

Acts 6:1-9; 7:2a, 51-60

Today we're going to be learning about a man named **Stephen** - a man who had been called to serve the Lord Jesus - the Good Shepherd - by waiting on **tables**. What is meant by the phrase "*waiting on tables?*" In our text, it involved dispensing food and money to the **needy**, especially to the **widows** in the congregation at Jerusalem. But a **problem** arose. **Some** of the widows were being **neglected**, or **overlooked** in this distribution. The whole situation is a problem which would probably not even **occur** today. In **our** society women often hold **jobs**, and are able to support **themselves** and their **children** as well - even after the **death** of their husband. But in the days of the early Christian Church, it was **not** that way. The **one** and **only** vocation of women was to become a **wife** and **mother** - and indeed, that in itself is a very **high** calling. There was much to be **gained** by keeping these women in their **homes**, **raising** their families on a **full-time** basis - and the early Christians **recognized** that fact. Therefore, it came about that there was a **daily** distribution of **food** to the **widows** of the congregation, to **enable** them to continue to put **all** their efforts into their **children**.

No doubt this was an **expensive** program, and we might wonder where the money **came** from to make this daily distribution of food. Actually, it was drawn out of a **common treasury** - a fund which existed through the sale of **private property**. The money which was then received for this property was turned over to the **Apostles** for distribution among the **needy**.

Certainly this was a very **important** work which was being carried out by the Christians in Jerusalem. But it was getting to the point where the **Apostles** were no longer able to be the **administrators** of these gifts to the poor. Why **not**? Well, there were getting to be just **too many people** to take care of, and it was taking **too much time** away from the **other** areas of their ministry. Our text says, "*The number of disciples was **increasing***" - and it was happening **rapidly**. On the day of Pentecost alone **3,000** souls were added to the congregation, and Luke tells us that their number continued to grow **daily**. It's not at all unreasonable to think that the Apostles had between **20 and 25,000 souls** under their care in Jerusalem. That's a **lot** of people, even for **12 Apostles** - but large numbers were especially **important** at that time. The Christian Church was in its **infancy**, and certainly these large numbers of people who were coming to Christ for salvation were both **comforting** and **encouraging** for the congregation. But these large numbers also presented some **problems**. The Apostles found that they could no longer spend time working on **extra** projects. They would have to **limit** themselves to the absolute **necessities** of their work.

What did the **Apostles** consider to be absolutely **necessary** in their ministry? In their own words they said, *“It is not right for us to neglect the **word of God** in order to wait on tables. Brothers, carefully select from among you seven men with good reputations, who are full of the Holy Spirit and wisdom. We will put them in charge of this service. But we will devote ourselves to **prayer** and the ministry of the **word**.”* The ministry of the **Word** was the number one priority for the Apostles - and **rightly** so. The ministry of the Word includes **any** preaching or teaching of God’s Word to His people - whether it is done from the **pulpit**, in the **classroom**, or at a **hospital** bedside - whether it is brought to a **church full** of worshipers, or to a **handful** of troubled Christians in a **counseling** session, or to **whomever** is watching and listening on YouTube. That’s where the Apostles felt their time could be **best** spent - in the ministry of the **Word**.

But interestingly enough, they also noted the importance of taking sufficient time for **prayer**. Unfortunately, most of us find too **little** time for prayer - and consequently, we reap few **benefits** from it. Martin Luther used to pray for **hours**, both in the **morning**, and again in the **evening**. When he was asked about how he could **afford** to spend so much time in prayer Luther said, “I can’t afford **not** to spend it! If I didn’t take this time out to **pray**, I would accomplish **little** or **nothing** during the day.” Prayer often seems like such a **little** and **insignificant** thing to us, yet, God **commands** us to pray, and promises that He will **answer** our prayers.

Now, although the Apostles didn’t consider waiting on tables to be a **vital** part of their ministry, nevertheless, there are some things which still made it a very **important** work. For one thing, it served the **needy** - helping to supply them with the physical **necessities** of life. And at the same time it also served the **wealthy** - giving those who were rich in **material** things an opportunity to **share** their wealth with the **less** fortunate.

Now let’s take a look at the men who were **chosen** to carry out this distribution of food - to wait on tables. They’re listed as: *“Stephen, Philip, Procorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas, and Nicholas a proselyte from Antioch.”* Now most of the children listening to this probably recognized the name **Timon** as the name of one of the characters from the Disney film The Lion King. But how many of those names did **you** recognize as being significant in the work of the **Lord**? Out of the **seven**, I only recognized **two** - Stephen and Philip. Philip is the man who later moved south, and Luke tells us about how he baptized the man from **Ethiopia**. But for the rest of the sermon today, we’ll be focusing our attention on **Stephen**.

Stephen had been called to serve the **Good Shepherd** by waiting on **tables**, and he did his work **behind** the scenes - virtually in total **obscurity**. It isn't hard to find **parallels** in our world today. We might think of the Christian **parents** who daily labor to bring up their children in the nurture and admonition of the Lord. Or we might think of those people who serve on the **Church Council**, or on a variety of **committees**. Or we might think of those people who **clean** the church, or who **prepare** the altar flowers and banners. Maybe the people come to mind are those who **donate** offerings, or perhaps those who **count** the offerings. Then again, there are all those who give their time and efforts to **teach** Sunday School or Vacation Bible School. These are people who go virtually **unnoticed** - people who work **behind** the scenes year after year. **Why** do they do it? Why did **Stephen** do it? The answer is, because these are ways to serve **God**. Stephen and the others who had been chosen to "*wait on tables*" could have found **other** things to do with their time. They were just as **busy** as anyone else. But they **chose** to do what they **could** to serve the **Lord**, and in **turn**, the Lord richly **blessed** them.

One of those blessings involves the fact that Stephen's service wasn't **limited** to waiting on tables. In fact, the Lord provided him with numerous opportunities to do what the **Apostles** did - to share the **Word of God** with others, and to contend for the **truth** of that Word. Again our text tells us, "*Now Stephen, full of grace and power, was doing great wonders and miraculous signs among the people.*" The **Good Shepherd** was with Stephen, providing him with the power to perform **wonders** and miraculous **signs** among the people. Nevertheless, just as it continues to be today, there was **opposition** to the preaching of God's Word - and when Stephen **encountered** such opposition, he didn't **back down**. Rather as a true soldier of the cross, he **stood up** for Jesus. Listen to what he **told** those doubters. Stephen said, "*You stiff-necked people, with uncircumcised hearts and ears! You always resist the Holy Spirit! You are doing just what your fathers did. Which of the prophets did your fathers not persecute? They killed those who prophesied the coming of the Righteous One, and now you have become his betrayers and murderers - you who received the law as transmitted by angels, but did not keep it.*"

Stephen didn't **mince** any words, but his **persistence** in contending for the **truth** ultimately resulted in his **death**. Our text concludes, "*While they were stoning Stephen, he called out, 'Lord Jesus, receive my spirit!' Then he fell to his knees and cried out in a loud voice, 'Lord, do not hold this sin against them.'* After he said this, he fell **asleep**." For Stephen, being considered worthy to **suffer** for his faith, and to **die** in that faith, was the ultimate **blessing**. Our text describes his death as a **sleep** - the eternal **rest** which the Lord has in store for all those who put their trust in **Him**. Dear friends, given the circumstances under which we currently live, it's not

out of the question that the Lord might call on **us** to serve Him by becoming Christian **martyrs** - to lay down our **lives**, rather than to give up the **truth** of His Word. We have been called to **serve** our Good Shepherd, and whether we have been called to serve Him by **preaching** and **teaching**, or by waiting on **tables**, or in some **other** form of ministry; may we follow the example of **Stephen**, and boldly **stand up** for Jesus - our Good Shepherd. Amen.