

“Distraction From Your Calling”

21 March 2021 - Led by Rev. Sam Mawhinney

Welcome & Call To Worship

Hymn of Preparation: IPH Psalm 100 All People That On Earth Do Dwell

Prayers of Adoration & Confession

Reading: Acts 6:1-7

Sermon:

The early church was young, growing in numbers and ministry opportunities, and vulnerable to the attacks of Satan. In Ch. 4, we learned of the threat of violence or physical persecution they faced from the Jewish religious leaders. They faced their opposition with courage and prayer, and we are to do the same when we are oppressed because of our faith in Jesus. Here is the outline of the content of their prayer.

1. *Consider their threats.* Leave the situation at the feet of Jesus, the Righteous Judge, and let Him sort it out.
2. *Give us boldness to keep speaking of Jesus and the gospel.* Do not give up or withdraw, but ask for God's help to continue speaking, doing what is good, and living for Jesus.
3. *Confirm the gospel in the church with powerful signs and wonders.* Prove the truth of the gospel to us and to others. Let us see You work with power, Lord God.

Luke testifies their prayer was answered; they were filled afresh with the Holy Spirit and spoke the word of God boldly (4:31).

Last week, we considered in Ch. 5 the seriousness of sin *within* the church. Ananias and Sapphira died due to divine judgement because they had stolen money promised to the church from the sale of a piece of property. They were deceitful towards the church when they conspired and claimed what they gave was the whole amount. As you can imagine, such events filled the church and those who knew about what had happened with “*great fear*” (5:11). Of course, no-one likes to be confronted with the judgment of God and this story is shocking to us and even offensive. As I thought further on this, another picture of the church helped me to understand the seriousness of sin within the church.

One of the biblical pictures of the church is as the bride of Christ, and Jesus' deep desire as her Bridegroom is to have His bride be beautiful in her holiness. Through His righteousness she is declared righteous, and in ongoing application of the gospel she becomes holy (sanctification) and will be perfectly holy when glorified in heaven. So, He takes extremely seriously anyone or anything that introduces sin to His bride, a lack of holiness into His church. Discipline and judgement come to protect His bride. God loves the church, and everyone must be careful not to hurt His bride by introducing sin deliberately.

Today in the early part of Ch. 6, we will consider a third way in which Satan seeks to disrupt the church, a subtle way of distraction from their calling, of not prioritising the use of the gifts given to the church by the Holy Spirit. So, let us look carefully at these verses and see what we can learn and what change we might have to instigate.

I. The problem (v.1)

The first problem was one of growth; their numbers were increasing. This is often described as a good problem. However, it raises questions of how those who have responsibility for the church deal best with the care of people pastorally and the supervision of ministries. With more people, better structures and oversight are needed. Consider the idea of a trellis and a vine - as the vine grows, so does the trellis!

The second problem was of factions, one group complaining about another group in the distribution of food. The word used here in v.1 means murmuring, low level discontent, a critical, negative attitude. The NIV uses "complained". There are two groups. The Greek Jews (Grecian/Hellenistic) are from the diaspora; that is, they have come from abroad to Jerusalem. They speak mainly Greek, the main language of the Eastern Mediterranean, and are quite positive about the temple, as it was the main reason they had originally come back. The Hebrew Jews (Hebraic) were local, spoke mainly Aramaic (I'm told not Hebrew) and were less connected with the temple. The two groups were separated by geography, language, and theology, in the sense of Judaism and the importance of the temple and circumcision in the outworking of their Christian faith.

The third problem was that the Greek Jewish widows were being overlooked in the distribution of food. Most considered opinion about this maintains it was not a deliberate or sectarian issue, but one of logistics, of not being well organised, so that the food was not properly distributed. It appears that the number of Greek widows was greater than the Hebrew widows; they had come to Jerusalem and probably didn't have family or support, and because of their greater numbers they were being overlooked.

I was struck about how relevant this is for us in ARPC in our multicultural city where we have people of different nationalities, needs and expressions of Christianity and people with different emphasis of ministry. Nor do I believe we are unique; it is a problem of every church family as it grows, and we need to admit the reality and seek to deal with it. Let us see what happened here and the lessons we can learn.

The problem of murmuring or grumbling is one that exposes the sinful reality of human nature, and we know it was a struggle for the people of God in every generation. In the Old Testament, the Israelites grumbled against Moses and Aaron when in the wilderness and God was not pleased. In the gospels, we have been surprised by the attitude of the apostles towards Jesus during His earthly ministry. They were often self-centred, unbelieving, and critical; ultimately, Judas betrayed Jesus. Here in Acts and in the letters written by the apostles to the church, we read of their ongoing instruction, such as Paul to the church in Philippi - "*do everything without complaining*" (2:14) - and Peter - "*show hospitality without grumbling*" (1 Peter 4:9). Therefore in light of the Bible's teaching, we conclude that murmuring or complaining, being negative and critical, is an attitude that is not good or healthy for a church and does not please God.

Welcoming and incorporating people from different cultural, language and theological loyalties is part of being a church. The difficulty of doing this is seen in wider society and its struggle with racism and xenophobia; we must not underestimate or deny the need to work at this, accepting that it takes time and effort. We begin, of course, with the position of our unity in Jesus Christ and the removal of all barriers through the gospel, founded on the fact

of our similarity as sinners who have experienced the grace of God. Listen to these key texts:

Galatians 3:28 - *“There is neither Jew or Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.”*

Ephesians 2:14 - *“For He Himself is our peace, who has made the two one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility...”*

Colossians 3:11 - *“There is no Greek or Jew, circumcised or uncircumcised, Barbarian, Scythian, slave or free, but Christ is all, and is in all.”*

We are one in Christ Jesus and we work out our problems from that foundational truth. We need to recognise the tendency within us of a murmuring or complaining attitude and ask God for His grace to admit our sin and seek His forgiveness in Jesus.

II. The solution (v.2-6)

A. Leadership and church involvement.

The problem is acknowledged by “the Twelve” (v.2-4; that is the apostles, presumably to distinguish them from “the Seven”). There is a lot happening in these verses which can form important principles for how we deal with problematic issues. The apostles (the leaders) acknowledge the problem, define the problem as they see it, and offer a solution to the church. However, in doing so, they did not impose a solution on the church. Rather, they shared, sought input, and invited the church members to actively seek those men who would be given the task of the ministry of tables. So, the solution was for the leaders to recognise the issue, outline a solution and involve the members in consultation and implementation.

B. Every member ministry.

Reading how the disciples outlined the problem in v.2 - *“it would not be right for us to neglect the ministry of the word of God in order to wait on tables”* - appears to subordinate the serving at tables. However, the text uses the word *diakonos* (servant) in both situations, so waiting at tables is “the ministry of tables”. The issue is not one of subordination or priority of ministry, but of calling. The Apostles have been called to testify to what they have seen and heard, namely the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ; their calling is not primarily to the ministry of service at tables.

There is a ministry of word and a ministry of tables. As John Stott says:

“All Christians without exception, being followers of him who came, “not to be served but to serve” are themselves called to ministry, indeed, to give their lives in ministry. But the expression full time ministry is not restricted to church work or missionary service; it can also be exercised in government, in media, the professions, business and industry and the home. We need to recover this vision of the wide diversity of ministries to which God calls His people.”

Or to put it another way, what I do is not “the ministry”. *All* members of the church are ministers and do ministry. I have been delivering our 2020 church magazine, which I believe is a fantastic ministry. Mark’s editing gifts and Jane’s creative gifts have blessed so many and bring honour to God. So, the solution is that each member of the church is to understand their call to ministry, know what their calling is and seek

ways to serve within the church. The problem comes when those particularly in leadership are doing the jobs that other members should be doing, as was the case for the apostles, and their calling is neglected or not used. Therefore, as was the case within the early church, some were doing many things and that led to another ministry being done poorly. It is important that each member serves, understanding their gifting and how it works together with the gifts of others.

C. Spiritual qualifications for ministry.

All ministry is spiritual, because it requires the gift of the Holy Spirit. Note the qualifications for those who were to lead the ministry of tables (or other ministries): they were to be full of the Spirit, full of wisdom and faith (v.3, 5). So they choose seven men whose names are given. All ministry within the church must be done by those who are Christians and have the Holy Spirit evident in their lives. The Spirit and wisdom probably indicate they had both a strong Christian testimony and they showed ability in particular fields. Also note the commissioning in v.6. The laying of hands gives recognisable authority by the church for their ministry: *"we will turn this responsibility over to them"* (v.3). It highlights again the spiritual nature of the work they are engaged in. When we look for people to fulfil roles within the church, the first criteria to consider is the evidence of the Holy Spirit and faith in their lives. Then, we look at the gifts God has given them. Blessing in ministry comes from the Holy Spirit.

D. Avoid being overly busy!

I read a headline in the Irish Times that said junior bankers in Goldman-Sachs work a 92-hour week. That is a lot of hours and few think it is a great idea. The Apostles were too busy. They were struggling to do their primary calling, because they were serving or ministering at tables, and both jobs were being compromised.

This is not to say that we can only do one job. Stephen could preach and teach, highlighting the spiritual gifting of these men, and the interchange between ministry of the word and other ministries. However, particularly as a church grows and new members are added, each member needs to think carefully about their primary calling under God. I remembered a story I once heard told by Stuart Briscoe and his wife, Jill; they were both very able Bible teachers and he was a minister. They also could sing and they received lots of invitations to lead worship at conferences. They ended up exhausted. Under God, they discerned that teaching was their primary calling, and chose to decline the invitations to sing. This led to a preaching and writing ministry, and plenty of invitations as speakers to conferences. The point again is not that being a worship leader is less of a ministry than preaching, but one of calling; nor that some are gifted in multiple things, but of pursuing your calling. In a fallen world, that can be a challenge and may require the wisdom of the collective church.

The implications for us are worth considering, both to help us grow and develop in our ministries and to see what gifting the church has been given by God.

Undoubtedly some are doing too many things and some are not doing enough. I want to invite the whole church to pray about this issue of gifting and service, to think of where God has called you to serve and discuss it with each other. The present Covid pandemic will afford us an opportunity to relook and reset every aspect of church life. The elders will be discussing this in April and hopefully establish a framework for this

conversation, but we will need the help of every member. This is a God-given opportunity to reprioritise and restructure as the early church did, and we invite you to pray and begin this conversation.

III. The outcome (v.7)

“So, the word of God spread.” Luke tells us the Apostles were able to concentrate on word ministry, and through the opportunities afforded in the other ministries the word of God spread. Men, women and families were saved and joined the growing numbers of disciples. We are told of the not insignificant breakthrough into the ranks of the Jewish priests. I read that on any given two-week period of the priestly rota, there were 18,000 Levites and priests on duty in the temple complex in Jerusalem. A significant number of them were saved and followed Jesus; they became obedient to the faith. They understood and accepted the gospel and followed the word of God.

The early church showed that when persecution is experienced, they joyfully accepted the reality and turned to fervent prayer; we should follow their example. When sin was present in church members, it was taken seriously and removed from the church; we likewise should be mindful about sin in the church and seek to remove it. When every member understands their primary calling and serves as called, then the church is healthy; all are involved, working well together, and ministries are multiplied. Some are not overburdened with too much work, those with too little work are helped in identifying and using their gifts, and those tasked with word ministry can be freed to get on with spreading the word. As the word spreads, people hear and are saved and the church grows to the glory of God. Let us strive to serve Jesus and His church in similar ways.

Praise: IPH 552 Take My Life And Let It Be

Prayers for Others

Announcements

Closing Hymn: All Glory Be To Christ

Benediction: May the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all evermore. Amen.

Discussion & Application:

Prayerfully consider the time, talents and resources God has given you and others.

- Which gifts is God calling you to use in His service at this time?
- What are some specific ways you might use (or are already using) those gifts?
- Are you doing too many things? Which gifts should you invest your time in now and which should you instead encourage in other members of the church?

Sometimes, we are blind to our gifts and need the perspective and encouragement of others in the church.

- Ask someone to work through the above questions with you (about you) and share their perspective.
- Take a few moments this week to encourage someone regarding a gift they are already using or a gift you think they might use.

Growth inevitably leads to growing pains. What 'growing pains' are evident in ARPC and what possible solutions might be considered and applied?