

Acts Series #7

“Staying Focused” — Acts 6:1-7

I. INTRODUCTION

A. Goofy Priorities

1. Every so often you meet someone whose priorities are way, way out of balance
2. Take for instance, this classified ad that appeared in the *Quay County Sun*, a small newspaper in New Mexico
3. “Farmer with 160 irrigated acres wants marriage-minded woman with tractor. When replying, send picture of tractor.” [\[1\]](#)

B. Today

1. Today, we’re going to be taking a look at the subject of staying focused—
2. Of keeping the right priorities in our daily lives

II. TEXT

A. Vs. 1

{1} Now in those days, when the number of the disciples was multiplying, there arose a complaint against the Hebrews by the Hellenists, because their widows were neglected in the daily distribution.

1. The church wasn’t merely growing by addition—It was *multiplying*
2. The church at Jerusalem was seeing a great influx of *new believers*—
3. It wasn’t just a case of transfer growth, of people leaving one church and going to another
4. We know that to be the case because at that time, this was the *only church*
5. They were experiencing explosive growth,
6. And as you might expect, with this growth came certain challenges and problems
7. One of the growing pains they had was a bit of dissension in the ranks
8. There was a momentary setback to their strong sense of being a caring community
9. It came when there was a complaint about an unfair distribution to the needy widows of the fellowship
10. You see, the Jews were divided between two main groups at this time
 - a. one group were more conservative
 - 1) they were traditional, patriotic and *very* nationalistic
 - 2) they spoke Aramaic
 - 3) and fiercely defensive of the old fashioned ways of Jewish life
 - 4) these were called Hebrews
 - b. the other group were called Hellenists
 - 1) because they were much more open to the Gentile world

- 2) specifically the Greco-Roman culture
 - 3) the Hellenists considered themselves more hip, more modern than the Hebrews
 - 4) they spoke Greek and enjoyed many of the advances the Greeks and Romans had developed
 - c. generally, the Hellenists considered the Hebrews to be old-fashioned prudes while the Hebrews despised the Hellenists for being compromisers
11. This division, so obvious among the Jews at large, began to manifest itself within the church
 12. All of the apostles were of the Hebrew group and apparently it was Hebrews who were making the daily distribution of food and goods to the needy of the church
 13. Some of the Hellenists began to notice that the poor of their group weren't being given a fair share and so they began to complain
 14. I know we often look back on the early church as being so pure and so perfect, but they weren't
 15. They had problems just like every church

B. Vs. 2-4

{2} Then the twelve summoned the multitude of the disciples and said, "It is not desirable that we should leave the word of God and serve tables.

{3} "Therefore, brethren, seek out from among you seven men of good reputation, full of the Holy Spirit and wisdom, whom we may appoint over this business;

{4} "but we will give ourselves continually to prayer and to the ministry of the word."

1. The apostles, as the leaders of the church, realized that they were ultimately responsible for dealing with this problem
2. But at the same time, they realized it would not be right for them to forsake their calling of teaching and prayer to be *Meals On Wheels* for the widows of Jerusalem
3. So they took a very wise step—they delegated the job to those who could do it *and* do it well
4. Notice the criteria the apostles gave for the selection of these men
5. **FIRST:** They must have a good reputation
 - a. that comes first on the list
 - b. a person in ministry doesn't have to be perfect, but they do need to have a reputation for goodness
 - c. others must see that their life is aimed at doing that which pleases God
 - d. sure they may stumble and fall along the way
 - e. but do they get back up, admit their failure and keep moving forward
 - f. I believe there is a need in our fellowship right now to stop and think hard about this point
 - 1) you see, we are experiencing a time of growth as well
 - 2) some of it is transfer growth, but a big part is people coming to faith in Christ for the first time
 - 3) and as is normal for babies, they make messes

- 4) sometimes new believers mess up and fall into things that marked their past
 - 5) the process of Christian growth doesn't happen in an instant
 - 6) and sometimes people take a while to overcome their sins
 - 7) being a grace-filled fellowship means giving learning to gently come along side these new believers and encouraging them to grow
 - 8) on one hand we mustn't coddle or be perceived as condoning sin
 - 9) but on the other hand we need to bear with the weaknesses and foibles of new believers
 - 10) and you new Christians, don't be upset or put off if a more mature believers comes to you with a gentle word of caution or rebuke
 - 11) don't get defensive
 - 12) just realize it's part and parcel of learning to put off the old man and putting on the new
 - 13) if we've received grace, we'll show grace, but that grace moves us toward God
6. SECOND: They must be filled with the Holy Spirit
 - a. it must be evident that their lives were being directed by the Holy Spirit
 - b. they must demonstrate a reliance on the power of God rather than merely the work of the flesh
 7. THIRD: They must be full of wisdom
 - a. they must have a track record of showing discernment
 - b. they must be sensible in their choices
 8. What's interesting about these 3 qualifications is that the only way the people could have *seen* these things in someone is if they were *already* ministering in the fellowship
 - a. determining whether or not a person is good requires relationship with them
 - b. knowing if they are full of the Holy Spirit means seeing the fruit of their ministry
 - c. discerning whether or not they possess wisdom means some kind of participation in what they are doing
 9. That means the apostles were telling the people to look among themselves to see who was *already* proving themselves to be faithful ministers
 10. One does not become faithful, wise, and good by being appointed to some office
 11. Rather, the church is to recognize whom God is appointing to office by seeing who is already serving
 12. The apostles justified this arrangement on the grounds that it would not be proper for them to neglect their ministry to wait on tables
 - a. not that there was anything demeaning about waiting on tables
 - b. the ministry of meeting the practical needs of the poor is a valuable and precious ministry
 - c. in fact, the OT prophets give great place to the importance of God's people meeting the needs of the poor, the needy, and the afflicted
 - d. there was nothing petty about this ministry, it's just that waiting tables was not what they were called to by God

13. As the apostles, their ministry was one of teaching and prayer
14. They were called to this
15. Now, someone might object and say that all believers are supposed to pray and study the Word
16. True - but all are not called to *prayer* and the *ministry* of the Word
17. God does call, equip, and ordain certain people to a full-time work of praying for His people and for serving them in the teaching of the scriptures
18. The apostles wisely recognized this as their calling
19. To forsake it to do something else, no matter how good or needed, it would have distracted them from their real calling
20. Friends, while only a very few of us in this room are called to a vocation of prayer and the ministry of the Word, the principle the apostles display here applies to every person in this room
21. We need to stay focused on that which the Lord has called us to

C. *The Struggle of Keeping Our Priorities Right*

1. As we've been seeing the last few weeks in our study through Acts, one of the most dramatic marks of the early church was the change in their priorities
2. God had set them free from the death grip of materialism and had birthed in them a deep and abiding desire to care for each other—specially the needy
3. Truly, this is one of the most basic marks and differences between genuine Christians and the rest of the world = a change in priorities
4. We are moved from a self-serving desire for pleasure and happiness to a desire to know and glorify God
5. But that is not to say there is no struggle in our priorities
6. As we all know, there seems to be a daily battle to stay focused on what's really important
7. A few weeks ago I said that in the Christian life, the main thing is to keep the main thing the main thing
8. Truly, I don't think there has been a more difficult time in the history of the church for Christians to stay focused in their faith than the age in which we live
9. With its space age technology, ready luxury, and ever present media outlets, the world barrages us with its message and priorities
10. When we get maybe 15 minutes of time with the Lord each day and then several hours of the radio and TV, it makes it pretty hard to keep the priorities straight
11. But that is what this passage teaches us
12. The apostles knew that if they were to be faithful they needed to do what the Lord had called them to
13. They could not be distracted by the tyranny of the urgent - which in this case was solving a legitimate problem in the church themselves
14. How much of our lives are lived, dictated by the tyranny of the urgent?
 - a. this need pops up, or that problem

- b. and really, without much thought or prayer, we just dive in
 - c. I admit, I'm like that, and I know many of you are too
15. No friends, there is an important lesson for us to learn from the Word here
16. That lesson is this: We need to stay focused on what the Lord has called us to

D. Three Steps To Staying Focused

1. There are three steps to staying focused
2. **FIRST: Discover Your Calling**
 - a. determine what it is the Lord has called you to
 - b. you see, everyone has a ministry in the body of Christ
 - c. there are no useless or unneeded members
 - d. everyone has a role to play and a ministry to fulfill
 - e. ask the Lord to show you what yours is
 - f. you'll discover what it is by the gifts he equips you with
 - g. God will also arrange circumstances to steer you
3. **SECOND: Submit To Your Calling**
 - a. once you discover your what ministry the Lord is leading you to
 - b. do it
 - c. simply be faithful to His direction
 - d. and know this: at first it may be scary because it something new
 - e. but if you couldn't do it, God never would have called you to it
 - f. the calling is proof of His ability working through you to accomplish it
4. **THIRD: Learn To Say "No!"**
 - a. this is a hard one for many people
 - b. but learn to discern what is effective for faithfully pursuing your calling and what will distract you from it
 - c. don't become entangled in those things which will hinder your effectiveness
 - d. Nike's motto is "Just Do It" = today, ours could be "Do Just It!"
 - e. the real challenge in this is that so many of the things needs that are presented to us seem like *good* things
 - f. Walt Disney was ruthless in cutting anything that got in the way of a stoy's pacing.
 - 1) one of the animators for *Snow White* worked 240 days on a 4½ minute sequence in which the dwarves made soup for Snow White
 - 2) almost destroying the kitchen in the process
 - 3) Disney thought it was very funny
 - 4) but he decided to cut it because he felt it slowed the pace of the movie
 - g. when the film of our lives is shown, will it be as great as it might be?
 - h. a lot will depend on the multitude of 'good' things we need to eliminate to make way for the great things God wants to do through us

E. Vs. 5-7

{5} And the saying pleased the whole multitude. And they chose Stephen, a man full of faith and the Holy Spirit, and Philip, Prochorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas, and

Nicolas, a proselyte from Antioch,

{6} whom they set before the apostles; and when they had prayed, they laid hands on them.

{7} Then the word of God spread, and the number of the disciples multiplied greatly in Jerusalem, and a great many of the priests were obedient to the faith.

1. The people saw the wisdom of the apostles decision and selected 7 men who met the criteria
2. The solution worked so well that the potential for trouble was turned into another opportunity to reveal the goodness and grace of God
3. And the result was that the Church continued to grow, both in quantity and quality

III. CONCLUSION

A. Not Exempt From Problems

1. No church is exempt from problems
2. Because the church is made up of imperfect people, there will be imperfections
3. What God is looking for is not perfect people or the perfect church
4. What He looks for are people who will come to Him with their problems and seek Him for the solutions
5. All too often we consult the experts first and only turn to God as a last resort, when everything else has failed
6. God should be our first recourse
7. He was for the apostles as they faced this first great challenge to their leadership
8. Their first thought was to remain faithful to the Lord and to stay focused on their calling
9. If you and I want to be effective, we need to follow their example

B. Is it Worth It?

1. Finally, let me ask those who are here who aren't Christians, what are the priorities of your life
2. What are you living for— What are you chasing after?
3. Lewis Sperry Chafer, a well known theologian of some years ago said about a certain friend of his; "He's like a bulldog chasing a train; what's he going to do when he catches it?"
4. What are you chasing after friend? And what will you do when you finally catch it, if you ever do?
5. Like chasing after the wind, you'll only discover you wasted a lot of time and energy for nothing
6. There is only one who satisfies - there is only one who can satisfy the longing in your soul = Jesus

[1] AP release, June 1978, Tucumcari, New Mexico