

God calls all of His people to places of service within the church. We each have a different role or ministry. Today we ordained two more deacons, and installed a third deacon, so in today's sermon, we focus on the role of deacons.

Deacons are essential for churches to grow. Deacons are servants of mercy.

Christ has given the permanent gift of the office of deacon to His people.

1. When deacons are absent. (v.1-2)

When the church was started in the book of Acts, we can read about attacks from the devil in the form of persecution, when the apostles were imprisoned. We can also read about the devil's attack in the form of corruption, when Ananias and Sapphira in Acts chapter five wanted to appear generous without actually being generous. When we get here, to Acts chapter six, the devil's next attack on the church was more clever – distractions. The devil tried to distract the church of Jesus Christ from doing its job of praying and giving away the good news. This attack strategy of the devil was if he could preoccupy the apostles with feeding the hungry, which was not essential to the calling and work of an apostle, then the apostles could become so busy feeding the hungry that they wouldn't pray and wouldn't study God's Word, and wouldn't preach the news of God's grace. If the people were being taught, they would be softened for the devil's next attack - false teachers bringing errors.

How does the problem of distractions show up in the church? First of all, we learn that the problem of distractions shows up in healthy churches and in growing churches. The church in Jerusalem in Acts 6, in Peter's day in Jerusalem was a growing church. We see this right away in verse 1, "*when the disciples were increasing in number....*" It means multiplying, spreading, growing in abundance. There were more and more Christians in the church in Jerusalem. People in a growing church begin to develop a problem. In verse 1, the word is "complaint" – it is a collective murmuring or a group whispering, or batch grumbling, a general wide-spread expression of dissatisfaction. This chain of complaining was an expression of skepticism, a secret talking, an expression of discontent. This process can lead to distraction.

Grumbling or complaining is a sin. Philippians 2:14, "*Do all things without grumbling or complaining ...*" That command was written to a group. All of you do all things without grumbling. In other words, no batch grumbling! It is a way that a whole church can enter group sinning. Grumbling is a sin. 1 Peter 4:9, "*Show hospitality to one another without grumbling.*" If a church has been complaining, the church needs to repent and ask God's forgiveness in Christ Jesus.

However, the underlying problem that caused the batch grumbling, still needed to be fixed. There was a place and a way in which they should properly speak to one another about real problems and an acceptable manner in which they could and should work together to address those problems. If something was not going right, God provided them a way to make it right.

The problem arose because a church was growing, there were growing pains, and something didn't go well. People started to notice, and start to discuss it and people started to speak up about it.

What was the underlying problem? v.1, *“a complaint by the Hellenists (Hellenists were the Greek-speaking Jews as opposed to the Jews who spoke Hebrew or Aramaic), arose against the Hebrews because their widows (the widows of the Greek-speaking Jews) were being neglected in the daily distribution.”* There was food being given daily to widows, and the Greek-speaking Jewish widows were being overlooked, or being missed. Certain widows did not get their food delivery. Imagine if your Mom were a widow, and she did not get fed, you would be upset, right?

How did the church solve this? Verse 2, the apostles said we should not give up the important task of preaching the Word of God in order to solve this problem. Verse 3, they decided to set apart men filled with the Spirit of God and wisdom *“to appoint to this duty.”*

Understand this. When there arose a distraction among the people of God, it was put to rest by the establishment of the office of deacons. It may seem a strange thing that this function of deacons in the Church, which is so excellent and so necessary, should be put into the minds of the apostles later, when they encountered a problem, instead of at the beginning. Why didn't the Spirit of God at the start give them this wisdom and counsel that He is here giving them? In other words, are deacons an afterthought?

No. God is wise not only in what He gives, but in how God gives it and in when God gives it. God was getting the people ready for the office of deacons. If they had deacons before any critical necessity for the deacons was actually realized by the people, they would not have had a ready people. Many people could have withheld their funds and figured that they could give away their own money, instead of giving so generously into the hands of deacons to distribute for them. They could have thought it was inefficient or less enjoyable to give to a deacon fund, instead of giving directly to a person in need. “Why go through so much work?” they might have thought. “Cut out the middle man!” they might have objected.

So it was wise and important for God to first show the believers by this experience of certain widows not getting daily food, what it would be like to have a church with no deacons! When deacons are absent, the church has problems that don't get fixed, and the church gets distracted. Without deacons, there would have been almost immediately problems of neglect and the bitter complaints that arise from

problems of neglect. What God had set up as a structure, and what God wisely taught, is that in God's church, rather than a system of neglect, we have a system of care.

With deacons present in our churches, our needs are met without unfair biases and without improper imbalances. Rather than a circle of murmuring and complaining, God's church has a circle of cooperation and unity. Praises rise up to our merciful Father in heaven. The office of deacon is a godly office and an ancient God-established order of men doing God's work.

Deacons are fashioned after God's own character, and God is rich in mercy. The world's ungodly answer to the problem of neglect and imbalance is the strategy of Robin Hood. Steal from the rich and give to the poor. In contrast, our Heavenly Father's wise and loving answer is the strategy from the heart of loving deacons.

God is the one who gives money to His people in the first place. Maybe you have noticed this – that God gives to His people in unequal amounts. Some Christians are rich and some Christians are poor. That is done intentionally by God, to keep us working together. Paul writes in 2 Corinthians 8 that the rich do not have too much and the poor do not have too little, but rather, supplies get evened out through generosity and mercy.

God is concerned about the poor. Well, then why doesn't God directly give more money to the poor for food and supplies? Listen. God did. God gave it to us, the rich, with the intention that we would distribute it to the poor. God gave us more than we need, and God gave us deacons to help us to re-distribute our surplus. God gave us not just Christian men, but men called by God, men ordained by the church, men who are filled with the Holy Spirit, men of wisdom. Their job in the church is to remove distractions by caring for everyone, and by disseminating what extra we have to those who have a shortfall.

The main point is this – a growing church can develop legitimate complaints, and thanks to the deacons, the church can find a way to fix problems without the church getting distracted from the gospel. Does the church remain focused on prayer and the ministry of the Word, or does that church get distracted from prayer and get distracted from the ministry of the Word? What is the solution to the main concern? Deacons.

2. When deacons are selected. (v.3-5)

Verse 3 – *“Pick out...seven men...”* So the disciples were to get to know the men, and train the men and then select deacons. What were the criteria to become deacons? 1) of good repute (being trusted as men with a widespread reputation as godly men) 2) full of the Spirit 3) full of wisdom. They need to be able to take care of problems with wisdom and care, and in line with God's Word, without taking every issue back to the apostles. They were to handle things, so that the apostles were reserved for prayer and the ministry of the Word. These are the type of men selected and appointed to the duty of deaconing.

We need people in the office of deacon who are deaconing and we need people in the office of elder and pastor who are praying and teaching and shepherding souls.

Why? Because God's people have need for both - physical food and spiritual food. The deacons see to it that people are fed physical food, so that the elders and pastors can see to it that people are fed spiritual food. Back in verse 2, the actual verb is "*to deacon*". It was in the comment of the Twelve disciples in verse 2, "*It is not right that we should give up preaching the Word of God to serve tables.*" [literally to deacon tables.] But do not conclude that the office of deacon is the church's equivalent to waiters in a restaurant. No, no. Let me prove this to you from an amazing statement in verse 4, where the elders said, "*we will devote ourselves to prayer and to the ministry of the Word.*" Literally giving themselves to prayer and the deaconing of the Word! The same word is used again here! In verse 2 that word is in the verb form "to deacon" tables or to serve tables, and in verse 4, that same word is in the noun form "deaconing of the Word." Or the ministry of the Word. Deaconing is serving. The deacons served up food, and the elders and pastors served up the Word of God. The deacons take care of physical needs, so that there would be no distraction to the elders and pastors who were taking care of spiritual needs.

Neither ministry is superior. Both the work of the elders and pastors and also the work of the deacons are works of Christian ministry and God's calling. Both require those who are filled with the Spirit of God and wisdom to exercise these services for God's people. Both are Christian ministries, Christian service. The only difference between an elder and a deacon is what they are serving to God's people. Deacons serve deeds, and elders serve the Word. Each office requires a different calling from God, and each office requires different spiritual gifts from God. These are the things we consider when deacons are selected.

3. When deacons are present. (v. 6-15)

The result of the presence of deacons in verse 7 is spelled out very clearly. Unhindered growth!

"*Increasing*" = the same verb as we noticed was used back in verse 1!

Verse 1 - number of disciples = INCREASING.

Verse 7 - Word of God = INCREASING.

That is not all. There is yet another verb in verse 7. It reads like this, "*So the Word of God continued to increase, and the number of the disciples multiplied greatly in Jerusalem, and a great many of the priests became obedient to the faith.*"

The word of the gospel spread!

The number of disciples increased.

These are continuous, ongoing verbs. The Word of the gospel kept right on spreading. The number of disciples kept right on increasing. If we will be the church God called us to be, and do church the way that God called us to do church,

the word of God will keep spreading and the number of disciples will keep increasing.

We need to remain mindful and keep on deeply appreciating the incredible gift of God in our midst – the deacons. The deacons are a little picture to us of the mercy of God in Christ Jesus, the chief servant.

All of this is built on the cross of Jesus. Jesus served us in the most foundational way, when Jesus served us unto death.

It was Jesus Himself who said in Mark 10:45, “*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.*”

Pastors and Elders are here to pray and give out the gospel, and shepherd the souls of people.

Deacons are here to serve and to live out the gospel and care for the people of God.

Members and visitors are here to receive the mercy of Christ and the teaching of Christ until you are healed and safe and full, and then start to spill over and give away the same mercy you have received back to the rest of the church family, and everywhere you go. This is a beautiful picture of the overflowing mercy of Christ. That is modeled for us by deacons.

Concluding Lessons:

we are protected by deacons. In this world of scandal after scandal, and self-serving leaders, we need someone to respect, who cares for us. Deacons!

Personal word - looking back in my life, I have always loved deacons. Haven't you always suspected somewhere in the back of your mind that deacons are precious? Let's celebrate our deacons today.

In a fast-paced and hectic world, and in a demanding culture, this picture is the picture of the church's victory against the devil's clever attack of distraction.

This is an ancient scheme of the conniving devil, and we will not fall for it.

Acts 6 tells us what we are not going to do. We are not going to get distracted from prayer and the ministry of the Word. Do you know how we know that?

Because God has given us the best protection of all. The Holy Spirit of God has taken up residence inside of certain men in such a measure of fullness as to cause us to recognize it and lay hands on these men and ordain them as deacons in our church. I love you men for your faith in the strong name of Jesus. I praise God for you men.