



ATTACKS UPON LIFE - DISTRACTION

SERIES: LIFE UNLEASHED

Acts 6:1-7

11th Message

Shawn Reese

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I. Introduction

The movie *Drop Box* documents a pastor in South Korea who built a box outside of his house for desperate mothers to drop off their babies. The pastor, Pastor Lee, then adopts the orphans and raises them. And, what is really great about what Pastor Lee and what many of you in our body are doing—adopting and getting involved in the foster care program is this—Pastor Lee and you all have been gifted with big hearts and lots of compassion for orphans and you're now building your lives around your gifts. Adoption kind of forces you to do ministry full time.

But in reality all who call themselves Christians are called into full-time ministry; not necessarily in the adoption ministry, but wherever we are with our own unique gifts in ministry. So my question this morning is, do you see yourself as being in full-time ministry? Do you see yourself as being a minister? In our text today, the early church was beginning to understand this very idea.

II. Review

We are in the book of Acts. If you've been with us up to now, you'll know that today we come to the third way in which the evil one attacked the early church. Firstly, the church was challenged through force from the outside in two ways, intimidation and persecution. Brian spoke on persecution last week.

Secondly, the church was challenged by hypocrisy from the inside. Back in chapter 5, Ananias and Sapphira, out of pride and wanting to exalt themselves over others, decided to lie about how much they sold their land for. God brought immediate judgment on them, and they fell down dead.

When I spoke on that passage we talked about unity, ministry and generosity. And if you remember, which I'm sure you don't because that was like 3 weeks ago (an eternity in church life), I delayed our talk on ministry until a later date. That date is today, as part of the third attack upon this early church.

The third attack is through distraction. This attack might be the most cunning of all. If the evil one can get the Apostles busy with other things—things they are not gifted in—then they won't be able to preach or teach the truth of the Good News of Christ. That would leave the church vulnerable to false teaching.

So that brings us to today's text, where we get a problem, a solution and a result. We begin with the problem in chapter 6, verse 1.

III. The Problem

Now in these days when the disciples were increasing in number, a complaint by the Hellenists arose against the Hebrews because their widows were being neglected in the daily distribution. (Acts 6:1 ESV)

The problem is two-fold: an unintentional oversight followed by some complaining. Even though there are many people still coming to the faith, all of a sudden an issue arises. Notice that the early church is attempting to look out for the widows. They understood well that God is the protector of orphans and widows and they have taken up the responsibility to look after these people.

But in doing so an issue arises, probably because so many people are coming to the faith.

The problem is complaining. We talked about unity a few weeks ago and here we get a situation that will break that unity if it's not taken care of. Quickly. The word used here for complaining here can also mean murmuring or grumbling.

If you are a parent of a middle schooler (or of any teenager for that matter), you probably know this well. You ask them to do the dishes and you get murmuring. This is a gift of the teenager. That's what is going on here: murmuring or grumbling.

The word used here is the same word used in the Greek version of the Old Testament for the grumbling of the Israelites in the wilderness. For example listen to this passage from Exodus 16:2 and 8:

In the desert the whole community grumbled against Moses and Aaron. (v.2)

Moses said, "The LORD has heard your grumbling against him. Who are we? You are not grumbling against us, but against the LORD." (v. 8)

It's the same word.

In Acts the Hellenists are grumbling against the Hebrews. Who are these two groups? The Hellenists are those who previously lived away from Jerusalem, spoke Greek fluently and had most likely adopted the Greek culture who have now moved to Jerusalem. The Hebrews on the other hand are Aramaic speaking people who have lived in Jerusalem their entire lives and have stuck to the Hebrew culture. There had always been tension between these two groups. So, in a sense, this is nothing new; but in Christ there is to be unity of one heart and one soul.

But someone is being overlooked in the daily distribution of money or food, the text doesn't say what the distribution is. All we know is that someone is being overlooked. There is no indication in the text that this is deliberate. As I said earlier, it is probably due to the large numbers that have come to the church. These large numbers have overwhelmed the Apostles who have been part of the distribution process. This situation could possibly derail the entire project. See how subtle this is? If a crack opens for Satan he will take advantage of it, and he will destroy the unity of the church.

Take this modern day example:

Years ago a certain church in Dallas decided to split, each faction filed a lawsuit to claim the church property. A judge referred the

matter to the higher authorities in the denomination. A church court assembled to hear both sides of the case and awarded the church property to one of the two factions. The losers withdrew and formed another church in the area. During the hearing, the church court learned that the conflict had begun at a church dinner where a certain elder received a smaller slice of ham than a middle schooler seated next to him. And, of course, it was reported in all the newspapers.¹

Sometimes our greatest challenges are not frontal attacks but are internal diversions. How subtle it is and how easily it can happen if we are not careful. I don't think this is a problem here at PBCC but we must always be on our guard.

So what will the apostles do? The whole project is on the line.

IV. The Solution

And the twelve summoned the full number of the disciples and said, "It is not right that we should give up preaching the word of God to serve tables. Therefore, brothers, pick out from among you seven men of good repute, full of the Spirit and of wisdom, whom we will appoint to this duty. But we will devote ourselves to prayer and to the ministry of the word." And what they said pleased the whole gathering, and they chose Stephen, a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit, and Philip, and Prochorus, and Nicanor, and Timon, and Parmenas, and Nicolaus, a proselyte of Antioch. These they set before the apostles, and they prayed and laid their hands on them. (vv. 2-6)

Well the disciples spring into action. The Apostles seem to get it—if this complaining is not taken care of quickly and wisely, the whole project is in danger. They immediately call a congregational meeting and propose a solution. They begin by saying in verse 2 that it is not right for them to give up what they are called to do to serve tables.

Let me clarify that statement and make sure we understand it:

- They are not saying that they are too good to serve tables.
- They are not saying that we need to find other people to do the menial task of serving while we do the really spiritual stuff of preaching.
- They are not saying "let's find people who are beneath us to serve the tables."

They are not saying any of that! What they are saying is that they have been gifted and called to preach the word and to pray (verse 4), and if they are distracted from this primary calling they will not have enough time to do what they've been called to do. It's simply a matter of gifting and calling. That's it! The Apostles have been gifted and called to preach and pray so let's find other people who have been gifted and called to serve and appoint them to take over the serving part of the church. Let's use other people's gifts.

Now the word there for serve is the Greek word, *διακονία*. It is the word from which we get the word 'deacon'. Some people regard this text as the beginning of the deacon ministry. I'm not sure we can say that definitively, but it sure sets a foundation for that awesome ministry. The word is translated as service or ministry throughout the New Testament.

I also want to point out three key aspects of gifting that emerge from this text:

#1: Distinctions are made in this passage between two categories of gifts: the gifts of preaching and the gifts of serving. Speaking gifts vs. serving gifts.

#2: There is no hierarchy to these gifts. It's really important that we remember that. Neither of the gifts are better than the other. They are all equal. Just because one person can preach does not make that gift better than someone who serves. There is no hierarchy to gifting.

#3: Notice in verse 3 that spiritual people are required for both categories of gifts. People full of the Spirit are required for serving as well as speaking. In fact, it says here that the people who are chosen to serve are not only full of the spirit, but are also wise and of good standing. They are wise men of character and full of the Holy Spirit.

The gathering approves of the solution offered by the Apostles. Seven men are chosen. All seven have Greek names. It may be that they chose Greek men to help serve the Greek widows being overlooked, but the text doesn't say. In any case, they are selected, set before the apostles and prayed over, committing them to ministry and symbolizing the bestowal of authority and power on them.

And what is the result? Let's read verse 7.

V. The Result

And 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. (v. 7)

Because the Apostles devoted themselves to the Word of God and were not distracted from it and because more people began using their gifts, the word of God continued to grow and many more people came to faith. In other words, the early church thrived.

The same thing happens today when people are using their gifts; the church thrives and grows, even adding people you wouldn't expect, like priests. The Spirit continues to move in the book of Acts.

VI. Reflections

That's our text for today. Let's now talk about ministry a bit, and I want to go back to my initial question I posed: Do you see yourself as being in ministry?

A principle we learn in this text is that every single believer is called into ministry. If you follow Christ, you are called into the ministry, whether you are a middle schooler, high schooler, stay at home mom, stay at home dad, businessman, businesswoman; whatever you do, you are called into the ministry. This is what the early church learned in this situation. The only question is what kind of ministry?

Somewhere along the line the church bought into this lie that only a few super Christians should be doing the work of the church. And this has perpetuated itself over the last few centuries. John Stott says this:

We do a great disservice to the church whenever we refer to the pastorate as 'the ministry', for example when we speak of ordination in terms of 'entering the ministry'...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.²

As Stott says, Jesus is the example when he says in Mark 10:45, “I did not come to be served, but to serve and to give [my] life away.” But somehow we’ve bought into this lie that only a few people are in the ministry.

And so church becomes a spectator sport! Something like what we see today on television—22 men on a field, desperately in need of rest, while 50000 people watch from the stands desperately in need of exercise.

This is not what church was intended to be like. If you are a follower of Christ, you are in full-time ministry. Who is ordained for ministry at our church? Every single one of you who is a follower of Christ, middle schoolers included. Every single one of you is ordained for the ministry.

Every single person who is a follower of Christ has been supernaturally gifted by God in order to make eternal impacts on the lives of other people. The only questions are how have you been gifted and what is your ministry?

As we said, the distinction made here in this passage is the ministry of the word versus the ministry of tables. It’s the difference between speaking gifts (v 4) vs. serving gifts (v 2). And, to reiterate, neither is superior to the other. The word *diakonia* is used to describe both categories.

Every one of you is needed! No one is too significant and no one is insignificant!

So how have you been gifted? If you know your gifting, here’s what I want you to do: build your life around your gift! As Pastor Lee has done, build your life around your gift. Use your gift at work, at church, at home, everywhere you go. Because it is the most fulfilling and joyful thing in life when you are using the gifts that God has given to you.

If you don’t know your gifts or are unsure about your gifts, here is what I want you to do—don’t take a test. I want you to get involved in people’s lives! Find out through being in community how you are motivated to love and care for others. Jump in somewhere and you’ll find out what your gifts are within a community. Watch for how God works through you to love and care for other people. And listen for encouragement from others on how God is using you. Look for that affirmation from within the community

And for all of us, let’s encourage each other and tell each other when we are blessed by someone! Let’s tell them, “Hey, you really encouraged me when you helped me set up for my event.” Or “You helped me by just listening to me”. Or “It was so nice when you invited me to that outing.” Let’s, as a body, help each other to discover our gifting and calling.

But be patient, because gifting takes time. You need to take some time to develop them just like natural talents. Find your gifting and use it and build your life around it! Because here’s the deal—there is no such thing as secular work!

There is no secular work. Let’s get rid of this secular/sacred divide. There is no such thing as secular work. Everything you do is sacred work. Let’s begin to see our lives that way. One of my professors at school shared this story with us:

He said there was a lady in his congregation who was not in good health and so was confined to her house. So she would listen to the MP3s of his sermons at home. And she continually called to grumble about how he was always calling people to be in ministry full-time. She complained because how could she be in ministry full-time when she’s confined to her house? So he went to visit to her, and they talked about it and he said, ‘who do you come in contact with on a daily basis?’ She said, ‘well, the only person is the caregiver who comes in everyday.’ He replied, ‘why don’t you just build a relationship with her and start praying for her?’ So she did. She formed a relationship with her and eventually shared Christ with her. And the caregiver became a believer and started attending the church.

No matter where you are, you are in ministry. Whether you are in the garden, in the boardroom, in the kitchen, on the field, in the classroom—it is all sacred work. It is to be done for the glory of God. When you get up to go to work tomorrow morning, you are entering ministry.

How has God gifted you? Where is your ministry? Find your gift, build your life around and don’t get distracted from it. Because we need you.

Benediction

May the love of the Lord Jesus draw you to himself;

May the power of the Lord Jesus strengthen you in your ministry;

May the joy of the Lord Jesus fill your souls during your ministry;

May the blessing of God, The Father, Son and Spirit be among you and remain with you always.

Amen

1. Kent Hughes, *Acts: The Church Afire*. (Illinois: Crossway, 1996), 93.

2. John Stott, *The Message of Acts*. (Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 1990) 122.

