

FOCUS ON PRAYER AND THE MINISTRY OF THE WORD

Acts 6:1-15

Key Verse: 6:3,4

“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 and will give our attention to prayer and the ministry of the word.”

In the last passage we heard the angel’s message, “Go, stand in the temple courts, and tell the people the full message of this new life.” By God’s grace, we obeyed this message by going to our campuses and sharing the gospel with students. Then God worked mightily among us. At Loyola University, more than 140 students signed up to join UBF campus Bible study. At UIC, everyone went out to share the gospel with students. Sometimes parents and children were fishing at the same time, like Christy Toh and Agi Toh, and Dr. Augustine Sohn and Augustine, Jr.. Many new students came to the Bible house for one-to-one Bible study. At Northeastern, God blessed the prayer of Missionaries Moody and Helen Kim and sent three new HNW sheep who are thirsty for Bible study. May God help us go to each campus and share the gospel until 1,000 one-to-one Bible studies are established among us.

In today’s passage we see that the Jerusalem church was growing remarkably. When the church was growing, problems arose. In dealing with problems, the apostles held on to a basic principle in doing God’s work. It was to focus on prayer and the ministry of the word. This kept the church healthy and headed in the right direction. May God help us, like them, to focus on prayer and the ministry of the word.

First, the growing church had a problem (1).

Look at verse 1. “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.” The number of disciples was increasing day by day. “Disciples” are not just church shoppers. They are those who have made personal commitments to Jesus Christ as their Savior and Lord. The church was growing, not only in number, but in spiritual depth. Its members were growing in faith and commitment. But whenever anything is growing, problems arise—as anyone with children knows.

In the Jerusalem church, there were Hebraic Jews and Grecian Jews. The Hebraic Jews spoke Aramaic and followed Jewish culture. The Grecian Jews spoke Greek and followed Greek culture. The Jerusalem church was predominantly Hebrew. Grecian Jews would have been a minority. Apparently, Hebraic Jews were in charge of distributing food to the needy on a daily basis. They never missed giving food to the Hebraic widows. But they overlooked Grecian widows. It was probably unintentional, and a matter of cultural sensitivity. The first time was okay. But it happened again and again. The Grecian widows began to be hungry. In addition to being sorrowful, they became skinny and pale. To secular sociologists, widows may seem to be peripheral people in a society. But to God they are very special people. Psalm 68:5 says, “A father to the fatherless, a defender of widows is God in his holy dwelling.” Our Lord Jesus had great compassion on widows. When widows were not treated properly, it was a big problem for the church in the sight of God. The apostles, who knew the heart of God, might have put on aprons and began to serve the Grecian widows. Still, the Grecian Jews complained against the Hebraic Jews. It could have led to a division. What did the apostles do?

Second, we cannot neglect the ministry of the word (2).

Look at verse 2. The Twelve gathered all the disciples together. Then, taking off their aprons, they said, "It would not be right for us to neglect the ministry of the word of God in order to wait on tables." Here we learn their key principle in doing God's work. They gave first priority to the ministry of the word of God. This is what they had learned from Jesus. Jesus was always giving the word of God to those who came to him. Jesus taught the word of God in the synagogues at the outset of his ministry. Jesus taught the word of God to crowds of people on the hillsides or at the lakeshore, even though they came for other purposes. Jesus taught the word of God to the disciples day and night. Even during the passion week, Jesus rose early in the morning and taught the word of God in the temple courts every day. Jesus did more than set an example. Jesus explicitly instructed the apostles to preach the gospel as of first importance. In Matthew 28:19-20a Jesus said, "Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you." In Mark 16:15 Jesus said, "Go into all the world and preach the good news to all creation." In Luke 24:47 Jesus said, "...and repentance and forgiveness of sins will be preached in his name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem." Why is preaching the word of God so important?

The word of God gives life to the soul. Jesus said in John 6:63b, "The words I have spoken to you are spirit and they are life." Jesus said in John 5:24, "I tell you the truth, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life and will not be condemned; he has crossed over from death to life." Everything on earth is perishing, spoiling and fading away. But the word of God gives eternal life. 1 Peter 1:24,25a say, "For, 'All men are like grass, and all their glory is like the flowers of the field; the grass withers and the flowers fall, but the word of the Lord stands forever.'" All men are like grass. This week Missionary Paul Choi's father had a sudden stroke. A few days ago, he looked fine as he was pulling weeds in front of the staff house and babysitting his grandchildren. Now his life in this world is fading. Each of us has a limited time to live on earth, after which we must go to our eternal destiny. Those who know Christ through the word of God will be saved for eternal life in the kingdom of God. Those who do not know Christ through his word will go to hell for eternal condemnation. So Jesus said, "What good is it for a man to gain the whole world, yet forfeit his soul? Or what can a man give in exchange for his soul?" (Mk 8:36,37) Nothing should be more important to a person than the salvation of his soul. Only Jesus can save man's soul. Jesus saves those who accept the gospel message by faith. Therefore, teaching the word of God is the most important ministry of God's people. The apostles were not going to neglect this life-giving ministry to wait on tables. Here we learn that we must not neglect the ministry of the word of God.

Third, choose spiritual men to be stewards of God's work (3).

The disciples had a clear spiritual value system and principle to preach the gospel as of first importance. But they did not make this an excuse to avoid responsibility for feeding hungry widows. Those who do that will soon become heartless hypocrites, like the priest and Levite in the parable of the good Samaritan. Though the apostles felt a dilemma in their hearts, they took the responsibility. They must have remembered Jesus' words, "You give them something to eat."

Then what did the apostles do? Look at verse 3. "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...." The apostles decided to delegate the responsibility of food distribution to others. They asked the brothers to choose seven men for the task. The qualifications were not based on human ability, but spiritual maturity. The

men had to be full of the Spirit and wisdom. Anyone who is appointed to a task of stewardship in the Christian church must be, first of all, a man or woman of God's Spirit. Spirit is everything. It is always good to appoint a person full of the Holy Spirit to do something. On the other hand, if a person has no Spirit of God he is no good for anything, no matter how well qualified humanly. It is interesting that the number of men chosen was seven. This is large enough to be representative and small enough to be effective, like the UIC Building Committee.

Here we learn from the apostles that basic responsibilities of the church must be acknowledged, not avoided. When necessary, these responsibilities can be delegated to spiritual men and women. In this way, the ministry of the word of God can be carried out most fruitfully. Senior leaders must be responsible for everything that goes on. But this does not mean that they do everything by themselves. They must delegate important tasks to spiritual coworkers, like the apostles did.

In Chicago UBF there are so many good stewards who sacrifice themselves silently to support God's work. Last week Missionary Mary Cowen had to move into her new house. All the young missionaries worked hard and moved her in one night. If they did not do this, I should have done it. Whenever we have national or international meetings, Dr. Charles Kim organizes the transportation and hosting of all the guests. This is vital for the sake of world mission. It requires time, heart devotion and much coworking. He has done this joyfully and responsibly for many years. Shepherdess Susanna Siy always works hard to support others by doing detail work. During our summer conference, she organized the entire Midwest region registration though her body was heavy due to pregnancy. Because of stewards like these, the ministry of God's word goes on among us. Because of stewards like these, we can support Mother Barry as a world mission headquarters.

Fourth, spiritual leaders must pray and love God's word (4-7).

Look at verse 4. "...and will give our attention to prayer and the ministry of the word." The apostles clarified their mission to pray and serve God's word. They did not become social workers or businessmen. They made a definite, absolute commitment to spend their time in prayer and the ministry of the word. This decision became the foundation of the spiritual life of the church. Christian leaders must learn from the apostles this precise commitment to prayer and the ministry of the word.

The decision to give our attention to prayer and the ministry of the word must come from the heart. Spiritual leaders must love God more than anything else. They must enjoy spending time with God in prayer and Bible study. Then they must influence others to do the same. Dr. Samuel Lee was such a leader. He constantly read and studied the Bible. He wore out two Bibles every year. While preparing the Sunday message, he often forgot to eat. Frequently he got up in the middle of the night to revise his manuscript. He would study so hard that his eyes would fail and his assistant would collapse with fatigue. Dr. Lee also trained young men to be Bible messengers like himself. Many learned to love the word of God and became capable Bible teachers.

For example, there was a young man who was always interested in something besides the word of God. But Dr. Lee had a broken shepherd's heart for him and decided to raise him as a Bible messenger. He invited this young man again and again to read the Bible together. At first, this young man thought he was doing a big favor to Dr. Lee by helping him read the Bible in English. Gradually he began to hear the word of God. He found that the word of God is the source of life, love and power. Gradually he overcame his petty desires. For the last seven and a half years he has delivered the Sunday message at the Chicago UBF worship service every week without fail. To prepare, he spent every Friday and

Saturday night in the center. When he slept, he put the Bible under his head as a pillow. He and two precious coworkers are growing in love for the word of God and delivering Sunday messages faithfully.

In fact, all of Chicago UBF has been established on the love for God's word. Elders, young missionaries, women missionaries, lay missionaries, student shepherds, high school students, grade school students and even babies (under the leadership of Missionary Young Lee) meet once a week and share Bible testimonies together. It has been nearly two years since Dr. Lee went to heaven. But the word of God has been gaining power and working mightily among us. We can only thank God for using Dr. Lee to help us lay the foundation of Chicago UBF on the word of God. Now we must be good stewards of this grace. Unfortunately, some leaders have not studied Luke's gospel and Acts sufficiently. Their Bible study binders are incomplete. May God help them decide to love God's word.

Look at verse 5. The proposal of the apostles pleased the whole group. They chose Stephen, Philip, Procorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas, and Nicolas. These all sound like Greek names. The Hebraic Jews sacrificially made peace with Grecian brothers. The Grecian Jews accepted, repenting of their suspicion. All complaints melted away. Unity was restored. Moreover, the direction of the church remained clear: focus on prayer and the ministry of the word. Verse 7 says, "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."

Fifth, Stephen, the exemplary steward in God's church (8-15).

Among the chosen stewards, the first one named is Stephen. He was exemplary. When he was chosen to distribute food to widows, he could have felt sorry about it, thinking that his calling was too mundane. But he did not. He accepted his mission with gladness and obedience. He was ready to do anything to serve God's work. He knew the servanthip of our Lord Jesus Christ. In Mark 10:45 Jesus said, "For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many." Stephen must have treated the widows with great respect as he made sure that each one received enough food each day. He must have encouraged them to overcome themselves and be great prayer servants for God's work like the prophetess Anna (Lk 2:36). His good influence contributed greatly to the growth of the church.

Stephen's most striking quality was that he was full of faith and the Holy Spirit. Although, he was chosen initially to oversee the distribution of food to widows, he became a powerful servant of God's word. God did great wonders and miraculous signs through him. Those who humbly perform menial tasks in God's church can be powerful spiritual leaders. In fact, Stephen and Philip became the next generation of spiritual leaders in God's work.

When God was working through Stephen, opposition arose. Evil men formed a conspiracy against him. They falsely charged him and brought him before the Sanhedrin. They treated him as they had treated Jesus. Stephen was not upset. His face was like the face of an angel. Everyone could see the godliness of his inner man in the time of trial. Stephen's imitation of Christ was not only outward, he learned Jesus' faith and love for God from his heart. This is the fruit of real Bible study.

In this passage we learn the fundamental principle of the Christian church. We must focus on prayer and the ministry of the word. As shepherds we must do many things to help our sheep. But we must not neglect to pray for them and teach the Bible to them. Then God will bless his church to grow and the word of God will spread.