

Serve Creatively

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Acts 6:1-7

Sermon Series:
God's Big Story

They understood that God has called every single Christian into ministry—into service... because Jesus who lives in you has something he wants to do through you where you are.

Now during those days, when the disciples were increasing in number, the number of people believing in Jesus and deciding to follow him was growing like crazy. Just when the church is doing really well, we read that the Hellenists complained against the Hebrews. Even in the best of times, some people can find a way to be divisive. So, the Hellenists complained against the Hebrews because their widows were being neglected in the daily distribution of food. Now the Hellenists were foreign Jews who had grown up outside of Jerusalem and its neighborhood. The Hellenists spoke Greek and were of a Greek culture. The Hebrews were the local Jews, who had always lived in and around Jerusalem and who spoke the ancient language known as Aramaic. Even before people from both groups became Christians, there was a rivalry between the locals and the foreigners that they just carried right into the fellowship of the church.

In those days, the social reality for widows was difficult. They were often left with nothing when their husbands died, destitute with no income, no social security, no insurance, no nothing. People were giving money to the church in order to help people in need, and it came to light that when the money and food was being divvied up

among the widows, the out-of-town Hellenist widows were being ignored and overlooked, and the first church squabble was under way.

²And the twelve called together the whole community of the disciples and said, *"It is not right that we should neglect the word of God in order to wait on tables."* It's significant here that the apostles were in no way diminishing service of waiting on tables. They understood that God has called every single Christian into ministry—into service—that every single Christian, whether you are a student or a business person or work for the government or what-ever you do, that you are in full-time ministry because Jesus who lives in you has something he wants to do through you where you are. In the case of the apostles, they understood that their particular calling was to pray and to preach the Word of God and said, ³*"Therefore, friends, select from among yourselves seven men of good standing, full of the Spirit and of wisdom, whom we may appoint to this task, ⁴while we, for our part, will devote ourselves to prayer and to serving the word."*

Now, we know that God has shaped everyone of us for service. Some of us have the gift of singing, others the gift of administration, others the gift of teaching or the gift of mercy and so on. What I find fascinating about this story is that, while the New Testament teaches

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that God has uniquely shaped everyone of us for service, this passage says nothing about one's SHAPE or one's spiritual gifts. The only qualifications it speaks of are the qualifications of character. You might not think that choosing seven people to be in charge of waiting on tables requires a character assessment, but that is exactly what they did. They understood the most significant issue in leadership is not what you do but who you are and what you are—your character.

We see the apostles specify character qualities to look for in those who will serve by leading: that they would be people of good standing, full of the Spirit and of wisdom. These are three qualities of a godly leader and are a great set of qualities to look for in the people we would ask to lead in any situation—and a great set of qualities for us to seek in our leaders and for you and me to grow in our own lives and to develop in our homes. First, they were to choose people of good standing. The word used in the original language that we translate as “good standing” is the Greek word *maturia*, which is also translated “witness”—as in witness boldly. It's a bit of a pun. They want leaders who are well-spoken of—that others bear witness that these are people of good standing, of good reputation. They also want leaders who will witness boldly about Jesus when the opportunity is given. So being of good standing does not mean popular. It does not mean you have a thousand friends on Facebook or

Twitter. It does not mean you are part of some “in” group! It means people respect you—bear witness to your character—and you bear witness (boldly) about Jesus.

At Duke University, the freshman chemistry class is taught by Professor James Bonk, a class known among Duke students as “Bonkistry.” Dr. Bonk is an excellent chemistry teacher. A few years ago, four Duke students decided to drive up to the University of Virginia over a weekend and spend the time partying with friends. On the way home late Sunday night, they realized they all had a chemistry exam in Dr. Bonk's class and, obviously, there was no time left to study. One of the four students said, “Look, no problem, let me handle it. I'll talk to Dr. Bonk first thing in the morning.”

So the next day the student said, “Dr. Bonk, the four of us were at UVA over the weekend, but on our way home, my car blew a tire and we were unable to get back in time to study—could all of us take your exam tomorrow?” Dr. Bonk thought about that for a moment and said “Okay, all of you report to me at 9 a.m. tomorrow. So the four crammed all night and walked into his office at 9 a.m. ready for the test. Dr. Bonk put the four students in four separate classrooms and gave them each a two-page test. On the first page and for five points was a fairly easy chemistry problem. The students then turned to the second page—for 95 points—the question was, “Which tire?”

If those four students were among those considered in Acts

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chapter 6 for service based on their character, you can see right away their reputation would be iffy. It's a good thing to consider what would lead someone to respect you—and to discuss these things with the children in your life! Such as the old expression, "Is your word your bond?" When you say you will do something, do you do it? Are you 100-percent-true to what you say you will do? If you are, people will respect you. Are you a servant? Do you put yourself out for others? Are you a listener? Do you have the will to work hard? Are you a person of integrity, whose words match your actions? The bottom line is to seek to be respected and not simply to be liked.

Three character qualities for you to grow as a godly leader are:

1. Be of good standing and respect.
2. Be filled with the Holy Spirit
- and 3. Have Wisdom. Now, when it comes to being filled with the Holy Spirit, perhaps the most useful word is Yield! You may be filled with yourself or you may be filled with the Holy Spirit. If you are full of you, then the Spirit will live in you through your trusting of Jesus, but if you are full of you and life is only about you and what you want, then you are squeezing out the role and influence of the Spirit in your life. However, if you yield yourself, open yourself to the Holy Spirit, relying on the power and wisdom of the Spirit in and through your life, amazing things will happen. A friend of mine loves sailing, and, for the last couple of years, I have gone

sailing for a day with him off the coast of Florida. Sailing 101: no wind, no power. No power, no movement. However, when the wind is blowing, all you have to do is raise the sail and the wind fills it. The role of the sail is to yield. The role of the Spirit is to do the filling. So, to be filled with the Holy Spirit now and every now, simply yield yourself, open yourself to God!

Three character qualities: 1. Be of good standing and reputation—that others bear witness to your character and you are willing to bear witness to Jesus. 2. Be filled with the Holy Spirit and 3. Have wisdom. What is wisdom? I remember taking a class in statistics in graduate school from Charlie Hicks, one of the finest professors in my life. His definition of statistics is, "A tool for decision-making in light of uncertainty." When he said that, I thought to myself, Wow! That is a great way to understand the biblical concept of wisdom. Wisdom is God's tool for decision-making in light of uncertainty. When life presents difficult or complex choices with uncertain outcomes, it is wisdom that helps you decide what to do, which way to go. I had to decide, a month ago, whether to attend a meeting in Atlanta that offered some opportunities in my work or remain home and attend to some very important projects. I needed wisdom to figure out what to do. A friend called last night whose father had just died, a relationship that had been difficult during my friend's whole life. He needed wisdom for how to handle the emotions and decisions now facing him.

It is by wisdom that God helps us make decisions in times of uncertainty that lead to life and peace and a future and a hope.

It is easy in our day to confuse intelligence with wisdom, to equate mental acuity, cerebral genius, intellectual brilliance with wisdom. Not so. Intellect, the capacity to think, is a gift of God just as wisdom is, but they are different. Some years ago, our family spent a week at the beautiful retreat facility in the North Carolinian mountains known as Montreat (Montreat is short for mountain retreat). One morning our son, Lee, who was about thirteen then, and I went for a walk around the beautiful Lake Susan and sat down to toss pebbles at the minnows. Lee had taken a battery of intelligence tests in school and wanted to know how important they were.

I said, "Lee, measuring intelligence is a tricky thing, and there are many theories about it among the experts. Since every person has his or her own learning style, and since some of us can understand a subject like math very easily and others of us find math difficult and excel in another subject, the school does the testing to help put students in classes where the pace and difficulty of the material are most suitable for the individual student. However, Lee, I must say there are matters even more significant to life than your IQ, your Intelligence Quotient." "Like what?" he said.

I said, "Such as WQ and MQ?" Nothing like leading a person on is there? "What's WQ and MQ, Dad," he asked. WQ is what I call Wisdom Quotient, and MQ is what I call Motivation Quotient. The idea is that whereas intelligence is

God's gift to help you understand something, it is wisdom that chooses the best course of action, and it is motivation that moves you to do it. Intelligence may determine the options, wisdom chooses the option and motivation provides the impetus to accomplish the option.

I have seen some mentally brilliant people make some very unwise decisions in life. I have watched people of average intelligence with great wisdom and motivation do very marvelous things in life, and of the three, IQ, WQ, MQ, if I could only have one, I would take WQ, wisdom. It is by wisdom that God helps us make decisions in times of uncertainty that lead to life and peace and a future and a hope. I finished by saying, "Lee, your IQ, whatever it is, is God's gift to you and is something you are born with. WQ, your wisdom comes from God when you ask for it. MQ, your motivation is your gift to God as you follow through and serve your Lord in carrying out the decisions you make." By the way, a great discussion to have with the children in your life is about IQ, WQ and MQ!

If you genuinely want to grow in wisdom there are two practices (of many) you can begin immediately. Once a year, read the Book of Proverbs. It is the Old Testament book of wisdom. There are 31 chapters—perfect for reading a chapter a day for a month, once a year. I assure you, as you soak in the proverbs of the Bible, you will grow in wisdom. Second, James 1:5 says, "If any of you is lacking in wisdom, ask God, who gives to all gener-

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ously and ungrudgingly, and it will be given you.” I love that verse. If you ask God for wisdom, it will be given to you—not hopefully or maybe or possibly but absolutely, our Lord will grant you wisdom. In uncertain situations, take courage to make decisions based on the wisdom you have, and trust God to lead you forward.

The apostles knew, when faced with that first church squabble, that the key to resolving it was the character of the leaders chosen. What they said pleased the whole community, and they chose Stephen, a man full of faith and the Holy Spirit, together with Philip, Prochorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas, and Nicolaus, a proselyte of Antioch. ⁶“They had these men stand before the apostles, who prayed and laid their hands on them. ⁷The word of God continued to spread; the number of the disciples increased greatly in Jerusalem, and a great many of the priests became obedient to the faith.” As a result of the leaders they chose, the church continued to flourish.

Who you are, that is the level to which people respect you as they bear witness to your character and you are willing to bear witness to Jesus, that the Spirit fills you and wisdom guides you, will have an immense impact on the people you lead. While leadership involves what you say and what you do, it begins with who you are—your character. One of my heroes in American history is our first president George Washington who, as

a young man, looked like a leader, tall and handsome, but who made many mistakes in his leading. It impresses me that he learned from his errors and grew in wisdom—a fascinating story you may read about in books such as *1776* by David McCullough. Another biographer, James Flexner, tells in his book, *Washington: The Indispensable Man*, of a meeting that took place on Saturday, March 15, 1783. Flexner called it, “Probably the most important single gathering ever held in the United States.”

The revolutionary war was nearing its end, and the soldiers had not been paid by either their state governments or by the Continental Congress. Resentment was growing rapidly. Officers were speaking openly of taking matters into their own hands and marching on Congress. Had that happened, the American Revolution would have ended with the army's destroying the very freedom it had fought for. Some sought to talk Washington into becoming king in order to avoid the crisis. He refused. An anonymous soldier called for a mass meeting of the officers. On March 15, Washington convened such a meeting of his own. Flexner describes what followed:

“As Washington began to speak, he was ‘sensibly agitated.’ He talked first of his own early and devoted service, of his love for his soldiers. The faces before him did not soften. He pointed out that the country which the anonymous exhorter wished them to tyrannize over or

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abandon was their own: ‘our wives, our children, our farms, and other property.’

“Washington had come to the end of his prepared speech but his audience did not seem truly moved. He clearly had not achieved his end. He remembered he had brought with him a reassuring letter from a congressman. He would read it. He pulled the paper from his pocket, and then something seemed to go wrong. The General seemed confused; he stared at the paper helplessly. The officers leaned forward, their hearts contracting with anxiety. Washington pulled from his pocket something only his intimates had seen him wear: a pair of eye-glasses. ‘Gentlemen,’ he said, ‘you will permit me to put on my spectacles, for I have not only grown gray but almost blind in the service of my country.’

“This homely act and simple statement did all Washington's arguments had failed to do. The hardened soldiers wept. Washington had saved the United States from tyranny and civil discord. As Jefferson was later to comment, ‘The moderation and virtue of a single character probably prevented this Revolution from being closed, as most others have been, by a subversion of that liberty it was intended to establish.’”

In the moment of deepest crisis, it was not Washington's vision the men followed, it was Washington himself. The soldiers were suddenly reminded of who George Washington was, the trustworthiness of

his person, what he had done for them, how he had loved them, how he had never failed to walk and talk without integrity and humility. He won them over with his character.

May the same be true of you. Grow as a person of good standing, of whom others speak well and who is willing to speak of Jesus. Yield your life to the filling of the Holy Spirit. Seek the wisdom of God to grow deeply within your life.

