

## WEEKEND Edition 25/26 June 2022 “Deacon Helpers?” (Acts 6:1-7)

Hello my 'Walking with Jesus' friends all around the world.

*I wonder if you sometimes find yourself with too many things to do, too many obligations and not enough time?* Do you struggle with discerning how to manage all the expectations that people place on you? This can especially be true when a business is really taking off, or a new baby has been born into the family, or you've moved to a new place and need to adjust quickly.

About 2000 years ago the close friends and followers of Jesus were experiencing the trauma of too many people clamoring for their attention and help. I think it's safe to assume they were struggling finding time even to sleep and eat! Acts 6:1 tells us ***"In those days the number of disciples was increasing..."*** That means, of course, that everyday more people were believing that what the apostles were telling them about Jesus was true! *And as they trusted Jesus to be their Savior, they were experiencing the exciting life changes the Holy Spirit promises to anyone, anywhere in the world, who steps into an authentic relationship with God through Jesus Christ.* In the last few days, we've looked at the remarkable generosity which was sweeping through Jerusalem as more and more people turned to Jesus. Among those experiencing generous help were **widows**. Since there were no government social programs caring for widows in those days, if a widow did not have extended family or friends to help her, she was destined for begging or enslavement to survive.

Evidently the cry for practical help, from widows and others, was becoming a real challenge for the **apostles**. They were, of course, the men who knew Jesus best, for they had been with Him for those many months, and *therefore the people gathered day and night asking the apostles to teach them about Jesus.* But as the number of people interested in Jesus surpassed 5000 and growing daily, the logistical demands of responding to all the expectations was simply too much, so the Acts record says: ***"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 to wait on tables. Brothers and sisters, choose seven men from among you who are known to be full of the Holy Spirit and wisdom. We will turn this responsibility over to them and we will give our attention to prayer and ministry of the word.'*** (Acts 6:2-4)

Who are these called **'the Twelve'**? Those are the 11 men remaining from the original group of 12 disciples whom Jesus had personally selected, and we presume even though he is not named, also Matthias, who was chosen back in Acts 1:26, in the days immediately following Jesus' ascension back to heaven. The word **'disciples'** refers to the hundreds, perhaps thousands of people who had trusted in the truth about Jesus and are clamoring for daily teaching from the apostles, so they can learn as much about this new life in relationship with Jesus, as fast as they can.

They used the words **'brothers and sisters'** to indicate they all considered themselves now related in God's family, even though they were likely all Jews from many parts of the Roman empire. What they referred to as the **'ministry of the word'** was the teaching the apostles were continually giving, explaining to the people how Jesus is the Messiah, fulfilling all the Old Testament prophecies, and also explaining what they learned from Jesus. They were also teaching extensively about the Holy Spirit of God and His role in the lives of all these people.

*Did you notice the three criteria which were to be used in the selection of seven people to care for the widows and the practical needs of the people, while the apostles focused their time on teaching?*

First, they were men.

Second, they were **'known to be full of the Holy Spirit'**.

And third, these men were **'full of wisdom'**.

Why? Well, I think they were following Jesus' pattern of selecting men to carry the responsibility of this massive project. That did not exclude women from helping in the accomplishment of the task, especially in caring for widows, but it placed the burden of finding the resources needed and managing their transportation and equitable distribution on seven men. *In addition to supplying the widows and the poor with food, I imagine this practical work also included repairs on their homes or other practical burdens left to a wife when her husband dies.* Of course, this work required great wisdom to discern the needs and how best to meet those needs without enabling a welfare lifestyle.

*Finally, of course, this great task required the guidance of the Holy Spirit of God in order to do the work in God honoring ways.* As you look at the role of modern churches in society, in almost every part of the world, do you see this expectation that God's people will be sensitive to practical needs, and will respond with help for the needy? Many churches identify specific people to do this. In some churches those tasked with these practical help roles are called **"deacons"**. That is what these seven men were called and years later the Apostle Paul wrote to Timothy with instructions about the selection and accountability of **'deacons'** as this movement of the Church of Jesus spread across the Roman Empire. You'll find that in 1 Timothy 3.

It appears this proposal was well received by the Christians in Jerusalem, so the record says: **"They selected Stephen, a man full of faith and the Holy Spirit, also Philip, Procorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas and Nicolas from Antioch... They presented these seven men to the apostles, who prayed and laid their hands on them."** (Acts 6:5,6) This was a historic moment! Seven wise men, full of the Holy Spirit, were commissioned by the apostles to get to work carrying for hundreds of people who needed help, in some cases daily help.

*This Jesus movement now had two groups of men as leaders.* First the **apostles**...those who had been selected by Jesus and had been with Him throughout His earthly ministry and been specifically commissioned by Jesus to take His Name, His message and His teachings to the world. And now, alongside them, seven men full of the Holy Spirit and wisdom... **deacons**, helping to identify and respond to the practical needs of the people who believed in Jesus. Organization was now coming to this movement and that was very important, for in and around Jerusalem the number of Jesus followers was now likely nearing 10,000 men, women and children!

Dr. Luke the author of this book of Acts once again gives us a single but powerful commentary statement: **"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."** (Acts 6:7) *It means the story of Jesus spread out from Jerusalem to surrounding towns and villages, in all directions.* We understand how that works don't we, my friends? You find something you really like, and you naturally speak with your friends about it. In our day this can happen almost instantly with technology, you've probably experienced that! In the first century it moved in the same way, friend to friend, but much more slowly, going face to face, *but still the excitement of lives changed in relationship with Jesus, was spreading out across Israel.* I've often wondered if when people in Bethlehem, only 6 miles south of Jerusalem, heard about Jesus, what did they think when they learned Jesus had been born in their town, in an animal stable!?

By the time we reach 6 months or more after that Passover/Easter weekend when Jesus was crucified, buried and rose again... this 'Jesus movement' was a significant, powerful force affecting great change in society in and around Jerusalem! Tomorrow we'll take a look at how society responded. For today, let's consider this question: do you see any evidence of this wonderful "Jesus movement" impacting your city in similar ways? If so, how? Are you part of it? *And are you someone who could be selected as a 'deacon', according to the criteria used in Acts 6?* If so, how are YOU impacting your city? Let's talk with Jesus about this, friends...

**Today's Scripture is Acts 6:1-7.**