

Office of Deacon (#5 - I Timothy 3) – Acts 6:1-7

I. Introduction:

- A. Since beginning this series a couple weeks ago, I have a tiny, latent fear in the back of my mind.
 - 1. You've probably figured out that I would like to implement the Biblical principle and install two or three deacons in our church.
 - 2. I'd like them to look after our finances and a few other things, just as our treasurers are doing now.
 - 3. My fear is that when looking at the high examples of Stephen and Philip, you might say, *"We don't have any men which meet that kind of standard."*
 - 4. As we thought about the qualifications mentioned in **Acts 6**, and tonight even more closely in **I Timothy 3**, otherwise good men, might decline the opportunity to serve in this office, because they see imperfections in themselves.
- B. But in that regard let me ask a couple of questions.
 - 1. Did the twelve ask the membership of the church for volunteers?
 - a. Did they tell the congregation, *"Look into your hearts, & ask yourselves, Am I filled with the Holy Spirit?"*
 - b. *Am I wise enough and honest enough to wait on these tables?"*
 - 2. The twelve addressed the church, telling the membership to look for men with these three qualifications.
 - 3. The people of the church were to **look AROUND them – not WITHIN themselves**.
 - 4. The twelve were looking for **willing servants**, but **not volunteers**, per se.
- C. And then, when **Moses** came off the mountain after speaking to the Lord....
 - 1. As Moses returned to Israel he was, in a sense, filled with the Spirit. But did he know it or revel in it?
 - 2. **Exodus 34:29** tells us *"When Moses came down from mount Sinai with the two tables of testimony in Moses' hand, when he came down from the mount, that Moses wist not that the skin of his face shone."*
 - 3. The man who is filled with the Holy Spirit will often not recognize that he is so filled.
 - 4. When Philip met with the Ethiopian, did he ask himself whether he was spiritually qualified to share the meaning of **Isaiah** with the man?
 - 5. When Stephen saw the mob turning against him, grinding on him with their teeth, grabbing at his clothing and arms to drag him out to where they intended to kill him....
 - 6. When Stephen knew that he was soon to die, did he stop to analyze whether or not he was filled with the Spirit sufficiently to die for the glory of God?
- D. I have no proof, because the Lord hasn't chosen to tell us....
 - 1. But because those seven men were filled with God's Spirit, I think they bore characteristics of godliness.
 - 2. I would guess that they were so filled with humility and spiritual insight that not one of them considered themselves the best choice, and perhaps not even a good choice, for this new church office.
 - 3. The godly man knows the wickedness of his heart, while the church may only see the best in him.
 - 4. I don't think these seven were running forward volunteering for the job of deacon, because they believed they were eminently qualified.
 - 5. No, they hung back in the shadows until enough of their brethren coaxed them out into the sunlight.
- E. Maybe my perspective is skewed, but that is consistent with what I believe accompanies the filling of the Spirit.
 - 1. There is no **TRULY godly man** in the pulpit today, who considers himself the best candidate for that job.
 - 2. Sure, there are religious hucksters, ecclesiastical stair-climbers, and professional religionists out there.
 - 3. But the godly pastor knows that he's **not AS qualified**, on many levels, **as he OUGHT to be**.
 - 4. And that goes for the deacon as well.
 - 5. Certainly, if there are real, but hidden, obnoxious sins, that is one thing, and he should disqualify himself.
 - 6. But if it's just that he knows he's a wretched sinner who has been saved by grace, that is something else.
 - 7. And the truth is, such an attitude & perspective is a very good qualification for the candidate of either office.

- F. This evening, I'm going to quickly go through what Paul tells Timothy about candidates for the office of deacon
1. But first, I need to point out once again that there ***IS an actual church OFFICE*** of "***Deacon.***"
 2. There are many commentaries and preachers who declare that the seven men of ***Acts 6*** were ordained to serve as helpers for a specific, temporary work.
 - a. They say, because the church held all things in common, these seven distributors were necessary.
 - b. A word which comes up in my reading is "***almoners***" – distributors of alms.
 - c. These people say that no other church had Jerusalem's kind of communal policy – therefore these seven were special.
 - d. They also say, since they weren't ***called "deacons"*** they were not a part of that later church office.
 3. But I say, "***balderdash.***"
 4. For every writer who declares that ***Acts 6*** doesn't describe the office of "***Deacon***" there are four who say it does. And without a doubt we find the office of deacon later.
 5. The ***Epistle to the Philippians*** was addressed to "***to all the saints in Christ Jesus which are at Philippi, with the bishops and deacons.***"
 6. And ***I Timothy 3*** begins with the words, "***If a man desire the OFFICE of a bishop, he desireth a good work.***"
 - a. And then he seamlessly moves into deacons.
 - b. "***Likewise must the deacons be grave, not double-tongued***" and so forth.
 7. As Paul went about the Mediterranean world establishing churches, he ordained bishops and deacons.
 8. And he instructed his helpers, like Timothy and Titus, to continue that practice.
 9. That was what prompted these words in ***I Timothy 3.***

II. Let's begin with one of the more difficult parts of this scripture.

- A. ***Verse 13 – "For they that have used the office of a deacon well purchase to themselves a good degree, and great boldness in the faith which is in Christ Jesus."***
1. In my reading, I noticed men who declared that ***boldness*** was a ***pre-requisite*** for the office of deacon.
 2. But I don't believe that is what Paul was saying.
 3. This verse is from the perspective from the top of the hill, looking back on God's deacons.
 4. "***For they that HAVE used the office of a deacon well purchase to themselves a good degree, and great boldness in the faith which is in Christ Jesus.***"
- B. There are denominations which use this verse to justify their practice of ministerial advancement.
1. If someone some how earns or buys the position of a ***sub-deacon***, or a deacon's assistant, they say he may be able to work his way up to the position of deacon, and to eventually the office of an ***arch-deacon***.
 2. But of course, ***sub-deacons*** and ***arch-deacons*** are extra-biblical – if not totally unbiblical.
 - a. If the deacons in some church need help, they don't need sub-deacons.
 - b. At that point the church ought to seek to ordain more deacons.
 3. ***More-deacons*** are Biblical, but ***sub-deacons*** and ***arch-deacons*** are not.
- C. While the word "***purchase***" can mean "***to buy,***" in Greek, it can mean "***to acquire***" or to "***pull around oneself.***"
1. And the "***good degree***" speaks of a ***good standing***, like a ***solid threshold*** before a door.
 2. There is no Biblical rule which guarantee's deaconship advancement.
 3. But the reality is, when a man is qualified to be a deacon, he is also qualified, generally speaking, to be an elder, if the Lord should call him to that ministry.
 4. And sometimes, men like Philip, who distinguish themselves in their service of God, may later become bishops or elders, preaching the gospel and leading God's churches.
- D. Paul says, "***They that have used the office of a deacon well purchase to themselves a good degree, and great BOLDNESS in the faith which is in Christ Jesus.***"
1. What is this great boldness?
 2. ***John Gill*** says, "***such (brethren) obtain boldness in the faith; in the exercise of faith at the throne of grace; and in asserting the doctrine of faith; and in vindicating their own character before men, as faithful men....***"

3. **The Pulpit Commentary** says, *"It is especially applied to boldness in preaching the gospel of Christ. This seems to imply that St. Paul contemplated preaching as a part of the deacon's work."*
 - a. While certainly, not casting down the idea of preaching or evangelism, I don't believe that is the deacon's responsibility, despite the preaching of Philip and Stephen.
 - b. On the other hand, when the pastor is not available to lead a regular service, one of the deacons should be the first to step forward and to minister the Word.
 - c. And over time, he should become more and more bold in this kind of ministry.
4. **Matthew Pool** suggests that these Deacons, spending so much time with their pastors, should become more and more confident in their own spiritual condition and in the knowledge of the Word, eventually taking on more responsibilities – secular and spiritual.
5. It doesn't matter which way one interprets the specifics of this verse, it clearly suggests that there are spiritual blessings inherent in the office. It is good to be one of God's deacons.

III. And with that we come to Paul's list of Deacon qualifications.

- A. First we notice that there is very little difference between their qualifications and those of the bishop.
 1. And why should there be? Both are important representatives of the Lord's church.
 2. And perhaps we should stop here for just a moment.
- B. Not only have I been guilty of this, but I think many churches which have deacons are as guilty of it as I am.
 1. To be a **Deacon** in God's church is a **great honour**; it is **not a formality**; it is not a **legal requirement**.
 2. In the old English Manor House, he would have been the Head Butler, not the footman, boot boy or hall boy.
 3. Without contradicting what I said at the beginning of this message, every Christian little boy, should wish that some day he too could be a deacon like his Father. As I said, it is good to be one of God's deacons.
 4. We should not be surprised that the character of the men of both offices should be the same.
 5. And the members of the church should honor the men of both offices.
- C. *"Likewise must the deacons be grave, not doubletongued, not given to much wine, not greedy of filthy lucre;*
 1. *Holding the mystery of the faith in a pure conscience.*
 2. *And let these also first be proved; then let them use the office of a deacon, being found blameless.*
 3. *Even so must their wives be grave, not slanderers, sober, faithful in all things.*
 4. *Let the deacons be the husbands of one wife, ruling their children and their own houses well."*
- D. To be **"grave"** means that when it is time to be **dignified, serious minded** and **free from levity**, they are.
 1. Does that mean they can't have a sense of humor, and from time to time they can't make others laugh?
 2. Of course not.
 3. And here is an example where an otherwise good man might try to disqualify himself from the office.
 4. He is a Christian, and there is a joy in his life which expresses itself from time to time – even frequently.
 5. Does his joy mean that he's not **"grave"** enough? Let the situation determine the condition.
 6. Is it sin for the preacher to make his listeners smile once in a while during his message? I hope not.
- E. The person who is **"double-tongued"** is one who says one thing to one person and something else to another when talking about the same thing.
 1. Or he talks in one manner – with one attitude – to one person and in another way to someone else.
 2. Or he makes a promise to someone just to get rid of him and fails to keep his promise.
- F. **"Not given to much wine."**
 1. Honesty demands that I point out that in this case the word **"wine"** refers to an intoxicating drink.
 - a. I know there are lots of sincere people, with a desire to protect their people from alcohol, say that this word refers to ordinary grape juice.
 - b. But if we substitute **"juice"** for **"wine"** this statement makes no sense.
 - c. Nor does that substitution make sense in a few other New Testament scriptures.

2. In regard to this verse I'll just quote Baptist theologian **T.P. Simmons**.
 - a. *"In the New Testament times alcoholic drinks had not been abused as they have today;"* and I will add, they weren't as powerful and toxic as they are today.
 - b. *"Therefore they were not absolutely forbidden. Only the abuse of them was prohibited."*
 - c. *But today they have been subject to such abuse that it is **well for all believers, and especially pastors and deacons, to abstain WHOLLY** even from wine, except for medical and sacred purposes."*
 - d. (Simmons used fermented wine in the Lord's Supper.)
3. To this statement I agree, with the exception of *"for sacred purposes."*
4. No Christian should use any kind of alcohol, especially elders and deacons, even for the Lord's Supper.
5. To ignore this principle is to invite danger and disaster – through example if nothing more.

G. "Not greedy of filthy lucre."

1. In the Greek this is all one word, and it is only used in scriptures speaking of bishops and deacons.
2. It means that these men must not have a love for money – *"lucre"* – or the things that money can buy.
3. If my understanding of **Acts 6** is accurate, these men were to be the treasurers of the Lord's church.
4. And in some cases, as it was originally, that meant the care of large sums of money, which would have been very tempting to those who were greedy of filthy lucre.

H. "Holding the mystery of the faith in a pure conscience."

1. Deacons should be sound in the faith, especially as men standing at the edge of the ministerial spot light.
2. They not only would be going in and out among the brethren, but they would be asked to fill the pulpit and teach Bible classes from time to time .
3. The man who is unsure about salvation by sovereign grace, shouldn't be a deacon.
4. He who rejects the idea of a literal millennium, or a literal hell, or a literal virgin birth should not be a deacon
5. And if his declarations of faith don't come out of his soul, out of a pure conscience....
6. If he is only regurgitating what he is expected to say about these things, he should disqualify himself.

I. "Let these also first be proved... found blameless."

1. As with bishops, so with deacons, we should lay hands suddenly or hastily on no man – **I Timothy 5:22**.
2. The fact that a certain candidate is a bank president or a certified public accountant does not make him a consistent Christian and therefore fit to be a deacon.
3. Only put into office men who have proven themselves over time.
4. Elsewhere we read, *"not a novice."*

J. And they must be **good family men.**

1. *"Let the deacons be the husbands of one wife, ruling their children and their own houses well."*
2. We may think that today's society is the worst that has ever been, and that may, or may not, be true.
3. But we can't think that previous societies were better, easier or less sinful than ours.
 - a. Take polygamy as an example. Something which is not common today.
 - b. But in Paul's day it was common that one man might be married to more than one woman, and they all lived together with their half-brother and half-sister siblings.
 - c. And sometime a woman might have more than one husband.
4. The Holy Spirit told Paul to forbade bishops and deacons from such polygamy.

K. What about the question of divorced and remarried men?

1. That is a huge subject, which we don't have time to address.
2. Let me just say at this point, I don't think such men – divorced and remarried – as good as they may otherwise be – should be ordained as either bishops or deacons.
3. If for the sake of testimony and example, if nothing else.

- L. And the wives and children of those deacons and pastors are expected to live moral and exemplary lives.
 - 1. They should be as grave and serious as their husbands – not gossips or slanderers, and faithful to the things of God.
 - a. A church-leader's wife hears things about members which must not be shared or spread.
 - b. If she cannot be trusted with confidential information, her husband should not be trusted with that information.
 - c. And perhaps even more difficult, those things must not become sources of division between that wife and the other members of the church.
 - 2. I have known men whose ministries were destroyed by their wives, and I'm sure the same must be true of the ministries of deacons.
 - 3. And perhaps to a lesser degree, the children of those men can make or break their ministries as well.

IV. Conclusion:

- A. I'll conclude much the same way I began this evening.
 - 1. It is possible to use Paul's words so scrupulously that no one in any church could ever be good enough for either the office of bishop or deacon.
 - 2. It is possible to apply these words so strictly that no one but a *"Pharisee of the Pharisees"* could ever hold a church office.
 - 3. Or we can read these words more generally, using them to highlight the best possible candidates for either office.
- B. I think that just as it is important for a church to have a good, well-qualified elder or pastor, it is important that the church have good, well-qualified deacons.