

*The Office of Deacon: 1 Timothy 3:8-15*  
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Paul's letter to Timothy, which we're studying in this sermon series, contains many instructions for the church. As we've seen in the last few weeks, there are instructions concerning prayer in the church, instructions concerning the roles of men and women in the church, instructions concerning the overseers of the church, and now instructions concerning deacons in the church. Last Sunday we studied the qualifications for overseers, also referred to as bishops, elders, or pastors. These terms are synonymous in the New Testament and refer to the same office in the church. And this morning we're going to study the qualifications for deacons. These are the two offices which the Bible prescribes for the church. This is the structure of leadership and service in the church. There are to be qualified men who lead and instruct and govern the church as elders, and there are also to be qualified individuals who serve the church in various ways as deacons.

What I want to do this morning is first look at the role of deacons, and we'll learn about that in Acts 6. And then we'll come to our passage in 1 Timothy 3:8-13 and examine the qualifications for deacons.

**The Role of Deacons (Acts 6:1-7)**

The word deacon is not found in this passage, but the verb form of the word is found in verse 2 and is translated "to serve." The word deacon simply means servant, and the verb form of the word is to serve. And what we find here in Acts 6 is the apostles, along with all the disciples, selecting and appointing deacons who would take care of the practical matters of ministering to those in need. The specific problem in this case was that certain widows were being neglected in the daily distribution. Those in the church had given or their resources to care for those in need, and the apostles were trying to distribute what had been given. But it finally came to a point where the apostles realized that they couldn't keep up with the task of receiving and distributing the church's resources and also remain faithful to the ministry of the word. They found themselves in a serious dilemma. Should they forsake the ministry of the word in order to serve tables and care for the widows? Or should they neglect those who are in need in order to preach the word and pray? Do you see the dilemma, and do you see the seriousness of that dilemma? On the one hand, think of the statement in James 1:27, "Religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father, is this: to visit orphans and

widows in their affliction, and to keep oneself unstained from the world.” If we are to be doers of the word and not hearers only, if we are to live out the true Christian life, if we are to be a church rather than a club, then we must be involved in caring for those who are in need. On the other hand, consider what would have happened if the apostles decided that they needed to devote all of their time and energy to caring for widows. It’s a worthy cause. It’s an essential component of the church’s ministry. But there has to be some group of men who will be devoted to the work of spiritual leadership and biblical preaching. For this, too, is an essential component of the church. It cannot be one or the other. It has to be both – and. Every church will have a tendency to gravitate in one direction or the other, and we have to be careful not to neglect either emphasis. Some churches will become so passionate about various social causes that they lose the Gospel. Other churches will turn inward and debate minute points of theology and forget that a needy and spiritually dark world is all around them.

The battle, then, is to maintain both emphases. The goal is that the ministry of the Word would inspire all of us to serve, and to serve not because we’re doing it out of duty or because we think we’re earning anything from God, but to serve out of an overflow of the joy we have in Christ. We have been transformed by the truth of the Gospel and therefore we have an unquenchable desire to help others and serve others and promote the Gospel message through the various ministries of the church. That should be the relationship between these two essential components of the church. The Word must be central. It must be studied and prayed over, and it must be taught and proclaimed. And the fruit of that should be a people who gladly sacrifice their time and energy and resources to serve others.

What we see in Acts 6 is a brilliant solution to the problem. The ministry of the Word requires time and energy. The ministry to the needy requires time and energy. What are the apostles to do? This is what they did. They recognized the importance of what they were specifically called to do, namely, preach the word of God. They could not relinquish that responsibility. So they 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” (verses 2-4). Isn’t that brilliant! Not brilliant of them, ultimately, but brilliant of God to ordain that there be individuals who are devoted to prayer and the ministry of the word, and other individuals who are devoted to caring for the practical needs and ministries of the church. This is

such a beautiful thing! Of course, this doesn't mean that the two categories are mutually exclusive. It doesn't mean that those who are primarily responsible for the ministry of the word can never serve in other ways. Nor does it mean that those who are primarily responsible for practical needs can never serve the church through the ministry of the Word. The point, though, is that God has ordained that certain individuals be devoted to one, and other individuals be devoted to the other. And what a wonderful thing it is when elders are laboring hard in prayer and the ministry of the word, and deacons are laboring hard to meet various needs, and the church as a whole is growing spiritually through the ministry of the word and being organized by the deacons to serve. That is the glorious vision of the church that is revealed in the New Testament.

God did not intend for the church to be run by a CEO. He did not intend for some generic board to govern the church. He reveals to us clearly that there are to be elders, and there are to be deacons. And the function of each office complements the other. One is not better than the other, or more prestigious than the other, or more valuable than the other. Both are needed, and where elders are serving as they should and deacons are serving as they should, you will find a God-honoring church that is edifying the saints and is impacting the world for Christ.

Before we move to the qualifications for deacons, I just want to clarify that this kind of service in the church is something that everyone in the church should strive toward. Not everyone will be appointed as a deacon, but everyone should strive to serve and help and labor to promote the work and the witness of the church. It may be using your musical talents to assist in leading our times of corporate worship. It may be using various skills you have to help improve this building. It may involve helping those in the congregation who have health needs, or financial needs, or transportation needs, or emotional needs. It may mean initiating various ways for us to serve our community. There are endless ways in which we can serve one another and serve this city where God has placed us, and we should all be looking for ways to do that.

The elders are set aside in a special way to govern the church as they devote themselves to prayer and the ministry of the word. And the rest of the church, led and organized by appointed deacons, should be joyfully laboring to carry out the practical ministries of the church, providing for tangible needs, serving tables, handling the resources of the church, distributing financial assistance, caring for this building, and on and on.

### **The Qualifications for Deacons (1 Timothy 3:8-13)**

As we saw last Sunday, verses 1-7 list the qualifications for overseers / elders. And immediately following that list, Paul now gives the qualifications for deacons. I already mentioned that elders and deacons are equally important and valuable in the life of the church. It's not as though the office of elder is a high office and the office of deacon is a low office. There is a difference in function, but both are essential in the life of the church. One thing that reveals this point is how similar the qualifications are for the two offices. It's not as though there is a high standard for elders / overseers and a lower standard for deacons. Can you see that as you compare the two lists? The moral requirements for deacons are just as stringent as those for overseers. The differences are found in the respective functions. Elders are to be able to teach (verse 2). They are also to be fit to care for God's church (verse 5). So there's a teaching role and governing role that is unique to elders. In contrast, the role of deacon, by virtue of the word (which means servant, *diakonos*) and also what we learned in Acts 6, is defined by meeting practical needs in the life and ministry of the church. But while there are functional differences, both offices require the same high standard of godliness.

Notice that in verse 8 Paul writes, "Deacons *likewise* . . ." This adverb shows us that there are both similarities and differences between the two offices. Paul is now moving on to discuss another office in the church – the office of deacon. But there are similarities in the qualifications. Just as overseers must have certain characteristics, *likewise* deacons must also meet certain criteria. And the criteria are very similar. As we saw last week, several of these items can be grouped under the heading "self-mastery" (this is how John Stott categorizes them, *Guard the Truth*, pg. 100). This is a good summary of verse 8. A deacon must demonstrate self-mastery in the way he behaves generally (he must be dignified), and specifically in his speech (not double-tongued), and in the way he handles alcohol and money (not addicted to much wine, not greedy for dishonest gain). There must be an evident self-control in all of these areas. The deacons represent the church in many different ways, and if the unbelieving world encounters a deacon of the church who is undignified in his behavior, who is not a man of his word, who is a drunkard, or who is greedy and dishonest with money, then those outside the church are going to have a very negative impression of what the church is about. Deacons need to be individuals who live out the Gospel and put the Gospel on display in their Christ-honoring behavior. It's also particularly important that deacons not be greedy for dishonest gain, since they are regularly involved with the financial resources of the church. They are handling the money that is given to the

church and disbursing that money in various ways to various ministries, and therefore they must have the utmost integrity when it comes to money.

Verse 9 adds two essential characteristics of a deacon, and Paul states in a way that reminds us of something he has said earlier in the letter. In 1:18-19 he exhorted Timothy to “wage the good warfare, holding faith and a good conscience. By rejecting this, some have made shipwreck of their faith.” He mentions holding faith and a good conscience. And here in 3:9 he says similarly that a deacon “must hold the mystery of the faith with a clear conscience.” To hold the mystery of the faith is to embrace the Gospel as it is revealed in God’s Word. When Paul refers to the mystery of the faith, he is talking about the wonder of the Gospel that was previously concealed, at least in part, but is now revealed in the Person and work of Jesus Christ and through the apostolic witness. The mystery of the faith, then, is the truth of the Gospel which is revealed in God’s Word, and deacons must have a firm grasp of what this Gospel is and the Gospel must have a firm grasp on them. Deacons are not just hard-working individuals who are committed to the work of the church, just like elders are not just gifted leaders or teachers (as I mentioned last week). Deacons, like elders, must be born again. They must be individuals who have been radically changed by the power of the Gospel. They have come to see their own sin and how their sin offends the Almighty and Holy God. Their eyes have been opened, then, to recognize Jesus Christ as the only hope for sinners. And repenting of their sin and trusting in Christ alone, they have been counted righteous in Christ. This is the wonder of the Gospel, and deacons must embrace this truth and hold fast to it.

And they must hold this mystery of the faith *with a clear conscience*. Just like Paul exhorted Timothy to hold faith and a good conscience (1:18), and in contrast to those who have seared consciences (as mentioned in 4:2), Paul says that deacons must have a clear conscience. This means that deacons live according to the faith they profess. They are fighting the fight of faith. They are waging the good warfare. When the conscience is pricked due to some sin, there is repentance and confession and forgiveness and reconciliation, whatever needs to happen, prompted by the Holy Spirit, so that at the end of the day one goes to sleep with a clear conscience. This is the behavior that accords with the Gospel. This is what it means to hold the mystery of the faith with a clear conscience.

Paul adds in verse 10 that deacons must be tested first. “And let them also be tested first; then let them serve as deacons if they prove themselves blameless.” It seems that Paul is comparing this with the tests for overseers, which were implied in verses 4-7.

An overseer must manage his own household well, he must not be a recent convert, and he must be well thought of by outsiders. Those would be some of the specific tests that a man must pass if he is to serve as an overseer. Similarly with deacons, an individual must not be appointed to this office hastily, without close examination. It must be clear that they meet these qualifications.

In verse 11 Paul shifts gears and addresses a related issue. This verse raises a lot of questions, though, because it's hard to discern in exactly what way this verse relates to the verses before and after it. Verses 12-13 continue the discussion of deacons, but verse 11 speaks of the *gynaikos*, which can be translated either "wives" or "women." The verse could be understood, then, to be referring to the wives of deacons (as in the ESV and other translations), or it could be referring to women who either serve as deacons themselves or somehow assist the deacons. There are good arguments on both sides, and I'll try to lay them out for you. I'll tell you that before this week I was pretty confident that this verse was referring to women deacons, but after further study this week I'm less sure of that conclusion. As I read the rationale for each interpretation, I found that the question is more complex than I had thought. So what I'll try to do is give you the main arguments for each view, and then draw out a couple points that are applicable even if we can't come to a firm conclusion on this verse.

First of all, the deacons' wives interpretation. Those who argue for this position point out that the title deacon is used in verse 8 and in verses 12-13, but it is not used in verse 11. These women are not called deacons. Also, the qualifications given for these women do not include anything related to sexual purity or marital fidelity. Both overseers (verse 2) and deacons (verse 12) are required to be "the husband of one wife." Therefore, if this verse was referring to women deacons, we would expect a requirement that they be "the wife of one husband." If it's referring to deacons' wives, though, it makes sense that this is not mentioned in verse 11, since it will be mentioned in the next verse that the deacon is to be "the husband of one wife." This reading of the verse fits well with verse 12, then, since both verses would have to do with the deacons' marriage and family. On the other hand, if it is referring to women deacons, then the insertion of verse 11 in the middle of this passage seems somewhat abrupt.

Finally, it seems most logical and appropriate that the women who would assist the deacons and work alongside the deacons would be the deacons' wives. And it is entirely legitimate for the deacons' wives to work alongside them in their ministry since the role of deacon does not involve teaching or exercising authority over the congregation, the two roles which women are

not to assume in the church (2:12). This would explain why the wives of elders are not mentioned, but the wives of deacons are mentioned, because the wives of elders should not participate alongside their husbands in teaching and exercising authority over the congregation (they may serve in many other ways in the church, but not in the specific work of an elder), while the wives of deacons should participate alongside their husbands in the diaconal service of the church. It's a team effort as they minister to the practical needs of the church. Those are the main points for taking verse 11 as a reference to deacons' wives.

On the other hand, there are also some good reasons to take this as a reference to women deacons. First, Paul could have easily made it clear that he was referring to the deacons' wives, but the literal wording is simply "Women, likewise." That's how verse 11 begins. He didn't say, "their wives," or "the wives of deacons," which he could have done very easily. He just says, "women." Secondly, the word "likewise" seems to indicate another category of individuals. In verse 8 he uses this word, "likewise," to transition from overseers to deacons, and here it seems that he is using the same word to transition from male deacons to female deacons. Third, in spite of the explanation I just gave for why deacons' wives are mentioned but not elders' wives, it is still puzzling why Paul would give qualifications for one and not the other. Even if elders' wives are not serving with them in the role of elder, it still seems that Paul would list some qualifications for their behavior if he does so for deacons. This isn't an issue if verse 11 refers to women deacons. Fourthly, Romans 16:1 mentions "Pheobe, a servant (*diakonon*) of the church at Cenchreae." It's possible that this just means servant in a general sense, since the word is used in that way in other places (Romans 13:4; 15:8; 1 Corinthians 3:5). But it's also possible that Pheobe was a female deacon in that church, in which case we have another mention in the New Testament of a woman deacon. Finally, if we understand this to be a reference to women deacons, we should be clear that this does not contradict 2:12, since the role of deacon does not entail teaching or exercising authority over the congregation. A woman serving in the role of deacon would not violate the God-ordained ordering of men and women in the church. These are some of the main reasons given for reading verse 11 as a reference to women deacons, or at least to a specific group of women who assist the deacons.

I can't say with confidence which interpretation is correct. There are good arguments on either side. But I think we can still apply the verse in a couple different ways, even without having that certainty. First, along the lines of the "deacons' wives" interpretation, we should recognize the obvious fact that a deacon's

wife is going to be very involved with him in serving the church. It *is* a team effort, and therefore it's not just the man who needs to have a certain level of maturity and godliness, but his wife needs to as well. If she's going to be involved with him in handling and distributing the funds of the church, she needs to be a woman who is dignified. She cannot be a slanderer – she can't be spreading gossip about needs in the church or situations in the church that must be handled with sensitivity and discretion. She needs to be sober-minded and faithful in all things. Therefore, I think it is incumbent upon us we consider the appointment of additional deacons, to evaluate not only the character of the man, but also of his wife. Secondly, along the lines of the “women deacons” interpretation, I think we need to recognize that there are women in the church who lead various ministries and serve the church in very significant ways, and those women are to be held to a high standard of godliness. They must be dignified, not slanderers, but sober-minded, faithful in all things. So I encourage you, women, whatever your role is in serving the church, take that ministry seriously, and realize that you are representing the church and representing Christ in the way you live and the way you speak. It is a high calling to serve the church, and all who do so must be diligent to seek the Lord in His Word and in prayer as we desire to live holy lives.

Verse 12 reiterates two qualifications that were given for overseers as well. I won't repeat the different views of “husband of one wife.” You can listen to (or read) last week's sermon if you'd like to see those. But, again, we see here that the moral standard for deacons is the same as that of overseers. He must be the husband of one wife, just as an overseer must be the husband of one wife (verse 2). And he must also manage his children and his household well, just as an overseer must manage his own household well, with all dignity keeping his children submissive (verse 4). To clarify again, as I did last week, I don't think these qualifications require that a man be married or that he have children. Paul is simply speaking to the common situation.

This paragraph ends with a very encouraging word to those who serve as deacons and also to those who may aspire to the office of deacon. Remember back in verse 1 there was an encouragement to overseers and those who aspire to the office of overseer. It says, “If anyone aspires to the office of overseer, he desires a noble task.” And now, at the end of this section, Paul encourages deacons by saying, “For those who serve well as deacons gain a good standing for themselves and also great confidence in the faith that is in Christ Jesus.” The phrase “good standing” I take to mean essentially what verse 1 meant by “a noble task.” Just as it is a noble task to serve as an overseer, it is

also a noble task to serve as a deacon, and deacons who serve well gain a good standing for themselves. It is a position of honor and respect. It is looked upon favorably by God and by those in the church. The other thing that is gained by deacons who serve well is great confidence in the faith that is in Christ Jesus. This shows the immense spiritual benefit of serving well in the church. It is not a mere duty. Our work is not to be done with murmuring and complaining. Rather, overseers and deacons and all of us are to serve the Lord joyfully. And the deacon who serves well is going to experience this joy in amazing ways. As a deacon experiences the power of God working through the ministry of the church and is able to taste the joys of serving the Lord in those ways, he will come to have great confidence in the faith that is in Christ Jesus. This is not to say that the work of deacons is always joyful, and it is certainly not easy. But it is a sanctifying work, and those who labor faithfully will grow in their relationship with Jesus Christ.

What a beautiful thing it is that God has ordained these particular offices for the good of His church. Elders leading and teaching, devoted to prayer and the ministry of the word, and deacons serving in a multitude of ways, devoted to the practical needs inside and outside of the church. We should rejoice that God has revealed these instructions to us so clearly. It is evidence of Christ's love for His bride, the church. He cares for us. He laid down His life for us. And He is sanctifying us, cleansing us by the washing of water with the word, so that He might present us (the church) to himself in splendor, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that we might be holy and without blemish (Ephesians 5:25-27). Christ is committed to sanctifying His bride. And a means of grace that He has given to us is this wonderful structure for the leadership and service in the church. So I encourage us all this morning to recognize the offices of elder and deacon, and those who have been appointed to these offices, as gifts to the church. We are not left to ourselves to figure out what it means to be a church or how to function as a church. We have God's Word, in which He graciously instructs us for our good and for His glory.