

Last week I went to the movies for the first time in a long time to see the *Odyssey*. It was an epic movie, a retelling of Homer's story directed by Christopher Nolan with an all-star cast—Matt Damon, Tom Holland, Anne Hathaway, Charlize Theron. These are all huge names, but it wasn't only five or ten Academy Award winners who made the movie. Over 2,000 people worked together to bring that film to life! Yes, there were headliners, but it took an entire village, every single person—cameramen, costume designers, stagehands, extras—doing their part to tell the story well.

What's true about an epic Hollywood movie is one hundred times truer of the church. Sometimes people look at a church and think about what it takes for a healthy church to function and thrive, and they focus on the key leaders, the senior pastor, the worship pastor, the elders. Those people matter, *but what really makes a church healthy is when everyone is engaged, everyone is serving, everyone is doing their part.*

The church we've been studying about in the book of Acts was a large, healthy, growing church!

- Acts 1—120 believers.
- Acts 2—3,000 baptized and people added daily!
- Acts 4—5,000 men (15,000 people)
- Acts 5—More and more believed in the Lord and were to their number.

The church in Jerusalem grew over the course of a couple years from 100 people to over 10,000 people. They were growing daily. In a large organization with tons of people, sooner or later that means tons of problems, tons of issues, tons of logistics. They had to find a way to address all those issues so they could continue honoring God and loving people well. That's what we see in our passage today in Acts 6.

In those days when the number of disciples was increasing, the Hellenistic Jews among them complained against the Hebraic Jews because their widows were being overlooked in the daily distribution of food. So the Twelve gathered all 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. Brothers and sisters, choose seven men from among you who are known to be full of the Spirit and wisdom. We will turn this responsibility over to them and will give our attention to prayer and the ministry of the word." This proposal pleased the whole group. They chose Stephen, a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit; also Philip, Procorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas, and Nicolas from Antioch, a convert to Judaism. They presented these men to the apostles, who prayed and laid their hands on them. So the word of God spread. The number of disciples in Jerusalem increased rapidly, and a large number of priests became obedient to the faith. (Acts 6:1-7)

What's happening in this passage? In a large growing church filled with a lot of people, there were a lot of needs, specifically poor people who needed food. If you've ever tried to organize a church

potluck, you know how quickly things can get complicated. You ask people to bring food and somehow, you end up with fourteen desserts, three bags of chips, and not a single fork!

The early church wasn't just giving food to everyone! It wasn't a free buffet line. If a person was young and able-bodied and could work, they were expected to work. The Bible says, "Those who don't work don't eat." The Bible also assumes that if you have close relatives who can care for you in a time of need, your biological family should be the first wave of support. But there are some people who can't work, some people who are all alone with no family to support them—those are the people the church should direct resources toward to help! The church in Acts was generous, but not indiscriminate. Compassion and mercy, expressed with wisdom, has been core to the church from its earliest days.

The church needed to ensure that everyone was being taken care of well and fairly with no favoritism and no discrimination. Those things should never be present in the church! The apostles, the leaders of the church, knew this needed to be done right and well, but they also knew they couldn't allow all their time to be consumed with handing out food and basic administration. As the people who spent three years with Jesus, they needed to preach and teach, establish doctrine, and pray. They decided to empower other qualified men to take care of these other very important issues so that the church family was taken good care of. Here's what I want you to see: this was a healthy, dynamic, thriving, Spirit-filled church with the most qualified leaders on the planet, men who had spent years being personally disciplined by Jesus, men who performed miracles, men who wrote books of the Bible. Yet even in that "ideal" church, there were still problems and issues. Those problems weren't solved by handful of leaders doing the work. For the church to honor God and love people well, everyone had to be ready and willing to serve.

This is how God designed the church to work! One of the clearest passages on this in Scripture is Ephesians 4:11-12: "So Christ himself gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the pastors and teachers, to equip his people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up." How did God design the church to work? By having the point leaders, the apostles and prophets and pastors and teachers, do all the heavy lifting? Of course not. God's design was for the point leaders to equip his people for works of service. God wants all his people, working as a team, fully engaged in his mission!

For that to be true in our day, in our church, and in your life, I want to encourage all of you to write down and pray two very simple prayers.

God, fill me.

Why is the first prayer for God to fill me? Because when the apostles were looking for men to serve the body and care for the widows, when they planned to delegate ministry authority to other people, they said, "Choose seven men from among you who are known to be full of the Spirit and wisdom." The leaders didn't say, "Find seven people with a pulse!" or, "Find a few people who don't really want to help and aren't qualified whose arm you can twist!" They chose people who were "full of the Spirit and wisdom." Every Christian every day of their life should make it a priority to pray, "God, I love

you. I want to live my life to honor you. No matter what the needs are in the kingdom of heaven today, I want to be the sort of person you can use to meet them. I am begging you God, fill me up. Fill me with your Spirit, fill me with your wisdom, so I am ready to be used at a second's notice."

Here's an incredible truth: this prayer, for God to fill you with the Spirit and with wisdom, is a prayer that God literally promises to answer! Jesus told us, "How much more will your Father in heaven give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!" (Luke 11:13). We read in James 1:5, "If any of you lacks wisdom, you should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to you." God's word tells us to pray for the Holy Spirit and wisdom, and literally promises us that if we come to God and ask for more of the Holy Spirit, for more wisdom from heaven, God will say yes! When we are filled with the Spirit and with wisdom, then, as we see in Acts, no matter what the need might be, we can meet it or at least find a way to meet it soon.

When we spend time in union with God, worshipping God, soaking in his word, enjoying his presence in prayer, asking him to speak and reveal himself, this is what he does! Romans 5 says God pours out his love into our hearts through the Spirit. Romans 15 says God will fill us with hope and joy and peace. Exodus 31 shows us that God gave special wisdom and understanding to the men who would help build the tabernacle so they could do it in just the right way. Jesus says in John 7 that when he sends the Spirit, it will be like rivers of living water flowing through us! Psalm 23 says God anoints our head with oil and our cup overflows. God wants to fill us! He wants us to pray for it and posture our lives to receive it.

God, use me.

The first prayer is "God, fill me." The second prayer is, "God, use me." Once you fill me up, pour me out! I'm not eating all these calories so I can sit on the couch and binge Netflix, but because I want to run an Ironman. I want to do something for your glory and for the good of others with all you've given me. In every generation there is a segment of the church that gets this wrong. Some people, like the Pharisees, just like being religious. They like studying. They like following the rules. They like all the traditions. They get super-spiritual, but it's a strange form of narcissism. It's only for their own good. They consume and consume and consume, and they consume lots of good things, but then they never do anything with it, and they get spiritually constipated. They have all this truth in their brain, but their face looks like they just ate a raw lemon. They can tell you every Greek and Hebrew word for love, but they haven't spoken to their neighbor since 2018. It's not enough to get filled up, we must be poured out!

One of the most beautiful passages in the Old Testament is Isaiah 6, where the prophet has an incredible, life-changing encounter with God. He has a vision in which he sees the Lord high and exalted in the temple. Angels are flying around crying out, "Holy, holy, holy." The doorposts are shaking and the temple is filled with smoke. This is a glory encounter! Isaiah sees God. He meets God. He's instantly convicted of his sin, but then God provides a way for his sins to be atoned for. And now, having been both filled up and purified, he hears God speak. "Then I heard the voice of the Lord saying, 'Whom shall I send? And who will go for us?' And I said, 'Here am I. Send me!'" (Isaiah 6:8).

Isaiah didn't want to stay in the temple for the rest of his life, enjoying great music, good, wholesome Christian fellowship, and complimentary coffee and donuts; he was ready to be used! He said, "God, whatever the need—you haven't told me who, when, where, or why—but whatever the need, send me! Use me. I want to live a life of consequence for your glory!"

Think about a watering can. If there is any hope that a watering can can be used to distribute water to quench, refresh, and nourish, what must happen first? It must be filled up with water from outside itself. The plant doesn't need the can; it needs what the can can hold. Likewise, people don't need *you*, they need *the God who can work in you and through you*. Our priority is to pray, "God, fill me up with the Spirit and wisdom. Might I be filled to the brim, might heaven be spilling out of me, might I have so much love and joy and grace and peace and hope that everywhere I go, for every need that is present, you can use me!"

It's not supposed to be that we get filled up then go through a long season of depletion, becoming empty and exhausted and discouraged, requiring a long recovery to get healthy again. We want to live in an ongoing state where God is filling us up and pouring us out. We want to have a posture of continually receiving from God, demonstrating grace, practicing the gospel, worshipping and surrendering and being sanctified, experiencing union with Christ, and then constantly living on mission, serving those around us.

God fill me! God use me! What if we began every day with that focus and prayer? Not just, "God, help me survive another day," or, "God, help the kids put on their shoes today without a full-scale melt down." Survival is good but we want to be filled up and used!

Everyone wants to be a part of a church like we see in the book of Acts, a church with theology and depth and relationships and miracles, a church with salvation and growth and discipleship and mission. That's a great thing to want. If you want to be a part of a church like we see in the book of Acts, YOU must be a part of the church like we see in the book of Acts. You've got to be seeking God, having him fill you up, and then be ready to be used, no matter the need, to point people to Jesus. The early church honored God and cared for people well. We can do that, if everyone is ready and willing to serve.

I want to paint a picture for you that I saw at the soccer field a while ago. There was a practice going on with one coach and a dozen kids under the age of ten. A group of parents sat on the sideline in their lawn chairs. To be honest, it looked a little less like a sporting event and a little more like someone trying to herd a group of feral cats. This one coach was doing everything he could, but the practice wasn't going smoothly. The kids were hard to corral. Balls were flying everywhere. Drills weren't running effectively. A few of the parents started muttering and complaining: "This was not our best practice. I wish this was a bit smoother and more organized." There was nothing especially negative—they were just pointing out the problems and wishing for a solution. While a few recognized the issue and talked about it, three other parents, not coaches, got up from their chairs and started engaging. They shagged balls. They encouraged the kids. They gave light instruction. In minutes, it went from a sub-optimal practice to a great practice. What made the difference? Seeing

the problem? Having great “discernment” to recognize the problem and evaluate it with others? No! That had a net-negative impact. What changed things was capable adults getting off their rear ends and helping the coach serve the kids. What can happen at practice can happen at a church. Problems are going to arise. Needs come up. Issues evolve. What matters isn’t seeing them, or caring about them, or “hoping” they get better. What matters is a willingness to engage, to serve, to work, to contribute!

This really is an identity, mindset, and personal philosophy shift! As followers of Christ, people filled with the Holy Spirit, we do not want to be people who go through life hoping to be consumers, hoping to be beneficiaries of everyone else's hard works and effort. We want to be contributors, spending our lives as givers, not takers. We don't want to be problem-pointer-outers; we want to be problem solvers. This flows from Jesus, the ultimate servant. On the last night of his life, when Jesus should have been most focused, somber, serious minded, conscious of his impending arrest and death, he saw that his disciples had stinky, dirty feet. He was the master, the leader, the most honored person in the room, and he took the lowest position to serve and wash the filth and scum off everyone else's feet. Because Jesus is the ultimate servant, and we follow him, we are to be the ultimate servants in every room and every relational circle and every home and every place of employment we step into.

At the end of the day, every person must decide what they want their life to be about. Two thousand years ago, there was a large, growing, dynamic church. Needs arose, and there were people in that church who were so filled with the Spirit of God, and with wisdom, and with a willing spirit, that they were instantly ready to fill the gap, meet the need, serve people, build the church, and honor God. Their names are recorded for us, and we are still talking about them twenty centuries later. No one remembers the complainers. No one remembers the critics. No one remembers the consumers. It's the contributors, the servants, the Spirit-filled, loving, joyful, leaders who bless other people—that's who we celebrate. That's what we want to live into. That's who we want to become.

We began today by talking about epic movies, how it's not just five or ten superstars and directors who make it happen, but thousands of people who come together to tell a grand story. As a church, we are telling a story. It's not Star Wars or Avatar or Marvel—it's the greatest story in the world. We tell the story of Jesus. We worship God and share with the world that God made them, knows them, loves them, came on a rescue mission for them, and gives them hope for today and for eternity in Jesus. We can't tell that story well with just a few pastors. We can't tell that story well with only 20 or 30% of our people engaged and serving. But if everyone here is ready and willing to serve, filled with the Spirit and wisdom, following the servant-hearted posture of Jesus, there is no limit to the beauty of Christ we can share with the world, and there is no telling what God could do in and through our church. I am so excited to be on that mission with you.