

The First Servers

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[0 : 0 0] So we are back to the book of Acts and with this week we are in Acts chapter 6. It's the story of the deacons, the story of how the deacons came to be, where they came from and what they do. And at the heart of the story of the deacons, underlying all the details in the passage, is the fact that the early church was committed to serve one another. And that's really the centerpiece of the entire passage. It's a service that's unlike any other community on earth, unlike any other community that's ever existed. So let's get right into it and have a look at it. We're going to look at two things. First, the problems of service and secondly, the ground of service. So first, the problems of service. From the very beginning of the passage there are two issues that arose in the early days of the church. And one of the first one was that they were growing at a rapid rate. So they had an immense amount of fruit. So we read in Acts chapter 2 that they had 3,000 converts in a day. Next chapter, 5,000. The chapter just before this, it stops counting and just says multitudes of men and women were coming. And you see it again at the end of the passage. So an immense amount of fruit. You put that on top of the second issue.

The second issue is that the apostles were deeply committed to two ministry practices. And these are the ministry practices that we see them list in the middle of the passage. They said, we will not neglect the Word of God or the, our ESV ads, the preaching of the Word of God. We will not neglect the Word of God and we also don't want to neglect the service of tables. That's literally the phrase that was used there in Greek, the service of tables, which is very little.

They're committed to that. And so what you have here is a church that's growing at an unbelievable rate and a church that's deeply committed to these two fundamental ministry practices, Word ministry and Deed ministry. And so what that builds is a recipe for administrative problem. They've got administrative problems. And so what happens is that the Hellenist complain, complain arises. And the Greek word for complaint here is the little word gizmos, which is not, it's not a formal complaint. It's not like a petition to the apostles. It's a rumor. It's a, it's murmuring. It's whispers in the night.

You know, the complaint arises. People are talking and what they're talking about is that the Hellenist are not getting food or their supply in the daily distribution, particularly the widows. Now in the early church in Jerusalem, there are two different groups of people and they're divided somewhat by their languages. There's Greek speaking Jews that are primarily come in from other countries to dwell in Jerusalem. And there are Aramaic speaking Jews mostly.

Now they both can speak each other's language, but they have a dominant language, which means they naturally divide into different communities. They probably live and hang out in people that, with people that predominantly speak the main language that they speak. And so what's happening here is it's probably not, and most commentators agree that it's not an issue of prejudice that's specific here. It's not that the Aramaic apostles are being prejudicial in the daily distribution to the Greek speaking, the Hellenist. It's, it's literally practical. It's a church in Jerusalem of well over 5,000 people and they're engaged in an activity of daily hospitality, daily distribution, and it's not holding together. They just can't, they don't have the resources to get to everybody administratively. It's just not happening. In other words, this is a big church. This is a really big church in Jerusalem. It's huge. It's a, it's a mega church as we would classify it today. And it's not that they're all meeting together every single Sunday in one place. That had not yet quite arisen at this time in history like we do today, but they all are going to be synagogues and huge numbers and worshipping together on Sundays and they're meeting in various house churches and fellow, not house churches, but house fellowships throughout the week and living and doing, doing life with one another. But what they are doing for sure in a united way across more than 5,000 people in this city, this mega church, is that they are distributing alms as we call it, gifts to the poor daily. They're doing it every day. It's a daily distribution and that's the situation that this complaint arises in. What's so remarkable at this passage is what is so unremarkable. And that's that, did you catch it? The office of Deacon, the *Dachinit* as we call it, which is prescribed to us in the New Testament and a number of places by Paul especially that we should have two offices, elders, which are derivative at the end of the apostles, the teachers of the word and deacons. Did you see how it arises? It's not a supernatural call from heaven. It doesn't fall down upon them and says you should have the office of Deacon. It's unbelievably unremarkable. They don't have enough people to serve the food every day. And so they have a practical problem. They have an administrative problem and they need, so they need more people. They need a new office. They need leadership. They need people to take up this new job. They've got overwhelming numbers and they don't, they can't deal with it. Look, the New Testament doesn't give any prescriptions for an ideal church size. No prescriptions for what kind of numbers a church should seek out. No ideal whether you should be small, a house church, medium, a mega church, like the church in Jerusalem was. Nothing like that. What the New

[6 : 03] Testament, the logic of the New Testament is that every church, every local gathering of believers should seek fruit, seek the fruit of ministry and then be willing like the apostles were to practically accommodate in ways that need accommodation to satisfy those ministries. That's the prescriptions we get from the New Testament. Jesus makes this really clear in Matthew chapter 25. In Matthew chapter 25, he tells a parable. It's normally called the parable of the talents. And in this parable, the master of the house takes bags of money and leaves them with three different stewards, servants. And he goes off and each of those stewards was expected to take that money, invest it and get a reward, double it at least. So two of the stewards do that, you'll remember. They take five talents, they make ten, they take ten talents, they make twenty. But one of the stewards, what does he do? He buries it. He buries his bag of money in the ground because he doesn't want to lose it. So the master comes back and the master congratulates the two guys that invested their money, that sowed in new fields, that bore a new harvest and produced fruit. But the guy that buried his, the master comes back and says, you wicked and lazy servant. You know that there are fields out there that I have not harvested in. And you see what Jesus is saying in that parable. It's a metaphor for the kingdom of God. He's saying that the church, the stewards of the resources that the church has been given, which is the gospel, the message of the word and the ability to serve, are not to bury the resource. In other words, the church isn't to go into maintenance mode. It's to seek out fruit.

It's to multiply. It's to do the work of ministry and to be committed to it and to adjust practically to seeing those ministries fulfilled. And this is exactly what's happening in the Jerusalem church. It's just unbelievable that the office of deacon simply arises when people are doing the work that they've been called to do and they've got practical needs. And that's exactly how the office of deacon comes about. The problem, secondly, is created by a deep commitment that this early church has to these two practices, word ministry and particularly here, service, the ministry of service. The service to widows is the one and they're not backing away from it. We talked about this briefly at the beginning of our study in Acts and Acts chapter two when Peter divides the two ministries of the church between what he calls teaching and if you remember in Acts two, fellowship is the word he uses. And it's a little Greek word, the word fellowship, *koinonia*. And it's probably better translated, not as fellowship, but as sharing. So it has less the sense of just like hanging out with one another and like making potluck dinners and stuff like that. It's the sense of deep committed sharing with one another. In Acts two verse 45, people were liquidating their resources in order to make sure that there wasn't a single person in the church that was even close to destitute. And that's exactly what's happening in this. They've developed a daily distribution, a service to the widows, to people that are particularly prone to be destitute. Now why did they do this? Well, if you read the Gospels and look at Jesus' miracles, a lot of theologians and

New Testament scholars will say that the reason for the miracles, the reason Jesus performs miracles is not in first place to prove that he's the Messiah, but actually to preview what the kingdom of God is going to be like in the future. In other words, when Jesus feeds 5,000 people out of a few pieces of bread and fish, what he's saying to us is that the kingdom of God is a place where people don't go hungry. Or when he takes control of the natural forces and walks on water, calm storms, things like that, he's saying the kingdom of God, the future kingdom to come, is a place that doesn't have natural disaster. When he raises up Lazarus, the kingdom of God is a place where people don't die, where people rise from the dead. And the church in the book of Acts does the same exact thing.

We're not always performing miracles, but what we are doing in service is putting on display what a preview of the future kingdom of God. The church is like a little garden of Eden, if you will, is the picture. And in that little garden of Eden previewing the future, nobody's hungry, nobody's destitute, everybody's got clothes on their back, and that's exactly how they thought of it. But it wasn't just something that was for inside the church. The New Testament and the whole Bible really is really clear that this service was also to extend outside the church community. It's all over the Bible, but one instance outside the Bible later on in history, and we read this actually when I was preaching on Acts 2, the Emperor Julian in the 360s, he was the emperor that came after Constantine, and Constantine was the one who instituted Christianity as a legal religion. Basically, Julian wanted to take a few steps back and reinvigorate the old Roman religion, the pantheon, the belief in many gods, and so there's a letter that he wrote to one of his priests, and he's basically giving the priest instructions for what to do about this problem, and the problem is there are too many Christians, and Christianity is way too popular, and this is what he says. Why do we think what we have been doing is sufficient and do not observe how the kindness of Christians to strangers, their care for the burial of the dead, the sobriety of their lifestyle, has done the most to advance their calls in this empire? Each of these things that they do ought to be practiced by us, I think, he says. If any one of the priests is not acting like the

Christians, then get rid of them. So he's talking about the pagan priest, or persuade them to tell the priest to stop drinking so much. I'm devising a plan, erect hostels for strangers in every one of the city, and be kind to them, like the Christians do. I'm ordering a fifth of our food supply to the poor. Four, and this is key, it's disgraceful when not a single Jew is a beggar in the entire kingdom, and the pious Christians not only care for their poor, but for our poor as well. Everyone can see that they are doing all the work for us. So that's Julian the emperor in the year 360. So you can see that the service, the daily distribution, extended well beyond just taking care of people inside the church, it extended outside the church. And the point is that this came actually from Old Testament practices. This came out of the very character of God. You see the term widow in this passage is actually more of a shorthand, most scholars think, for an entire group of people that were most likely the people to become destitute in any particular situation. It can be applied to us today in different ways. It might not be particularly widows that are as susceptible as they were in these days. In these days a widow that was a Jew, that was a believer would come to Jerusalem in their twilight years, and often it was the case that the male would die first, the husband would die first, and when this happened the widows had no recourse to anything. There was no income, there was no pension, nothing. And so they were broke, and they were starving, and they were begging. And so it was widows in particular that were particularly susceptible. But this comes straight out of the character of God. In the Old

[13 : 47] Testament from Deuteronomy 10, just listen to what God says to the people, I defend the cause of the fatherless and the widow. I love the alien, the stranger, the immigrant. I give food and clothing, and justice will roll down like a river, and righteousness like a living stream. You see? Orphan, widow, alien, sojourner, the fatherless. These are the words that you get over and over again throughout the Bible. These are all shorthand terms for anybody that's especially prone to physical destitution, to physical, to lacking things.

Proverbs 14-31, if you insult the poor, you insult the Lord. Proverbs 19, whoever is kind to the poor is kind to the Lord. God was the father to the fatherless, that's how he describes himself so often in the Old Testament. And this was really radical because all of the gods in the ancient Near East always identified themselves with the head of any society. So the only way, if you want to get to God in Egypt, you got to go through Pharaoh. It's the highest of the high that are the channels to the gods, but not Yahweh, not the God of the Old Testament. He goes directly to the lowest, to the poor, to the destitute, to the fatherless, to the orphans. Matthew 25, Jesus, for I was hungry and you gave me something to eat. I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink. I was a stranger and you invited me in. I needed clothes and you clothed me. I was sick and you looked after me. I was in prison and you came to visit me. And the disciples say, who in the world, where in the world were you naked? Where in the world were you despised? And he says, look out at these, these poor ones. Whenever you did it to the least of these, you did it to me. That's what he says at the end of the parable of the talents that we talked about just a minute ago. What we get from this passage is that this daily distribution to people that are particularly prone inside the church first, but extends outside the church, is not just a call for officers in the church, but it's called in the

New Testament for everybody, for any Christian. You can see one evidence for this and the pretty unremarkable qualifications that are listed here to be a deacon. So it says that they have to be mature, relatively mature, have a good reputation, have the spirit of God, in other words, be a Christian, and be basically known to be men of good character. And then Paul's list in 1 Timothy 3, just listen to this. This is the qualification. Don't let anybody be a deacon that's a drunkard. Don't let anybody be a deacon that goes out and beats people up. So he literally says that is aggressive or overly violent, gets into many fistfights. I mean, that's literally what he's saying. I think most of us are probably not doing too much of that. Then he goes on, don't give it to people that gossip. Make sure that non-Christians speak well of anybody that you elect as an officer, so that they've got non-Christian friends, non-believing friends, and that those people think they're decent people, that they have a good reputation with them, and make sure that they're trustworthy with money. And you see, these are pretty unremarkable qualifications. Don't get in fistfights, don't be drunkards, don't gossip. See, the office of Elder and Deacon is an office that's elected for people that are mature in the faith, men that are mature in the faith, Christians. But what it is, is it's exemplars for a ministry that everybody's being called to be involved in. The ministry of proclaiming the word that's listed here, the service of the word, and the service of the table, literally accommodating people's physical needs, is a ministry that's for the entire church, not just for elders and deacons, but elders and deacons are called to be the exemplars and leaders of the entirety of these ministries. And so what we get from the whole book of Acts really, is that we have to understand how deeply the pattern of commitment to both the ministry of the word and the life of the whole church and the ministry of service and the life of the whole church was ingrained into the daily life of these people, of these early Christians. It was thoroughly fundamental to their daily lives. Okay, that's the first thing. Those are the problems of service.

But secondly, the ground, and finally, the ground of service. A community that looks like what we just read about here, even in their practical problems, this type of a community that serves pedigrees that are below them, different classes that goes after and loves the destitute in really radical ways, this cannot be constructed by simple attempts to be good people. So in the modern sense of philanthropy, we have a lot of people, especially celebrities today, that really love to be philanthropists, and that's great. I'm glad that that's happening. But the basic idea underneath philanthropy is that we do good to other people who need it, because we want to be good people, because we, because that's what it means to be a good person, is to do good to other people. But any sense of guilt, of inspiration, of just trying to be a good person, that is not what creates a community that looks like this. It just won't work. It will only last for a day if that's your primary motivation. That's not what does it. Instead, the prerequisite for creating any type of community that looks like this is that you stop trying to be good. Actually, the sense of the New Testament gives us is that it's only people that know that they're not good, that can actually live and love and serve people like this. The basic idea that underlies this entire type of ministry is the word disciple in the Gospels. In Matthew 28, Jesus says, make disciples, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded. Matthew 11, whoever wants to inherit the kingdom, not everyone who says to me, Lord, Lord, will inherit the kingdom, but the person who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. So a disciple is not merely a yes man or a yes woman. A disciple is not merely a person who says yes to the claims of Jesus, who says Lord, Lord.

It's not merely that, but a disciple it says is a person who seeks to do the will of my Father who is in heaven. That's what it means to be pursuing discipleship. This is what Jesus called a gapae. It's a unique, a very unique kind of love that is introduced into the world by this very unique Christian community. How do we get this? How do you become like this? We notice that in Judaism, Judaism was already doing a weekly almsgiving every Friday and the Christians in this passage have up the ante on that and they're doing a daily distribution, but we went back and saw that in Deuteronomy that this comes just out of God's character in the Old Testament and Judaism. In another place, he says, I am the God of gods and the Lord of lords, the great, the mighty, the awesome God who is not partial and does not take a bribe. I execute justice for the fatherless and the widow. I love the sojourner. I give him food and clothing. So God's character, he's the king. He's the God of gods. He's the Lord of lords, he says, and as the ruler of the world, he administers justice and he describes that justice.

[21 : 28] That justice is to care, he says, for the fatherless, for the destitute, for the widow, for the orphan. But then he turns to Israel in Deuteronomy 10 and he says, but you too, Israel, you're about to enter the land of promise. Here's my command to you. And this is what Moses records. Love the fatherless, love the widow, love the sojourner. And these people had been called to do that already and they utterly failed. And so they cry out basically in Deuteronomy and say, why should we? Why should we? Why should we be like you? Why should we care for these people? Why should we love the orphan and the fatherless, the destitute, the widow? And this is what he says, because you are the fatherless and the sojourner and you were until I brought you out of the land of Egypt. You see, in other words, if you want to create a community like this, it requires a total destruction of your self-interest. These physical issues that people have in life, clothes on our backs, food on our table, poverty, destitution, right?

What the scripture is saying is that these are symptoms of a much deeper problem and it's a problem that's fundamental and universal. And that's the problem that every single person is spiritually destitute, spiritually poor, spiritually impoverished. And this is exactly what Jesus means in the Sermon on the Mount when he says, blessed are the poor in spirit. In other words, he's saying blessed is the one who realizes that they are orphaned in spirit, because there is an ultimate family to which they are estranged. Blessed is the one who knows they are widowed in spirit, because there is a bridegroom that they have yet to marry. You see, blessed are the ones that know they're poor, that know they're poor in spirit, that know that they lack the resources to get any of the promises of God. Here's the question. What's a deacon? What's a deacon? The word deacon that Paul uses that we translate deacon is the little Greek word diaconos. And really diaconos is a word that Paul co-ops for the idea of a deacon. It just means servant. That's all. It just means servant. And in Mark chapter 10, Jesus gives us a direct identification of what he thinks of as a deacon or as a servant. The sons of Zebedee, James and John, come to Jesus in Mark chapter 10, and they say to him, Lord, will you promise us that we can stand at your right and left hand when the kingdom of God comes? And Jesus says, you have no idea what you're asking for, because if you want to stand at my right hand and left hand, at the left hand and right hand of God, the Father, you have to drink the cup of wrath with me. And they have no idea what he means. And then the rest of the disciples are mad and annoyed at James and John because they recognize these guys have just made a power play, a political power play. They've tried to procure a top position in the coming kingdom of God. They're thinking of it merely in political terms. And this is how Jesus responds. He says, don't you know that the Gentile rulers lured over their people? And the word there is not lured, it's the word dominate or oppress. Don't you know that the

Gentile rulers oppress their people? The great ones amongst the Gentiles, it says dominates. The little word for great there is the word megas, where we get the word mega big, right? The megas and the Gentiles, they become giants by subjugating their people. And then this is what he says to them, if you want to be a megas, a giant in the kingdom of God, you must become a diaconos, a deacon, a servant, you see? And then he takes us a step further. Not only must you become a diaconos, a deacon, he says you must become a doulas, a slave. He's literally talking about the lowest caste, a slave. You have to become not only a deacon, but even lower than a deacon, a slave, if you want to be great in the kingdom of God.

And then this is what he says. He says, the son of man, what do I mean? The son of man came not to be served, but to serve, to be a deacon. You see, Jesus Christ was the first deacon. He was the first diaconos. He identified himself directly as the diaconos, the son who came not to be served, but to be the diaconos, to give his life as a ransom for many. When Jesus went to the cross, when he went to the cross and he cried out to the Father, why have you forsaken me? You see what's happening there? Jesus Christ came for the fatherless. He came for the widow. He came for the orphan. He came for the destitute by becoming the fatherless. He became the orphan. He cried out, my God, my God, why have you forsaken me? And God did not respond to him. He became the fatherless one on the cross. He became the ultimate orphan. And you see what he's saying is that if you want to become a true servant, a true deacon, which not only the officer deacons are called to be, but every single person in the church, you have to turn to the fundamental power of the cross to the man, the ultimate deacon, who lost his father in heaven so that he could come and get you the fatherless, the orphan, the widow to be able to marry the bridegroom. You see, in other words, the cross, the cross is the ground of the diaconate. If you want to know what it means to be a deacon, you turn your face to Jerusalem and you look at the man of power hanging there, the fatherless himself. That's where the change, the love, the reconstitution of your heart comes from to be able to create a community like this. And it's a community that we are all called to be a part of.

All of us are called to be lowercase deacons, serving under the uppercase deacons, the office. All right, we're out of time. Let me just say this, I have four brief practical things about how to get started in advance in this ministry of service, but let me just close with this and we can do those another time. The ministry of service, the ministry of mercy that we're being talked about here, that's for both inside the church and outside the church, neighbor love, neighbor love that extends all the way down to your enemies. It's not just for the benefit of the people that are being served, the destitute, the people in our congregation even that have deep needs that only maybe a few know about. It's not just for them. It's a means of grace. The book of Acts makes very clear that this is a means of grace and what happens in a means of grace? A means of grace is something that God has given us that changes us. And so prayer is a means of grace. When you go to pray to God, one of the beautiful things about prayer is that it's not only glorifying God to pray, but prayer actually changes you because every day if you start your day with prayer, it re-orientes your entire view of the world, of the cosmos, of the universe. It's you pronouncing to

[28 : 44] God in the morning time, this world is not mine. I'm re-oriented. I once again called back to see that this world is God's. It's a re-orientation you see to your calling. When you serve and love people who are in destitute circumstances, the ministry of service that we're being called to here, the exact same thing takes place. You see because what for a moment in that act of service what happens is, is you have to leave yourself. You have to actually leave your own problems and you enter into problems that are probably and typically much deeper, much more serious in grave and for that moment you become self-forgetful and the means of grace are there to make us self-forgetful people and self-forgetfulness is the key to happiness. If you want to have happiness and joy believing in Christ and becoming self-forgetful like he was, the man of power broken on the cross, that's the call to be a deacon. Let's pray. Father we, we don't serve and love each other the way that we've been called to from the text and so we ask Lord that you would help us to have a deep agape, a love for one another, that you were created in our hearts and that we would look to the man of power broken on the cross for us to give us such desire and such ability.

I'm gonna pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.