

Living Things Grow

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[0 : 00] Morning troops. Keep your Bible open in Acts 6. You're going to need that open. But I want to kick off looking back to Luke's first letter to his mate Theophilus in Luke. Because in Luke chapter 8, Jesus tells his boys and disciples a story.

It's known as the parable of the sower. And to a large degree, the point of the story is this. Living things grow. A farmer in that scene wants a harvest, needs a harvest.

And so he goes mental, sowing this seed everywhere. He doesn't mind where it lands. Wherever he goes, he's just sowing it all over the place. Now some of it lands on a path.

Gets trampled on, gets eaten by birds. He gets nothing there. Some of it lands on rocky ground. Doesn't take root, gets no moisture, nothing grows. Some of it lands amongst thorns.

They choke anything that grows. But some lands on good soil. And what lands on good soil grows like mad so that he makes 30, 60, even 100% profit on what he sows.

[1 : 08] And when Jesus tells his disciples that story back in Luke chapter 8, he's actually preparing them for life in the book of Acts. He's saying, listen boys, as the farmer sowed the seed, preach the gospel to everyone and to anyone.

Don't be stingy. Don't be selective about the who or the where. Everyone and everywhere needs to hear this word. And boys, you need to know this.

That in some places, the devil will steal it away and you will get nothing. In some places, the floggings you get from the authorities will scare people off so that you get nothing.

In other places, the enticements and the entrapments of the big city will allure people away and you'll get nothing. But I promise you that some of what you sow will find good soil.

And their living things will grow. Boys, you need to get ready that although in Acts chapter 1 you're going to start off in a tiny little upper room, very quickly you're going to burst out of that thing.

[2 : 23] It's going to overflow. Because there is a harvest of people that the devil cannot snatch, persecution cannot steal away, and the enticements of the world cannot allure away from you.

Living things grow. If you were here last week, I presume you did Acts chapter 5, and you will have heard a Pharisee guy called Gamaliel say this, that actually if this is just some kind of mad rebel revolutionary, it will come to nothing like seed planted among the thorns.

But if it's from God, this living thing will grow. To nick another one of Jesus' parables, from a teeny weeny little mustard seed to a mahousive tree.

Because living things grow. And in Luke and in Acts, it is the word of God that gives life and grows life. The word of God will spread, the church will increase, and the kingdom will grow.

And Luke is so desperate for us to see this in the book of Acts, that he gives us about six headlines from a newspaper that tell you this time and time and time and time again.

[3 : 39] You've seen it already in Acts by this point, but he then wants to make six headlines. He's seen already 120 in an upper room in Acts 1. That expanded to about 3,000 in Acts 2 after Pentecost.

In Acts chapter 4, that goes to over 5,000. And he wants to keep giving you the point that living things grow. So, open your Bibles, track with me through his headlines. Acts chapter 6, verse 7.

We had it read to us. The word of God spread, the number of disciples in Jerusalem increased rapidly, and a large number of priests become obedient to the faith. See the point?

Living things grow. Flick over to Acts chapter 9, verse 31. Second headline. Then the church throughout Judea, Galilee, and Samaria enjoyed a time of peace, was strengthened, and living in the fear of the Lord and encouraged by the Holy Spirit, it increased in number.

Living things grow. Acts chapter 12, verse 24. Look over a couple of pages. 12, 24. But the word of God continued to spread and flourish.

[4 : 44] Living things grow. Look at chapter 16, verse 5. So the churches were strengthened in the faith and grew daily in numbers.

Next one. Acts chapter 19, verse 20. In this way, the word of the Lord spread widely and grew in power. Last one. Last words of the book. Acts 28, 30, and 31.

For two whole years, Paul stayed there in his own rented house and welcomed all who came to see him. He proclaimed the kingdom of God and taught about the Lord Jesus Christ with boldness and without hindrance.

What is the point? Living things grow. As the word of God spreads, the church increases, and the kingdom grows. So if you come back to Acts chapter 6 and you read the first verse, it sounds like this is going to be a proper positive moment in the book of Acts.

So Acts chapter 6, verse 1. In those days when the number of disciples was increasing. All right. It's growing.

[5 : 53] Especially when you come off the back of chapter 5. Because in chapter 5, at times it felt like rocky ground. When the apostles have been flogged within an inch of their life. It's tough soil.

At times it's felt more like the kind of thorny ground because Ananias and Sapphira have been lured away by the pleasures of this world. You think Acts chapter 6, finally, after those two, we've got good soil.

But as most teenage boys know, growing is rarely without growing pains. And that's exactly what you see in Acts chapter 6.

So read again verse 1. In those days when the number of disciples was increasing, the Hellenistic Jews complained against the Hebraic Jews because their widows were being overlooked in the daily distribution of food.

Now here's the issue. And it's kind of like a complicated ming and onion that's got multiple layers. The first layer is that the church is just growing.

[6 : 57] I'm a kind of 90s boy in terms of music, so it's kind of the notorious B.I.G. problem where the more people you come across, the more problems you see. As the church is increasing, there's creaks.

It groans. But the second stage is that as it groans, there's complaining. They're probably speaking Hebrew. Obviously some of them are speaking Greek. But although they're in Jerusalem, there's that kind of natural Scottish language of gurning.

Something's wrong here in Jerusalem. Now what's going on? Third layer, there's tension. Potential prejudice between Hebraic Jews and the Hellenistic Jews.

Now they're just two different groups of people. One from outside the city who spoke Greek. Others from inside the city that spoke Hebrew. But it seems to be that the final complicating layer is that some people are looking at it and going, our group are not getting the necessary food that our widows need.

And they're starving. Now a lot of older folk in that time would have come from outside the city back to Jerusalem because they would want to die and be buried in the holy city.

[8 : 12] Now it's always the Bible's view that widows should be cared for by their own families. See that in 1 Timothy chapter 5. But if their own families aren't around or aren't able, then the Bible prescribes that it is the church that ought to care for the most alone, the most vulnerable in their community.

But here's the problem. The church is growing great, but widows are starving. Far from great. And we need to see the potentially nasty flavor to this.

As people look at it and see that it's one specific people group whose widows are being overlooked, people are at best questioning it.

Maybe at worst they're going, is there some institutional racism inside this church in Jerusalem? Are the widows being overlooked, especially because of where they're from or maybe just the language that they speak?

Now you start off the chapter going, oh, the church is growing. Wahey, happy days. And all of a sudden you're going, flip, this church could split. This could be a devastating moment in the book of Acts.

[9 : 30] Now what I want to show you this morning, we could go a million different ways with this text. All I want to do is give you four applications for you guys as Brunfield Evangelical Church. Some of them are going to be for all of us together.

Some of them are specifically going to be for the elders. But the first one is one that hits us all together and it's simple. Church. So speaking of all of us, church, people must not be overlooked.

As a church, our primary responsibility is to care to one another in the church. Now you could instantly kind of come back at me and go, hang on, Primey, we're in the book of Acts here.

The whole point is we're meant to take the gospel to the world. However, one of the clearest ways that the church witnesses to the world is the love and care that we show for our own people.

And in the church, people must not be overlooked. You've seen that already in Acts chapter 2 at the end, again at the end of Acts chapter 4. If someone is in need, we ought to be the ones who meet that need.

[10 : 34] If the church has people who are hungry, the church should feed them their food. If someone is in need, it is our responsibility. However, here's the struggle.

And hasn't that been particularly clear in the last 18 months? That there are periods in the church of life where it's easy to accidentally overlook people. Especially when everyone can't be in the room.

We don't have a scooby who's watching this. And so we need to make sure in this season that the people we haven't seen for a while or heard from a while may not be either physically or spiritually being overlooked.

And whose responsibility is that? All of us. Church. People must not be overlooked. However, it's actually more sinister here.

The sinister reality is that even within a church, it can be possible for people to be deliberately overlooked. In the book of Acts, Luke wants to show us on repeat the attractiveness of the purpose of God to bring people from diverse backgrounds into the church of his son.

[11 : 47] He repeatedly shows us the power of the gospel of Jesus to unite people who were once enemies and to break down the barriers and walls that have culturally divided people for centuries.

The church is meant to be multicolored, multilingual, and multiclass. However, the book of Acts is not rose-tinted. It is real life. And since then, and probably still today, some of the prejudices that we held before we were Christians continue to have a hangover now that we are Christians, which means we need to be on guard about this in Grace Mount Community Church and in Brunsfield Evangelical Church.

Now, maybe that's on issues like classism. And we need to make sure that we don't look down on people because of where they have come from or what their backstory has been.

In the church, Christ unites us more than class divides us. Our identity is not in our class. It is in Christ.

That is not meant to be a dividing barrier for membership or leadership in Christ's church. But we need to be careful not just on classism, but on racism.

[13 : 08] If someone enters our church and they raise a concern that they feel like an outsider because of where they're from or the language they speak, we need to be asking ourselves the hard question that we are not in some subtle, unconscious way overlooking some people.

When our church is predominantly white in a community that is increasingly diverse, we need to ask the hard questions that we are not maybe even deliberately overlooking people.

Because in the church, people are not to be overlooked. Definitely not if they're needy and absolutely not just because they are different. But that's the issue in Acts 6.

Widows are being overlooked from one particular people group. Now, how do the apostles respond? Have a look back in Acts 6. Look at verse 2. So, the 12, that's the apostles, gathered all of the disciples together and said, it would not be right for us to neglect the ministry of the word of God in order to wait on tables.

So notice what the apostles do. They take the lead. They do it immediately. No time for this to fester. And they do it by gathering the entire number of disciples around them.

[14 : 27] And notice how they start. It's a surprising thing. They don't start by saying what they must do. They start by saying what they must not do. They start with something that is not a right response.

So they say, okay, overlooking people is a priority. We must not overlook people. However, it's not the only priority. It would not be right for us to neglect the ministry of the word of God in order to wait on tables.

So here's the second thing this morning, second application. And this one, especially to the elders in the room. So, Shanksy, Alice is watching at home. Anyone else who's an elder? Here's the important thing we must remember this morning.

Word ministry must not be neglected. So people must not be overlooked. But word ministry for elders in a church must not be neglected.

Here's the two things that are not right. Widows being overlooked or the apostles and elders overlooking the responsibility to be teachers of the word. Now, that is not the apostles saying that waiting on tables is beneath them.

[15 : 41] Like the queen saying, wiping skidmuffs of a bog is beneath her. That's not the point. It's not that they're too good to do this. The point is, it's more like a nurse in a hospital who's saying, I cannot leave my post on the ward to go and cook meals for everyone because that would be neglecting what my role is in this place.

It's not saying that the chef is less needy than the, not needy is the wrong word, but needed, than the chef. But actually, the hospital will fall to bits if both parties don't play their vital roles in this thing.

Without both, the hospital falls apart. It's not a difference of importance, but rather a difference of calling. Now, come back to the thing we started at the start.

Living things grow. And if the church is to grow, it is the word that will give life and preserve life. So the life and growth of a church is dependent on the apostles' teaching of the word of God.

How did the widows come into the church in the first place? Through the teaching of the word of God. What's going to sustain the widows even in their hunger for physical food?

[16 : 57] The teaching of the apostles' words. Now, they do need the spiritual food as well as the physical food, but whose responsibility is the spiritual food in the life of a widow?

The apostles. And so just as a nurse needs to stay on her ward, the apostles need to stay in the ward. Now, it is significant here.

The apostles don't try and silence the complaints. They don't try and spin the narrative to preserve their own reputation. They don't try and hide it in darkness.

They acknowledge the complaints. That is vital. Widows are being overlooked and that must not happen, but the first thing they do is to make sure that everyone knows this is not going to be something that we deal with personally.

Our task, our service here is the ministry of the word. So elders, you're not a psychologist, you're not a social worker, you're not an entertainer, you're not a delivery driver, a gardener, a community worker, or a politician, you are a minister of the word.

[18 : 11] When people meet you, they ought to be served the word. Just like you can tell by looking at a farmer how much he's committed to his harvest by how much he sows the seed, you can tell by looking at an elder how committed they are to their people and their community by how much they serve up the word of God.

And if you were here last week for Acts chapter 5, you'll know that doesn't just happen from a pulpit, it happens as they go house to house to house to house to house. Elders are not to hide up here, they're to go to the houses of the most vulnerable, the most needy to serve the scriptures.

Especially when the church is on the verge of split because of prejudice and potential racism. What does the church need most in that moment?

For its leaders to teach the gospel that doesn't just unite us to God but unites us to each other. The answer in this moment is not to split the church into ethnic groups but to preach the gospel that unites every group.

And in these moments of tension the church needs its teachers to teach. But actually when it comes back around see if you look to verse 4 they kind of reinforce this priority in verse 4 and they add something to it where it says and we will give our attention to prayer and the ministry of the word.

[19 : 44] An elder who does word ministry without giving their attention to prayer is still neglecting word ministry. To preach without praying is to neglect preaching.

It's like trying to send a letter without a stamp on it. It might have good content but it's going nowhere. And just as the power of the preacher is not in his preaching but in the word of God the power of his preaching is not so much in his preaching but in his praying.

above the desk of my study where I write my sermons I've got a whiteboard that's just full of quotes that I've picked up from somewhere I've no idea where they're from but there's one right at the top that every week says he who has truly prayed has completed the half of his study.

So elders are you doing that half of your study? Because my guess is prayer can be often more overlooked than widows are.

Living things grow but they will only grow if the elders give attention to prayer and to the ministry of the word. Now here's what we're up to so far.

[21 : 00] There's still a problem but all we've kind of got is there's two things that wouldn't be right. It's not right that the widows are overlooked it's not right that the elders neglect preaching and prayer.

So where do we go? Something needs to happen. So look at verse 3 look at what the apostles lead them into. Verse 3 Brothers and sisters choose seven men who are among you who are known to be full of the spirit and wisdom we will turn responsibility over to them.

So here's a second application to elders third one in total but second to elders. Elders you must turn responsibility over to the church. Notice here the answers to the church's problems is the whole church.

The apostles can't do everything in the church but thankfully the apostles aren't the only ones in the church and word ministry is not the only ministry in the church. Look at verse the word ministry comes up in verse 2 it would not be right for us to neglect the ministry of the word and it also comes up in verse 4 and we will give our attention to prayer and the ministry of the word.

However verse 1 uses the same word and when it says because their widows were being overlooked in the daily distribution of food the same word ministry is in there.

[22 : 23] There's different types of ministry in the church there are some who do the ministering of the word and there are some who do the ministering of food but both are vital ministries both are ministries areas of service that serve the church and serve the Lord Jesus Christ.

Again it is not that one is more important than the other they are both vital they're just different. What is vital is the elders turn responsibility over.

Come back to the illustration of the hospital what would kill a hospital is if a nurse also tried to be a chef a cleaner an administrator and a security guard. the thing falls to pieces.

What makes a hospital thrive when every different person plays their distinctive roles. What kills a church when it relies on just a few people who are trying to do everything.

What makes a church thrive when everyone is fulfilling their distinctive roles. And here's where I need to make a confession and repent and go my name's Andy and I'm an irritating micromanaging control freak.

[23 : 36] And I think it's a temptation that a lot of pastors and elders fall into but I will drive myself to burnout and my church to a burning car crash if I try and keep my finger in every pie and control over every detail like a nurse trying to do everything in a hospital.

And often I need to ask my church for forgiveness for the times when out of my arrogance and anxiety I've neglected my main calling and I've underemployed everyone else's gifts in the church.

And so as leaders our instinct needs to be the same as Acts 6 where we get over ourselves and we remember we're not the only people in the church and we do the same as what the apostles do.

To solve the problem we gather everyone, verse 2. To remedy the problem we employ all of the members, verse 3. And employing all the members, verse 5, they please everyone and to meet the need they empower specific members to deal with a specific issue in verse 6.

Now that shows us when these moments of tension come up in this church, the way to preserve unity in the face of complaints and prejudice is to decide to face the issue together.

[24 : 52] Living things grow but the church collectively grows through the active ministry of every single person. So, elders, keep turning responsibility over.

And here's my final application, number 4, that comes to everyone. Church, be known for being full of the spirit, of wisdom, and of faith.

Be known for being full of wisdom, full of the spirit, and full of faith. What happens in these verses and acts is the church becomes the answer to its own problems.

Both in its leaders as they give attention to the word and prayer, and as all its members begin to fulfill their ministries. And that happens as the church look out for, choose, and present seven blokes who are known.

For what? Not a CV that impresses in Jerusalem. It's not what they're looking for. But for character that impresses King Jesus.

[26 : 05] These men, verse 3, are known for being full of the spirit. That means that the spirit is the driving influence in their life. These men are being known for full of wisdom. That means they take the apostles' teaching and they apply it to every aspect of their life.

They're known for being full of faith. That means that what their lives are impacted by is not the visible and the temporary, but the invisible and the eternal.

And these guys stand out in Jerusalem as being different because of their relationship to Jesus. These types of people would stand out in Bruntsfield because of their relationship to God. They're known for it.

That's a challenge, isn't it? What are you known for? It's a reminder. See if you look at one of the names. Just got time to look at one. In verse 5 you get this guy called Nicholas. Notice how he's described.

He's described as a convert. Now if you're new to Bruntsfield, new to church, that's something you need to get that you don't join a church simply by coming. You join Jesus' church by being converted.

[27 : 17] His word gives you a new life as you repent of your sins, trust in Jesus and trust that he forgives your sins. This isn't a club. It is a hospital where Jesus' crucifixion extracts the fatal sin within you.

Where Jesus' righteousness imputes his perfect record to you and Jesus' resurrection life implants eternal life within you. And when you are converted by him, there's a change in you.

Like in Nicholas, he was a convert. And that change is recognized, it's known in the church. So much so that they spot it, they empower it and they employ it to overlook the church and make sure that no one is overlooked.

That's a searching question. What are you known for? And has that changed since you became a Christian? Full of the spirit, full of wisdom, full of faith.

There's a great story that Paul tells, not a story, he writes to the master of a former slave who had bolted from this guy. But the slave, when he bolted, met Paul, probably in prison.

[28 : 33] He gets saved and Paul writes back to the master. And what he says about him is this. He was once useless to you. But now he is useful both to you and to me.

That's what Jesus does. He saves us when we were useless. But then what does he do? He fills us with his spirit. He teaches us his wisdom. He strengthens our faith so that we become useful in Jesus' church.

And Brunsfield Evangelical will be at its healthiest when all of its members are flourishing in these three things. My conversion from the old useless me means that I'm now full of the spirit, full of his wisdom, and full of faith.

You do not come to church as a spectator. And that's the danger of the last 18 months. We've kind of got into that place, particularly if we're still watching from home, where we think, I come here as a consumer.

Not true. You don't come here as a consumer. You definitely don't come here as a complainer. You come here as a convert if you're a Christian. A convert to serve, to care for the needy, to strive for unity, and to take the gospel to the ends of the earth.

[29 : 49] Which means, if you're sat here and you're a Christian this morning, it needs to be your thing when you come to church to go, I'm going to make sure no one's overlooked. I'm going to make sure the needy are cared for.

I'm going to make sure no one is starving. I'm going to make sure if Shanks is doing something that he shouldn't be doing because he's an elder, so he should just be doing the word and prayer, and he's doing stuff that I could do to take off him, then I'm going to take it off him.

Because it is only as the elders are fixated on their thing, and all of us are doing our thing, that the word of God is going to take off in this place.

And by the way, don't then take that as an excuse to go, fine, they get to preach and teach, and I don't have to do any of that evangelism thing. Nonsense. One of the guys who's chosen as a deacon in these verses is a guy called Stephen, and you're going, fine, Stephen, what's he going to do?

He's going to wait on tables. Look at what he's going to do next week. The rest of Acts chapter 6, the Holy Acts chapter 7, he preaches one of the best sermons you'll ever hear and gets murdered for it.

[30 : 54] And you're going, Stephen, you've just been set apart to wait on tables. You're stealing the elder's job. Nah. Just because something is their priority doesn't mean it's also something that we get to be involved with.

We're to go and do ministry. We're to go and be the church. Because when a church is faced with a threat to its unity, we need to see here the answer is found within the own church.

And look back to verse 7 as we finish, because look what it unleashes. When every member is doing his ministry, every member is provided for, when none are needy, none are overlooked, when the elders are giving their attention to the word of God, look what happens, verse 7.

So, the word of God spread. The number of disciples increased rapidly. And a large number of priests became obedient to the faith.

They were groaning at the start. But all of a sudden, they're growing again. It looked like at the start of Acts chapter 6, he was a hurdle for the gospel.

[32 : 02] But by the Spirit, he takes what is a hurdle and he makes it a stepping stone for the gospel. Now, I'm not a mathematician, but apparently there would have been about 10,000 priests in Jerusalem at this time.

And Luke says that a large number of the priests became obedient to the faith. What do you reckon a large number of 10,000 is? A couple of thousand?

4,000? 5,000? Now, here's the challenge then. They were growing and there was problems. What's now happened even more? More growth.

What's going to come at them? More problems. People will be overlooked. The elders will be tempted to give away their attention to the word and to try and solve all the problems.

And so the whole thing in this beautiful livingness kicks off all over again. Which means that there will never be a moment in our church where we don't need to get these things right.

[33 : 03] Right. No one should be overlooked. The elders must not neglect the ministry of the word and prayer. Therefore, elders must turn responsibility over. And church, you must continue to be known for being full of wisdom, full of the Spirit, and full of faith.

Because here's what you can guarantee. That kind of life grows. And whatever challenge hits us next, more COVID stuff, more lockdown, more tension in the church, the Spirit can take through the word of God, even the worst hurdle for the gospel, and make it into a stepping stone for more growth.

Shall we pray? Our gracious Father in heaven, we thank you that when we were dead in our sins, you graciously gave us life in the Lord Jesus Christ.

Thank you for the reminder this morning that that is not just a life on our own, but a life within the living church of the living Lord Jesus. And I pray for this congregation. I pray for my little church up the road.

That we would be members known for full of wisdom, full of faith, and full of the Spirit. And that together we would navigate the challenges of the world, the flesh, and the devil.

[34 : 24] And that you would work all things for your glory, for our good, and for the growth of the gospel in this city and beyond. And we pray these things for Christ's sake. Amen.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.

Amen. Amen. Amen.