

Acts 6:1-7

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[0:00] So, tonight we're beginning a new series, a short series on deacons. I didn't advertise it, in that I wasn't sure how attractive it would be to come to a sermon series on deacons.

And yet, I do think, having got you here by stealth, it is a really, really important topic for us as a church family. There's no crisis, there's no problem with the deacons, we're really thankful for the deacons that we do have.

I've not preached on deacons before, but we recognise that within the church leadership, the elders and the deacons, we've had three elders in this past year, two have gone back to America, two older elders, Czech and Paul Miners, and then Chris Roberts has moved to Ilford.

So, we're aware that we're a little bit depleted on the eldership. And so, we want to think, as a church family, just a bit about church leadership and about elders and deacons, and how we're governed as a church family.

Deacons, what does the word deacon mean? It's not a word that we use, is it, kind of out there? People don't talk about deacons in your workplace, I would have thought. It's a Greek word, and it's a Greek word for servant.

[1:16] It's really simple, what it means. A deacon is a servant. The greatest deacon that has ever lived is the Lord Jesus Christ. The Lord Jesus came not to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom.

The Lord Jesus is the greatest deacon. And every Christian is a deacon with a small d, because we're all servants of the servant, aren't we? Every single one of us is a servant.

And yet, we believe that the New Testament teaches that there are two permanent offices in Christ's church. That is, offices that continue in every local body of God's people through all time. There is the elder, and there is the deacon. The New Testament talks about apostles, doesn't it? And it talks about prophets, and evangelists. And we don't believe that those are offices that continue today.

You might have questions on the last one about evangelists. But I do want to say, particularly with apostles and prophets, they obviously existed for one specific period.

[2:26] In the early years of the Christian church. If you look at your New Testament, there is a development within the New Testament. 1 Corinthians is an early book in the New Testament.

And then later on, a number of years later, you have the pastoral epistles, which really give us the foundations of how our church should be governed. And you'll see, as you go through the New Testament, there is a progression.

There are certain things which are prominent at certain times. Which were for that period. And as you come to the pastoral epistles, you'll find that there is a more ordinary pattern of church life. And so in the first year of those early churches, in Ephesians 2.20, it describes the apostles and the prophets. What are they? They are the foundation of the Christian church. They are the foundation on which the rest of the church was built.

You have one foundation in your house. And after the foundation is put in place, and the building goes up, you don't keep putting in the foundation.

[3:30] Evangelists in the New Testament, they seem to have had a specific roving mission in the early church. They weren't limited to one congregation.

And there's lots of debate, and lots of people get really angry when you say, maybe that office hasn't continued. And I wouldn't want to argue that firmly on either way, whether that role continues. But whatever the case with those offices, I think you'll find that everyone agrees that the two offices that do continue, in all places at all time, are the elder and the deacon.

And you might think, well, this is not going to bring the numbers in on a Sunday night, is it? This isn't kind of box office preaching. But I hope what we're going to see together is that the office of the deacon is a wonderful, gracious, exciting, Christ-exalting provision.

And so I want us to look at the kind of origin of the deacon. I want us to think of it in two perspectives, one really broad and general, and then one specific. And so the origin of the diaconate roots itself in the character of God.

[4 : 49] The diaconate has its origin most broadly in the character of God. In his special concern for the poor and the needy. I don't think you can read your Bible for very long without realizing that.

That God is full of compassion for the poor and the needy. You see that in the marvelous revelation of God to Moses on Mount Sinai. So if you've got a Bible with you, let's jump around a little bit.

If you haven't got a Bible, just run out and grab one. But let's jump around the Bible. Let's look at Exodus 34, verses 6 and 7. And how does God describe himself to Moses? So when Moses went in before the Lord in Exodus 34, verses 6 and 7, he went before the Lord to speak with him.

And when he came out, he told the people of Israel what was commanded. The people of Israel see the voice of the Lord.

They see the face. No, sorry. It's 34, verses 6 and 7. I'm reading from 34, 6. Actually, it's 34, verses 6 and 7. So the Lord passed before Moses and proclaimed the Lord, the Lord, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin.

[6 : 08] And that's something that's picked up on again and again. You'll see that description of who God is that is given to Moses that again and again. So the psalmist picks it up.

It's something which God is praised for over and over and over again. So look with me at Psalm 68. Why are we to praise God? Psalm 68. 68, verse 4.

Sing to God. It's a command. It's not an optional extra. Sing praises to his name. You've got a duty to sing. Lift up a song to him. Ride through the decrees.

His name is the Lord. Exalt before him. Why? Because he's the father of the fatherless. And he's the protector of widows. Is God in his holy habitation.

Go a few psalms later. Go to Psalm 146. And what are we told there? We're told in Psalm 146, verse 7, that the Lord watches over the sojourners, the travelers.

[7 : 12] He upholds the widows and the fatherless. But the way of the wicked he brings to ruin. And so all these different categories of needy people.

And how does the Lord feel about them? And what does the Lord do for them? He cares for them. And he provides for them in every way. And this care of the needy, particularly within his church, is delegated to the covenant community.

It is commanded to God's people. So let's go back to Deuteronomy chapter 15. And what do you see there?

In Deuteronomy chapter 15, he says in verse 9, not in verse 9, verse 11, he says, for they will never cease to be poor in the land.

Therefore I command you, you shall open wide your hand to your brother, to the needy, and to the poor in your land.

[8 : 21] And so God made abundant provision for the poor in his law. For the widows, for the orphans, for the foreigners. For all those different classes of needy people who would come within the borders of Israel.

He didn't do it by giving freebies, if I can put it like that. It doesn't seem to me in the New Testament, as you read it, that there is ever just goods or money just given.

I think that's partly to do with the creation mandate of work. And work is a good thing. And work should be rewarded. So the most obvious example of that is Ruth, isn't it?

You know the gleaning law, do you remember that? The owners of the fields, they were not to, as they went round and they gleaned and picked up the corn, they were to leave the bits in the corner. Or if they missed a bit, they were to go back and kind of make sure that they hoovered absolutely everything. They were to leave the produce that was initially missed by the harvest.

[9 : 33] They went to go round a second and a third time and make sure they picked up every last bit of grain. Why not? Because there was provision so that the poor and the needy could come and work and gather it and provide for themselves without having to receive a handout, without being dependent on charity.

And that is typical of God's law. So in God's law, interest was not to be charged on the poor. If they took out a loan, interest wasn't to be charged on the loan so that people didn't profit from others' misfortune.

And so when you had to give a coat or a millstone of security for a loan, it was to be given back the moment that you needed it. And all of that was written into God's law for God's people.

And why was it written into God's law for God's people? Because God cared for the poor and the needy. And the Old Testament prophets, they rebuke God's people over and over and over again because they failed to do this.

Because they didn't care for the poor and the needy. And so come with me to Isaiah chapter 58. Isaiah 58 and verses 6 and 7. Where Isaiah says this, and God says this, Is not this the fast that I choose?

[10:56] To loose the bonds of wickedness? To undo the straps of the yoke? To let the oppressed grow free? And to break every yoke? Is it not to share your bread with the hungry?

And bring the homeless poor into your house? And when you see the naked to cover him, and not to hide yourself from your own flesh? And that's fairly typical of the teaching and the preaching of the prophets.

They turned God's people to God's people. And commanded them to obey God's law. God has told you to do this, so why are you not doing it?

Israel was meant to be a light to the nations. They were meant to display God's gracious character of God to the nations. But we know, don't we? We saw it this morning. Over and over again, they failed to do that. And of course, that's not just something for the Old Testament.

And so when you come into the New Testament, you find exactly the same concern. The famous parable of the Good Samaritan. In Luke 10. Listen to what Jesus says as he summarizes that teaching of the Good Samaritan.

[12:07] He says, Luke 10 and verse 36. He asked, which one of these do you think proved to be a good neighbor? To the man who fell among the poors.

And he said, well, the one who showed him mercy. And Jesus said to him, you go and do likewise. You go and do what the Samaritan did. You go and care for the whole range of those who have needs.

As you have opportunity to do so. We find it in Paul's letters. Galatians chapter 2 and verse 10. Only they asked us to remember the poor.

The very thing I was eager to do. Good James. What do you find in James chapter 1 and verse 27? Religion that is pure and undefiled before God the Father is this.

To visit orphans and widows and their affliction. And to keep oneself unstained from the world. John puts it like this. In 1 John 3.17.

[13:19] But if anyone has the world's goods and sees his brother in need. Yet closes his heart against him.

How does God's love abide in him? Little children. Let us not love in word or talk. But in deed and in truth. And that's just a little sampling.

We could be here all night. There are a number of verses that you and I could turn to. That make the same point over and over and over again. God's concern for the needy and the destitute amongst his people.

Is everywhere in scripture. And so any church. That wants to reflect the Lord's heart. Will have an honoured and an active diaconate.

Because we are to be involved. As the people of God. In acts of mercy and of compassion. That's every single one of us isn't it? As to be involved in that.

[14:21] But one of God's great provisions. For that work within the church. Is a functioning diaconate. And so there's the origin of the diaconate.

It's kind of most general and broad level. It's in the character of God himself. God's special concern for the poor. And the needy. And particularly amongst his people.

But then specifically. We find the origin of the diaconate in a crisis. So let's go to the passage that Judy read. In Acts chapter 6. And here we have. Luke's record of this crisis.

In the church. It's really interesting. Chapter 5. You've got hypocrisy. And you've got opposition of the state. Which is a great threat. It's a massive threat.

I think you come to Acts chapter 6. And you have a greater threat. And it's the greater threat of disunity within. And so first of all. We begin with the problem. The problem Luke begins by telling us something.

[15:20] That is wonderful and tremendously positive. Isn't it? Look at chapter 6 verse 1. Now in these days. When the disciples were increasing in number. That's great isn't it? Who doesn't want that? It's tremendously positive.

God was adding many new people to the church. But as anybody who's been in a church like we have. We've just grown just a little bit. Growth brings with it challenges. And so look at the second half of verse 1.

A complaint by the hellness arose against the Hebrews. Because their widows were being neglected in the daily distribution. So if a widow had no family to support her.

Then it was and it is the church's responsibility. To provide for material needs. That follows on doesn't it? From God's special care of widows in the Old Testament.

And so we've been thinking about that. But let me give you one reference out of many. Let me give you from Exodus chapter 22 and verse 22. Where it says this. You shall not mistreat any widow.

[16:28] Or fatherless child. If you do mistreat them. And they cry out to me. I will surely hear their cry. And my wrath will burn. And I will kill you with the sword.

And your wives shall become widows. And your children fatherless. And so that is very serious isn't it? It's something that the Lord says. I care about this.

Extremely. I care about widows. And so as the church grows. And the number of widows increases. So the administrative demands.

Of keeping track of all these widows increases too. Who is it that needs help? How much do they need help? When does this help need to be given? Who's going to give the help?

And I think that's hard to do isn't it? That's hard to do when numbers are so large. And so 3,000 people were baptized. And added to the church. On the day of Pentecost.

[17:27] Start it. Acts chapter 2 and verse 47. It says praising God. They were praising God. And having favor with all the people.

And the Lord added to their number daily. Day by day. Those who were being saved. Chapter 4 and verse 4. In the book of Acts. Many of those who heard the word believed.

And the number of the men. That's just the men. Came to about 5,000. I expect there were some people who were saying. I wish the church. It was much nicer when it remained small.

So the numbers are absolutely huge here. And there's no question. There's no question at all.

That the apostles were deliberately missing out. These widows. That's what their intention was. It's just a question of growth. You could say it's a question of poor administration.

[18:23] And poor supervision. And some of the widows are falling through the cracks. And there are only 12 apostles. And there are many, many widows. And what made the problem worse.

Is that all the widows that are being overlooked. Were part of one particular group within the church. Church in Jerusalem is made up of two main groups of Jews.

In the beginning there were the Hellenist Jews. They spoke Greek. They had a Greek mindset. They had a Greek lifestyle.

And most of the Hellenists were outsiders. They were immigrants to Jerusalem. There were Jews living all around the Roman Empire at that time in history. But many devout Jews would move to Jerusalem.

As they grew older. As they came to the end of their life. They wanted to live in the city of God. They wanted to die in the holy city.

[19:21] And so that means that there's quite a lot of these Hellenist widows. Who'd come from all over the Roman Empire into Jerusalem. So there are the Hellenists. And then you've got the Hebrew Jews.

The other group. And they are from Judea. They are true Hebrews. They have a thoroughly Hebrew mindset. We might call them kind of true-blooded Jews.

If you want it. They're the real Jews in their own mind. Do you remember how Paul described himself? He said, I was a Hebrew of Hebrews. And there's rivalry.

And there's a bit of tension between these two groups in Judaism. And so these old fault lines. From the past. Are still present in the church. And the devil.

He seeks to kind of. Expand that fault line. That's exactly what he does. There's an oversight and neglect. There's a mistake on the part of the apostles. And it gives rise to what Luke says.

[20 : 20] In Acts 6. Can you see it? A complaint. It's a really. Poor. I think translation. Murmuring. Is a better translation. Grumbling. That's the literal word. Grumbling. Grumbling. Murmuring. Murmuring is an ominous word.

Isn't it? So let me say this. Grumbling is never a good word in the Bible. Because you've heard about grumbling before. I knew. In the Old Testament.

When the Israelites. And. Had come out. Of the. Land of Israel. And were in the wilderness. And they. What did they do? They grumbled. They murmured.

And they grumbled against God. That's the connotations this word has. And so these members of the church. In Acts 6. They may have had a legitimate complaint. But they're dealing with it.

[21 : 18] In a very ungodly way. They murmur. Against the leaders of the church. And that's something that I see in churches.

All around. Today. Again and again. And so people have got a legitimate issue. About something. A legitimate issue. About something. There is a real problem.

And a real problem. That needs to be addressed. It's right for it to be raised. But instead of raising it. Openly to the leaders of the church. With the elders of the church. People. Grumble.

And they moan about it. Behind the elders back. And down the phone. An ill feeling is spread.

Like a virus. To anybody that will listen. Anyone that will listen. And be sympathetic. And give them a hearing.

[22 : 14] And so Acts 6. One. It was a problem. It is a problem now. And it's a real problem. The widows are being neglected. There's no question about that. And the widows being neglected.

Are particularly vulnerable widows. These immigrants. They don't have a big family network. In Jerusalem. They don't have people on hand. To care for them. And so what are the apostles going to do? If they give their time.

To ensure that this work. Is done properly. Then it means. They will not have any time. For prayer. And the ministry of the word. And that will hamstring. Restrict the church's growth.

And that brings us. From the problem. To the principle. Verse 2. How did the apostles deal with this problem? Well what they do. Is they clarify for themselves. And the church. The priorities.

What's the principle at stake? It's there at the end of verse 2. They said. It is not right. That we should give up. Preaching the word of God. To serve tables. Now again. Don't misunderstand this.

[23 : 13] All right. Do not misunderstand this. This is not saying. That the. The. Serving at tables. The distribution of money. Or food.

Or clothing to widows. It is not suggesting. That that's a second class thing. They're not suggesting. That it should stop.

All they're doing. Is they're saying. We can't be responsible for it. And they're not saying that.

Because they're lazy. They're not saying that. Because they want to get out of the work. They're not saying that.

Because they are so high and mighty. And they are apostles. They couldn't possibly do something. So demeaning. As look after old women. That's not what they're saying. These are the same men.

Who were in the upper room. When they saw the son of God. Get up from the table. And take a towel. Wrap it around his waist. And wash his disciples feet.

[24 : 10] And he explains to them. That he was setting them. An example. For them to follow. And so I think the principle here. Is faithfully doing.

The work that God has given you to do. The work must be done. The widows must be cared for. But the apostles can't do it. Because if they do.

They're not going to be able to carry out. The primary work. That God has given them to do. Of prayer. And ministry of the word. And so they have a proposal.

The problem. The principle. And the proposal. And I think again. It's just. Worth. Seeing that. As some people read.

Acts chapter 6. They say. Listen. All I'm going to do as a minister. Is pray. And read God's word.

And preach God's word. That's all my issue. That's all I'm going to do. Anything else. Is over to you. I don't think that's right.

[25 : 08] I think that neglects. I think that neglects. The biblical theme of oversight. And so. What you see here. Is they come up with a proposal. I cannot believe. That that proposal. Was easy to

come up with.

I can't imagine. That they had a kind of. Blinding light. And thought. Oh well this is the obvious way. They had to work it through. The same way the church leaders. Have to work things through today. So the proposal. Is the apostles.

With God's authority. As his ambassadors. They suggest. That a new class of minister. Be instituted. Now. You need to see. They're not called deacons here. In fact.

They're not called anything here. And there are some issues. With saying. This is the passage. Which shows us how deacons operate. There are problems with that. Because later on.

Philip starts preaching. And it's a little bit more fluid. Than that. But what it does show us here. Is that the verb. To deacon. Is used. The word.

[26 : 06] The verb to deacon. Is used here. To describe the work. That these men are going to do. So. The people are to choose. Seven men. Who've got the gifts. And the qualifications. For this important work.

And they'll be given the work. And when they understand. What the work is. The apostles at that point. Can forget all about it. Knowing that it's in good hands. It's a brilliant solution. It's a fitting solution.

And so the ministry of mercy. Is not neglected. It's being properly organized. And God's concern. For the poor. And the needy. Is being expressed.

Within the church. And these two permanent offices. Of elder and deacon. And they reflect the way. That God has created human beings. I think.

It's why I chose to speak. To the children. That we have two parts. To a human person. There is body. And soul. There is physical. And spiritual. And they both matter.

[27 : 05] And God. Wonderfully provides. For both. Within his church. He provides. For us. As whole persons. Isn't that great? He does not relate to you.

As a disembodied soul. As if the body. Doesn't matter. And the church. Must never separate. What God has put together. It's a mistake. That the church does. Again. And again. And again.

I find myself. Doing it all the time. I find myself. Praying that souls. Will be saved. Now. You know what I mean. Don't you? But.

There's not such thing. As a soul. Without a body. In our world. As if the only thing. That matters. Is their soul. And these people. Have no care. For the body. Show no concern. For the body. And think the body. Doesn't matter. And don't speak about. Living. Under Christ's lordship.

[27 : 58] In your body. In this life. Paul talks about. Glorify God. In your body. And then. On the other hand. There are Christians.

That neglect the soul. Don't they? That speak. On and on and on. About social justice. They talk about. Caring for the poor. They talk about. The widows.

The orphans. But actually. Never get to the point. Of speaking. Of the great need. Of humanity. The gospel. Of teaching. And evangelism. And prayer. And so it's not meant.

To be one or the other. God has put both. These things together. And we are meant. To care for both. And so within the church. Amongst God's people.

The elders. If I can say. Look after the soul. The deacons care for the body. And that way. The church is able to meet. All the needs of God's people. Somebody has put it like this.

[28 : 52] The elders are God's voice. The deacons are God's hands. Now please. Don't misunderstand me. At this point. This will be really important. It's not that the elders.

Are spiritual men. And the deacons. Are practical people. It's not that you have to be. Spiritually minded. To be an elder. And well you don't have to be. Very spiritual. To be a deacon.

As long as you're. Practically minded. Now the New Testament. Is really clear. Isn't it. That everyone. Who has a leadership role. In the church of Jesus Christ. Needs to be outstandingly. Spiritually minded.

And so. So think of the way. That we use our money. As a church. That requires. The people who are. Involved in that. To be spiritually minded.

Committed Christians. So that they will use. That money. That people are giving. To the church. In the wisest possible way. For the work of the kingdom. And not in worldly ways.

[29 : 48] And so a worldly minded. Person will see. Like what. Why are you giving. Fifteen thousand pound. Of presbytery. For other churches. And for other plants. And for the governing. Of other churches.

Surely. You could use that better. Here couldn't you. In Ealing. In West Ealing. Where we would see. The good of it. And we would get. The best use of it. And we could use it. For the facilities. Why do we want to spend it.

On preaching. In the back of beyond. In places that we don't go. That we'll never go. Now of course. Our deacons need to be. Outstandingly. Spiritually minded.

And that's something. We'll come back to again. And again. The problem. The principle. The proposal. And then lastly. Verse seven. The progress. Can you see it? What's the result. Of this change of government? Why does church government matter?

Church government matters. Because verse seven. The word of God. Continued to increase. And the number of disciples. Multiplied greatly. And a great many of the priests.

[30 : 52] Became obedient to faith. The devil. He's behind. Act six. He's trying to stop. The word of God spreading. He's tried to distract.

The preachers. By piling on. All sorts of other work. And he's tried to divide. The congregation. Along the fault lines. Of Hellenist. And Hebrews. But it fails completely.

And he seeks to try. To do harm. To the church. But he ends up. Making the church's witness. More effective. And all the more effective. Because the preaching. Of God's word.

Is reinforced. As being central. And it is supported. By the competent. Fair. Ministry. Of compassion. And so that's what we should expect.

To see in our churches today. That the elders. Are freed up. And they make decisions. To free themselves up. To prayer. And the ministry of the word. And the word spreads.

[31 : 49] And the church is strengthened. And the deacons. Take care of that practical. Compassionate ministry. Within a congregation. And Luke says.

A number of disciples. Increased rapidly. Including a large number of priests. Which is unexpected. And very surprising. Because at this time. There's so much persecution. Coming from the Jews. To the Christians. And here's a large number. Of Jewish leaders. Who become obedient. To the faith. And this is the first. Of six summaries. Of growth.

In the book of Acts. Here in verse seven. And each one. Comes at a crucial point. In the story of the church. And so in Acts six. They reach a crossroads. And there's a problem.

And the problem. Potentially could split the church. And they are grumbling. Against their leaders. And it looks like. Everything will fall apart. But the leaders. Recommit themselves. To God's priorities.

[32 : 42] And the result is growth. And blessing for the church. And unity and harmony. Amongst their members. And we need to pray earnestly.

We must never take it for granted. As a congregation. Let's pray earnestly. That as we try to model. Our congregation. Along the lines. Described here.

In the church of Jerusalem. What do we pray for? Wouldn't it be a wonderful thing. If we experience. The same harvest. And the word of God spread. And the number of disciples.

Increased rapidly. As we seek to minister. To the full range. Of the needs of God's people. That God entrusts to us.

Body and soul. Let's pray. Let's pray.