

## Deacons: God's Choice Servants

1 Timothy 3:8-13

**“Even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve and to Give His life as a ransom for many” (Matt. 20:28),**

LTS: Psa. 119:1-16

Introduction:

As we continue making our way through 1 Timothy we would do well to remind ourselves of the passage that serves as the interpretive key to this short letter. It is located in 3:15, so turn there with me for a moment and let's read beginning in v. 14. Paul says,

I hope to come to you soon, but I am writing these things to you so that, <sup>15</sup> if I delay, you may know how one ought to behave in the household of God, which is the church of the living God, a pillar and buttress of the truth.

You will remember that some years earlier Paul had planted the church in Ephesus and then went out to plant many other churches throughout Asia Minor. By the time he wrote the epistle before us, Timothy had joined the mission and had been traveling as kind of a disciple / protégé of Paul, learning how to live for Christ and serve the church. Immediately before the writing of this letter Paul had been released from jail, and was reunited with Timothy. He then sends Timothy to serve the church in Ephesus as the apostolic representative among the leaders there. It was Paul's plan to catch up with Timothy in Ephesus, but it was beginning to look like his planned arrival was going to be delayed. So here in verse 15 he tells Timothy the purpose of His letter. “I am writing these things to you so that, in case I am delayed, you may know how one ought to behave in the household of God which is the church of the living God, the pillar and buttress of the truth.”

Paul was committed NOT only to planting churches, but to making sure they functioned as God intended. With that on his heart he reminds Timothy of two things. First, he reminds him who created and maintains ownership of the church; It is the church of “The Living God.” It's not Paul's church; it's Timothy's church, and it isn't the elder's church. The church belongs to God. She is Christ's bride and He is jealous for her purity and integrity.

He also reminds Timothy of the purpose of the church; namely, to exalt the truth and defend the truth. The truth here in the Pastoral Epistles usually refers to the gospel of Jesus Christ, which stands as the blazing center around which all other truth revolves.

The church's isn't to be thought of as a gathering place for religious people to experiment with novel ideas about spirituality. It isn't the corporate headquarters for organized attempts to create unity in the world, or to champion a set of political ideals. The purpose of the church is to stand in the world as God's ordained beacon of eternal

Truth. It stands as the herald of the gospel proclaiming salvation in Christ alone and calling all men everywhere to repent and be reconciled to God. And the only way it can do that is to maintain its resolve to exalt and defend God's holy word.

So you can see why false teaching in the church is such a big deal for Paul. He devoted the entirety of the first chapter to instruction on how to deal with false teachers in the church. Then he returns to the subject of false teaching repeatedly in the rest of this letter. So when we come to chapter three and ask, "Why is Paul writing so much about elders and deacons?" the answer is simple: everything rises or falls on leadership. The false teaching problem in the church of Ephesus was a leadership problem. The church had adopted a wrong understanding about what kind of leaders should direct and oversee the church.

The wrong kind of leadership is precisely what the world embraces. In their eyes, the best leaders were those who can manipulate and control large numbers of people. For them, humility and purity are signs of weakness, not strength. Wine and wealth are pleasures to be flaunted and indulged.

Now, that may work in secular corporations, but in the eyes of the living God, the only ones who are qualified to oversee the church are those who have a verifiable reputation of holiness, godliness, devotion to their wives and children, and a love for God's word coupled with the ability to teach it. As disciples of Jesus Christ, they understand Jesus' teaching that "If anyone wishes to be first, he must be the servant of all." "For even the Son of man did not come to be served, but to serve and to give His life a ransom for many." Faithful elders serve the flock by feeding them the truth, protecting them from error, and leading them as they follow Christ.

The primacy of servanthood in the church becomes all the more clear when we begin to think about what it means to be a deacon in the household of God.

Our governing idea: God grows and matures his church by giving it deacons who are willing to serve the church.

We are going to proceed under three headings,

- I. The Origin of Deacons
- II. The Duties of Deacons
- III. The Qualifications of deacons

## I. The Origin of Deacons:

1. The study of the office of deacon begins with understanding something of the meaning of the key word. In Greek, the word for deacon is diakonos, which means "One who is busy with something in a manner that is of assistance to someone else" (Tyndale Bible Dictionary). The term finds its origin in the idea of "laboring in the dust." Originally it was used in reference to those who wait on tables, or serve food, but its usage became broader and spoke of any form of service.

2. The word “serve” is just as general in the GK as it is in the English. In English we talk about serving dinner, serving a warrant, serving a tennis ball, serving as President, or serving time in jail! The term “serve” can mean any number of things. And this is true in GK as well.

3. Usually, however, when the NT speaks of service it is referring to the kind of service that meets another person’s needs.

- A. John 2:5&9 servants (diakonos)at the wedding in Cana of Galilee
- B. Luke 4:39 after Jesus healed Peter’s mother-in-law she immediately rose and began to waited on (or served – diakoneo) them a meal.
- C. Sometimes the word simply refers to general service w/o any designation as to what that service may entail. John 12:26 Jesus says, “If anyone will serve me (diakonae), let him follow me... If any one serves Me, my Father will honor him.”
- D. Romans 13:3-4 Paul speaks of the government as a “minister” (diakonos) of God for your good.”
- E. Often in the NT, however, the GK words for service are used to speak of spiritual service.
  - 1) Paul speaks of his work as “serving” the saints.
  - 2) In 2 Cor. 8:3-4 he says that the churches in Macedonia begged to be allowed to participate in the support of the suffering saints in Jerusalem. The word for support is diakonia. In this case it refers to giving money to relieve a need.
  - 3) The way the word is used in Acts and the Epistles, a believer in any form of ministry can be called a deacon or servant of Christ.
    - 1 Cor. 12:5 Paul says, “There are a variety of ministries but the same Lord.” Ministries here is the word diakonia
    - This same usage of the word can also be found in 2 Cor., and Rev.
- F. The point of all of this is simply to show that when we talk about deacons we are, at the irreducible minimum, speaking of those who serve. We are speaking of those who set their minds, bodies to work for the good of others in any capacity.
- G. Nevertheless, under the leadership of the Spirit, the apostles established a kind of office of deacon in the local church that involved identifying men (and probably women as well) to minister to the body as the officially recognized servants of the church.
- H. It is interesting to note that there is no counterpart to deacons in the O.T. The apostles were not borrowing something they had seen in Judaism. This office or ministry responsibility in the church was brand new.
- I. Another important note is that while we get the point that deacons were the designated servants, it is difficult to nail down exactly what it was they did in the early church. This brings is to the second point...

## II. The Duties of the Deacons:

1. When Bible scholars talk about the duties of the deacons it seems the most obvious place to start is in Acts chapter six. Turn with me for a moment to Acts 6.

Read Acts 6:1-6

2. This was a really critical moment in the life of the early church. The controversy threatened to disrupt the unity of the fledgling body of Christ. This kind of ethnic

discrimination could have been absolutely devastating. But notice how the apostle's handled the situation.

Read 2-3

3. Now we need to be clear on one point. The men who were picked to handle this difficult task were NOT deacons. The church had not progressed that far along doctrinally yet. But we do see here an event that shows the kind of priorities the apostles had that led to the establishment of deacons later on.

4. Notice a couple of interesting words in this text that make us think about deacons. Remember, the word for deacon is *diakonos*. In verse 1 we read that the Hellenists (Greek speaking) widows "were being neglected in the distribution. The word for distribution is *diakonia* (preposition). Then at the end of verse 2 the apostles say, "We should not give up preaching the word of God to serve tables, The word serve here is *diaknein* (verb). This is why some point to this passage as the origin of the office of deacon.

5. In reality, however, Acts 6 is simply a passage that shows us is that in order for the apostles to serve as God had called them to serve, there needed to be other men who would relieve them of certain pressing responsibilities - even responsibilities as important as bringing reconciliation to people who were disputing with one another on a grand scale.

6. As Alexander Strauch writes, "The task required skilled men of high moral character who could be trusted to fulfill the responsibilities with integrity and ability" (Biblical Deacons)

7. The wrong men could exacerbate the problem. The wrong men could have deepened the divide. The wrong men could have sown suspicion and mistrust and turmoil. But with the help of these godly men (verse 7 says), "the word of God continued to increase. And the number of the disciples multiplied greatly in Jerusalem, and a great many of the priests became obedient to the faith."

8. Now we don't really hear anything about deacons as an official capacity in the church until we read Philippians chapter 1 which was written some thirty years after the incident in Acts six. But there Paul addresses his letter as follows, "to all the saints in Philippi, with the overseers and deacons." So we know that by this point it had become the practice in the church to identify certain men who would minister as the official servants of the church body.

9. And yet, even here in Philippians, Paul does not explain what the duties of the deacons entailed. All we know for sure is that they were by definition "servants." And we can infer that their role was to serve the practical, physical, and even many spiritual needs of the church so the elders of the could devote themselves to leading the church, ministering the word of God, and prayer.

10. The fact that their duties are not specified in Scripture shouldn't frustrate us. Rather, it should encourage us because God ordained the ministry of deacons to serve

in all times, in all countries, and in every culture. What they do in the church is determined by the need! They are the official servants of the church. They may be called upon to manage the church's money, facilities, serve tables, organize and oversee ministries, evangelize, teach, serve the Lord's table, greet visitors, clean, mow, chop, bake, wipe, or whatever...

11. You may say; Well anyone can do those things! And that is true. In fact, everyone in the church body is called to serve in practical ways. But you can't be consider one of the official servants of the church unless you meet certain qualifications. And that brings us to the last point.

### III. The Qualifications of Deacons:

1. Paul identifies nine qualifications for deacons. In reality, the only difference between the qualifications for deacons and those for elders is that elders must be able to teach. But turn with me to 1 Tim. 3:8 and let's very briefly consider the qualifications for deacon.
  - a. Dignified (v. 8): This term normally refers to something that is honorable, respectable, esteemed, or worthy, and is closely related to "respectable," which is given as a qualification for elders (1 Tim. 3:2).
  - b. Not double-tongued (v. 8): Those who are double-tongued say one thing to certain people but then say something else to others, or say one thing but mean another. They are two-faced and insincere. Their words cannot be trusted, so they lack credibility.
  - c. Not addicted to much wine (v. 8): A man is disqualified for the office of deacon if he is addicted to wine or other strong drink. Such a person lacks self-control and is undisciplined.
  - d. Not greedy for dishonest gain (v. 8): If a person is a lover of money, he is not qualified to be a deacon, especially since deacons often handle financial matters for the church.
  - e. Sound in faith and life (v. 9): Paul also indicates that a deacon must "hold the mystery of the faith with a clear conscience." The phrase "the mystery of the faith" is simply one way Paul speaks of the gospel (cf. 1 Tim. 3:16). Consequently, this statement refers to the need for deacons to hold firm to the true gospel without wavering. Yet this qualification does not merely involve one's beliefs, for he must also hold these beliefs "with a clear conscience." That is, the behavior of a deacon must be consistent with his beliefs. In other words, he must have a gospel-shaped life.
  - f. Blameless (v. 10): Paul writes that deacons must "be tested first; then let them serve as deacons if they prove themselves blameless" (v. 10). "Blameless" is a general term referring to a person's overall character. Although Paul doesn't

specify what type of testing is to take place, at a minimum, the candidate's personal background, reputation, and theological positions should be examined. Moreover, the congregation should not only examine a potential deacon's moral, spiritual, and doctrinal maturity, but should also consider the person's track record of service in the church.

- g. Godly wife (v. 11): It is debated whether verse 11 refers to a deacon's wife or to a deaconess. There is a strong exegetical case for seeing the women here as deaconesses, but I won't delve into that today. In either case they must "be dignified, not slanderers, but sober-minded, faithful in all things" (v. 11). Like the male deacons, women must be dignified or respectable. They must not be slanderers or people who goes around spreading gossip. She must also be sober-minded or temperate. That is, she must be able to make good judgments and must not be involved in things that might hinder such judgment. Finally, she must be "faithful in all things" (cf. 1 Tim. 5:10). This is a general requirement which functions similarly to the requirement for elders to be "above reproach" (1 Tim. 3:2; Titus 1:6) and for deacons to be "blameless" (1 Tim. 3:10).
- h. Husband of one wife (v. 12): He must be a "one-woman man." That is, there must be no other woman in his life to whom he relates in an intimate way either emotionally or physically.
- i. Manage children and household well (v. 12): A deacon must be the spiritual leader of his wife and children.<sup>1</sup>

#### Conclusion:

One of the most beautiful things about the ministry of the deacons is that they NOT only serve the elders by serving the church, but they also serve as models for every believer in the church. If discipleship is about learning Jesus (his life, character, behavior and teaching), then these men (and perhaps women as well) show us what Jesus looks like by the way they live.

After all, it was Jesus who, in the upper room on the night of His betrayal, wrapped Himself in a towel and washed the disciples feet.

It was Jesus who said "the greatest among you will be your servant."

It was Jesus who said, "Even the Son of man did not come to be served by to serve and to give His life a ransom for man."

We need men and women like this. In fact, Paul tells us to look for them! He says in Phil. 3:17, "Brothers, join in imitating me, and keep your eyes on those who walk according to the example you have in us." You see, beloved, we are all greatly helped in our progress of discipleship by having living, breathing models of Christ joyfully

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<sup>1</sup> Adapted from Benjamin Merkle, *Biblical Qualifications and Responsibilities of Deacons*, (9 Marks Journal), <https://9marks.org/journal/deacons/> (visited on 2/18, 2017)

laboring and serving among us. And this is what the ministry of deacons is all about. Remember the description of the seven servants in Acts 6? They were “men of good reputation, full of the Spirit and of wisdom.” Deacons are God’s choice servants. And every believer in the church should aspire to become one of them.

Deacons are not a special breed of human! They are simply spirit-filled people who take seriously what Paul said about our salvation; namely, that while we were not saved by works, we are saved to do good works which God prepared beforehand that we should walk in them.

And deacons also believe the promise of grace found in the last verse of this section (13), “Those who serve well as deacons gain a good standing for themselves and also great confidence in the faith that is in Christ Jesus.”

In other words, those who serve well will be lifted up by the Lord in the eyes of His people (honor and blessing), and that will embolden them all the more to serve the church in meaningful ways.

Are you a faithful *diakonos*? Do you see yourself as a servant of Christ and therefore a servant of the church; a servant of the people around you; a servant of the sick, the poor, the unbelieving, the sorrowful, the burdened, the joyful, and the stranger? Then you are already a deacon whether you have been named to the office or not. You are already living the Gospel you believe. And we are all blessed and thankful for your service, because in you we see Jesus.