

“Seven Great Men”

Acts 6 and 7

The Choosing of Seven Deacons Including Stephen, Who Became the First Martyr

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This story was first told by Fred Craddock while lecturing at Yale University. He told of going back one summer to Gatlinburg, Tennessee, to take a short vacation with his wife. One night they found a quiet little restaurant where they looked forward to a private meal—just the two of them.

While they were waiting for their meal they noticed a distinguished looking, white-haired man moving from table to table, visiting guests. Craddock whispered to his wife, “I hope he doesn’t come over here.” He didn’t want the man to intrude on their privacy. But the man did come by his table.

“Where you folks from?” he asked amicably.

“Oklahoma.”

“Splendid state, I hear, although I’ve never been there. What do you do for a living?”

“I teach homiletics at the graduate seminary of Phillips University.”

“Oh, so you teach preachers, do you? Well, I’ve got a story I want to tell you.” And with that he pulled up a chair and sat down at the table with Craddock and his wife.

Dr. Craddock said he groaned inwardly. “Oh no, here comes another preacher story. It seems everyone has one.”

The man stuck out his hand. “I’m Ben Hooper. I was born not far from here across the mountains. My mother wasn’t married when I was born so I had a hard time. When I started to school my classmates had a name for me, and it wasn’t a very nice name. I used to go off by myself at recess and during lunch-time because the taunts of my playmates cut so deeply.

“What was worse was going downtown on Saturday afternoon and feeling every eye burning a hole through you. They were all wondering just who my real father was.

“When I was about 12 years old a new preacher came to our church. I would always go in late and slip out early. But one day the preacher said the benediction so fast I got caught and had to walk out with the crowd. I could feel every eye in church on me. Just about the time I got to the door I felt a big hand on my shoulder. I looked up and the preacher was looking right at me.

“Who are you, son? Whose boy are you?”

I felt the old weight come on me. It was like a big black cloud. Even the preacher was putting me down.

But as he looked down at me, studying my face, he began to smile a big smile of recognition. “Wait a minute,” he said, “I know who you are. I see the family resemblance. You are a son of God.”

With that he slapped me across the rump and said, “Boy you’ve got a great inheritance. Go and claim it.”

The old man looked across the table at Fred Craddock and said, “That was the most important single sentence ever said to me.” With that he smiled, shook the hands of Craddock and his wife, and moved on to another table to greet old friends.

Suddenly, Fred Craddock remembered. This was Ben Hooper, former Governor of the State of Tennessee.

My text isn’t about fathers today. It’s about men - seven great men from the book of Acts.

Acts 6

Choosing of the Seven

1. Now at this time while the disciples were increasing in number, a complaint arose on the part of the Hellenistic Jews against the native Hebrews, because their widows were being overlooked in the daily serving of food. 2. So the twelve summoned the congregation of the disciples and said, "It is not desirable for us to neglect the word of God in order to serve tables. 3. Therefore, brethren, select from among you seven men of good reputation, full of the Spirit and of wisdom, whom we may put in charge of this task. 4. But we will devote ourselves to prayer and to the ministry of the word."

5. The statement found approval with the whole congregation; and they chose Stephen, a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit, and Philip, Prochorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas and Nicolas, a proselyte from Antioch. 6. And these they brought before the apostles; and after praying, they laid their hands on them.

7. The word of God kept on spreading; and the number of the disciples continued to increase greatly in Jerusalem, and a great many of the priests were becoming obedient to the faith. 8. And Stephen, full of grace and power, was performing great wonders and signs among the people.

Intro.: I have been preaching from the book of Acts for the past several weeks, (when we haven’t had a guest speaker, Children’s Day, etc.). Today is Father’s Day and since I am in this book, this passage seemed most appropriate since it talks about seven great men.

These seven great men were appointed to a specific position to take care of a specific problem. Let me explain who they were and why they were needed.

First of all, it should be noted that the church at this time was still almost entirely Jewish. Jesus was a Jew, and his 12 disciples were Jews. They had been sent out by Jesus to the lost sheep of Israel before they were to go anywhere else. That makes sense. They were to go to the people they knew, to the culture and language they knew before they were to go to anywhere else in the world. The message would spread beyond the realms of Judaism, of course. The parting words of Jesus were that they were to go into Jerusalem, Samaria, and the uttermost parts of the earth. But Christianity began in Jerusalem with Christians preaching in the temple to Jews.

There were problems (there always are – that’s just life both in and out of the church). The problem in the Jerusalem church had something to do with criticism. Sometimes criticism can be useful. The issue was that the Hellenistic Jews were complaining that the Jerusalem Jews weren’t properly taking care of their widows. What is that all about? Let me explain.

Judaism had spread all over the Roman world. Years earlier Rome had conquered and replaced Greece as the major world military power. But the people they conquered loved the Greek culture. They loved the Greek language, many loved Greek philosophy. Many loved Greek religion and adapted many of the Greek gods and goddesses. Those who adopted the Greek language and some of its philosophy were called Hellenists, named after “Ellene” the Greek God, the supposed son of Zeus. The term Hellenism simply means Greek thought. Jews scattered around the Greek/Roman world were called Hellenistic Jews.

The Jews who continued to live in around Jerusalem were called native Jews. They maintained a form of the Jewish language and thought of themselves as pure Jews. So, there was some tension between these two groups anyway. They were different in the way they thought, the way they talked, and the way they did things.

In the early days of Christianity, some of the Jews who became Christ-followers came from both groups of Jews. There were native Jewish Christians and Hellenistic Jews who became Christians. The Hellenistic Jewish Christians complained against the native Jewish Christians about the neglect of the widows.

It wasn’t an entirely fair criticism, because lots of Hellenist Jews came to Jerusalem in their old age, as couples, to die. Many Jews felt they had to live out their lives in other countries to make a living and to raise their children, but they had a passionate love for Jerusalem. If they couldn’t live in Jerusalem, they at least wanted to come to Jerusalem to die and many did.

Women have always tended to outlive their husbands and that left an inordinate amount of widows. There was no state run Social Security in place. If their children lived in Greece, for example, and the parents moved to Jerusalem, when the father died, the

children were not on hand to take care of their parents. So, the Jewish/Christian community had to pick up the load. Somebody had to make sure they had a decent place to live and had access to daily food. Unless somebody looked after the aging, crippled widows, they would suffer and die.

In the early days of Christianity, the work of caring for the widows was not yet organized. The Hellenists, who themselves wanted to move to Jerusalem to die, were criticizing the native Jews who lived in Jerusalem because they themselves would be in that position where they needed care, and it was scary to think no one would help them when they needed it the most. Their criticism was somewhat self-serving.

But the Christians, instead of arguing or blaming, agreed that they did indeed have a problem that needed to be fixed. That's when they organized themselves and said somebody has to do this. Who is going to organize this ministry? Well, the leaders of this new-found faith would have to see to it. Guess who they elected to be the new "waiters" – the new "deacons"? Well look at their names: They elected people like Stephanus, a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit, Prochorus, Parmenas and Nicolas. Folks, these are Greek sounding names. In other words, the task was given to younger Hellenistic men who were now, in fact, living in Jerusalem. The widows would be more comfortable with them. If we all of a sudden had an influx of new Hungarian widows who needed light bulbs changed and their lawn mowed, and who needed meals taken to them, I would probably suggest that some people whose names sound like Fekete and Sebastian assume the job. Among other things, they could talk to them about the old country and about things back home.

The disciples knew they had only two options. They could run around taking care of widows, which would have been very time consuming, or they could delegate that responsibility to others. They chose the latter and wiser part. They chose seven really good men. We have come to know them as the first Deacons, which means servant, or more specifically, "waiters". They were originally called to wait on tables. We have changed our structure, but many Baptist Churches have people they call "Deacons". Those folks tend to prepare and serve communion. But when these deacons slaughtered a goat, they took the widows some of it, so they could cook it up for dinner. When they harvested their tomatoes, beans and rice, they took some to the widows. They went around the communities collecting those things from other people at slaughter time and harvest time. That was their job.

What is interesting to me was that they didn't choose just anyone to take care of widows. They didn't say, "Anyone can do that job. You don't have to be very spiritual to collect rice and beans for widows. It would be nice if they were Christians, but they don't have to know how to pray for those widows. They don't have to attend to the spiritual needs; we've got a pastor to do that. They just have to know how to ask for things."

No, not at all! They called seven great men. They were great because of their inner qualities. These were guys who were full of faith and full of the Holy Spirit. In fact one of them turned out to be a great preacher. His name was Stephanus. We will call him

Steven. Steven was so fired up for Jesus and so verbal about his faith that he preached a sermon that was so confrontational that it cost him his life.

Steven knew the Bible. Acts 7 is a record of his sermon in which he went through the entire history of Judaism beginning with the call of Abraham. He spoke of Isaac, Jacob and Moses. He especially talked about the unfaithfulness of the Jewish people under the leadership of Moses. And finally he said, “You stiff-necked people with uncircumcised hearts” (he was calling them a bunch of stubborn Gentiles), you are just like your stubborn forefathers. You always resist the Holy Spirit. Was there ever a prophet your forefathers did not persecute? Even the Messiah, who your prophets predicted, you have murdered. You have received the law through Moses - good for you. But you do not obey it.

The Jewish leaders were so upset with him that they stoned him to death and Stephen became the first Christian martyr.

These deacons, these seven great men, knew the Bible. They were men of prayer, some of them really knew how to preach, and they bravely stood for what they deeply believed. Acts 6 says they were men who were filled with the Holy Spirit. That’s what made them great.

Men, that is what we are called to be on this Father’s Day. We are called to be great men who love the Lord, who know the Bible, and who will speak to our families and our friends the truth of it.

We have confused greatness. We speak of great politicians, great actors, and great vocalists. But what makes a man great is his love for God, his moral and spiritual integrity, and his willingness to stand up for what is right. God calls us to be that kind of a man.

That takes me back to Father’s Day and to the story Dr. Craddock told. I don’t know your past. I don’t know about your parents. I don’t know what kind of Father you had. In a sense, it doesn’t matter. You have a great inheritance. You are a Son or a Daughter of God. He sent His Son to die for you. When you accept His Son as your Savior, He comes into your heart with another gift – the gift of the Holy Spirit. What I know is that you have been made great. Go and claim your spiritual inheritance.

