

Acts 6 & Acts 7:1-14

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Tape #8095

By Chuck Smith

Let's turn in our Bibles to chapter six. We have as we've been going through Acts, pointed out how that there came a movement in the early church of people selling their properties and bringing the money in so that there was a common treasury, a community living. We have seen already that certain problems have arisen from this practice. In the study last week we saw how that Ananias and Sapphira had sold their property and made a pretense of giving everything, when in fact, they conspired to hold back a part of it for themselves. Now, their sin was not holding back. Their sin was hypocrisy, pretending to give everything when in reality they were holding back. Peter makes that very clear. They weren't required to sell the property. They weren't required to bring the money in, but they were seeking to deceive the people, lying to the Holy Spirit, lying to God, as they feigned giving everything when in reality they had determined to hold back part of it.

Now in chapter six we find another problem that arises from this practice of sharing the wealth of the church and distributing it from the church. *Now in those days, when the number of the disciples was multiplying*, (I like that word. We read that the Lord added to the church, but now the Lord is multiplying to the church. God's mathematics are interesting. Sometimes He subtracts and sometimes we experience blessed subtraction. Last week we found the Lord subtracting, Ananias and Sapphira, but the subtracting led to multiplying. As the Lord works in building His body, it's always exciting when the Lord is multiplying to the church.) *there arose a complaint against the Hebrews by the Hellenists, because their widows were neglected in the daily distribution.* That is in the daily distributing or administering of the welfare program of the church. Now the Hellenists were the Grecians. They were the Jews who were following the Grecian culture. As you know when Alexander the Great conquered the world, he left the Grecian culture throughout the world. Many people adopted the Grecian culture. Greek became almost the universal language at that time. People adopted the Grecian culture. So even among the Jews there were many who had adopted the Grecian culture over against the Hebrew culture. Thus there was this division among the people, those who were living according to the Grecian culture and those who were Kosher, living according to the Hebrew culture. Now they felt, some of the people, because they were living according to the Grecian culture, they were not getting an equal share when the church was administering the welfare program. They felt that their widows were being neglected. So they brought the issue to the apostles.

²*Then the twelve summoned the multitude of the disciples and said, "It is not desirable that we should leave the word of God and serve tables.* Now here they recognized that in the ministry there are certain priorities that must be maintained. In the ministry the top priority is the Word of God, the teaching of the Word of God. That's what God has called the minister to do. Jesus said to Peter, feed My sheep. So that was the top priority of the apostles. It was waiting upon God in prayer and studying the Word of God in order that they might teach the people God's Word. Now pressure has arisen. There are problems that have developed in the physical aspects of the church's ministry. That is the administering of the welfare program. So there was probably a pressure to get the apostles to take a more active role in this doling out of the church's welfare program. But they said no. It isn't right, it isn't reasonable that we should do this. And so here they are guarding against what has in subsequent years become a real problem in the church. So often a pastor is expected to be an errand boy, to be a taxi, to do all kinds of things. You would be amazed of what people have called on their pastors to do. It isn't right, they said, for us to neglect the Word of God to take care of all of these other issues. It isn't that these other issues are not important and should not be a function of the church. But those who have been called to the ministry of the word, it is important that they give their

time to the ministry of the Word. Pastor Chuck feels it isn't right to give a lot of time to personal counseling because that takes away from your time of study in the Word. There was a time when he got caught up with that. People were demanding to come and see him. He was trying to accommodate everybody that wanted to see him. He didn't want to remove himself too much. He found that he would be sitting there listening to the person's problems. So many times they want to make sure you understand the problem, they tell you ten different ways. Even though you got it the first time. He knew that that coming evening he had to be teaching and he really had not completed his study time and preparation. The whole while he would be thinking, oh, please, you know, wind it up. Find an end to the story so we can pray and he could go home and get the studying done that he needed to do for that evening. Time was robbed from the whole congregation because he wasn't fully prepared when he came into the pulpit because of the time that had been taken in the personal counseling, which he doesn't consider himself a gifted counselor anyhow. Many people have told him that. They said we did what you told us to do and everything blew up and it's horrible now. That doesn't really encourage you in personal counseling. So he says now he seeks to avoid it like the plague. But they understood their real place of ministry was the Word of God. That's what God had called them into. So they maintained that. It isn't reasonable for us to leave the Word of God that we might dole out the welfare program of the church.

So the solution: ³*Therefore, brethren, seek out from among you seven men of good reputation, full of the Holy Spirit and wisdom,* (The three requirements, well I guess four, men, but that's not a necessary requirement, who are of good reputation, who are filled with the Holy Spirit. It's interesting to me that this they considered a requirement for this job that doesn't seem to be a spiritual job. It seems to be more mundane, just when the people come to determine their need and giving the church's goods to them. And yet it was a requirement that they be filled with the Holy Spirit and wisdom.) *whom we may appoint over this business;* ⁴*but we will give ourselves continually to prayer and to the ministry of the word."* So this ministry will be handled. It will be taken care of by the seven men, who are of good reputation, filled with the Holy Spirit and men of wisdom. And we will maintain that which God has called us to do, prayer and ministry of the Word. ⁵*And the saying pleased the whole multitude.* (Fair enough) *And they chose Stephen, a man full of faith and the Holy Spirit, and Philip, Prochorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas, and Nicolas, a proselyte from Antioch,* ⁶*whom they set before the apostles; and when they had prayed, they laid hands on them.* Now I've noticed both here and further in the Book of Acts, in the thirteenth chapter, they didn't lay hands on them and pray, but they prayed and then laid hands on them. No big deal, it's just something to be noted. Not trying to teach anything by that, but just a notation. The Bible says, (1 Timothy 5:22), lay hands on no man suddenly. So they would pray and then, it would seem, lay their hands on them. That isn't quite the way we do it. But I'm sure that that's only methodology and meaningless.

Now it is interesting that all seven of these men have Greek names. There isn't a Hebrew name among them. So here were the Hellenists, cultured Jews, complaining they felt their widows were not getting a fair shake. So what do they do? The seven men they appoint are all with Hellenistic names or Greek names. So they were probably all of them from this Hellenistic Jewish culture.

⁷*Then the word of God spread,* (a good result, a good decision) *and the number of the disciples multiplied greatly in Jerusalem, and a great many of the priests were obedient to the faith.* Even those that were in the priesthood. Many of them believed and God was moving mightily in the church. Things were going well. Now these seven men that were chosen for the tasks that we would, perhaps, that we would consider a menial task, especially if we had ambitions for ministry or something greater. We would think, well they've got me here waiting on tables, you know, and I feel called of God to be an evangelist, you

know. Billy Graham is going to be passing from the scene and surely they are going to need someone to take his place, you know and why should I be serving here at the tables? But I have discovered that, we start wherever God opens the opportunity and we are faithful there. And as the Lord said, you've been faithful over a few things, now I will make you ruler over many (Matthew 25:23). That does seem to be sort of a principle by which the Lord operates.

People very often come to me and declare their desire to get into the ministry. They feel that God is calling them into the ministry. What shall I do? I usually send them over to the Christian Education department to volunteer to teach a Sunday School class. If God has called you to the ministry, then start ministering. There is an open door in the Christian Ed department to teach in a Sunday School class. In reality, that is one of the greatest training grounds that you will ever find. Learning to communicate God's truth in an understandable way so that even a child will be interested and understand the truths of God. If you can communicate God's truths to a third grader, you'll be able to communicate it to anybody. And if you can develop your skills in the communicating of God's truths to children, you'll find that you will have the ability to communicate God's truth to adults. But that is a great training ground because children are so forgiving. But you start by doing.

I have always said that the greatest way to learn is to teach because in teaching it requires so much research and study, you have to absorb ten times or more the amount of material that you are going to give out. I read commentaries until I'm so confused that I don't know which one is right because they all seem to have their own ideas and many of them disagree with each other. But you have to absorb so much more than what you give out, that it's great pressure to study because you know you've got to have something worthwhile to say when you lead a study and thus it takes a lot of preparation.

Here is now showcased for us in the next two chapters, two of the men who were selected to wait tables. These men had good reputations. They were filled with the Holy Spirit and they were filled with wisdom. They began the ministry waiting tables. But faithful there, God soon raised them up to other areas of ministry.

Paul in writing to the Ephesians, introduces himself as an apostle of Jesus Christ by the will of God. The most important thing is that you are what you are by the will of God! Trying to be something other than what God has willed you to be can be a great lesson in frustration. It is important that I am what I am by the will of God. That I know that I am what I am by the will of God. That I have an assurance of my calling and my election in the body. But Paul clearly teaches (Ephesians 4:11), that not all are apostles, not all are prophets, not all are evangelists, not all have the gifts of healing and all, so that we are what we are by God's will. And it is faithful to be what God has called you to be. That's what is important! (Romans 12:2).

I hear people refer to, say those that stand up and say well God has called me to go to Borneo to minister to the people there on that island. We think, oh my, such primitive people and what a wonderful thing. What a noble thing. And I've heard it referred to often as "the highest calling" or the ministry as "the highest calling." There is no "highest" calling. Whatever God has called you to be and whatever God has called you to do, is the highest calling for you. That's the highest calling. Whatever God has called you to be. If it's waiting tables, great! Do it as unto the Lord. Whatsoever you do in word or deed, do all as unto the Lord! (Ecclesiastes 9:10, 1Corinthians 10:27, Colossians 3:17), I am what I am for the Lord because of His calling upon my heart and mind. But it is important that I am faithful there.

Pastor Chuck started out teaching Sunday School. When he was in high school he was teaching the young married couples class, of all things. Of course he says he knew more about raising kids and marriage at that time than he does now. It's amazing how much you know about raising kids when you don't have any. And it's amazing how much you admit you don't know anything about them once you've had a few. But be faithful where God has placed you. Promotion comes not from the east to the west but promotion comes from the Lord. But we need to learn to be happy and content wherever God has put us. Paul says (Philippians 4:11) I have learned that whatever state I'm in to be content. If God has called me to be a janitor in the house of the Lord, I'm content to be a janitor. It's interesting how many of our janitors are now pastoring churches around the country. And I mean, these fellows were so faithful in their work here as janitors. I mean they were diligent. They would sing. They would have the tapes and would listen to the Word of God as they would be vacuuming the floors and God has blessed them. Now many of them are pastoring churches. It's just being faithful to wherever God has put you, is what is important. God will open up other doors of opportunity if that is His will.

Two men chosen to wait tables are now focused on as we go into chapter seven and chapter eight. We will see the ministry of two of these seven. Interesting, isn't it of the apostles we know nothing of their further ministry? Here are two men, not even apostles, but yet a chapter is given to each to tell of their expanded ministry after their faithfulness in the place where God had put them.

⁸*And Stephen, full of faith and power, did great wonders and signs among the people.* It is interesting that this is also the case with Philip who we will look at in chapter eight. When he went to Samaria, many believed and were baptized when they saw the miracles that he did. So these men waiting tables and yet so gifted by God. Men of faith who went out. One who stirred the Jews and the other who stirred a whole community of people, the Samaritans towards the gospel. ⁹*Then there arose some from what is called the Synagogue of the Freedmen (Cyrenians, Alexandrians, and those from Cilicia and Asia), disputing with Stephen.* ¹⁰*And they were not able to resist the wisdom and the Spirit by which he spoke.* Filled with the Holy Spirit, no doubt, word of wisdom being exercised. And these fellows, the trained, skilled, college men were not able to resist the wisdom and the Spirit by which he was speaking.

¹¹*Then they secretly induced (hired) men to say, "We have heard him speak blasphemous words against Moses and God."* ¹²*And they stirred up the people, the elders, and the scribes; and they came upon him, seized him, and brought him to the council.* ¹³*They also set up false witnesses who said, "This man does not cease to speak blasphemous words against this holy place and the law; ¹⁴for we have heard him say that this Jesus of Nazareth will destroy this place and change the customs which Moses delivered to us."* ¹⁵*And all who sat in the council, looking steadfastly at him, saw his face as the face of an angel.* There he was, angel faced Stephen, sitting there and all of these accusations being made against him. False accusations, accusing him of saying things that he really did not say. Taking these things that he had said out of context. There was probably partial truths in some of the accusations but they were taken out of context. Thus, they are bringing him before the religious counsel to stand trial, these false witness being brought in.

^{7:1}*Then the high priest said, "Are these things so?"* ²*And he said, "Brethren and fathers, listen: The God of glory appeared to our father Abraham when he was in Mesopotamia, before he dwelt in Haran, ³and said to him, 'Get out of your country and from your relatives, and come to a land that I will show you.'*

⁴Then he came out of the land of the Chaldeans and dwelt in Haran. And from there, when his father was dead, He moved him to this land in which you now dwell.

What Stephen is going to do is rehearse to them their history. Going back to the beginning of the nation with Abraham. The call of God upon Abraham to leave the area of Babylon, the Ur of the Chaldeans, and to journey to a land that God would show him, that later God would give to his descendants. Starting with the beginning of the nation with Abraham, for God chose that Abraham through him would the Messiah come.

So God had to build the nation. *⁵And God gave him no inheritance in it, not even enough to set his foot on. But even when Abraham had no child, He promised to give it to him for a possession, and to his descendants after him.* Here's the promise of God. This land is yours. When Abraham came into the land, God said look to the north, the south, the east, the west, all as far as you can see, I've given it to you and to your descendants after you. And the thing was, Abraham didn't have any children at this point. His wife Sarah was barren. So then God spoke to him through a vision and in this vision God informed Abraham that his seed would sojourn in a strange land. *⁶But God spoke in this way: that his descendants would dwell in a foreign land, and that they would bring them into bondage and oppress them four hundred years. ⁷'And the nation to whom they will be in bondage I will judge,' said God, 'and after that they shall come out and serve Me in this place.'* *⁸Then He gave him the covenant of circumcision; and so Abraham begot Isaac and circumcised him on the eighth day; and Isaac begot Jacob, and Jacob begot the twelve patriarchs. ⁹'And the patriarchs, becoming envious, sold Joseph into Egypt. But God was with him ¹⁰and delivered him out of all his troubles, and gave him favor and wisdom in the presence of Pharaoh, king of Egypt; and he made him governor over Egypt and all his house. ¹¹Now a famine and great trouble came over all the land of Egypt and Canaan, and our fathers found no sustenance. ¹²But when Jacob heard that there was grain in Egypt, he sent out our fathers first. ¹³And the second time Joseph was made known to his brothers, and Joseph's family became known to the Pharaoh. ¹⁴Then Joseph sent and called his father Jacob and all his relatives to him, seventy-five people.*

So God is declaring to Abraham now, through this vision that your descendants are going to be four hundred years in a strange land the people will make servants out of them but then I will visit and they shall come out and serve Me in this place. This was the prophecy concerning the children of Israel going into Egypt. When Joseph was sold by his brothers, and he is going to deal with this in a moment, he was sold by his brothers to slave traders going to Egypt where he was then sold as a slave. And yet God was with Joseph. And Joseph ultimately because of the Lord's hand upon him, became second in command in Egypt. When Joseph's brothers came back again and Joseph finally revealed himself the second time and they bowed before him, fulfilling Joseph's earlier dream of the sheaves bowing down to his sheaf. Then he said bring dad down to Egypt because this famine is going to continue for a while so Jacob came down to Egypt with his family. One place it said seventy souls (Genesis 46:26-27). Here it says seventy five. The seventy five were the children of Joseph who were already in the land so there is really no discrepancy. The seventy who came down from the land of Canaan into Egypt with Jacob and then, the family of Joseph that was already there. So Stephen here refers to the seventy five.

So after Joseph died there rose a pharaoh that knew not Joseph, a succession of pharaohs, the Jews had become a threat and so there was that edict to kill the baby boys. Now as Stephen is recounting the history, you must know that the Jews were very proud of their heritage. They revered their fathers. They were always talking about our fathers. Holding them in the highest respect. And Stephen is going to irritate them

because he is going to point out that their fathers weren't saints as they had sought to make them. It's interesting concerning, they say, the Irish. You never speak evil of the dead. And they always seek to saint them, once they die. They can live like the devil, but when they're dead, you only think of the saintly aspects of them. And thus, was the sort of the case with Israel. When they would think of their fathers, they would always think in saintly terms. Yet Stephen is going to show that their fathers were not saintly men at all. They missed God's will over and over again. But in Stephen's defense, the brilliancy of his argument does not go unnoticed I'm sure. Jesus had said (Luke 12:11) to His disciples, you're going to be brought before the magistrates and kings. But don't take any forethought of what you are going to say, for in that hour the Holy Spirit will give to you the words you are to say. It is very obvious that Stephen is being gifted now by the Holy Spirit in the arguments that he presents to the counsel.

Basically what he is going to show as he brings the story up to Joseph, he's going to show that the brothers of Joseph, the great patriarchs, the fathers of the nation of Israel, that they looked to with such esteem, that the brothers of Joseph, when he first revealed to them his dream, concerning the sheaves. Their sheaves bowing down to his and then the sun and the moon and the eleven stars bowing down to him. That is going to make his brothers so jealous and so angry that they are determined to kill him. The one brother more or less interceded, Rueben. He said to throw him in the pit. Let him starve to death with the intention that after the other brothers left, he would come back and get him out. But then as he is there in the pit, they see the traders heading towards Egypt. They see an opportunity to make a few bucks off of their brother. So they sold Joseph four thirty pieces of silver. Why? Because they rejected the thought and the idea that he would rule over them! Now the next time they see Joseph, he is a ruler. They don't recognize him at first, but then the second time he reveals himself. Herein is a beautiful type of Jesus.

Now earlier, Peter when he was talking to this same counsel, he said that you have put to death, Jesus Christ but God raised Him from the dead. He is the stone which was rejected by you builders, which has become the chief cornerstone. The first time that Jesus came, He was not recognized by His brothers, the Jews. They put Him to death. But the second time they will recognize Him as Lord! When He comes again, every knee will bow and every tongue will confess that Jesus is the Lord. So he is showing that they missed the first time around, but the second time around they had to acknowledge that He is the Lord. When Joseph was putting the pressure on his brothers, they all bowed down to him and then he remembered his dream. I'm sure he was chuckling.

But brilliant and Stephen is going to follow through this thought until he is just going to lay it on them directly about how their fathers rejected all the prophets that God sent to him. And how they are worse than their fathers because they have rejected the Just One of whom all the prophets spoke.

So as you go ahead and study the seventh chapter, study carefully this brilliant defense by Stephen. We will be looking at it more fully next time as we finish the seventh chapter, this brilliant defense of Stephen.

As you study it, I want you to realize that sitting there listening to all of this was a young man whose name was Saul. He's hearing all of this. Now the first response of Saul was extremely negative as is often the case of a person who is under conviction. A lot of times when a person gets under conviction, they become absolutely intolerable. You can't be around them. They are under conviction and they respond in a very negative way against everything, because God is speaking to them and they are fighting. As Jesus said later, it's been hard for you to kick against the goads. But here is where the Spirit of God is beginning His work in Saul's heart, though his first response is negative, yet later, when the Lord apprehends him, the

whole thing flashes clear in his mind, and we find him born again, running. So continue your reading ahead in the seventh chapter and next time we will continue this particular study.

Father, we give thanks to You today for the opportunities to serve You. Lord, even in places that don't seem to be important, we know, Lord, that You have chosen those less comely parts of the body to bestow the more abundant comeliness. Some of these ministries, Lord, that seem to be so insignificant, they don't really receive much praise or recognition and yet, Lord, we are faithful just to be what You called us to be and just to do what You have set before us. We realize Lord, that You will open the door for greater opportunities. So, Lord, give to us that contentment and the diligence in serving You in the little things, whatever it is that You have given us the opportunity to do. May we be faithful. May we be diligent. In Jesus' name. Amen.