

THE CHURCH'S MOST DANGEROUS MOMENT EVER

Acts 6:1-7 // June 27, 2021 AM

The commencement address at Puritan Reformed Seminary's 2021 graduation was given by Paul Washer. Preaching to future gospel ministers, he made the comment that the text before us records "the most dangerous moment in the history of the church." He went on to say that this account in Acts 6 is "when the church was in the absolute greatest danger she has ever been in and ever will be in." Remember, Satan has been wielding various tactics to destroy Christ's kingdom:

- ⇒ He has used external opposition from the Jewish leaders. Persecution as a means of silencing the church.
- ⇒ He has used internal corruption through the deceit of Ananias and Saphira. Sin within the covenant community as a means of destroying her fellowship.

The church has already faced some dangerous moments. So what is it about the text before us that would lead Washer to say this is "the absolute greatest danger she has ever been in and ever will be in"? It is, I think, the subtlety of Satan's tactic here.

At this point, the Jerusalem church would have consisted of tens of thousands of believers. Jews are coming to faith in droves. And there are two main groups of Jews—Grecian Jews (those who speak Greek and are heavily influenced by Greek culture) and Hebraic Jews (those who speak Hebrew and are heavily influenced by Hebrew culture). At some point, a complaint arises among the Grecian Jewish converts (whom Luke calls "the Hellenists"). V. 1: "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." As we saw in chapter 4, those in the church were selling their possessions and bringing the proceeds to the apostles to share with those in need. And we are told here that the apostles are distributing those funds daily. But in doing this, some of the Grecian widows have been overlooked. This was not intentional, but likely due to an administrative flaw. And some members are complaining about it.

This is helpful for us to see. We often can read Acts as if it is setting before us a glorified church. But the church is not yet perfected. Her administration, even by the hands of the apostles, is imperfect. And complaints have arisen about it. This is the same word used in the Greek OT with reference to the grumbling of the Israelites. In a strange way, I found that to be incredibly encouraging this week. Even the apostles had people in the church complaining about them due to their imperfect leadership!

Now this hardly seems like a great threat. All the apostles need to do is meet with these disgruntled members to hear them out and defuse their anger, formulate a better plan of distributing the funds, more carefully oversee that distribution, and regularly meet with the many widows in the church to ensure that their needs are indeed being met. What is so

dangerous about that? The danger is great because it is so subtle. It is the danger of busyness. The danger of distraction.

You see, the church's mercy ministry is booming. As she increases in number, the number of needs goes through the roof. And all of this is incredibly time consuming. The apostles, contrary to popular thought, are not super-human. They are finite creatures with limitations. They have limited time and energy. The threat here is that their time and energy would be consumed by that which they have not been called to. These are good things. These are even necessary things. But they are not the things that Christ commissioned the apostles to do. This is the most dangerous moment in the history of the church because it is the moment wherein the apostles were tempted to neglect their calling for the sake of something really wonderful—mercy ministry. Notice...

I. The domination of mercy ministry is a serious threat to Christ's kingdom (vv. 2, 4).

When this complaint reaches the apostles, they call a congregational meeting. V. 2: "And the twelve summoned the full number of the disciples." They are not going to allow this complaint to spread like gangrene throughout the body. They address it immediately. They address it publicly since the administrative flaw is public and the complaint is public. But interestingly, they don't address it directly. They don't attempt to fix the problem themselves. Recognizing their limitations and their calling, they gather the church and say (v. 2), "It is not right that we should give up preaching the word of God to serve tables."

They have a choice to make between the ministry of preaching and the ministry of mercy. They recognize they cannot give themselves to both. And given what Christ has called them to— to be the Spirit-inspired witnesses of the resurrected Christ—it is wrong for them to be preoccupied with mercy ministry. "It is not right." In other words, it would be sinful. To become busy and distracted with good things when they are called to give themselves to the greatest thing. Christ had called them to be servants of the word. And Satan wants nothing more than to keep them from that. He understands that...

A. The kingdom advances through preaching.

No one has ever been saved by the church's loving deeds. Mercy ministry is often a means by which hearts are prepared for the gospel. Mercy ministry is often a means by which opposition to the gospel is silenced. But mercy ministry is not the gospel. It is not the power of God unto salvation for all who believe. The gospel cannot be preached by our actions. The gospel is news. It is a message that must be proclaimed with words. It must be heard. And if it is not heard, it will never be believed. It is through the preaching of the gospel that the kingdom grows both spiritually and numerically.

And that is the primary work the apostles have been called to. Yes, there are great needs arising in the church. "But," they respond (v. 4), "we will devote ourselves to prayer and to the

ministry of the word.” We have seen this word devoted on a number of occasions already. Prior to Pentecost, the 120 “with one accord were devoting themselves to prayer” (1:14). After Pentecost, the growing church “devoted themselves” to Christ’s voice, Christ’s body, and Christ’s throne (2:42). And now the apostles are saying, we will devote ourselves to two things only—prayer and the ministry of the word. Remember, the word devoted means *to continually do something or give yourself to something with intense effort*. These men are determined to give themselves continually and zealously to the word. This entails preaching the word in the temple, teaching the word from house to house, and reaching out to a lost world with the word. Everything they do is unto the promotion of the word.

The apostles are foundational servants of the word. But Christ, after laying the foundation, has given the church pastor-teachers to continue to minister His word. I am a servant of the word. Now I have not been a pastor for very long, and I am not a pastor of a mega-church. But already I am very familiar with the grave danger that is set before us here. Busyness with good things. Busyness with mercy ministry. Busyness with meetings and phone conversations and emails. Busyness with administration. Busyness with publishing. Feeling the need to fill my calendar so that it appears that I am working hard. Feeling the need to have an active role in all the various ministries of the church and all the various trials and needs arising in the church. And God this week has been saying, “No! That is not right! You are a servant of the word!” Now that is not an excuse to never give myself to these other things. But God forbid that they would ever keep me from the central task to which I have been called. And, Cornerstone, if you ever see that happening, call me to the carpet.

The ministry of the word. It is incredibly time consuming. Incredibly mentally taxing. Incredibly emotionally draining. I can’t give myself to word-service, when I have my hands in every other form of service. But...

B. The kingdom also advances through prayer.

The apostles were continually giving themselves with intense effort, not only to the word, but to prayer. And remarkably, prayer is stated first. V. 4: “But we will devote ourselves to prayer and to the ministry of the word.” The apostles recognize that all their preaching and teaching will be for nothing if the Spirit does not bless it. If the Spirit does not wield His word until the salvation and sanctification of His people, then all is lost. And so these men are given over to prayer. They are earnestly seeking after Christ night and day to do what only He can.

If devotion to prayer simply entailed the apostles praying as they went about their work, they could have done that and continued serving tables. Yes, we are to live in a spirit of prayer. But what they are speaking of is time and energy give over solely to calling upon the Lord. The church devoted herself to prayer through corporately gathering to seek God’s face. And the apostles devoted themselves to prayer by leading those corporate times and seeking God much in private.

How do you expect your pastor to be using his time each week? Certainly, you expect me to be sufficiently prepared to preach two sermons every Lord's Day. You expect me to be counseling with and teaching the word. You expect me to be giving hours and hours and hours to the word. And that is right! But would it bother you if I spent 10 hours a day devoted to the word, and left a mere 30 minutes for prayer? Would that cause alarm? Would that cause an outcry among you because you recognize that my ministry will be for nothing if I am not much in the secret place?

To pray like these men prayed, to pray like the great men of old prayed, consumes hours and depletes energy. It means I won't be able to do other things. That is the implication of the apostles' words here. And so I have determined this week to not allow busyness with good things to keep me from prayer.

We are so self-sufficient. And that is why the kingdom does not extend through us. That is why this moment in our text is so incredibly dangerous. The American church has been dupped. The OPC has been dupped. We here have been dupped. And Satan loves it. He loves prayerless pastors with busy calendars and impressive agendas. As Samuel Chadwick once said, "Satan fears nothing from prayer-less studies, prayer-less work, prayer-less religion. He laughs at our toil, mocks at our wisdom, but trembles when we pray." When pastors cast themselves upon God for hours each week, desperate for His grace to be shown to His people and to the world, God moves, the kingdom extends, and the devil trembles.

But doesn't Christ care about mercy ministry? Isn't pure and undefiled religion summarized in caring for orphans and widows? Yes. There is actually a second danger in our text. I don't think it is equally dangerous, but it still has great potential for harm.

II. The disregard of mercy ministry is a serious threat to Christ's kingdom (vv. 3, 5-7).

The apostles could have said, "We are called to prayer and the word. The kingdom is spiritual. Forget about all this mercy ministry!" That is sometimes what happens in churches that prize the preaching of the gospel. Physical needs are neglected and unmet. But the apostles recognize that the tables must be served. Mercy ministry must continue. These widows must be cared for, not by the state, but by the church. In fact, this work is so important that they establish an ordained office to carry it out! In Acts 6, the apostles establish the deaconate. The first deacons are called here and ordained.

V. 3: "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." This duty must be carried out. And it must be carried out by men of God. Men filled with the Spirit. Men of wisdom. Christ, by His Spirit, has gifted and graced these men. And Christ now appoints them through His Spirit-filled church. And so in vv. 5 the church chooses seven men, and the apostles pray and lay their hands on them. Notice...

A. The deaconate performs important kingdom work.

Throughout redemptive history, God has revealed Himself as One who cares for the oppressed. Deuteronomy 10:18: “He executes justice for the fatherless and the widow, and loves the sojourner, giving him food and clothing.” And here is the implication of that. V. 19: “Love the sojourner, therefore, for you were sojourners in the land of Egypt.” In fact, God in His law pronounces curses upon His people if they fail to do such. Deuteronomy 27:19: “Cursed be anyone who perverts the justice due to the sojourner, the fatherless, and the widow.” If the church is to remain under the blessing of God, it must care for widows and orphans. That is not because mercy ministry is the gospel. But because it is the fruit of the gospel working itself out in the covenant community. It is the result of love in the hearts of God’s people, a love flowing from saving faith in Christ. And where there is no love for neighbor, there is God’s curse.

Thus, mercy ministry is important kingdom work. It is a vital for the church to care for those in need. Loving the least. The apostles understand this. The Spirit-filled kingdom is a body pervaded by love that seeks to meet the needs of one another. And this is so important to the life of the kingdom that an ordained office is established to lead it. That doesn’t mean these seven men alone did all the work. But they were responsible for the oversight and direction of it.

If God’s heart is for the widow, then the church that fails to love and care for its widows is not a church after God’s own heart. That is why disregarding mercy ministry is a serious threat almost to the same degree as allowing mercy ministry to dominate. The apostles recognize they are not called to oversee this great work, but that such oversight is a necessity. Hence, the vital importance of the deaconate in the life of the local church.

Again, this is an encouragement for us to pray to our risen Lord that He would raise up such spiritual leaders in our midst. Men full of the Spirit and wisdom. Men of love. Some of you men need to be seriously asking yourself before the Lord, “Am I called to such?” Some of you young men have gifts to serve in this way, and you need to be zealously pursuing the fullness of the Spirit and giving yourself to God’s word so that you might grow in wisdom so that when the time is right, you will be fit and qualified to lead in this way.

B. The deaconate protects the most important kingdom work.

The leadership of these newly ordained men frees up the apostles to devote their time and energy to prayer and preaching. And what is the result? V. 7: “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.” The word of God is going forth from the lips of praying men, and it is increasing in Jerusalem. The word is being planted and growing up everywhere in this city. The Spirit, in answer to prayer and through the preached word, is extending the borders of the kingdom in mighty proportions, even bringing many of the temple leaders to faith.

And here is what we need to see. If the apostles had given up preaching and prayer for the sake of serving tables, none of that would have happened. If they had become busy bodies, given over to good things, but not the things to which Christ had called them, the kingdom would have been decimated. The health of the church depended upon the apostles knowing when to say, “No.” Think of how unspiritual this would have sounded. *We can’t serve tables. Yes, there are widows in need, but it is wrong for us to be the ones serving them.* Think of what freedom from the fear of man had to mark their souls in order for them to say this. Sometimes the most Christ-honoring and loving thing a pastor can do is to say, “No, I cannot do that.” It may be a really good thing, even a vital kingdom work. But he says *no* because he will not be deterred from the greatest and most vital kingdom work.

It is the deaconate that here ensures that the word continues to go forth. And that it continues to go forth in the power of the Spirit because the preachers are much in prayer. We have the tendency, I think, to downplay the deaconate. To view deacons as groundskeepers. To view deacons as second-class officers, in comparison to the elders. To view deacons as an optional extra—nice to have, but unnecessary. But what this passage is impressing upon us is that the office of deacon is a most noble calling. A kingdom calling. Deacons are essential to the health of the church and the advance of Christ’s cause in the earth. A church without a strong, Spirit-filled deaconate is, at best, a vulnerable church. Without a spiritually mature deaconate, the domination or disregard of mercy ministry will ever be looming over her. May God keep us from these two Satanic, kingdom-thwarting errors.