - 70% of new people decide whether or not they’ll come back to a church in the first 7 minutes of arriving at a campus
 - The sermon starts in the parking lot
 - We want everything to say “you are important!”
 - The result of the deacons’ service was not, Luke records, that “people quit complaining” but “the word of God spread.”

- Deacons served tables and the *city council* got saved.
- Grid for where you serve (jd: Jim Collins’ circles!): heart (passion), hands (skills), place of greatest demand

How many of you have been on a cruise at some point in your life? Did you have a good time? I’ve been on one cruise. It was in the Mediterranean sea as a part of a school field trip when I was going into my junior year of high school. HOW my AP history teacher convinced all the powers to be to make that an eastern Guilford high school educational trip is beyond me. We saw some sights during the day hung out on the cruise ship for the rest of the time.

Highlight: I met my future wife. She was 16, I was 15. Told her I was 16 though. Of course. We had great dinners, beautiful scenery, fell in love and after we got back she broke up with her boyfriend and we’ve been together ever since. One cruise, One wife. Can’t top that so why try?

Any of you ever visited the Battleship North Carolina outside of Wilmington? VERY different than a cruise ship. Guns everywhere. Tiny hallways, no pools for swimming. No lounges for limbo. There’s a mess hall, sleeping quarters, and there are battle stations. They are built for different things. A cruiseship is built for comfort & for finding your spouse. A battleship is built...for battle. On a cruiseship most people are there to be entertained

¹ Peterson, D. G. (2009). [*The Acts of the Apostles*](#) (p. 231). Grand Rapids, MI; Nottingham, England: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company.

and a few staff are there to provide. On a battleship everyone is there for a mission. A cruise is an escape from reality, a mission is the culminating event everyone on board has been training for.

I think you will see where I'm going with this. They are made for different things. If you sent a battleship on a cruise route, the soldiers would get bored and a bunch of bored soldiers almost always leads to trouble. But if you sent a cruiseliner on a military mission...it would fail. Because nobody would be trained, positioned, or equipped for battle. And if you step onto a battleship thinking it's a cruiseliner you are in for a tough ride at first. Cause you are going to have to put down your expectations and find a battle station. But if you stick with it you'll find contributing to a mission to be far more rewarding than a cruise.

Today we are getting into Acts 6 and its where the church for the first time starts assigning people to battle stations. It has a mission and the mission requires everyone to have a battle station. Here is the connection for you: Because God has called his church to a mission...he has called and equipped every Christian for a specific battle station. And we are building mercy church to be a battleship. And God's word tells me he has equipped each Christian with a unique design to step in and provide exactly what we need for the mission.