

# The 12 Choose 7

Acts 5:41 – 6:7 NIV

Today, I want to borrow verses 41 and 42 from acts chapter 5 to begin acts chapter 6.

This was a powerful and exciting time for the church. What started in the temple now filled Jerusalem and had spread into the surrounding towns. All the words of this new life; preached by the apostles and confirmed by signs and wonders in the power of the Spirit.

Persecution couldn't stop it; corruption didn't taint it; and now thirty-nine lashes minus one was considered a badge of honor for the Name. But the powers of darkness were not finished yet. They will now try a distraction. And, if not handled properly, the distraction would accomplish what the threats of the Sanhedrin had not; a pause, or even the end of the preaching of the Gospel.

The apostles had been flogged and ordered not to preach in Jesus name, then let go. We pick up Luke's account in verse 41:

The apostles left the Sanhedrin, rejoicing because they had been counted worthy of suffering disgrace for the Name. <sup>42</sup> Day after day, in the temple courts and from house to house, they never stopped teaching and proclaiming the good news that Jesus is the Christ.

In those days when the number of disciples was increasing, the Grecian Jews among them complained against the Hebraic Jews because their widows were being overlooked in the daily distribution of food. <sup>2</sup> So the Twelve gathered all the disciples together and said, "It would not be right for us to neglect the ministry of the word of God in order to wait on tables. <sup>3</sup> Brothers, choose seven men from among you who are known to be full of the Spirit and wisdom. We will turn this responsibility over to them <sup>4</sup> and will give our attention to prayer and the ministry of the word."

<sup>5</sup> This proposal pleased the whole group. They chose Stephen, a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit; also Philip, Procorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas, and Nicolas from Antioch, a convert to Judaism. <sup>6</sup> They presented these men to the apostles, who prayed and laid their hands on them.

<sup>7</sup> So the word of God spread. The number of disciples in Jerusalem increased rapidly, and a large number of priests became obedient to the faith. (Acts 5:41- 6:7)

In the first few verses of chapter 6, we have a record of rapid growth; even a large number of priests became obedient. With this rapid growth came a problem.

Have you noticed that whenever something good is happening the devil seems to throw a wrench in the works?

Do you get a little gun shy when everything seems to be going well; waiting for the other shoe to fall?

When everything is running smooth, I know a test is just around the corner.

One of the unique characteristics of the church was the genuine love they had for one another. This love was demonstrated by:

Selling their possessions and goods, they gave to anyone as he had need. (Acts 2:45)

All the believers were one in heart and mind. No one claimed that any of his possessions was his own, but they shared everything they had. (Acts 4:32)

There were no needy persons among them. For from time to time those who owned lands or houses sold them, brought the money from the sales <sup>35</sup> and put it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to anyone as he had need. (Acts 4:34-35)

And there would have been no one with greater need than widows in Jesus day.

Judging from the above passages that Luke provides concerning the distribution of possessions and goods, this oversight was likely accidental. Several factors played a part:

One: Satan was at work behind the scenes trying to stir up division. He will use an honest mistake to his advantage, if he can.

Two: there was a natural division within the church. The Grecian Jews, also known as Hellenist Jews, were those who were born of Jewish parents outside of Palestine, who spoke the Greek language, and had adopted Greek customs.

The Hebraic Jews were those born in Palestine, who spoke Hebrew and held to their Jewish customs. In Jewish communities, the Hebraic Jews, who had not adopted the Greek customs looked down on the Grecian Jews. But, at Pentecost, Hebraic speaking Jews and Greek speaking Jews became one in Christ. However, it is possible that some prejudice could still exist. The Greek-speaking widows soon felt as if they had been shorted in the daily division of food.

Three: It would have been easy for this to fall through the cracks of a growing church, even when that church was as spirit-filled and full of love for one another. The success of the church was actually the source of the problem. The Church was experiencing "growing pains"

and this was making it difficult for the apostles to minister to everybody.

Reese's commentary on Acts suggests that there may have been as many as 20,000 Christians in and around Jerusalem by this time. If this is a reasonably accurate estimate, how many widows would there have been, and where would they have been located? Would they all have been in one place? Not likely. They would have been scattered throughout Jerusalem and in the surrounding suburbs. Remember, this was a *daily* distribution of food; not a weekly shopping list or a monthly voucher. There were no 'Meals on Wheels;' this was meals on sandals.

When a church is small, many of the jobs can be handled with little or no structure. But, the church wasn't small any longer.

Notice the source of the complaint: the Grecian Jews. The complaining was not coming from the Greek-speaking widows; but the Greek-speaking saints, who took up the cause of their widows. And, the complaining was not against the apostles, but against the native-Hebraic Jews, whose widows were apparently doing a little better.

Entering a department store, a lady was startled when a band began to play and a dignified executive pinned an orchid on her dress and handed her a crisp hundred dollar bill. She was the store's millionth customer. Television cameras were

focused on her and reporters began interviewing. "Tell me," one asked, "just what did you come here for today?" The lady hesitated for a minute, and then answered, "I'm on my way to the Complaint Department."

Some people don't go to the complaint department; they live in the complaint department. Some people are chronic complainers. But, this is not the case with this complaint. This was a real issue that the enemy could have used to disrupt the unity and witness of the church. The issue needed addressed with wisdom and tact.

Luke does not include a report of the whole process, just the decision. In the decision, the first thing we see is that the apostles kept the main thing the main thing.

**It would not be right for us to neglect the ministry of the word of God in order to wait on tables.**

With the distraction, the enemy wanted the apostles to overload themselves to the point of allowing the ministry of the word to suffer. No human can do it all, not even an apostle; not even a Moses.

I wonder if during the discussion of the situation if one of the apostles remembered Moses trying to handle all the disputes of the people. In Exodus 18, Jethro, Moses father-in-law, came for a visit. He sees Moses' overload and heads

off a disaster by advising him to delegate; to get some help.

Notice that the apostles did not appoint people to do the work, but allowed the believers to participate in solving the problem; wisdom and tact. The apostles gave the guidelines, but the believers did the choosing.

Notice also that the believers chose Greek speaking men to handle the Grecian widow's daily distribution of food, for all seven names appear to be Greek names, one even being a gentile convert to Judaism.

More wisdom; good choices; the enemy foiled; problem solved and Luke gave future generations of church leaders the first recorded deacons.

But, on closer examination of these verses, I don't think that Luke's main purpose was to give us our first examples of deacons.

Notice verse 7: **7 So the word of God spread. The number of disciples in Jerusalem increased rapidly, and a large number of priests became obedient to the faith.**

Why would Luke mention priests coming to faith? How is this related to the problem of daily distribution of food?

Basically, the priests were the 'hands on' servants of the Old Testament. The priests would be the ones who would have

contact with the people as opposed to the high priest. For example: in Luke 5; when Jesus healed a leper, he told him, **“Don't tell anyone, but go, show yourself to the priest and offer the sacrifices that Moses commanded for your cleansing, as a testimony to them.”** (Luke 5:14)

In a way, you could say that the priests were the 'deacons' of the Old Testament.

So, as the word spread, and the priests heard how the situation with the widows was handled between the apostles and believers, they could identify. By the very nature of their work, they knew firsthand the hypocrisy of the Jewish leaders, how they talked so pious, but their actions didn't line up with their talk.

They saw firsthand how the Jewish leaders would **devour widows' houses and for a show make lengthy prayers.** (Mark 12:40)

When these priests heard how the believers handled the problem of the daily distribution of food, they saw words and works line up the way they should.

A few sermons ago, I used the word genuine to describe the action that was taking place between the believers. What these priests saw was Jesus words genuinely being lived out:

**“Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind” ;**

**and, 'Love your neighbor as yourself.** (Luke 10:27)

James would later write:

**Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world.** (James 1:27)

So, the powers of darkness, in their attempt to distract the apostles from the main thing, which was preaching the word and prayer, not only failed in the attempt, but gave the church opportunity to spread the word and to grow numerically, by handling a problem with wisdom and tact.

When John the Baptist was in prison, he sent his disciples to ask Jesus, **“Are you the one who was to come, or should we expect someone else?”**

Jesus replied, **“Go back and report to John what you hear and see: <sup>5</sup> The blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy<sup>[bl]</sup> are cured, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is preached to the poor. <sup>6</sup> Blessed is the man who does not fall away on account of me.”** (Matthew 11:3-6)

In effect, Jesus answered John's question, “Look, John, at what I am doing, and judge for yourself if this isn't the work of Messiah.” It wasn't just what Jesus said, but also what He did, that was so persuasive.

The apostles were not only proclaiming the words of Jesus; they were practicing the works of Jesus. This was convincing proof for those who had eyes to see. Many of the priests therefore came to faith in Jesus, due to the way the church responded to the needs of the widows.

This is what our neighbors need to see. They need to see that our words and our works line up. Jesus words need to be proven true by every believer:

By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another.  
(John 13:35)

Our neighbors are looking for something genuine.