

GOD'S SURPRISINGLY SIMPLE REMEDY

Acts 6:1-7

MAIN IDEA: In His church, God uses simple men as the remedy for great problems.

Intro:

My wife told me not to do it; but I did it anyway! She said if I did it, I'd get stuck; but she was wrong. Our car kept moving over the sand toward the water just fine. And then, suddenly she was right! As I tried to turn, our rear-wheel-drive Malibu suddenly sank in the sand. I put the transmission into a lower gear and tried to rock the car back and forth to get momentum going again, but we only dug in deeper!

We were stuck in the sand in a remote area in Venezuela, inextricably it seemed! While I was mentally calculating how we might mortgage our house to hire a tow truck, I realized that there were no phones available anywhere near us to call one anyway. I suggested that maybe if the car was pushed from behind, it might get moving again; but I just couldn't talk her into doing it!

My high school physics training kicked into gear to analyze my great problem. Too many pounds of steel on too few square inches of tire contact on the sand would displace the sand almost as if it were water. My tires were too skinny! I needed fatter tires, more like what you often see on the big 4-wheel drive rigs. That would make a bigger footprint on the sand! Well, wider tires were even harder to come by in that remote location than a tow truck! What to do?

A brilliant idea came to me! Don't be fooled by the dumb look on my face! You see, sometimes the most appropriate solution to a great problem is a surprisingly simple remedy. So, I got out of the car and let most of the air out of our tires. Then I climbed back in and drove right out of the sand! I was feeling pretty smug, but then as wives are prone to do, Cheryl brought me back to reality. "Well, if you hadn't been so stupid, you wouldn't have to be so smart!"

This morning we are going to look at a tremendous problem in the early church and God's surprisingly simple remedy for that problem! The story is found in Acts 6:1-7. I like to invite you to stand in reverence for God's Word as I read it.

Acts 6:1-7

Now at this time while the disciples were increasing in number; a complaint arose on the part of the Hellenistic Jews against the native Hebrews, because their widows were being overlooked in the daily serving of food. So, the twelve summoned the congregation of disciples and said, "It is not desirable for us to neglect the word of God in order to serve tables. Therefore, brethren, select from among you seven men of good reputation, full of the Spirit and of wisdom, whom we may put in charge of this task. But we will devote ourselves to prayer and to the ministry of the Word."

The statement found approval with the whole congregation; and they chose Stephen, a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit, and Philip, Prochorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas and Nicolas, a proselyte from Antioch. And these they brought before the apostles; and after praying, they laid their hands on them. The Word of God kept on spreading; and the number of the disciples continued to increase greatly in Jerusalem, and a great many of the priests were becoming obedient to the faith.

An Extended Context: Defiance

As we consider God's solution to a great problem this morning, it's important that we consider the context of this story. If there was one word that I could choose to describe the context, it would be DEFIANCE. Defiance, as I'm using the word, is a bold resistance to authority. Our look at this context

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of defiance is complicated by the fact that the context goes back before the six days of creation, back to when God created angels with the faculty of choice. One of those angels set himself up against God, leading a third of the heavenly host to rebel against God.

On the last of the six days of creation, God created man as a creature also with the ability to choose, able to choose to fellowship with God and give Him the worship of obedience or to walk away from Him. Satan, that chief fallen angel, went after the crown of God's creation, tempting Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden; and they chose to disobey God's clear command, in their defiance setting themselves at enmity with God. The image of God was marred in Adam and Eve and their descendants.

Since that time, Satan and his minions have conspired with the fallen nature of man, that sinful nature inherited from Adam, to nullify the work of God, to thwart His plans, and destroy what is God's. God promised in Genesis 3:15 that Satan would bruise the heel of One coming from the woman, but that her seed would crush Satan's head. You see that conflict carried out then throughout biblical history.

After the flood in the time of Noah, God set aside a people for Himself, a nation that was to come through Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. In the life of each of these patriarchs of the Jewish people, you can read of opposition by Satan. And at times Satan would attack the whole nation such as during the 400 years in Egypt and the attack by Pharaoh at the Red Sea or in battles with nations such as the Amorites. God would always bring a remedy, often working great miracles, as problems arose for His people.

During the time of the judges, nations would attack God's people to wipe them out and God would send a deliverer like Sampson, Deborah, and Gideon. Later Satan conspired with the evil kings of Israel and Judah, kings like Jeroboam, Ahab and Manasseh, to lead the people of God to abandon Him and serve idols. Even during the captivity of God's people by the Assyrians and Chaldeans and during the period of the reconstruction of Jerusalem, we see Satan conspiring with men like Haman, Sanballat, and Tobiah to obliterate the people of God and tear down the work that God was doing. When God sent His son, Jesus to be born in Bethlehem so that He might die for mankind, God's enemies tried to wipe Him out by killing the babies in Bethlehem. Having failed to snuff out the life of the baby Jesus, Satan tempted the adult Jesus in the wilderness, trying to deter Him from doing the Father's will, offering Him a shortcut to a glorious reign that bypassed the cross. But Jesus carried out the Father's will, offering Himself a sacrifice for our sins on the cross. Death itself could not keep Jesus as He rose on the third day. In His death and resurrection, Jesus indeed did crush the head of Satan just as Genesis 3:15 predicted. In fact, I John 3:8 says that the Son of God appeared with the express purpose of destroying the works of the devil. Unable to stamp out the Messiah, Satan went back to trying to destroy what Jesus was doing.

After He ascended into heaven and after the Spirit descended on the followers of Jesus on the day of Pentecost, Jesus started to build His church, something that He said that He would do in Matthew 16:18. In the words of the Apostle Paul in his letter to Titus, God was calling out "...a people for Himself, a people for His own possession, zealous for good deeds."

Acts 2:41 says that after Peter preached his first sermon, about three thousand souls were added to the church, a church that before that sermon had presumably around 500 people who were witnesses to Christ's resurrection. Satan's adversarial hand was evident as the apostles were doing miracles attesting to the witness they were giving of the power of the risen Christ. The church was in its infancy, and the believers were centered in Jerusalem. It's not until Acts 8 that we see persecution

scattering the believers into various parts of the world where the church multiplied into many local congregations in the different cities.

Chapter 3 of the book of Acts tells us about the healing of the lame beggar and Peter's explanation to the crowd. Many came to faith in Jesus when they heard the message of the power of the risen Christ. The religious leaders felt threatened because by then, just the men who put their faith in Jesus numbered about 5000 (v4). We have no count of the women and children. So, Satan sent persecution from outside of the church. Peter and John were imprisoned and were threatened by the religious authorities to keep them from speaking about Jesus. But the followers of Jesus weren't silenced. Rather, they prayed for confidence from the Lord to speak boldly and continue on in ministry.

Satan wasn't done yet. As chapter 5 of Acts relates, Satan attacked from within, conspiring with Ananias and Sapphira to lie to the Holy Spirit as they misrepresented their offering to the apostles. God justly punished their sin and verse 11 tells us that great fear and great reverence fell on the whole church.

Tremendous Problems: Disunity and Diversion

So, out of that context, we come to chapter 6 and read of Satan doubling up on his attack on God's work, Jesus' Church. Satan used a two-pronged attack, first **disunity** and then **diversion**. Just a casual reading of the first seven verses doesn't communicate to our souls the seriousness of this attack on the work of God.

I'm not sure that even the apostles realized in the moment, the seriousness of the challenge to God's grand eternal plan. Much later, the Apostle Paul wrote some words under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit that put Satan's attack in perspective.

Look with me at Ephesians 3:4-11 where the Apostle Paul spoke about the revelation he received of God's mystery which... *"...in other generations was not made known to the sons of men, as it has now been revealed to His holy apostles and prophets in the Spirit; to be specific, that the Gentiles are fellow heirs and fellow members of the body, and fellow partakers of the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel..."* Then in verse 8 he says, *"To me, the very least of all saints, this grace was given, to preach to the Gentiles the unfathomable riches of Christ, and to bring to light what is the administration of the mystery which for ages has been hidden in God who created all things; so that the manifold wisdom of God might now be made known through the church to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places. This was in accordance with the eternal purpose which He carried out in Christ Jesus our Lord."*

It was through the church that God's wisdom was to be revealed to angelic authorities, both good angels and demonic ones, in the spiritual realm. The church, consisting of both Jews and Gentiles, will give testimony throughout eternity to God's wisdom and God's work in bringing together disparate people who normally would be at enmity with each other. The church consists of naturally adversarial groups who are bound together in a loving unity that can only be attributed to a work of God Himself.

Remember that in the heavenly scenes in the book of Revelation, it is not a number of autonomous groups, but rather one great throng from every tribe and nation that is before the throne, giving praise, honor, and adoration to the Lamb. Jesus Christ died for them all, and so they will eternally worship Him together! Remember, *"This was in accordance with the eternal purpose which He (God) carried out in Christ Jesus our Lord."* That united church glorifies the Lord as His eternal purpose is carried out!

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Look now at how Satan attacked the unity of the church. In verse 1 we read of a complaint arising because the Hellenistic widows were being overlooked in the daily serving of food. The widows from Jerusalem were taken well care of but Hellenistic widows, those with Greek culture and Greek thinking who had come from surrounding countries for the Passover and then came to faith in Jesus, were overlooked or possibly intentionally bypassed in the distribution of food. Dissention and disunity in the church would be the inevitable result, threatening God's plan to bring both Jew and Gentile into the church.

Disunity would be a tremendous problem for two reasons. First, it would become a scandal, publicly negating the work of Jesus in reconciling us to God and to each other through His death on the cross. Reconciliation, not alienation, is God's design for His church. This is an avenue of attack that Satan uses even today as He tries to undo the work of Christ.

Secondly, disunity was a problem because the testimony of authenticity of the gospel message was at stake. In Jesus' prayer to the Father in John 17, Jesus said He was not asking that His disciples be taken out of the world but that they would be kept from the Evil One, the Devil. Then listen to what He says in verses 20-23. ²⁰ *"I am not asking on behalf of these alone, but also for those who believe in Me through their word, ²¹ that they may all be one; just as You, Father, are in Me and I in You, that they also may be in Us, so that the world may believe that You sent Me. ²² The glory which You have given Me I also have given to them, so that they may be one, just as We are one; ²³ I in them and You in Me, that they may be perfected in unity, so that the world may know that You sent Me, and You loved them, just as You loved Me."*

It was through the unity of Jesus followers, unity forged by the Father, that people would understand that the *"God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son that whosoever believeth on Him might not perish but have everlasting life."* Jesus was just beginning to build His church and it was important that through their unity, Christ's followers would give a clear testimony about Jesus and His redemptive work. So, the enemy was threatening that message by bringing dissention and disunity in the congregation.

A farmer told his son, "Tommy, I'm going to be gone for five days. I have two jobs for you to do. Feed the cows and milk them twice a day until I get back."

Tommy was an obedient son and wanted to do what his father told him to do. But the first day a sickly calf was born, and its mother died. The next day or so, Tommy had a real problem. His attention to the instructions of his dad to feed the cows and milk them twice a day was diverted to a little calf that demanded so much care, that he had little time to tend to the rest of the cows. Yet he couldn't quit attending to the little calf if he was to care for all the herd. Something analogous to Tommy's problem came up in the infant church in Jerusalem.

Satan's second prong of the attack was an attempt to divert the apostles' attention from the priority tasks that God had assigned to them. If the infant church was to grow and mature, the apostles needed to focus on prayer and the ministry of the Word. But the enemy gave them a valid reason to divert from their priority tasks in order to settle a squabble between the Hebraic and the Hellenistic Jewish believers, a quarrel that threatened the credibility of the Gospel message. Yet the situation was not an "either/or" choice for them but rather a "both/and" imperative.

Indeed, Satan was appealing to the old sinful nature of man as he played on jealousy, mistrust and bitterness in both the Hellenistic and the Hebraic members of the congregation of believers. It was a problem the apostles could not ignore if the newly born church was to survive and prosper.

A Surprisingly Simple Remedy: Deacons

Fortunately, as we see in verse 2, the 12 apostles didn't decide to just ignore a problem that wasn't going away in order to devote themselves to their priority ministry. Instead, God gave them wisdom to say, "It is not desirable for us to neglect the word of God in order to serve tables." They refused to be diverted from the ministry to which God had called them.

Notice too that the apostles didn't try to settle the matter themselves. Rather, God gave them wisdom to enact a simple remedy for this great problem, a problem that would be multiplied in different ways and magnified many times over the years in many other situations, problems that were destined to tear down the work of God throughout the life of the church.

The apostles asked the church to choose seven men who were full of the Holy Spirit and wisdom whom the apostles could put in charge of the tables from which the widows ate. Not a spectacular solution to the big problem. Just "seven men FROM AMONG YOU!" The apostles didn't look to a hiring firm to find them the right candidates from somewhere else in the world. They didn't hire equity specialists. They didn't hire politicians to fix their problems. Just seven men whose only qualifications were dependent on the Spirit of God in them. Seven humble men whom God could use to serve, to "deacon" the congregation in their great need. You see, even today in His church, God chooses to use simple, humble men indwelt by the Holy Spirit as His method of meeting great challenges.

We've read the story about how those seven men were chosen to minister (deacon) in this way. We've seen too how the result was that the Gospel message kept spreading and many were added to the number of disciples in that early church in Jerusalem. Let me point out some important points in the story and then move on to some application for us here at Emmanuel:

1. Isn't it wonderful to see that God had time for these Hellenistic widows? They weren't the most numerous group, the most obviously important group, the most visible group. Children's ministry, youth ministry, or ministry to women certainly would have attracted more attention to their perceived needs yet God, through the elders of the church, intervened because He cares about even the least prominent and the least embraced widows of the church. The problems of Acts 6 had implications far beyond the widows that it touched....yet for their own sake, God intervened.
2. Notice too that these first deacons are not given the title "Deacon" in this passage, though the verb "to deacon" is found multiple times. Interestingly enough, one could read the elders' words as *"It is not right that we should give up preaching the Word of God to deacon tables...but we will devote ourselves to prayer and to deaconing the Word."* It is only later in the N.T. that we see the titled office of "Deacon" emerge as a regular part of the church life.
3. You can see the wisdom of God at work in the early church as seven men of good reputation in the congregation, men who were full of the Holy Spirit and wisdom, were nominated by a congregation composed of Hebraic and Hellenistic Jews. All of the seven have Greek names, not Hebrew names. In fact, Nicolas from Antioch was a Gentile convert to Judaism. These were Greek speaking and Greek cultured Jewish men. Think what this would communicate to the Hellenistic Jews about the regard of the Hebraic Jews for their concerns!
4. At least Philip and Stephen were gifted in communication of the Gospel message. Stephen is also mentioned as "full of faith" and was the first martyr in the church.
5. The nominees whom the congregation chose, met with the approval of the Apostles who prayed and laid hands on them. This public presentation of the new deacons confirmed to the congregation that they had the endorsement of the elders to serve the congregation. It opened up doors of ministry for them because the people could have full confidence in them.

6. The deacons' task was way more than just waiting on tables...this was already being done. The first deacons were not called to replace or add to the numbers of those already serving at the tables! No, they were called to practical, hands-on shepherding in the congregation, helping the elders to accomplish the ministry that God called them to, in this case, maintaining the practical unity of the congregation of believers.
7. Notice how simple God's solution is. God didn't do a spectacular miracle or tap into His omnipotence as a remedy for the life-threatening attack on His infant church. Rather Jesus entrusted the survival and the future of His church to simple ordinary men who had Adam's fallen nature; but because they had put their faith in Christ Jesus, they had the Holy Spirit and His wisdom. The Holy Spirit made them more than adequate for the attacks of the Devil, and the wisdom the Spirit gave made them adequate for the task of hands-on shepherding in the church. God used simple men as the remedy for great shepherding problems in His church.

Application:

Next week, I intend to flesh out what deacon ministry looks like in the Scriptures and how it applies to today's church, 2000 years after the Acts 6 story that we read this morning. But I'd like to ask you an important question.

How important is the unity of the church to you? Today God puts the same priority on the unity of the church as He did back in the primitive church. Are you "...diligent to preserve the unity of the Spirit" the way Eph. 4:3 tells us to be? Remember, Satan is still at work trying to destroy the work of God in His church. As the elder's shepherd this congregation, Satan would love to divert their attention from prayer and ministry of the Word. And he would love to use jealousy, bitterness, and envy, or whatever other means, to tear down the unity of this congregation, unity for which Jesus prayed to the Father and for which He gave His life. That unity is essential to the credibility of our Gospel message to our neighbors and the world we seek to reach for Christ today!

So, we need deacon ministry at Emmanuel just like the early church did as it grew larger. Though the deacons serving at Emmanuel are quiet about their ministry, they humbly serve the Lord as they serve us in an effective hands-on shepherding role. Their service goes way beyond administering the Deacon Fund as they are intimately involved in hands-on shepherding in our lives. In His church today, God still uses simple men as the remedy for great problems.