
KNOW AND GROW IN CHRIST

FOCUS

Acts 6:1-7

Now in these days when the disciples were increasing in number, a complaint by the Hellenists arose against the Hebrews because their widows were being neglected in the daily distribution. And the twelve summoned the full number of the disciples and said, "It is not right that we should give up preaching the word of God to serve tables. Therefore, brothers, pick out from among you seven men of good repute, full of the Spirit and of wisdom, whom we will appoint to this duty. But we will devote ourselves to prayer and to the ministry of the word." And what they said pleased the whole gathering, and they chose Stephen, a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit, and Philip, and Prochorus, and Nicanor, and Timon, and Parmenas, and Nicolaus, a proselyte of Antioch. These they set before the apostles, and they prayed and laid their hands on them.

And the word of God continued to increase, and the number of the disciples multiplied greatly in Jerusalem, and a great many of the priests became obedient to the faith.

We have been sharing in the last ten weeks a series on vision. **We have been talking about Jesus Christ as the hope of glory. Jesus Christ is the hope of the world. When Jesus comes into your life he makes everything new. There is wholeness. There is peace. There is joy. There is the promise of healing and restoration. Jesus Christ will transform your life and give you eternal life. That is the message of scripture and that is the message of the New Testament. There is a wholeness that is available to us only in Jesus Christ and it's available to us in this life and in the life to come. Now, there is an enemy of your soul who wants to do anything possible to keep you from that experience. He wants to keep you from knowing Jesus Christ. He wants to keep you from growing in Christ.** And we come to a passage today where the early Church is growing in Christ. People are coming to know Jesus Christ by the hundreds and the thousands. Their lives are being transformed and the entire culture of Jerusalem is being transformed. The message about Jesus is going out from Jerusalem into the region and into the world, and this enemy opposes that success in Christ, so an attack begins.

At first, the attack comes from *outside* the Church. It comes in the form of persecution. The religious leaders in Jerusalem begin to persecute the Church. They arrest Christians. They arrest the leaders of the Church and they threaten them. They try to intimidate them.

When that doesn't work, the enemy comes with a different strategy. He comes from *within*. He seeks to bring corruption within the Church. We are told about a very startling account in Acts Chapter 5 where an important couple in the church, Ananias and Sapphira, conceive of a plan to lie to God, to lie to the Church, and to deceive the entire Church. In some ways we would look at that and say, "Well, it's harmless, isn't it?" And yet, God jealously watches over the purity of his Church and he brings judgment on Ananias and Sapphira and purifies his Church.

We see in this passage a third strategy of the enemy. In some ways I think that this strategy is more dangerous than the first two, because this is a silent killer. This is a strategy that can be employed against you, that can hinder your entire spiritual life, and it is the strategy of *distraction*. **Distraction: Keeping your focus from God, keeping your focus from Christ, keeping your focus away from Jesus Christ as the hope of your life and the hope of glory, and as all you need. That's an astounding message, isn't it? If the enemy can get your focus off of that truth and onto anything else, he is succeeding.**

I picked up one of my sons this week to take him to a class. He got in the car and opened a book and said, "Dad, I'm sorry. I need to do some homework on the way. Do you mind if I jump in and do a little bit of homework?" I said, "No, no problem. Go for it." So we pulled up to a stoplight on a very busy road. It was one of those long lights. There he was, doing his homework, and there I was, just waiting, waiting, waiting. I looked down, and there was my phone. I picked up my phone, and I'm not very proud of this, but I opened it and started doing emails on my phone, sitting at the stoplight. I know. You are judging and you shouldn't be right now, because I'm coming clean.

And do you know what happened? Next thing you know, all these horns were going off. I looked up and there was this long stretch of open road, green light, just me and all these cars behind me. There was my son, doing his homework. There I was, the car was out of gear, and I was doing my emails. I might as well have had my feet up. Do you know why we don't text and drive? Because people get hurt. Or worse. We lose focus. We don't keep focus on what we're doing. People get hurt.

There are marriages that get into trouble because they lose focus. That man, before they get married – he has a sharp focus. His eyes are set on the prize and he is pursuing her. But they get married, and then somewhere, somehow, at some time, he loses focus. She loses focus. And people get hurt.

Distraction is a strategy that the enemy delights in using in our lives. We have been talking about a vision of *Knowing and Growing in Christ*, and today I want to share this message on overcoming distraction and keeping our focus. My desire is to serve us as a church, to help us as a community to keep our focus, and then also to encourage you individually in terms of keeping your focus on Jesus Christ and his call for your life. So, we have three powerful insights, three powerful truths that will help us to stay alert, to stay awake, and to keep our focus. Let's go to #1.

I. The word of God matters.

The apostles wisely recognize that God has called them to keep God's word as the priority for the church. And they recognize that this problem which emerges is important. It needs to be addressed. But if they are not careful, it will distract them from what God has called them to do. The problem is one where there is a group of widows who are Greek in their culture. They are Jewish, but they are Hellenized. They are Greek in terms of their culture. Then there is a group of widows who are more traditionally Jewish. They are also Jewish Christians. These two groups are really at the heart of the challenge. The less traditional group of Jewish Christians, the Greek in culture, come up and say, "Listen, our widows are being neglected." You see, the church is trying to take care of those in need in the church family, and there is this problem that emerges. The apostles recognize that they, as the leaders of the church, cannot do everything, and that the church must be equipped and released to care for the church.

What you have here is the origin of the office of the deacon. What we are going to do today, Riverside, as a local church – we are going to launch, or re-launch our deacon ministry. And we are going to do it with this goal in mind: that the deacons of the church will help us to keep focus and to not be distracted. For you individually, for us as a church, I want to encourage us here in this first truth – that the word of God is the priority of our lives. **The word of God must be central and first.**

Did you recognize what happened when we came out of the passage and we got to the very last verse? Look at verse 7. This is the summary: "And the word of God continued to increase, and the number of the disciples multiplied greatly in Jerusalem..." Hold your finger right there. Up in verse 4, this is the declaration of the apostles: "We will devote ourselves to prayer and to the ministry of the word." They are saying, "Listen, this is important. We are going to set up a plan so that this need is met, but we, as the leaders of the church, will devote ourselves to prayer and the ministry of the word."

As they do that, and as the word of God is being taught and the whole counsel of God is going forth, the power of God is going forth and people are getting saved, and the church is growing, the church is being built, lives are being transformed, and individual Christians are growing. When the word of God is compromised, watered down, or just not held as precious and central, we become stagnant.

There are a lot of ways to grow a church, but there's really only one right way. Let me clarify that. I understand that there are going to be many different expressions and many different strengths and unique callings in terms of churches. There are various ways to gather people, but God's way always involves, *always involves* the centrality of his word. I want us to understand that it's not just a matter of right and wrong. The picture here is on the *power* of the word of God, that organic quality that the church is experiencing – unexplainable growth, because God's word is going forth. It's penetrating hearts. It's going deep into souls. It's revealing motivations and thoughts and intentions, and with it, bringing

a conviction of sin, but not leaving us under that conviction of sin, bringing us to a place where we see there is life in Jesus Christ. There is forgiveness in Jesus Christ. There is eternal life in Jesus Christ.

And that truth is not something that we come to and say, “Okay. Let me just respond. Let me say yes to God, and then we leave that truth.” That truth forever defines us, renews us, strengthens us, and gives growth to our very souls. So as our bodies just give out with time, we say, “That’s okay!” Right? That’s what we say. “It’s okay!” Why? Because I’m getting a new one. I’m getting a new body. My soul is being renewed and strengthened as the word of God is held central, not – please understand – not as just a right and wrong, and I’ve got to check the list, but because God’s word is powerful. **God brings life through his word.**

Some of you may be familiar with a translation of the scripture called [The Message](#). It’s by a man named Eugene Peterson. He is an older pastor and author and a really wise leader in the wider Church. He has written a book to pastors and he tells pastors, “You know, you have three main responsibilities. #1 – Pray. #2 – The scripture. #3 – Give spiritual direction. That’s your calling from God. Your calling is to focus first on those three things.” Then he says, “Out of that there are three other responsibilities: Preaching, teaching, and administration, or leadership.”

Now, if you stop and think about it, you say, “Okay, the top three strong priorities all revolve around the word of God and our communion with God, and two of the next three -- preaching and teaching -- do the same. So of the six main responsibilities of a pastor and leader in the church, five of those revolve around the word of God and prayer. It’s very, very important.

I want to tell you as a pastor who has been at it for a while, that I see that truth diminishing and weakening in terms of the conviction of the wider Church. And I want to call us, Riverside, to be settled on the fact that we are a people of God’s word. We cannot survive without it. We understand that Jesus, quoting Moses, declared an eternal truth that man cannot live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds forth from the mouth of the Father. The word of God matters.

II. **People matter.**

Consider this. How easy it would have been when this complaint came forward for the entire church to fall in and take sides. How easy it would have been for people to get defensive and for the leaders to get defensive and to begin to see disruption within the life of the church. But that didn’t happen. The leaders were approachable. They were accessible. There was humility in their response. They didn’t make it all about them. They didn’t feel like they had to be hands-on, the one doing it. They gave away a lot of authority in calling the church to respond to this need. You see an ownership by the entire church and strong, confident, godly leadership that comes from the gospel when we understand that my sin is

forgiven in Christ. **I am a messed up person without Jesus – beautifully made in the image of God, but marred because of sin, healed because of Jesus, empowered because of him. My destiny, my calling, my identity is: I’m a child of God because of what Jesus has done. That frees us to come to a place of saying, “Every person matters.”** Every person matters.

We live in an amazing age where there are some massive churches. I hear of churches that are 50,000, 60,000, multiple locations, multiple states. It’s awesome. I don’t know -- it’s not my place to determine the spiritual quality of these churches. Are people getting saved? Are people really saved? Are they preaching God’s word? That’s up to God. I’m going to leave that to God right now.

It’s so funny. Right before the service, my phone popped up with a message. It said, “Vice President Mike Pence is here in town, going to one of the church services here in the city. I think it said Church By The Glades. I don’t think the Vice President is here. Is he here? I don’t know why he’s not at Riverside! Right? It’s so easy in our day to think, “Well, if there aren’t 10,000 people it’s just not happening. And if some celebrity is not here...” I’m just not aware of a single celebrity. Now, if you’re a big deal and you’re here and we haven’t figured it out, I’m sorry. But the good news is you matter just as much. So church, every person matters.

I just can’t leave this point without leaving us with some simple applications, so I’m going to give you four words to help you with your personal encounters: **1) Listen.** Listen to people. **2) Process.** As you listen, process what they are saying. Seek to understand what they are saying. Clarify what they are saying if you don’t understand what they are saying. **3) Curious.** Be curious. Get to know that person better. Explore more of what they are telling you and what they are talking about. So listen, process, be curious. Don’t be thinking about what you are going to say as they are speaking. Don’t talk over them. Don’t assume you know where they are going. Don’t assume you know what they are going to say. Process it. Understand it. Be curious. Explore. And **4) Care.** Just love them. It doesn’t mean you need to fix them or fix the situation. It’s just a simple four-word reminder that people matter.

III. Structure matters.

Here in Acts Chapter 6, I believe we have the origin of the office of the deacon. There is something official about what happens. Here is the process: The church puts forward seven men. I believe in time biblically we see that becomes men and women, and we will have men and women deacons, or deacons and deaconesses here at Riverside. They will have special hats. No, they won’t have special hats. I understand that there is some controversy in what I’ve just said. Okay, men and women – I want to tell you that even the most conservative theologians hold out for that possibility. We are not leaving the bounds of orthodoxy. I think we all understand that biblically this culturally is a challenging issue. We are not

going to explore it now. Email all of your questions to that man right there on the front row. Adam Greenfield would love to have this discussion with you.

Do you understand that they could have fixed the problem, put a group on it, but they did more than that? They laid hands on them. There is this element of ordination. There is something that's born out of this. By the time you get to First and Second Timothy and Titus, where Paul is instructing his sons in the Lord on how to pastor, how to build, what the church looks like, we see by then that there are elders and deacons. In fact, you will see it as Paul addresses churches.

You can look at an example here in Philippians 1:1. "Paul and Timothy, servants of Christ Jesus, to all the saints in Christ Jesus who are at Philippi..." That's the entire church. "All the saints" – saints refers to all those who have been made holy in Jesus Christ. That's every Christian. "...with the overseers..." That's a synonym for "elder." "...and deacons." That is the minimal church structure according to a biblical pattern, and your leadership is saying to you that that structure matters and we are rebirthing. We had deacons a long time ago and we feel like this is a weakness now that we want to correct. We want to repent and reinstitute and see a level of care provided in the body through deacons.

Let me explain what I mean by that. **A deacon is someone who facilitates care for the members of the body.** Let me say that again. A deacon – the word means servant (it can be translated minister) -- is someone who facilitates care for the members of the body. That doesn't mean that the deacons do all the caring. They facilitate. So our hope is that every member of the body will have a deacon. A deacon will have a small group – a deacon family – and they will pray for every person in that group and they will facilitate care. If there's a need that's not being met in someone's life, they will try to connect that person to the resource that can help them experience help in that particular area.

In particular, part of what the deacons will do is help members of the church live out the vision of *Gather, Connect, Serve, and Grow*. If you say, "Listen, I want to improve serving in my life and I'm looking for opportunities to do that," your deacon will be a place where you will be able to connect to resources and opportunities and be someone who will pray with you in that area. They will not replace group leaders or home group leaders or other areas of ministry that now exist. It's another level of care.

I think we all see that people sometimes fall through the cracks in church life. They don't show up for a few weeks. It's a little while at first – one or two Sundays, three Sundays. You are thinking, "Well, they are away. They're ill. I should give them a call. You don't. And next thing you know, they slip through. Deacons, in part, will be there to help us improve in caring for every person in all circumstances.

Also, we could highlight areas of special need where deacons may be especially helpful in facilitating and leading ministry. You will hear more about that. The plan is that you will nominate deacons in the month of April. We will be giving you a

fuller explanation. Nominate deacons throughout that month. The elders will meet with those nominees and will select deacons from that group. They will be trained in the next few months and then ordained sometime at the end of the summer or the beginning of the fall.

That's the plan. Please give us grace to adjust that as we go forward, but that is the time schedule as we see it happening. The qualifications according to this passage and Acts Chapter 6 are: good reputation (that speaks of character), full of the Spirit, full of wisdom. These are people who know God and walk in the fullness of the Spirit and value the things of the Spirit. They are full of wisdom. They are full of scriptural truth and the ability and good common sense to apply God's word to life, and they are people of good reputation.

Now, structure matters. Here is where I want to bring this message to a close and give you a few responses and applications to help you. Then I'm going to ask you to help us with something. Okay? **The first application obviously, personally, is for you to see the importance of structure in your own life – not a kind of rigid structure that brings death and kills life, but seeing the importance of discipline and a certain rhythm or regularity in terms of the practice of the spiritual disciplines of your life.** That's part of what we are trying to do with the vision of the church.

Listen, I get it. If you are here and you say, "Wow. We've been talking for 10 weeks about *Gather, Connect, Serve, and Grow*." I get it. Maybe it's not all that spicy, but where it lacks spice, it's biblical. I believe it's thoroughly biblical and right and I believe with my heart that you will experience growth if a conviction for these elements grabs your heart and you see how the word of God meets us when we gather. The word of God is proclaimed. It's sung. There is some dynamic about the larger gathering. I want to be in relationships. I want to connect. The word of God is applied and Christ is ministered to my heart and I learn to speak about him to others. I want to serve and give away the word of God and share Christ with others and live out what I'm learning. And I want to grow in my private time with God, where I learn to meditate and reflect on the word of God and read the word of God, take in that life-changing word of God and call out to God in prayer. That rhythm, that structure is there to serve you. I believe that it matters. And if you work to connect this sermon to that, you will see that the word of God is central in all four of those elements.

Secondly, I want you to pray about being a deacon and pray about who you will nominate. I want you to embrace this ministry and say, "You know what? This is not just something that our leaders have come up with. This is clearly biblical. We see in this simple message that God lays out this structure for the Church. This is going to help us and this is going to serve the people. This is right. So I'm going to pray into it and I'm going to cooperate. And I'm going to give grace to our leaders, because we see that situations like this one in Acts 6 which could have exploded into some form of controversy, these things can stir us up. No, this is for the good of the church. We are going to see this happen and we are going to commit ourselves to it."

And here's the third thing. This is what we are going to do in the last few minutes of our message. We are going to put this into practice right now. We are going to ask you to take five minutes and fill out a survey. It is completely anonymous. No one will ever know what your answers are. We want you to be honest, to be transparent, and to tell us where things are really great in your life. Tell us where things are not. Tell us where things are really working for you in the church. Tell us everything in between.

We have Bertrude and Priscilla, who are here leading missions. We introduced Bertrude and Priscilla a few weeks back. They graduated from the University of Florida with their Ph.D.'s, and one of the areas of their expertise is in this very activity – this surveying activity. I'm sure I'm just not getting the academic term right. I have no idea what to call this, except they have Ph.D.'s in it, so they are helping us as a church.

This is the progression here. We said, "You know what? We want to start in our community around the church, and we realize we don't want to just go into the community assuming what people need. We want to find out." Then that led us to the next thing to say, "Well, let's do that right here. Let's not assume we know where everyone's at right here. Let's start right here." We want to listen. We want to hear. We want to understand where you're at. So Bertrude and Priscilla are going to come up and tell you how we are going to do this. Would you welcome Bertrude and Priscilla?

Thank you so much, Pastor B. We are very excited for this church survey. This brief survey, as Pastor Brian mentioned, should take us about four to five minutes to complete. It is completely anonymous, so we do encourage being as free and as honest as possible, because the honesty in the survey is going to allow us to have really effective data. So with that, we have an electronic version and a paper version for your convenience. To access the electronic version, we are going to have you pull out your phone or your tablet. I see people are already pulling out their phones. Everyone's eager! This is wonderful! You would enter in this link: [Tinyurl.com/954ChurchSurvey](https://tinyurl.com/954ChurchSurvey) in order to get that electronic version. If you have access to the internet on your phone, we do strongly encourage you to take this route. For the paper version, we ask that you look at the tray of the seat in front of you. Many of the chairs in the sanctuary have a paper survey underneath them. If you would like a paper survey, but don't have a survey underneath the chair in front of you, we ask that you ask people around you, because there will be more than enough surveys in the sanctuary. If you still don't have a survey and you would like one, you would raise your hand and Priscilla and I will come and find you. Also, we have Lyndsay, who will find you as well and give you the paper survey.

For those of us who feel more comfortable in the Kreyol Ayisyen or the Español language, we do have the survey in those versions. To access the Kreyol Ayisyen version, you would type in: [Tinyurl.com/954ChurchSurveyK](https://tinyurl.com/954ChurchSurveyK). For the Español, it would be: [954ChurchSurveyE](https://tinyurl.com/954ChurchSurveyE). If you would like access to the paper version of the Kreyol or the Español, Priscilla, Lyndsay, and I will make sure to give it to you. You would just raise your hand for that.

Know and Grow in Christ – Focus

Acts 6:1-7 | Sunday, March 19, 2017 | By Brian Brookins



This survey is for everyone. If you are a first-time visitor, if you feel comfortable please go ahead and fill out the survey because we would love your feedback. Also, if you are in this service, we assume that you are middle school or older. Therefore, we ask that only those who are middle school or older fill out this survey.

Also, the worship team is going to come up and play a final song. While we finish the survey, you can go ahead and fill it out while they are playing. When you finish, please take time to pray and to reflect, then we will sing a final chorus together. If you have a paper survey, go ahead and take them at the conclusion of service and put them in the four black trays that are toward the back. We will be back there to go ahead and lead you. Thank you so much. We look forward to seeing how this survey will help strengthen our church.