

*Words and Deeds: Waiting Tables*  
*By Jason Huff*  
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*Proverbs 17:2; Colossians 3:23-24; Acts 6:1-7*

Our final Scripture reading today comes from Acts 6:1-7. May God add His richest blessing on the reading of His holy and inerrant Word. “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. 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. 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.” 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. They presented these men to the apostles, who prayed and laid their hands on them. 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.”

Did any of you ever have a job or two growing up where you were like, “I can’t believe I’m doing this?” Something that you thought, “it’s just not worth it”. Waiting tables was like that for some people. I had a couple jobs like that. In high school, I was supposed to start an internship at a radio station. A few girls in my class had been interns there, they’d gone on remote reports, played music, the whole nine yards. I get there and I’m stuffing envelopes for two hours, and I’m not even getting paid. And they came back two hours later to send me home and I was like, “So when do I get to see the studio?” And they were like, “No, this is pretty much it.” And I quit on the spot and found an internship with the Christian radio station in town that liked me so much, I worked there summers in college.

I worked for Blockbuster Video for a few weeks. I interviewed at a really nice one close to my house, I was thinking, “Yeah, I’ll get to talk about movies and recommend things to folks who walk in, this will be great!” And they assigned me to one in kind of a bad part of town twenty minutes away where 99% of the movies they were renting were like awful grade-Z horror movies that cost them a dollar fifty to make. And I spent 99% of my time dusting shelves. Working there was like a horror movie.

Now I bring this up because we might think that this is what is going on in this passage. If we listen to this passage with Western ears, we might think that the apostles are complaining about work that is beneath them. That’s not actually the case. In fact, we can learn a lot about the church and how it works best from this passage. It might surprise us, and it will require us to think about our part in the church, but it also shows us that God has created us for unique and special purposes we were made to fulfill.

Today's passage starts with a sign that even in the early church, human struggles continue to be a problem. For all the blessings that God poured out, as the church expands, human sinfulness rears its ugly head. And today, we're dealing with a form of ethnic conflict, not racism exactly but close. The Gentiles haven't even come into the church yet, but there is still a major conflict surrounding the Grecian Jews and the Hebraic Jews.

Long story short: the Greek Jews were Jewish people whose families (sometimes generations back) lived in areas populated by Romans and Greek-speaking peoples. They learned to speak fluent Greek, they had business dealings with the foreign world, and associated more freely with the pagan community. They used the Septuagint, a Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible. The Hebraic Jews were those who tended to live in lower Israel near Jerusalem; they spoke Aramaic; they studied the Bible primarily in Hebrew. They rarely had dealings with the outside world unless they had to do so.

And quite frankly, the Hebraic Jews looked down on the Grecian Jews. They weren't as pure and God-fearing in their eyes; they weren't as devoted to the temple and the worship of God, not only because they lived too far away to come to every festival in Jerusalem, but because they lived in a world of compromise. Now you would think that them all becoming Jesus-followers would have smoothed over these differences, but old habits die hard.

So there's a problem...the Grecian widows start being forgotten when food is distributed throughout the Christian community. We really don't know if it was intentional, if somebody was skipping the Greek widows because they thought they weren't true believers, or if it was just an oversight. Nevertheless, the history of misgivings between the two groups makes it seem like somebody is deliberately overlooking the widows who really are in need.

It's bad enough that the apostles, the twelve, have to get involved. Now we have to note the language here – it isn't that the work of distributing food is beneath the apostles. Jesus washed their feet and taught them to wash each other's feet. Jesus taught them that they would have to become the servant of all. So it's not an issue of not wanting to do it. It's that the job has become so big that they would have to neglect their call to preach and teach the Word of God in order to do it. All the apostles were with Jesus since the beginning; they'd had His full teaching, and they were uniquely qualified for their job. To take care of this issue, they'd have to stop doing what they were gifted to do.

Now the group of disciples has become so large that the apostles don't even choose the ones who would become the first deacons in the church. They tell the disciples, "You choose men who are full of the Spirit and wisdom." And that's what they did. They agree on seven men to take on this aspect of the ministry. And what's not obvious to us but would have been obvious to them is that the list is a mix of both Greek and Hebrew names. The chosen group represented everyone who was currently in the church. There wouldn't be any fighting about everyone being served because no one was left without a voice. Stephen gets top billing simply because the rest of the next couple of chapters are about what happens to him, but all of them are qualified.

So the apostles pray for them and lay their hands on them, symbolizing their approval of the ministry and their desire for them to be filled with the Holy Spirit as they do it. And they let them go to it. And the end result is that more people become believers. The word of God spread, which meant that the apostles were able to do their job without worrying about the day-to-day care of the congregation.

Not only are many people becoming disciples, but priests start joining the movement in large numbers. That's really important, because it means that the Jesus followers can no longer be accused of being ignorant or simpletons. Through the Holy Spirit, the priestly class starts believing. As a group, these are the most highly educated set of people in all Israel, especially regarding the Scripture. This occurs potentially for two reasons: one is that the apostles are free to take the time to reason with the priests about all the Messianic prophecies. Second is that, in the work of the deacons, the priests can see that the Christians are caring for one another in a way that they, the people of the Law, weren't.

Now we could take on every aspect of this passage, the racial/ethnic side, but I don't think that's really what this particular passage is about – if it was, Luke might have explained more about the conflict or made it clearer. There are plenty of passages in Paul's letters that take on racial and ethnic conflict, and we'll deal with those when we study letters like 1 Corinthians. Suffice it to say that Paul believed that we are one in Christ – he wrote that in the eyes of God, we are united, not men or women, Jews or Greeks, but His people.

So let's deal with what the leading issues and concepts are. The first is this: *no one can do everything in the church*. The apostles were amazing. They had incredible gifts given by God. The Holy Spirit works through them in such a way that people were healed being in their shadows. They preach and teach and the Holy Spirit drives people to believe through their ministry. They are going from house to house telling the Good News. Think of modern teachers or preachers we respect and admire – Billy Graham, R. C. Sproul, Beth Moore or Joni Erickson Tada. No comparison. The apostles are blessed in a way the modern world hasn't seen.

Yet they can't do it all. They couldn't do what Jesus had called them to do and oversee food distribution to likely a thousand widows or more. They would be neglectful of the work they were equipped to do. Again, it's not an issue of willingness or ability. It's the question of what's best for the Kingdom of God. If they were to administrate feeding these widows, people in desperate need of the Word of God wouldn't hear it. People in desperate need of healing wouldn't receive it. The widows were important, but this was not their calling.

Thom Rainer is the president of Lifeway Christian Resources and the founding dean of the Billy Graham School of Missions and Evangelism for twelve years. Before that, he was a pastor in Florida. He did an experiment with his congregation and gave a survey to his 12 deacons, asking them what the minimum amount of time he should spend on certain responsibilities: praying at the church building, preparing sermons, evangelizing, visiting the sick, counseling, being at meetings. When he got back the sermons and tallied them, he found that the minimum amount of time they thought he should spend in ministry would have been *114 hours a week*. 7 days a week, sixteen and a half hours a day. No family or recreation time included. The work had been piled on the pastor rather than the congregation.

Now I'm going to be super honest in that I am thankful for all of you. I have not felt those pressures. You all know I'm part-time, you respect my family and our time, you don't put crazy burdens on me, and I completely appreciate that. There are times I wish I had more time to do more for our congregation, but I haven't been made to feel guilty about that.

Yet our expectations on our leaders are often out of whack. It's been my experience that the people who are most dedicated to the church, the ones most willing to volunteer the most hours, are also the ones quickest to burn out and land somewhere else. They invest a lot, they don't see other people investing, and they figure, "Why should I bother?" And unless we realize that we're doing it for the Lord and not to impress other people or to get them to work hard, we'll burn out too. Because no one, not a pastor, not a volunteer, no one is supposed to do it all. God didn't make us that way. God made us to work as a family.

That leads into our second thought for the day: *the primary qualifications for any significant role in the church are fullness of the Spirit and wisdom.* If we were putting out a job description to hire somebody for the role that Stephen and the other deacons filled, it would probably sound something like this: "Hiring a full-time food service and distribution manager. Must have expert knowledge in food preparation and handling. 5+ years of restaurant management experience required. Must be able to handle a large staff working with a diverse population of customers. Excellent organizational and interpersonal skills are a must. Needs extensive certification in human relations, customer service, and knowledge of community resources or networking." (Some of these I stole from ads for jobs at Meals on Wheels.)

But that's not the way that the church went about it. They knew that if God led them to the right men, the job would get done. It didn't mean they were unqualified, only that the primary qualifications weren't things like experience or training in a field. They were chosen based on the wisdom they had shown in previous situations and their spiritual maturity showing the work of the Holy Spirit in their lives.

We as the church today must learn this. So many churches are operated like businesses because the boards and Sessions and leadership teams are made up of business people acting like business people. Or they are filled with warm bodies, the people who say that they'll do it because nobody else is stepping up, but who don't actually belong there. Instead, the leadership of the church should be made up of Spirit-led, Spirit-driven people who have shown Spirit-given wisdom.

Now this doesn't mean that those are the only qualifications. Someone who's tone-deaf shouldn't be leading the choir. Someone who's never handled money shouldn't be doing the books. And not everyone who is qualified is chosen. The apostles said to appoint seven people as deacons; it didn't mean that there weren't thirty or fifty or a hundred people in the church who had the spiritual qualifications, just that they needed seven. No one should feel badly if they aren't chosen for a role in the church for which they are qualified. God might have other purposes for you.

But the qualifications made for the deacon – and Paul outlines more in his letters, but we'll just deal with these for now – should make us examine ourselves. Would we qualify? And if not, why not? Ideally, everyone who's a member of the church should eventually be able to serve in a leadership role, elder, deacon, something like that. If you say, "I'm just not spiritually mature enough to serve," OK, that may be true. What are you doing about it? Spiritual maturity comes through participation in what God is doing. As far as it depends on you, how are you growing in faith? If you are spiritually mature, are you seeking to serve? Are you looking for places that you can help the body of believers, to grow the church, to bring it to greater faithfulness and holiness?

This brings us to the last thing I want to talk about: *faithfulness in everyone's role brings more people to faith*. We aren't sure who did what, but when this issue that could have torn apart the early church was dealt with compassionately, lots more people became Jesus-followers. Maybe it was because the widows could tell their friends without having to worry about the day's meal. Maybe it was because the apostles could devote all their time to sharing the gospel. Maybe it was because the deacons' faith in action inspired people. We don't exactly know. What we do know is that out of a crisis, the faithfulness of God and God's people showed itself.

And that's what we need to explore for just a minute. Everyone in the church has a role, even if it's not leadership, even if it's small. In 1 Corinthians 14, Paul talks about everyone bringing something to build up the church to their local group worship – a song, a teaching, a psalm, some revelation of some sort. Our worship is more planned, but there's still a need for everyone to bring something to the people of God. In Romans 12, Paul taught that everyone should use their gifts according to their faith, whether teaching, serving, giving, encouraging, leading, showing mercy.

I believe that if everyone has a role and they are faithful to fulfill it, CrossWay will grow. I've been asked more than once, "What's the strategy to grow the church?" Professional church planters following sales techniques say you spend 9 months saturating the entire area with postcards and fliers and 10,000 door to door visits to get 125 people. I have said this, "My strategy is grow a church where people feel loved and cared for and challenged in their faith so much that they want others to know about it." That's my goal.

Our roles in that are different. The Reynolds set up communion without fail. The Pokrzywinskis send letters to everyone celebrating their special events. Tracy helps with music and hosting the Bible study. The list goes on. But if we are fulfilling our roles and then enjoying the fellowship of believers and encouraging others to be a part of it, more people will find the Kingdom of God here.

So the simple question is, do you have your role? Do you know where you fit? If not, pray about it. If everyone participates, everyone has ownership. Everyone feels a part. No one feels overwhelmed that they're the only ones doing anything. And no one needs to worry that there's no place for your calling. If everyone invites folks, some will eventually come. If we all pray, God will hear us and move. The church is not a place to come and hear a nice message and do your spiritual duty an hour a week. The church is the people of God working together so more people can enter into God's Kingdom and know His love and grace and forgiveness.

Maybe waiting tables doesn't sound like the greatest job in the world. But because of Stephen and the first deacons' willingness to do it, many lives were changed. Their example for the church over the centuries has affected millions of lives. May we all be willing to serve so that more people might have the joy of the LORD.