

Obeying God Rather than Men; Selecting the Seven (Acts 5:29 and 6:1-7)

Expository Lessons from the Book of Acts

I. Review of Prior Lessons

- a. The church begins at Pentecost, in **Acts 2**.
 - i. Three thousand were baptized, and the church in Jerusalem at first enjoys “favor with all the people”. (**Acts 2:47**)
- b. Peter and John heal a crippled man in the temple area, in **Acts 3**.
 - i. As a result, they were brought before the high priest, members of his family, and the Sanhedrin for questioning, in **Acts 4**.
 - ii. After being warned and threatened, they are released without being punished.
- c. The number of believers continues to increase, and this brings on more persecution.
 - i. The high priest and Jewish leaders have the apostles arrested. (**Acts 5:17-18**)
 - ii. The apostles are released from prison at night by an angel. The next morning they are found preaching in the temple area again.
 - iii. The apostles are brought before the Sanhedrin. Some of the members want to have the apostles killed. (**Acts 5:33**)
 1. However, Gamaliel persuades the Sanhedrin to release the apostles, saying that if what they are doing is not from God, it will fail (as other recent revolutionary attempts had come to nothing). (**Acts 5:34-39**)
 2. The apostles are beaten and released and do not cease preaching Jesus in the temple area and from house to house (**Acts 5:40-42**).
 - iv. Soon we will see the first recorded martyrdom (after Jesus) in the early church.

II. We Must Obey God Rather than Men

- a. Before we proceed to **Acts 6**, I would like to discuss one verse in **Acts 5** that has served as a life-saving spiritual anchor on my spiritual walk. This is a

verse that has inspired others in the past as well.

- b. Most people, by nature, fall into one of two categories. They *tend to be either*:
 - i. Compliant, going along with leaders; not “making waves” (sometimes out of cowardice, fear or mental laziness); *OR*
 - ii. Rebellious, tending not to submit to any human authority (sometimes out of a rebellious nature).
- c. The apostles, following the example of Jesus, were submissive to human authority. However, when human rules or directives contradicted what God said, they respectfully continued to obey God and were willing to face the consequences.
 - i. Read **Acts 4:18-20** (when Peter and John were commanded by the high priest and Jewish rulers to stop speaking about Jesus).
 1. “But Peter and John answered and said to them, ‘*Whether it is right in the sight of God to listen to you more than to God, you judge.*’” (**Acts 4:19**, NKJV)
 2. Here Peter and John make their point (that we must obey God rather than men, in the face of contradictory commands) by cleverly asking their opponents a *rhetorical question*.
 - ii. Read **Acts 5:26-29** (when the apostles are brought before the Jewish ruling council).
 1. “But Peter and the other apostles answered and said: ‘*We ought to obey God rather than men.*’” (**Acts 5:29**, NKJV)
 2. Here the apostles are no longer asking rhetorical questions. They clearly state that they must obey God rather than men!
- d. To me, this foundational principle (that we must obey God rather than men) is like an anchor that keeps a boat from being dashed against the rocks or blown out to sea during a storm.
 - i. It can help us see things clearly when we are being pressured by the governments of this world (or even by church leaders) to do something that involves disobeying a clear command of God.
- e. Jesus taught this principle (that we must obey God rather than men) in **Mark 7**. There He accused the Pharisees and scribes of holding to things handed down by the elders (related to ceremonial washings and giving monetary gifts to God) instead of following the word of God.

- i. Read **Mark 7:1-13**.
- f. Jesus, Peter and Paul all taught submission to the ruling authorities (where this does not contradict the commands of God).
 - i. Read **1 Peter 2:11-17**.
 1. “Honor all people. Love the brotherhood. Fear God. *Honor the king.*” (**1 Peter 2:17**, NKJV)
 - ii. Read **Romans 13:1-7**.
 1. “Let every soul be subject to the governing authorities. For there is *no authority except from God*, and the authorities that exist *are appointed by God.*” (**Romans 13:1**, NKJV)
 2. “Therefore whoever resists the authority resists *the ordinance of God*, and those who resist will bring judgment on themselves.” (**Romans 13:2**, NKJV)
 3. Paul says the ruling authorities are “*God’s ministers*”. (**Romans 13:4**)
 - iii. **Question:** Do you *really believe* these things that Paul says here? Remember, he is writing to Christians in Rome, the heart of the Roman Empire, ruled by notoriously corrupt, depraved men.
 1. Think of the rulers that Christians have been under, even over the past hundred years, including:
 - a. Hitler, Stalin, Mao;
 - b. and more recently, Obama, Trump, Biden, Putin in Russia, Chairman Xi in China, and Islamic leaders in places like Saudi Arabia and Iran.
 2. The list of rulers has included morally depraved men, compulsive liars, mass murderers, selfish egotists, and godless people.
 - a. **Question:** How can these people be referred to as being “appointed by God?” and being “God’s ministers”?
 - i. David Lipscomb addressed these questions in his work, ‘*On Civil Government*’, which he wrote after having lived through the US Civil War.

1. Lipscomb was from Middle Tennessee, an area contested by both Confederate and Federal forces.
3. Also, recall that in **Acts 5**, the apostles said to members of the Jewish ruling council, "You murdered Him (*Jesus*) by hanging Him on a tree" (**Acts 5:30**).
 - a. The apostles treated saw the Jewish leaders as wicked men who were guilty of murder. The apostles were honest, bold and straightforward in addressing the sins of the leaders.
 - b. However, notice that the apostles were submissive and respectful. They were not rebellious.
- iv. Read **1 Timothy 2:1-4**.
1. Paul calls us to pray for the ruling authorities, that we may have peace, in order to spread the gospel.
 2. **Question:** *Have you been praying for the rulers of this world (Biden, Harris, Pelosi, Xi, Putin, etc.), that we can live peaceable lives and be able to advance the kingdom of God?*
- g. Read from *On Civil Government*, David Lipscomb, chapter 11, pp. 67-69. (See Appendix at the end of these notes for the quote.)
- i. Practical application: letters from the Disciples of Christ in Middle Tennessee during the U.S. Civil War (also known as "The War Between the States").
 1. First, a letter from the disciples to the President of the Confederate States of America, Jefferson Davis. (See the text of this quote in the Appendix at the end of these notes.)
 2. Second, a letter from the same group of Christians to the Federal authorities. (Also provided in the Appendix to these notes.)
 - ii. Today we may be heading into WWII. Classic signs include:
 1. Propaganda, demonizing one side (with things that later may turn out to be exaggerations, lies or completely one-sided).
 - a. I am old enough to have seen the US government do this many times, in an attempt to persuade reluctant Americans to support a war effort. Some examples:

- i. Viet Nam War: The Gulf of Tonkin resolution, based on a fraudulent claim that US ships had been fired upon in the Gulf of Tonkin.
 - ii. Gulf War No. 1: False claims that the forces of Iraq had been cruelly taking babies out of hospital incubators and casting them onto the floor.
 - iii. Gulf War No 2: Claims by the US government (which turned out to be false) that Saddam Hussein had weapons of mass destruction.
2. Distraction from other problems (such as a failing economy).
3. Suppression of dissent.
4. Government leaders and media cheerleading for involvement in a war conflict.
5. Sending arms to one side of a conflict (often a prelude to more direct involvement in a war).
- iii. Christians must keep our allegiance straight. *We must obey God rather than men. We must fear God (alone) and not men.*
 1. From the beginning of the church, Christians have taken the words of Jesus literally in the Sermon on the Mount, that we must love our enemies, and not resist an evil person. **(Matthew 5:38-41)**
 - a. For more information on the understanding of the early church regarding Jesus' teachings on nonresistance, see *Dictionary of Early Christian Beliefs*, ed. David Bercot, article on 'War'.
 2. As Lipscomb said, our duty as members of the kingdom of God is to "to obey God first, let the consequences be to him what they may".
 3. This is the spirit and principle that guided the apostles in their dealings with religious (Jewish) and secular leaders.

III. A problem in the Church: Greek-speaking Widows are Being Neglected

- a. Read **Acts 6:1-7**.
- b. This is the second 'problem' mentioned that is *internal to the church* (the first being the deceit of Ananias and Sapphira, in **Acts 5**).

- i. We have seen the *external* problems facing the church, related to persecution.
- c. The problem: in the daily distribution of bread to the Christian widows, the 'Hellenists' were being overlooked in favor of the 'Hebrews'.
 - i. Early Christian writer John Chrysostom, in his *Homily No. 14 on Acts*, said:
 - 1. "And in those days, when the number of the disciples was multiplied, there arose a murmuring of the Hellenists against the Hebrews, because their widows were neglected in the daily ministrations.' (**Acts 6:1**) Not absolutely in those immediate days; for it is the custom of Scripture to speak of things next about to happen, as taking place in immediate succession. But by 'Hellenists' I suppose he means those who spoke Greek ['against the Hebrews']: for they did not use the Greek language.
 - 2. "Behold another trial! Observe how from within and from without there are warrings from the very first! 'Then,' it says, 'the twelve called the multitude of the disciples unto them, and said, It is not reason that we should leave the word of God, and serve tables.' (**Acts 6:2**) Well said: for the needful must give precedence to the more needful. But see, how straightway they both take thought for these (inferior matters), and yet do not neglect the preaching. 'Because their widows were overlooked': for those (the Hebrews) were treated as the persons of greater consequence..."
 - ii. According to John Chrysostom, the Greek-speaking widows were considered to be *less important* than the ones speaking the local language of Jerusalem (Aramaic or Hebrew).
 - 1. This sounds like some kind of cultural discrimination, even in the early church.
 - 2. The apostles are solution-oriented. Their solution was to assign the responsibility for this need *to spiritually-minded men*.
- d. The apostles use wisdom to see that the problem is taken care of.
 - i. The twelve apostles were set apart for *prayer* and *ministry of the word* (preaching).

1. This, to me, reinforces how important the apostles saw *prayer*. For them to wait on tables would have cut into their time *devoted to prayer* (and/or to the ministry of the word).
2. Prayer is one of the two primary focuses of the apostles.
 - a. “Confess your trespasses to one another, and pray for one another, that you may be healed. The effective, fervent prayer of a righteous man avails much. Elijah was a man with a nature like ours, and he prayed earnestly that it would not rain; and it did not rain on the land for three years and six months. And he prayed again, and the heaven gave rain, and the earth produced its fruit.” (**James 5:16–18**, NKJV)
 - i. One of the great challenges of this passage is that it says the prayers *of a righteous* man avail much.
 - ii. Obviously, James did not subscribe to the popular modern notion in many Protestant circles that “no one is righteous” (taking Paul’s statement from **Romans 3:10** out of context).
 - iii. If we want the Lord to hear and answer our prayers, and for our prayers to be effective, we need to be living according to righteousness.
 1. That is not easy!
 - b. Read **Psalm 34:12-20** (designated **Psalm 33:13-21** in Bibles where the Old Testament is based on the Septuagint).
 - i. The Lord listens to the prayers of those who are righteous, who fear Him; those who keep their tongues from evil and deceit. They also are the ones who pursue peace.
 - ii. The righteous will face many afflictions, but the Lord will listen when they cry out to Him.
 1. This one statement demolishes the popular modern so-called ‘prosperity gospel’. Those who hold to this false teaching claim that a benefit of adopting the Christian faith is that one’s life will thereafter become easier and more prosperous.

- iii. Peter quotes from this in **1 Peter 3**, where he talks about why husbands need to dwell with their wives in an understanding, honor-giving way so that their prayers may not be hindered.
- c. The challenge for us is not only to be devoted to prayer, but to combine that with devotion to righteousness, so that the Lord will hear our prayers. The prayers of the righteous do have great impact!
- e. These are sometimes referred to as 'the seven deacons', although not clear to what extent this corresponds to deacons who would be appointed later in the churches.
- f. Are there any lessons for us, regarding appointing men to positions of spiritual responsibility in the church today?
 - i. Apostles give the criteria, then ask the people to select men from among themselves who are spiritual, who meet these standards.
 - 1. Note that these men were not just chosen by lot, nor were they directly picked by the apostles.
 - 2. There are a variety of ways that churches pick leaders and deacons today. For example:
 - a. Some choose the person by lot.
 - b. Some churches have the current leaders select and appoint the men.
 - c. In some churches, the members make the decision, for example, by voting (with the most popular person being chosen).
 - i. Unfortunately, I was in a church once where an elder was chosen by the church leaders who clearly did not meet the Biblical qualifications of **Titus 1:5-9**. When I pointed this out to one of the leaders before this man was appointed, I was told that the proposed elder was very popular with the people he would be leading; that they liked him and wanted him to be one of their elders.
 - ii. While it is a good idea to get feedback from those who know a man best before appointing him to a position of spiritual responsibility, this always

should be done *in the light of the qualifications laid out in the Scriptures!*

- ii. This approach to choosing the seven men in **Acts 6** reminds me of what Moses said regarding how the leaders of the people had been selected at Mount Sinai.
 - 1. Read **Deuteronomy 1:9-18**.
 - 2. The approach:
 - a. Moses gave the criteria for selection of judges (“wise, understanding, and knowledgeable men from among your tribes”).
 - b. Then, the people chose the men who met these criteria.
 - c. After that, Moses appointed the qualified men to be over the people.
 - 3. It is not clear to me if this passage from **Deuteronomy 1** refers to the same event described in **Exodus 18:13-26**, where his father-in-law Jethro gave advice for Moses to select men to judge all but the most difficult cases.
- g. Stephen, mentioned first, is described as a man who is “full of faith and the Holy Spirit”.
- h. The apostles pray and then lay hands on the seven men who had been selected.
- i. Who was Nicolas of Antioch, who is mentioned last among the seven?
 - i. Jesus later said to the church in Ephesus: “But this you have, that you hate the deeds of the *Nicolaitans*, which I also hate.” (**Revelation 2:6**, NKJV)
 - ii. Tertullian claimed that this Nicolas in **Acts 6** is the same man referred to in **Revelation 2:6**, from whom a heretical sect arose. (See Ante-Nicene Fathers vol. 3, p. 650.)
 - iii. On the other hand, Clement of Alexandria defended Nicolas, saying he never became a heretic. (See Ante-Nicene Fathers vol. 2, p. 373.)
- j. A comment I find encouraging in the text here: “A great many of the priests were obedient to the faith.” (**Acts 6:7**)

- i. These were religious leaders among the Jews who served in the temple, offered the sacrifices and prayers, and were under the authority of the high priest!
- ii. They also knew the Old Testament Scriptures very well and realized in Jesus the fulfillment of all the prophecies.
- iii. **Challenge:** In reaching out to the lost, do not be intimidated by anyone. No one should be considered 'off limits' based on their current position or religious training.
 1. Even among the Jewish priests, a great many of them came to faith based on the testimony of the apostles, fulfilled prophecies, and the signs they saw being demonstrated through the apostles.

IV. APPENDIX – Excerpts from *On Civil Government: Its Origin, Mission and Destiny and the Christian's Relation to It*, by David Lipscomb; from Library of Christian Discipleship, Stone-Campbell Tradition Series, vol. 4; Doulos Christou Press

- a. From *On Civil Government*, chapter 11: The New Testament and Civil Government, pp. 67-69.
 - i. "...The apostles were imprisoned and punished for preaching the gospel, and were forbidden to preach any more in the name of Christ; they respond:
 1. "Whether it be right in the sight of God to hearken unto you more than unto God, judge yourselves, for we cannot but speak the things which we have seen and heard.' (**Acts 4:19-20**)
 - ii. "And this was the spirit that guided the apostles in all their preaching. They paid taxes and treated the human rulers with respect, when they did not interfere with their duty to God. When they did this, all Christians, as Christ had done, disobeyed the human ruler and obeyed the God of heaven. They showed in this that they were subjects of the kingdom of God and only in a secondary sense of a human ruler.
 1. "No man can serve two masters. He will love the one and hate the other, or he will hold to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and Mammon.' (**Matthew 6:24**)
 - iii. "The first of all commandments is,
 1. "[You shall] love the Lord your God with all your heart, and all your soul, and all your mind and with all your body.' (**Mark 12:30**)
 - iv. "To love a ruler is to serve him from your heart. You cannot serve God and the ruler of this world. All the powers of the soul, mind and body must be devoted to the service of God.
 - v. "The letter to the Christians at Rome was written by the apostle Paul, during the reign of Nero, the most cruel and wicked persecutor of the church of God, as well as the most depraved in personal character, that ever sat upon the throne of the Roman empire. His residence was in Rome where these Christians dwelt. They were the special objects of Nero's hatred. He accused them of setting fire to the city as an excuse for gratifying his own ferocious spirit. Renan says:
 1. "Never before had such refinements of cruelty been witnessed. The unusual punishment of such unfortunates was to be thrown to wild beasts, or to be burned in the amphitheater, with an addition of cruel scourging.'

2. “Poor, timid maidens, with modest gestures veiling their nudity, were tossed by a bull and torn in pieces on the pebbles of the arena.’
- vi. “They were put to death, not for the public good, but to gratify the cruelty of one man. These Christians at Rome, enduring these things, were liable to be excited to take vengeance in their own hands and rise up and slay or burn out their cruel persecutors. But Paul writing to them admonishes them,
1. “Recompense to no man evil for evil. Provide things honest in the sight of all men, if it be possible, as much as lies in you, live peaceably with all men. Dearly beloved, avenge not yourselves, but rather give place unto wrath; for it is written: Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord. Therefore if your enemy hunger feed him, if he thirst give him drink: for in so doing thou shalt heap coals of fire on his head.
 2. “Be not overcome of evil, but overcome evil with good. Let every soul be subject unto the higher powers, for there is no power but of God. The powers that be are ordained of God. Whosoever, therefore, resisted the power, resisted the ordinance of God, and they that resist shall receive to themselves damnation, for rulers are not a terror to good works but to the evil.
 3. “Will you not then be afraid of the power. Do that which is good and you shall have praise of the same. For he is the minister of God, a revenger to execute wrath upon him that doeth evil. Wherefore you must needs be subjects not only for wrath, but also for conscience’ sake. For this cause pay you tribute also, for they are God’s ministers attending continually upon this very thing. Render to all, therefore, their dues; tribute to whom tribute is due; custom to whom custom; fear to whom fear; honor to whom honor.’ (**Romans 12:17-13:7**)
- vii. “This is the most complete statement of the Christian’s relation to the civil government found in the New Testament, accepting as we do that the higher powers here refer to the civil government.”
- b. From the Appendix to *On Civil Government*, an excerpt from of a letter written by disciples in Middle Tennessee to the President of the Confederacy, dated November 13, 1862 (pp. 128-130).
- i. “To his Excellency the President of the Confederate states of America.

- ii. "WHEREAS, A large number of the members of the churches of Jesus Christ throughout this and the adjoining counties of the State of Tennessee, feel a deep sense of the responsibility they are under to recognize the Bible in its teachings, as the only infallible guide of their life, and the supreme authoritative rule of action, and as being of superior authority to and more binding upon the subjects of the Kingdom of Jesus Christ, than the rules and regulations of any human government or power, they would respectfully represent,
- iii. "1. That they are fully satisfied that God, through the Scriptures of Sacred Truth, demands of his servants that they should submit quietly, heartily and cheerfully to the government under which they may live, in all cases, except when compliance with the civil law would involve a violation of the law of God. They are deeply impressed with the truth that when there is a conflict between the requirements of worldly government and the law of God, the duty of the Christian is, upon the peril of his well-being, to obey God first, let the consequences be to him what they may.
- iv. "2. They are firm in the conviction of the truth, that no man who regards the authority of God, the spirit and letter of the Sacred Scriptures in their proper division and application, the life and teaching of the Son of God, or his Holy Apostles, as given for the guidance of his followers, can in any manner engage in, aid, foment, or countenance the strifes, animosities and bloody conflicts in which civil governments are frequently engaged, and in which they often involve their subjects.
- v. "The measure and limit of their duty to, and connection with the governments under which they live, as laid down in the Sacred Scriptures, is not an active participation in its affairs to destroy or upbuild, but simply a quiet and cheerful submission to its enactments, in the payment of tribute and any demands on our property or time, modified only, by the first and highest obligation to obey God.
- vi. "With these considerations of what our duty to God requires at our hands, the enforcement of the 'Conscript Act' for the purpose of raising and maintaining an army, for the purpose of carrying on of this unhappy war, in which our country is involved, cannot fail to work indescribable distress to those members of our churches holding these convictions. Some of them will be driven as exiles from their homes, for no political preferences, but because they dare not disobey the commandments of God. Others may be thrown into seeming opposition to your government, suffering imprisonment and punishment as may be inflicted on them. Others still by the pressure of circumstances, may be driven to a deeply sadder fate, the violation

of all their conscientious convictions of duty to their Maker and Master, whom they have under the most solemn vows, pledged themselves to serve.

- vii. "In view of these things, we are induced to make a statement of these facts to you, with the hope that some relief may be afforded to those of our members thus distressed...."
- c. The following is excerpted from a letter sent by disciples from churches in Middle Tennessee to the Federal authorities, when they were in power in Tennessee. (Source: *On Civil Government*, Appendix, pp. 131-133.)
 - i. "To the ruling authorities of the state of Tennessee:
 - ii. "WHEREAS, A large number of the members of the Churches of Jesus Christ feel a deep sense of the responsibility they are under to recognize the Bible in its teachings, as the only infallible guide and authoritative rule of action, and as being of superior authority to, and more binding upon the subjects of the kingdom of Jesus Christ than any human rules or regulations, they would most respectfully represent.
 - iii. "1. That they recognize the necessity for the existence of civil government, so long as a considerable portion of the human family fails to submit to the government of God.
 - iv. "2. That while God demands of his servants that they should submit cheerfully and heartily, to the government under which they may live, in all cases, except when compliance with the requirements of civil government, involves the violation of God's law, they are deeply impressed with the truth that when there is a conflict between the requirements of the civil government and law of God, the duty of the Christian is, upon peril of his eternal well-being, to obey God first, let the consequences be to him what they may.
 - v. "3. They are satisfied that the measure of their duty to civil government, as defined in the Bible, is to submit, not by personal participation in affairs of government, to uphold or destroy, pull down or upbuild, but simply, as a duty they owe to God, to submit, and in that submission, modified only as above to discharge the offices of good citizens in all the relations of life.
 - vi. "4. They are firmly impressed with the truth that no man who regards the authority of God, or of his Holy Apostles, as set forth in example and precept, for the instruction and guidance of his followers in the future ages of the world, can engage in, or in any way aid, foment or countenance the strifes, animosities and bloody conflicts in which civil

governments are frequently engaged, and in which they involve their subjects.

- vii. “5. The spirit of the Church of Christ and the spirit of civil government are different. The one is a spirit of force, as all history attests, that no civil government ever did arise except by force, violence and the destruction of life. So they must maintain that existence by force. We suppose the future, with but slight variations, will repeat the history of the past. But Christianity permits not its subjects to use force or do violence, even in defense of his own existence; its guiding spirit is one of love, ‘peace on earth and goodwill toward men’.
- viii. “6. The difference in the spirit of the two institutions, the government of God and the government of man, together with the diversity of the means essential to the prosperity and success of each respectively, necessarily, at times, involves a conflict in their respective requirements. We, therefore, in behalf of the churches of which we are members, respectfully petition of you that the requirements which, as we believe, conflict with their duties to God, may be remitted to those members of our churches who have been, and are now, striving to maintain a position of Christian separation from the world, its conflicts and strifes, as set forth in the preceding articles.
- ix. “7. We firmly believe that the oath of allegiance, and the oath to support and defend the governments of the world, now imposed as necessary to the transaction of the common affairs of life, are contrary to the spirit and teachings of the Savior and his inspired Apostles, and involve, if strictly complied with, a violation of some of the plainest precepts of the Christian religion. We therefore, feel that in taking these oaths and obligations, and performing those requirements that have an appearance of countenancing bloodshed and violence, we are violating the obligations of fealty we have taken to our Heavenly Master. We imperil the well-being of the church, dishonor God, and involve ourselves in eternal ruin. We, therefore, respectfully ask a release from the performance of these requirements, and others of a similar character, assuring you again, that we recognize it is a solemn duty we owe to God, to submit to the government under which we may live, and all its requirements, save when that government requires of us something contrary to the letter and spirit of the Christian religion, as revealed in the Bible.”