

SERMON TITLE: "Acts of the Spirit: Fathers of the Spirit"
SERMON TEXT: Acts 6:1-7 and 7:54-60
PREACHER: Rev. Kim James
OCCASION: June 20, 2021 (Father's Day) at First UMC

INTRODUCTION

One of the funniest TV commercials I've seen recently features a teenage boy sitting at a table eating Pringles hot and spicy chips. Speaking across the table, the teenage boy tells his girlfriend's father, "Mr. Clark, your daughter is a very good kisser." The camera then pans to the girlfriend's father, who is now glaring at the boyfriend. Then the camera goes back to the teenage boy, who calmly takes another bite of his spicy chips. As you're feeling the tension across the table, the narrator says, "When you crave the uncomfortable, try new spicy Pringles Scorchin."

Yeah, that certainly would be uncomfortable. And, whether or not you like spicy chips, you can appreciate this advertisement that plays off the understood role of father as the guardian and guide of daughters and sons. Fathers play a lot of necessary roles in our lives, and—on this Father's Day—we thank them for all that they do and have done for us.

We're going to focus on fathers today as we continue our "Acts of the Spirit" sermon series. For five weeks already, we've been immersing ourselves in the New Testament book of Acts and observing the energetic movement and accomplishments of the Holy Spirit. Just as Jesus promised his disciples in Acts, chapter one, the Holy Spirit came and empowered them for ministry, so that the disciples were able to preach and heal and so that the fledgling Christian church grew rapidly. While that growth most certainly included women and children, we find that the Holy Spirit's action in chapters six and seven is focused especially on the men--the brothers and fathers, the patriarchs, the twelve male disciples, and the new male leaders. So, let's take a look at these two chapters to see what we can learn from these fathers of the Spirit.

1—FATHERS OF THE SPIRIT FACE CHALLENGES

Probably the first lesson we learn from Acts 6 & 7 is that even fathers of the Spirit face challenges. In case you were under any misconception about that, here's your chance to get straightened out. The truth is that even very good, faithful, and Spirit-filled men—like the 12 apostles, the seven new recruits, and the martyr Stephen—face serious problems and conflicts.

In Acts 6:1-7, the obvious challenge was that some of the widows were missing out on the daily distribution of food. Whether elderly women or young women with children, these widows had no husbands to support them, and they needed other good men to help provide for their needs. At the end of Acts 2, we learned that the brand new Christian community shared all their resources, so that no one had need. That was the ideal and goal, at least. But, like in any human community, there were problems. And, as the body of believers grew from 3000 to 5000 and beyond, the challenges multiplied.

Did these fathers of the Spirit get into this difficult situation because they had raised expectations beyond their ability to deliver? Possibly. Were there misunderstandings that needed to be sorted out? Likely so. Acts 6:1 tells us that “the Hellenists complained against the Hebrews,” so the failure to serve the needs of the Hellenist widows certainly involved language differences between those who spoke Greek and those who spoke Hebrew. Cultural differences and barriers likely existed, as well. Prejudice, discrimination, and uncomfortable finger-pointing accusations were probably all there.

The challenges these fathers of the Spirit faced were complex and multi-faceted—kind of like the challenges faced by fathers of the Spirit today. Even if we're only talking about the nuclear and extended family, dads today have to earn a living, share in the household chores, help raise the kids and grandkids, tend to the needs of elderly parents, care for their own physical and spiritual health, attend and volunteer at church, participate in community organizations, and more. And, because we are all plugged into the news, today's fathers hear about and share the burden of problems at the state, national, and world-wide level too. It would be nice if being a father of the Spirit meant freedom from

responsibility and problems, but it doesn't--not back in the earliest times of Christianity and not today. Fathers of the Spirit definitely face challenges.

2--FATHERS OF THE SPIRIT VALUE WORD & SERVICE

Fortunately, the Holy Spirit has provided some resources and examples to help fathers meet those challenges. In Acts 6 & 7, we see the example that fathers of the Spirit value both word and service. The 12 apostles knew that their spoken ministry of preaching, teaching, and praying was vital for the on-going development of the Christian church. In large part, it was their ministry of the word that had caused 3000, 5000, and more people to believe in Jesus and to receive the Holy Spirit. So the twelve apostles certainly didn't want to get distracted away from that highly important and valuable ministry to which they had been called.

But it was also clear that the Christian community of believers had other needs also, which couldn't and shouldn't be dismissed. Service needed to be rendered. The Hellenist widows were hungry. And, no doubt, those Greek-speaking widows needed some emotional affirmation that they were just as important as the Hebrew widows. Taking the time and care to serve the food in a more equitable manner would be a valuable way of fulfilling the gospel message. The New Testament letter of James puts it this way, "Be doers of the word, and not hearers only . . . Religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father, is this: to care for orphans and widows in their distress" (1:22, 27).

Today, fathers of the Spirit have these same two valuable resources: to teach with words and to demonstrate with service. It isn't enough to tell our kids, "Do as I say, not as I do." Nor can fathers today pretend that words don't matter—that it's only actions that count. For fathers of the Spirit, both words and service are ways to meet life's challenges. Both words and service have value.

3--FATHERS OF THE SPIRIT EMPOWER OTHERS FOR MINISTRY

Another helpful example we see in Acts 6 & 7 is that fathers of the Spirit empower others for ministry. The twelve apostles could have tried to add the food distribution challenge to their already

busy workload. But that would have caused them to neglect their ministry of the word. Or, spread too thin, they might have just done a lousy job at everything. So, those fathers of the Spirit empowered others for ministry.

How did they do that? Well, Acts 6:2 tells us that they “called together the whole community of the disciples.” “The whole community of disciples” means it wasn’t just an insider group making the decisions. This time, the Greek-speaking Hellenists were included. Then the twelve instructed that representative group of brothers and fathers to “select from among [them]selves seven men of good standing, full of the Spirit and of wisdom.” Once the large number of Christians had narrowed their choices down to the seven Greek-speaking men, then the apostles laid their hands on those seven, prayed for them, and appointed them to oversee the distribution of food. The Christian mission could then carry on with competent leaders because the fathers of the Spirit empowered others for ministry.

My husband Steve and I have been watching a lot of basketball lately. Have you? It’s too bad that the Jazz lost to the Clippers this week, isn’t it? At this point in the NBA season, when there are so many players suffering from injuries, it really shows which teams are dependent on just one or two key players, and which teams have developed a number of members who can step up their game when the time is right. Fathers of the Spirit are like those best teams. They know they can’t do everything by themselves, and they know that it takes a whole team to get the job done well. Fathers of the Spirit empower others for ministry.

4—FATHERS OF THE SPIRIT IMITATE JESUS

In case you’re wondering why we read those verses from the end of Acts 7, it’s because I wanted to point out one more example from these chapters. Stephen was one of the seven Greek men who was chosen to help with the distribution of food to the widows. But, apparently, he also had strong gifts for preaching. Nearly all of chapter seven is one long sermon Stephen preached to the Jewish Council. In that speech, Stephen rehearsed their Jewish faith history. Stephen talked about Abraham,

who was the father of Isaac, who was the father of Jacob, who was the father of the patriarchal leaders of the twelve tribes of Israel. Stephen told about Joseph, Moses, Aaron, and Joshua; he spoke about king David and his son Solomon. In his references to ancestors and prophets, Stephen was essentially saying that all these fathers of the Spirit were pointing to Jesus, whom the current generation of Jewish leaders had betrayed and murdered.

I'm guessing that isn't where Stephen intended to finish his sermon. Most likely, he was hoping to offer those brothers and fathers some words of redemption, forgiveness, and salvation. But before he could get to that point, his listeners became so angry that they "dragged him out of the city" and stoned him to death. The good news is that Stephen didn't die in vain. Even as he was being mortally attacked, Stephen showed us that fathers of the Spirit imitate Jesus.

Stephen's words were almost exactly like Jesus' words from the cross. Stephen prayed, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit" and "Lord, do not hold this sin against them." Can you hear the last words of Christ there? "Father, into your hands I commend my spirit" (Lk 23:46), and "Forgive them, for they know not what they do" (Lk 23:34). In one of the most difficult challenges we can imagine, the Holy Spirit gave Stephen a clear way to respond. Stephen, a father of the Spirit, imitated Jesus.

CONCLUSION

All fathers have a heavy responsibility to manage a lot of problems and challenges. Fortunately, dads don't have to carry all that weight alone. Christian fathers are empowered by the Holy Spirit with some great resources and examples. Fathers of the Spirit value both word and service. Fathers of the Spirit empower others to assist with and carry on the good work. And, as Stephen showed us—even in the worst adversity—fathers of the Spirit can imitate the example of Christ. So, all you dads out there, face your challenges with courage. You are not just fathers; you are fathers of the Spirit!