

Keeping on Track - 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, the classified ad that appeared in the *Quay County Sun*, a small newspaper in New Mexico. [\[1\]](#)

**Farmer with 160 irrigated acres wants marriage-minded woman with tractor.
When replying, send picture of tractor.**

3. An up & coming young exec had his brand new Z4 Beamer out for a spin in the hills above LA.
 - a. Unfamiliar as he was with the car, he took a curve too fast & lost control.
 - b. The car spun around & slid sideways off the road, crashing through the side rail.
 - c. He had just enough time to dive out before it went over & plummeted a couple dozen feet.
 - d. His *life* was saved, but in exiting the car he'd lost his left arm.
 - e. He stood on the edge of the cliff looking at his mangled car when a driver who'd seen the whole thing came running up. He heard the young man saying, "Oh, no! My car! It's brand new!"
 - f. Thinking the poor guy must be in shock the witness said, "Forget about *that*. You've lost your arm!"
 - g. The young man looked down & said, "Oh no, my *Rolex!*"

B. Today

1. Living in 21st Century America, we face some *unique challenges*.
2. Never before in history have so many achieved the standard of living we enjoy today.
3. The marvels of modern technology provide a plethora of labor saving devices that provide more *leisure time*.
4. We have before us a smorgasbord of entertainment choices.
5. The abundance of cheap travel & telecommunications adds even *more* opportunity to the mix.
6. Our privileged political environment means we have the *freedom* to do just about *whatever we want*.
7. In fact, there are *so many* choices & options, some people are *overwhelmed* & suffer emotional breakdowns.
8. More & more, anxiety disorders are attributed to *opportunity-overload, decisional-disorder, a crisis of too many choices*.

 - a. The problem of so many choices comes when we *lose sight of what's important*.
 - b. When our *priorities* aren't clear, it's difficult knowing what to do.

9. Today we're going to take a look at a time when the priorities of the Apostles were put to the test.
10. This won't be new material for many of us. If you've been a Christian for a

while you've probably heard a study on priorities before.

- a. But it's one of those life-lessons we need to be reminded of *often*.
- b. We need reminding because it's a truth that's constantly challenged.

II. TEXT

A. Vs. 1

1. This was a time of *rapid increase* among the followers of Jesus.
 - a. Their lifestyle of love & holiness, coupled to the dynamic ministry of miracles worked by the Apostles,
 - b. Had resulted in *thousands* coming to faith & joining the new movement.
 2. As we saw last Sunday, their reputation for being a community that loved one another & took care of their needy was well-known.
 3. Some of the wealthy sold property & gave the proceeds to the poor.
 4. We saw how the devil tried to *use* this reputation of practical love as a *mask* to insert himself into their community, but it backfired.
 5. Here we find that trouble boiled up in *another* area.
 6. There was a *complaint* about unfair distribution among the widows of the movement.
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7. At this time, specially in Jerusalem, which was a rather large & cosmopolitan city, the Jews were divided into 2 main groups – *Hebrews & Hellenists*, roughly synonymous with our conservatives & liberals.
 - a. The *Hebrews* were *conservative*.
 - 1) They were traditional, patriotic & nationalistic.
 - 2) They spoke Hebrew & Aramaic, & were fiercely defensive of Jewish religious & cultural traditions.
 - 3) The *Pharisees* were usually a part of this group.
 - 4) Being *nationalistic zealots*, they detested the Romans & chaffed under their yoke.
 - b. The *Hellenists* were *liberal*.
 - 1) *Ethnically* they were Jewish but *culturally* they'd *thrown off* Jewish traditions to embrace a Greco-Roman lifestyle.
 - 2) Hellenists considered themselves *hip, modern, contemporary*; they were the *Emergent Church* of 1st Century Israel.
 - 3) They spoke *Greek*. The Sadducees who controlled the priesthood & temple were Hellenists.
 - 4) They worked in partnership with Rome & enjoyed their position of power, wealth, & influence because of that.
 - 5) The Hellenists acceptance of foreigners inflamed the hostility of the Hebrews toward them. Hebrews considered Hellenists *traitors & apostates*.
 - c. *Conservative Hebrews* interpreted the Bible *literally* while *liberal Hellenists* saw it as *symbolic & allegorical*.
 - d. Many historians believe it was the conflict between these 2 groups that resulted in the Roman destruction of Jerusalem & temple in 70 AD.
 - e. It wasn't so much the Romans that *won* as that the Hellenists & Hebrews brutalized each other & allowed the Romans to sweep in & finish them off.

8. The point is – the prejudice & hatred between these 2 groups of Jews in Jerusalem was *epic*.
9. Knowing this, & reading v. 1, our reaction could be one of *concern*. How could prejudice carry over into the New Church?
 - a. Remember—as holy love was **THE MOST REMARKABLE** thing about them at this time.
 - b. But now we read of a petty case of *bigotry*, of political-infighting & cultural prejudice that divided them.
 - c. So much for their vaunted love! So much for the great days of charity!
 - d. It dissolves over *nothing* more than the difference of *partisan politics*!
10. If that's our reaction, we're missing the author, Luke's point.
 - a. His aim is to show how the change Christ brings *overcame* the riff that had torn Jerusalem in 2!
 - b. But he doesn't paint an "all is roses" picture—that's not the way it went down.
 - c. Just because thousands were coming to Christ, that didn't mean *all* their values & priorities were *instantaneously harmonious*.
 - d. They were still people with habits & opinions & views about politics, culture, entertainment, & dozens of other things that needed to see the Holy Spirit *re-work*.
11. How many of you know the Christian life is something you **GROW** in?
12. The mind needs to be **renewed** and that it *takes time*.
13. That was no less true for these first believers.
 - a. They didn't all become *perfect pals* the second they were born again.
 - b. It took a while for *Hebrews & Hellenists* to realize "*Christian*" is a *label & identity* that *trumps* all others.
 - c. It took a while for the old attitudes to fall away & Luke doesn't gloss over the problem they faced.
 - d. No – he speaks of it plainly, honestly.

14. Both Hebrews & Hellenists were getting saved.
 - a. And there were members of *both* groups who needed provision from the community resources.
 - b. But those who'd come from the Hellenist camp noticed their widows were consistently being *overlooked* in the distribution.
15. It became a cause of *complaint*.
 - a. The *word* refers to a quiet grumbling, murmuring.
 - b. This wasn't a major blow out. They didn't appear on the *Jeremiah Springer Show* & toss chairs at each other.
 - c. The Hellenists simply remarked to one another that their needy members weren't getting the same level of care as others.
 - d. Their concern, which was *just*, was made known to the Apostles.

B. Vs. 2-4

1. As leaders of the Church, the Apostles realized *they* were responsible for dealing with this problem.
2. But at the same time, they knew it wouldn't be proper for them to *forsake their calling* to be Jerusalem's *Meals On Wheels*.

3. So they *delegated* the task of taking care of the needy to those who *were* called & gifted for it.

4. Notice the *criteria* the Apostles gave for the selection of these ministers -

5. **FIRST**: They minister must have a **good reputation**.

- a. That's *first* on the list.
- b. The minister doesn't have to be *perfect*, but he/she does need to have a *good rep*.
- c. Others need to know that they're lifestyle is basically god-ward.
- d. They may stumble along the way; but they get back up, *admit* their failure & press on.

6. **SECOND**: The minister must be **filled with the Holy Spirit**

- a. It has to be evident his/her life is *directed* by the Spirit, not fleshly ambition, pride, or greed.
- b. They must demonstrate a *reliance* on God rather than mere human ingenuity & talent.

7. **THIRD**: The minister must be **full of wisdom**.

- a. He/she needs to have a *track record of discernment*.
 - b. He/she must show a level of skill in the task they're appointed to.
8. The only way the people could've seen these 3 things is if the ones they selected were *already ministering* among them.
- a. *Really* knowing a person's reputation, as opposed to hearsay, requires a relationship *with* them.
 - b. Knowing whether or not they're full of the Spirit means *seeing* them in action.
 - c. Discerning wisdom means seeing the fruit of their choices.
9. The apostles told the disciples to look *among themselves* for those who were *already proving themselves* faithful & gifted workers.
10. One does not *become* faithful, wise, & good by *being appointed* to an office, or by being given a title.
11. Rather, the church is to *recognize God's appointing* by seeing who's *already serving*.
12. The apostles based their decision about how to handle this crisis on the grounds it would *not be proper* for them to *neglect their calling* to wait on tables.
- a. They didn't in any way *disparage* ministering to the practical needs of widows.
 - b. The Bible is quite clear that taking care of the poor is near & dear to God's heart & a priority for His people.
 - c. But there are *different ways* to minister to the poor & each must seek his/her own calling in how.
 - d. The Apostles knew the poor would be *best served* by their *continuing* to teach & pray – showing the *rest* of the disciples God's heart & seeing *them* conformed to His image.
 - e. As they did that, God would call men & women to be His hands & feet.
13. The Apostles said their calling, their unique role from which they *ought not be distracted*, was to the ministry/service of the Word & Prayer.
- a. How is *that* unique? Aren't *all believers* supposed to read the scriptures &

- pray?
- b. Yes, certainly – but not all called to a *full-time work* where their vocation, their occupation, is to *serve* the Word & prayer.
 - c. A flock needs a shepherd, & if a man's a shepherd, leading, feeding, & protecting the flock is his sole concern. It occupies his attention 24/7.
 - d. He might like to go skiing, or surfing, or even try his hand at another line of work.
 - e. But if he does & leaves his flock, he's derelict in his duty & calling.
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14. Some years ago, as our church was growing, the administration & business requirements were just exploding.
 - a. Over the period of about a year, the elders noticed we were spending way too much time in our monthly meetings on pedantic legal & business details.
 - b. We knew we ought to be focused on *spiritual* issues but it seemed like we were spending all our time on administration.
 - c. And while as elders our gifting was more spiritually orientated, we for the most part weren't all that sharp with the business challenges.
 - d. So we did some re-organizing, formed a new group of folks in the fellowship with good business sense, and charged them with the task of administrating the ministry.
 - e. That freed the elders to focus on the spiritual issues & needs of the fellowship.
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15. Here in Acts 6, the Church was growing rapidly & the Apostles wisely recognized it was a crucial moment; a *test* of their leadership.
 - a. It would have been a *good thing* to pick up food baskets & go house to house feeding widows.
 - b. Others would've looked at these men who'd walked with Jesus & worked miracles & said, "Look how humble & godly they are!!"
 - c. Yeah – it would have been a *good* work – and set an example.
 - d. But it would **NOT** have been the *best work* – because the ultimate result would have been a *spiritually impoverished Church--satisfied* bellies but *hungry* souls.
 - e. While the Apostles served loaves, they could not serve the Bread of life.
 16. How much better to find those who could do an EVEN BETTER JOB of taking care of the widows because IT WAS THEIR CALLING & EQUIPPING?

C. The Struggle to Keep Our Priorities Right

1. As we've been seeing in our study in Acts, one of the major marks of the early church was their *change in priorities*.
2. They'd been set free from the death grip of materialism & given a passion to care for each other.
3. One of the fundamental marks of a genuine Christian is a *radical change in priorities*.
4. We move from a self-serving desire for pleasure to a longing to know & glorify God.
5. But that's not to say there's no *struggle* in that change to our priorities.

6. There's a **daily battle** to stay focused on what's important; to keep the Main Thing the main thing
 7. As I said at the outset of today's message, there's never been a more difficult time for the followers of Christ to **stay focused** in their faith than now.
 8. We go to church, hear a message on keeping our priorities straight
 - a. And determine to redo our skeedoolies, carving out time to spend with the Lord each day.
 - b. We think about cutting off distractions & focusing on our calling.
 9. Then Sunday turns into Monday. And the **tyranny of the urgent** trumps our best intentions.
 10. We push back the start of the new schedule to Tuesday.
 - a. Tuesday pushes it to Wednesday; Wednesday to Thursday.
 - b. January pushes it to February; 2007 to 2008; our 30's to our 40's.
 11. It'll never end till we wake up to what the Apostles realized & saw as a non-negotiable – their Calling.
 12. They didn't evaluate their lives by today, how many good deeds they got done, or how many items they checked off their **To Do** list.
 13. They lived with the vision of standing before Jesus & answering His one question—What they'd done with what He'd given them.
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14. Some years ago, a seminary student named Don McCullough was studying for a Ph.D. in Edinburgh, Scotland.
 - a. His thesis had a chapter on the work of a German theologian named Jurgen Moltmann.
 - b. McCullough heard Moltmann was going to be in town giving a lecture.
 - c. He was determined to attend the meeting & have a conversation with the famous theologian.
 - d. McCullough read every book & article Moltmann had written.
 - e. He thought about Moltmann every day all day.
 - f. He lived, ate, & breathed Jurgen Moltmann as he prepared to meet the man.
 - g. The night of the lecture came & McCullough sat in the front row.
 - h. As soon as it was over, Moltmann was ushered off stage & through a side door.
 - i. McCullough raced down the dark street after him.
 - j. The rain was pouring & McCullough was soaked but he caught up with Moltmann.
 - k. He said, "Professor, please, may I talk to you?"
 - l. McCullough told him he was writing his Ph.D. thesis about his theology & had some questions.
 - m. Moltmann invited McCullough to share his umbrella.
 - n. McCullough later wrote, "We were standing face to face and had a great conversation. I had prepared myself for that moment. All of my thoughts were focused on meeting him."
 - o. Later, as McCullough thought back on all his frantic, single-minded preparation to meet Moltmann, he realized it beggared the interest he invested in preparing to one day stand face to Face with the King of kings.

- p. He'd shown more concern in studying the subject of *theology* than theology's subject → God.
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15. The Apostles would not allow themselves to be *distracted* by the tyranny of the urgent.
16. As leaders, they needed to *take the lead* in meeting the need – but that did not mean waiting tables.
17. It meant *pointing out* the solution & setting it in motion.

D. Vs. 5-7

1. We'll take a closer look at this Wednesday evening.
2. For now, notice the church saw the wisdom of the Apostles' decision & selected 7 men who met the proper criteria.
3. The solution worked so well the potential for trouble was turned into *yet another opportunity* to reveal the goodness & grace of God.
4. The result was more growth, both in numerical quantity & spiritual quality.

II. CONCLUSION

1. There are 3 steps to staying focused we can learn from the Apostles' -

FIRST: Discover Your Calling

- a. Determine what God has called you to.
- b. *Everyone* has a ministry in the Kingdom of God. There are no useless or unneeded members.
- c. Everyone has a role to play & a ministry to fulfill.
 - 1) Please don't think of just the local church.
 - 2) By 'ministry' I don't mean Sunday School teacher or Usher, or Choir member.
 - 3) Those **ARE** some peoples' ministry – that **IS** their calling.
 - 4) But if God has made & called you to be an *entrepreneur* – being an usher is a waste of your potential –
 - 5) And it's going to be terribly frustrating because you're not wired for helping people find a seat.
 - 6) Your ministry/vocation/calling might be to press the borders of God's Kingdom into the jungle of Borneo – or the concrete jungle of West LA.
 - 7) Maybe you're supposed to pastor a church of surf rats on Hollywood Beach.
 - 8) Maybe you're called to invent a new technology & found an IPO to manufacture it.
- d. Ask the Lord to show you what your calling is.
- e. You'll discover what it is by the gifts & talents He equips you with.
- f. He'll also use circumstances to steer you.

SECOND: Submit To Your Calling

- a. Once you discover your calling - Do it! Be faithful.
- b. At first it'll likely be scary because it's *new*. There'll be a measure of *risk* in stepping out.
 - 1) And remember, you have a mortal enemy who's *terrified* at the prospect

- of you moving into your calling.
- 2) It spells the end of his dominance of your life.
 - 3) And it means the erosion of his territory because you're going to be pressing the boundaries of the Kingdom of God deeper into the devil's realm.

THIRD: Just Say "No!"

- a. This is difficult for many.
 - 1) They think saying "No!" is ungodly – that faith always says "Yes, sure!"
 - 2) Remember Acts 6 & the Apostles – they said "No!" to a seemingly good thing,
 - 3) Because it would have kept them from something better.
- b. Discern what's effective for *advancing your call* & what *detracts from it*.
- c. Nike's motto is "**Just Do It**" = Ours should be "**Do Just It!**"
- d. Walt Disney was ruthless in cutting anything that got in the way of a story's flow.
 - 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, almost destroying the kitchen in the process.
 - 2) Disney thought it was very funny & some of the best animation in the film.
 - 3) But it ended up on the cutting room floor because the scene distracted from the story.
- e. When the film of our lives is shown, will it be as *great* as it could be?
- f. 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.

[1]

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